

Ruth: Return to Bethlehem

Ruth 1:6-22

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Last week we saw the flight of Elimelek and Naomi, and their two sons, from Bethlehem to Moab, amid a famine, in the days of the judges. It was an act of disobedience, which was followed by tragic consequences. Naomi endures the death Elimelek, her husband, and her two sons, over the course of a decade. She is left stranded, an alien, a woman, without resources, and without an heir, under the dark clouds of a frowning providence. With today's text, thankfully, the story begins – slowly – to change. Here we get the first shafts of light in the darkness. We shall make three points. The Partings (vv. 6-15), The Pledge (vv. 16-18), and the Return to Bethlehem (vv. 19-22).

I. The Partings

First, then, the partings. Ruth 1, verse 6: When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people. Finally. The first sign of a reversal, of relief. There are only two places in the Book where God is said to have acted. He is invoked a good deal. But he is only said to have acted twice. One is here, and the other is in chapter 4, in the conception of Boaz and Ruth's child. Both times the issue is fruitfulness. Here the land becomes fertile again, later Ruth becomes fertile.

The Lord, who is sovereign over death – and surely Naomi has tasted the bitterness of that – is, nonetheless, more basically, more fundamentally, the Lord and giver of life. The God who renews the face of the ground. So, this is a critical juncture: God has acted and word has reached Naomi. Notice: She heard IN MOAB – just in case you forgot – in Moab, where she is NOT supposed to be. And she heard that the Lord has come to the aid of HIS PEOPLE – his people, that is, the people who stayed behind in the land, who didn't flee, and for them, he has provided food, or bread.

Bethlehem then, the house of bread, is no longer empty. Famines, and end of famines, are both under the providence of God. And it is the LORD who has come to the aid of his people. LORD is the name of the God of the Exodus, the one who delivers from bondage and oppression, the one who REDEEMS Israel from foreign oppression. And this theme of a redeemer (looms large later in

Ruth) is subtly introduced by the name LORD. That one has “come to the aid of his people.” Or, better, he has “visited” his people. What the covenant LORD does, is he VISITS his people to *redeem* them.

Thus, Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, prophesies of Jesus, at the beginning of Luke’s gospel: Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, for he has *visited and redeemed* his people. Having heard this, Naomi does the right thing. She prepares to return home with her daughters-in-law. They set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah, the land of the kingly tribe. When we speak of this return home, the word “return,” which is used 12 times in chapter 1 alone, is the word for repentance. So, this is not just a physical journey, Naomi is returning spiritually, repenting, making her way back to God. And, in this Naomi is painted with great realism. She is, like all of us, something of a mixed bag, and, though I sympathize with her greatly, we will have to criticize her as well. Her repentance, at least at the beginning here, seems quite a bit like the prodigal son, who “comes to his senses” and starts heading back to his father’s house – largely for the sake of his own hunger. She’s returning in body, but her spiritual return is a work in progress. Verse 8: Naomi said to her daughter’s in law: Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. Probably because the mother would be the one who would help ready them for any future marriage.

In any event, why would Naomi not encourage them to follow her? Would she be embarrassed by two Moabite daughter’s in law? Does she just want the whole Moab experience behind her? Does she not know the God of Israel accepts foreigners? That through Abraham he intends to bless all the families of the earth? Or is she just being realistic, a good practical Mother-in-law? You’ll be safer, have better prospects for marriage, less cultural strain, if you stay among your own people. No one in Israel will want to marry a Moabite woman (awful advice sincerely offered).

Next, she prays, and asks for the Lord’s blessing on them, as they depart. And the prayer is sincere, and one that God will, in due time, answer. May the Lord show you kindness. Kindness is *hesed*. It’s the word for covenant love, or loving kindness. It entails faithfulness or loyalty, and the word has a warmth, a generosity about it. They, Ruth and Orpah, have shown *hesed* to their dead husbands and to Naomi. And Naomi prays that God will repay them.

Verse 9: May the Lord grant that each of you find rest – that is provision, protection, and progeny – in the home of another husband. The Lord through his *hesed*, his kindness, gives his people rest in the land. This is a key theme in Scripture, and it will play out in this one family’s life.

Now this is probably sincere, though we can’t rule out that it’s sort of boilerplate for Naomi – what we might refer to as general Christianese. The stuff anyone would say at a time like this. But more important here is Naomi’s confusion. Just HOW is the LORD, the covenant God of Israel, supposed to show his *hesed*, and

give his rest to these women... who you are sending away from his covenant presence, and his land of rest, into the land of his enemies and their idols? This is a real hodgepodge of sincere human advice, some desire to pray and bless, and a complete lack of theological depth. Perhaps it's partly the result of the raw emotion of the situation. The end of v.9 says: then she kissed them goodbye, and they wept aloud.

On top of all the bereavement, there is now, this parting. One can imagine Naomi's face if this were a movie: ...weather-beaten, lined, grim, etched by having to leave three graves behind in Moab, and now this. It's amazing there are any tears left to be cried. And the two daughters' in law say: we will go back with you to your people. And, again, Naomi insists they go back to pagan Moab. (They are choosing Naomi over the hope of motherhood!!) *In verses 11 through 13 she gives a speech about how she is too old to provide them with any more sons to marry, and even if she could, they wouldn't wait around for them to grow up.*

The background here is what is known as the levirate law: when a man died without a male child, the brother (deceased) was encouraged to marry the widow, and raise up children to the dead man's line. In Ruth, this practice, and the practice of the redeemer (Goel), who was a relative who could redeem or liberate a family from debt or poverty, blend together. In any event, Naomi has forgotten that she indeed has a redeemer named Boaz, back in the land. In fact, there are two potential redeemers who might be able to provide husbands for the two girls.

So, Naomi's despair here may be self-inflicted – she's been away so long, she forgot the Lord's provision in the land. At the end of v.13 she says: It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me. She knows God is sovereign, but she seems to have forgotten his goodness. When providences are dark, foreboding, and bitter it's easy to project that onto the character of God. Naomi is returning, and when you've been through what she has (self-inflicted or not) it is a long road back to the light of God's countenance.

While there is clearly some self-indulgence, and some bitterness, here we should say this on her behalf:

She chooses neither some sort of stoic, stiff upper lip, nor some sort of pious happy-face clichés. The source of her misfortune is neither fate, nor some inexplicable mystery: The Lord's hand has turned against me. She is right about the hand, but she is wrong about the intent of the One whose hand it is.

Now they weep yet again, and Orpah kisses her mother-in-law goodbye. She's a sensible girl. Family, tribe, kin, one's place, these must come first, right? You don't reject your customs and your ancestors for some new god. Note well, Orpah uses Naomi's logic. She disappears back into pagan oblivion because she

follows Naomi's advice. Well-meaning advice can be tragically wrong. That is the partings.

II. The Pledge

Our second point is the pledge. Ruth, on the other hand, clung to Naomi. It is a marital image. It is the word used in Gen. for a man *cleaving* to his wife. It is the word used in the Torah for Israel cleaving to Yahweh. It is an outward bodily sign of the total commitment she is about to announce. And Naomi, whose moral and theological clarity became muddled in Moab, astonishingly says to the cleaving Ruth: Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people AND her gods. Go back with her.

This is a reckless piece of advice to someone who is now basically a convert, clinging to your body, begging to go with you. This from the woman who just prayed: "may the Lord bless you" and "may the Lord give you rest" *Now it's: go back to your nation, and your gods, and your people who are excluded from the Lord's worship for generations.*

Let us be clear: here Naomi is seeking to become an accomplice to idolatry. In fact, she's ferociously committed to her advice. But the one clinging to her will not be deterred. And verses 16 through 18 are among the most famous and moving verses in the whole Bible. Ruth says: Don't urge me to leave you, or turn back from you. Stop with this counsel, Naomi – it's not going to work with me. Wherever you go, I will go. *I will trace your steps. Your journey will be my journey. Where you stay I will stay. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your home shall be my home.*

Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Because people, land, ethnicity and religion (gods) were bound together, most would think it inconceivable that they could be changed. But Ruth knows that the God of Israel accepts foreigners. And thus, she/Ruth (Moabitess) echoes the very heart of the covenant: I will be your God and you shall be my people. It is a pledge of covenant loyalty to Israel's god and to his people. Ruth has been converted.

But this is also a pledge of extraordinary personal commitment (which is why we often hear these words at weddings). It involves the complete crucifixion of her own will, her own identity, and of all her native bonds and ties. She continues: Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried. Here she goes beyond a wedding vow. Ruth is young, and she is saying to her mother in law: even if you die, I am not going back to Moab. I'm staying in the land, and even if its decades later, I'm dying where you die, and I'm going to be buried with you. I'm following you into death and the grave itself. I renounce every other allegiance, every other possible future. And to seal this remarkable pledge, she takes an oath, in which she calls on God to judge her, if she fails to keep her words. *May the Lord deal*

with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me. Wedding vows are “till death do us part” this is something else: this is “may God judge me if EVEN DEATH parts us.”

This may be the most extraordinary confession of loyalty and love and devotion ever uttered – it’s hard to see how it could be surpassed. And Naomi’s response: well, she says - get this - nothing. The text says she stopped urging her. Literally, she stopped talking to her. Naomi ignores the pledge, and grudgingly capitulates to having Ruth along. Ruth doesn’t even get the dignity of a reply. She takes on here a certain humiliation, an invisibility in the narrative.

III. The Return

Our final point is the return. Notice this in v.19: the two women, THEY came to Bethlehem, THEY arrived, the town was stirred because of THEM. And the women of the town exclaimed: Can this be Naomi? Again, Ruth is invisible and ignored. Naomi then laments: Don’t call me Naomi, which means pleasant. Call me Mara – which means bitter –for the Almighty has made my life very bitter. *It doesn’t seem that her outward circumstances alone are bitter. The bitterness has infected Naomi.*

I went away full she says. This is self-centered nostalgia. Her family left in an act of presumption during a famine. That is glossed over. For her, full means “I had my husband and my sons.” And then in an unthinking act of callousness, with Ruth, after her pledge of covenant loyalty, standing right there, she says: and the Lord brought me back empty. And the two of them, Ruth designated as a Moabite, arrive in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. The famine which opened the chapter is over, now the land is yielding a harvest.

I want to make three applications. One for each point in your outline. First, with respect to the partings. In the end, there are only Orpah’s and Ruth’s. There are sensible people who chose clan, family, and country, jobs, and their own prospects, over the terrifying uncertainty of following Jesus. To them Jesus says: let the dead bury the dead – you follow me – above and before all earthly bonds. In the end, the only kind of believers there are - are Ruth’s. She is a picture of the grace of God that summons – radically – the Gentiles from the ends of the earth.

Second, on her pledge, notice: it is impossible to cleave to God without SIMULTANEOUSLY cleaving to his people. In fact, Ruth gets to Yahweh, to God, BY cleaving to Naomi. (Naomi and Naomi’s god) And here I give Naomi her due: Ruth must have learned the faith, and come to trust Yahweh, though Naomi’s witness, weak and fractured and confused, though it was. She saw this woman endure what she endured, in a decade or more of agony in Moab, and she wants her and her God. And clearly the bond between them – despite Naomi’s insensitivities - is deep. It transcends the standard in-law relation. These kinds of

friendships, close personal bonds, are critical for there to be real change in lives, and real renewal in churches. If we haven't forged any bonds like this in the body of Christ, we should examine why that is so. Because nothing can replace this kind of deep, abiding bond – this cleaving -in enriching our lives and transforming us.

Finally, we must see that while Ruth is our model, we all have a lot of Naomi in us. Especially when things go badly. (keep returning) We ought, then, to preach the gospel which has come forth through her anguish. And in the language of this passage, the gospel sounds like this: There is one who was full, and became empty. One who left his father's house, not in rebellion, but to bring bread to the world. That One cleaves to our humanity. Against that obedient One, the hand of the Lord went forth, the Almighty struck him, and testified against him, that he might be accursed and afflicted. That One felt the bitterness of the Almighty's dark providence. And in neither our lives, or our deaths, or in our burials, will this One be severed from us. For in his hesed, his kindness, he brings all prodigals, all halting, struggling believers, all Naomi's called to be Ruth's, out of our wanderings for bread that doesn't satisfy, back to Canaan, back to the house of bread, back to the land of rest and plenty. Amen.

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