

Ruth 1v6-22

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[0 : 00] Has anybody noticed the heat over the last week or so? Oppressive, I think, is the word for it.

Especially on those days when the air is still, or when you're sitting on the sunny side of the bus. All you really want to do is get home to a nice quiet place and find some place to rest.

The break today has been wonderful, by the way. Have you ever noticed also that calamity often has the same type of reaction in us? Have you ever had to admit failure?

Were you afraid of what others would say? Were you angry or bitter? Did you blame God? Or did you just want to find a nice quiet dark place to rest?

Last week we talked about how God reveals himself through stories. We talked about irony.

Situations that turn out exactly the opposite way from what we would expect.

[1 : 04] Sometimes it's for the sake of humor, sometimes it's to make a point. In our introduction last week, we saw that the book of Ruth takes place in the time of the judges, when every man did what was right in his own eyes.

And we briefly met Elimelech, whose name means, my God is king, and his family living in Moab. The central figure of the story at this point is Naomi, a woman who left the Promised Land of Israel with her husband and sons because there was a famine in Bethlehem, Bethlehem, the house of bread.

She first loses her husband, and then both of her sons. We met Orpah and Ruth, two fairly flat characters, merely introduced as the Moabite widows of her dead sons.

In our text today, though, Naomi hears that God has visited his people and has given them food. Now remember that point, we'll come back to it a little bit later. God has visited his people and given them food.

So Naomi prepares to leave Moab to Bethlehem. And here we see three women, none of them related by blood, none of them with any money, three widows, leaving Moab, where Naomi is a foreigner, an outsider, going to Bethlehem, where Orpah and Ruth will be the outsiders.

[2 : 21] Naomi is their mother-in-law. Now when you hear the word mother-in-law, what comes to mind? Some of you, I see you chuckling, are probably thinking of the early 60s song, pop song, called Mother-in-Law.

The words go something like this, the worst person I know, mother-in-law. She worries me so, mother-in-law. If she'd just leave us alone, we'd have a happy home.

Sent from down below, mother-in-law. And then the second verse says, Satan should be her name, to me they're about the same. And it just goes on from there, and I think only gets worse.

But this is not Naomi, is it? Her daughters-in-law love her. We've learned quite a bit about Naomi in these verses, and we've heard, just read. Not so much by what we're told about her, but by what she does.

First, she's in mourning. She's lost her sons. Now none of us is at our best, at a time like that. We're heartbroken, we're angry, we're confused, we're rarely thinking clearly.

[3 : 26] But she's heading back to Bethlehem. Back home. But it's under very difficult circumstances. Her husband is dead. Her sons are dead.

Her parents and her husband are very likely to be dead. She's going to be a perpetual widow. She's too old to marry, too old for children, no income, and no prospects.

She's bitter. And, most people would say she has every reason to be. And Orpah and Ruth are both planning to leave their homelands, though.

To go with Naomi to Israel. As I said, it's apparent that these two women truly love Naomi. How many of us have that kind of relationship with our mother-in-law?

And how many mothers-in-law would love to have that kind of a relationship with their daughters-in-law? Naomi must have been a very gracious and loving woman. Treating her daughters with dignity, with respect, with friendship, in order for them to treat her that way. [4 : 28] She may also have been a very devout woman, worshiping God in her home in Moab, possibly keeping the Sabbath, the Passover, various other feast days. But here, Naomi starts out with her two daughters-in-law and then seems to have second thoughts.

She's destitute. She's going to be dependent on the charity of others. How can she afford two additional mouths to feed? Or two additional bodies to clothe or house?

It's going to be bad enough for her, but can she really subject these girls to that kind of a life? Naomi also might have started thinking about what people will say when she gets back to Bethlehem.

You let your sons marry foreigners? Didn't God curse those Moabites? Didn't He bar them from the assembly? Or even, are they going to try to seduce our husbands?

And of course, these two women would be a constant reminder of her time in Moab, the loss of her husband and the loss of her sons. So they set out. Now, the text doesn't tell us where in Moab they were, but looking at Google Maps, the distance seems to be about 100 miles from the center of Moab to Bethlehem.

[5 : 46] It would be sort of like walking from here, from Ealing, to Birmingham. Now, how long would that take? You think, three days? Four days?

Five days? A hundred miles? It would take a while. But in verse 8, she stops. Now, this may have been at a crossroads. It may have been as far as the Jordan River, the border between Israel and Moab.

It may have simply been at the edge of their village, but she stops. She says goodbye, and she sends Orpah and Ruth home, back to their own families, and she gives them a blessing.

She says, Go, return each of you to our mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grants that you might find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.

It's a beautiful, poignant blessing. She invokes the name of the Lord twice, but we see a bittersweet irony in this blessing as well. May the Lord deal kindly with you.

[6 : 53] She must have been thinking, but he hasn't dealt kindly with me. As you have dealt with the dead and with me, she acknowledges that these two women were good wives to her sons and were kind to her.

May the Lord grant you rest in the house of your husbands, in the house of a husband, one who would care for them, protect them, love them. The concept of rest really is an important one in the Old Testament, especially in the early books.

Rest in those days meant far more than an afternoon siesta or a day off or a cool room on a hot afternoon. It would have meant more than a holiday at the beach.

To the children of Israel, rest was viewed in opposition to the slavery that they had just come out of. As slaves in Egypt, there was no rest, no time off, no freedom from their oppression.

Now, rest can also sometimes mean peace, rest from war, from conflict, from threat, we see in Deuteronomy 25. Rest was also, though, equated to the promised land itself.

[8 : 02] Deuteronomy 12 and Judges 1 speak of the promised land as a resting place. And Psalm 95 quotes God as saying that the unbelieving generation shall not enter into my rest, but will wander in the desert.

But Elimelech and Naomi had left the promised land, that place of rest. Deuteronomy 28 predicts exile for failing to trust God. And Lamentations 1 talks about the people being scattered among the nations and finding no rest there.

But Naomi is asking that the Lord give Orpah and Ruth rest in Moab. Rest also was seen as the presence of God himself.

For in Exodus 33, God, talking to Moses, says, My presence will go with you and I will give you rest. But rest also had another spiritual dimension. Rest was seen as the restoration of the relationship between God and man, severed by Adam's fall from sin, or into sin.

Each generation anticipated the promised one, the one who would end God's judgment against man and end the curse on the earth. In Genesis 5, one hopeful father declares, Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our

hands.

[9 : 24] And then, he gave the name Rest to his son. Rest is the same word there that's used here, Noah. And Noah was hoped for, was the hoped for one who would restore communion with God.

But Orpah and Ruth each listened to Naomi, but they responded very differently. Orpah saw the pragmatic wisdom in Naomi's words. You're young. You're not getting a husband from me.

I'm no spring chicken. My prospects of finding a husband are nil. And even if that were to happen, you'd be way too old to marry any child that I might have. Your prospects are much better in your own land, among your own people, among your own gods.

Go home. And Orpah did that. She walked away. And she's never heard from again, at least not in the Bible. Now, she may very well have found a husband.

She may have had children. She may have lived a happy life. But in terms of God's eternal plan for humanity, or even for her own soul, she walked away. Ruth, on the other hand, did not do the logical, the pragmatic, the sensible thing.

[10 : 35] Instead, she chose to stay with Naomi. And in doing so, God integrated her into his wonderful story. But I'm getting ahead of the text. We don't want to do that.

But Ruth's response is absolutely amazing. Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go. And where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people. And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me. And more also, if anything but death parts me from you.

This is an amazing covenantal commitment. Ruth commits to a journey to an unknown destination. She abandons her people, her home, her gods.

She commits herself totally to Naomi. To Naomi's home, wherever that might be. To Naomi's people. To Naomi's land. And to Naomi's God.

[11 : 35] Whom she mentions by name. This covenantal promise echoes God's own covenantal commitment to his own people. Repeated throughout the Old Testament. I am the Lord, your God.

I will be your God and you will be my people. A treasured possession. This sentiment is so powerful. So heartfelt. That we ironically take it completely out of context.

We use it at weddings. Where a husband and wife make that same commitment to each other. But here, it's a daughter-in-law making that commitment to her mother-in-law. An amazing statement. And how does Naomi respond? She says nothing. She just turns around and starts walking. Hours pass.

Days pass on the road to Bethlehem and Naomi says nothing. Finally, Naomi reaches Bethlehem. She's recognized by the village.

[12 : 37] But the homecoming is far from joyful. All she sees is what she's lost. I left full and have returned empty with absolutely nothing.

Call me Mara. For the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. There's a place on the east side of the Red Sea that bears the name Mara. Spelled only slightly differently but the same basic name, same words.

Three days after miraculously defeating Pharaoh and his army, God brings the children of Israel to this place. The people are thirsty but the water is bitter, undrinkable.

And the people immediately start grumbling. Are we to die in the desert? Why didn't you leave us in Egypt? Things were so much better there. But God provides a log for Moses to throw into the water. And miraculously the bitter becomes sweet. You know, sometimes God takes us to a bitter spot. He brings us there to get our attention. Sometimes to teach us some sort of a lesson.

[13 : 47] Sometimes just to demonstrate his power and his love and his faithfulness to his people. But you know, sometimes we choose our own path to the bitter place. But how often are we quick to complain when those things don't go our way?

We blame God for our troubles without ever considering our own roles and the natural consequences of our own desires. Remember, Elimelech and Naomi chose to leave the promised land and chose to go to Moab.

Now, here is Naomi back in Bethlehem with Ruth in tow. Are you familiar with the term the elephant in the room? You know, that big issue or problem that no one wants to mention?

So big that it can't be missed and yet so disturbing that nobody wants to discuss it? Did you notice that no one acknowledges Ruth? Not the village women, not even Naomi.

Ruth seems to be the elephant in the room. Now, maybe it was Naomi's bitterness. Maybe it was some embarrassment. Maybe she doesn't want to explain who this Moabite woman is.

[14:57] Maybe she's just hoping that Ruth would go away. And poor Ruth, she's been traveling with Naomi for at least a couple of days without a word passing between them and now they've arrived and Naomi won't even introduce her.

But as we'll see next week, Ruth remains faithful. But let's not be too quick to condemn Naomi either. Remember, she's still grieving and she's seeking.

But what is it that Naomi is seeking? Well, think back to that blessing that she gave to Orpah and Ruth that they might find rest. The rest that she and Elimelech sought under their own strength. The rest that she could not find in Moab, the faraway country. A rest that only comes through God. The rest and peace and completeness of shalom that can only be found in a good relationship with the Almighty.

Today's passage begins and ends with God's provision for His people. Naomi hears while still in the fields of Moab that God has provided food for His people. And she thinks of home.

[16:06] She thinks of rest. Now Naomi and Ruth have arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of barley season. grain once again in the house of bread. We all seek peace.

We all seek rest. We all seek that peace with God through a Redeemer. The one who will pay the debt that we cannot pay. Rest.

The end of the famine in our lives. The end of the curse on the land. Rest from that curse of sin that separates us from God. The rest that was hoped for in Noah.

The rest ultimately fulfilled in the Holy One. The one promised in Genesis 3. The one pictured throughout the Old Testament. The eternal God who took on human flesh so that through His life, death, and resurrection He might redeem a people for Himself from every nation, tribe, and tongue. Saved by grace through faith. The rest through Jesus Christ. The ultimate fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. who calls to us saying, Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

[17:15] Let's pray. We thank you, O Lord, for your promise of rest to those who come to you by faith. Give us this rest through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.