

Overcoming Grief

Lesson Text: Ruth 1:3-8, 14-18 **Devotional Reading:** Psalm 31:9-16.

Background Scripture: Ruth 1.

TIME: around 1130-1120 B.C. **PLACE:** Moab

Ruth 1:3-8, 14-18

³ Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷ With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me.

¹⁴ At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." ¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

TODAY'S AIM

- **Facts:** to point out the grief that surrounded Ruth's life and how she overcame it.
- **Principle:** to show that times of grief in our lives can be overcome by turning to God.
- **Application:** to teach students to daily look to God, through His Word, for strength and encouragement.

LESSON BACKGROUND

The incidents recorded in the book of Ruth took place during the days when judges ruled Israel (1:1). These were dark days, known for the fact that "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

In the midst of all the darkness and evil lived a few godly people who believed in the Lord and lived according to His Word. Because of that we are able to read the delightful love story found in the book of Ruth and to see how God continued to accomplish His will among His people. The most amazing thing of all is the realization that the record of history included here leads directly to King David and eventually to the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Because of the serious famine that engulfed the land of Israel, the man Elimelech of Bethlehem took his wife and two sons to live in the land of Moab (Ruth 1:1). His wife was Naomi, whose name means "pleasant." His sons were Mahlon (probably meaning "sickly" or "puny") and Chilion (perhaps meaning "pining"). After they had moved to Moab, they settled in there, though only as sojourners.

Unexpected Sorrow (Ruth 1:3-5)

The opening verse of the Book of Ruth mentions a famine that had struck the land, a famine that became so severe as to necessitate a family move from Bethlehem of Judah to Moab, a mountainous region east of the Dead Sea. This would have been a journey of fifty or sixty miles.

Sometime after the move, a tragedy far worse than famine occurs: Sadly for Naomi and her sons, Elimelech died, leaving the family to fend for themselves. We are not told how long they had been in Moab when this happened, but at least Naomi had her two sons and was able to find reasons for going on with her life. The boys eventually married Moabite wives; so everything appeared to be going on for Naomi as normally as life could without a husband. Perhaps she would know the joy of grandchildren someday.

The names of the Moabite women the boys married were Orpah and Ruth. According to Ruth 4:10, Ruth was married to Mahlon; so we know that Orpah was married to Chilion.

Deuteronomy 23:3,4 says, "³No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation. ⁴For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you." There was, however, no specific prohibition in the Mosaic law against marrying Moabites.

1. What great loss did Naomi and her sons suffer (Ruth 1:3,4)?

The biggest problem associated with marrying someone from another nation was the possibility of being tempted to worship that person's gods. Solomon learned this the hard way, although he did not change his ways because of it. It might be that had their father still been alive, he would not have allowed Mahlon and Chilion to marry Moabite women. He apparently had hoped to return home someday, and he surely would have preferred that his sons marry Israelite women. Without his influence, however, they married as they desired.

The text tells us they all lived in Moab for about ten years. No children were born to either of these unions, making one wonder whether they had forfeited the blessing of God by entering into these marriages. Deuteronomy 7:1-4 prohibits intermarriage with certain nations and warns of their idolatry. Even though Moab is not specifically mentioned there, perhaps it was considered one of them because of its idolatry.

2. What was the biggest problem involved in marrying someone from another nation?

Whatever pleasure Naomi enjoyed from her sons and their wives was soon cut short by the death of both sons. Jewish tradition has taught that the premature deaths of these three men indicate God's displeasure with them for having left their homeland, but the biblical text does not indicate one way or the other whether this was the case.

Her sons' deaths left Naomi in a difficult situation. She was now living alone in a foreign nation with no prospect of an heir to carry on her family's name. From a human perspective there was little or no hope for Naomi as far as a reasonable future was concerned. There was certainly nothing happening that would guarantee her any job. It is understandable why Naomi, upon returning home, would tell her friends to no longer call her Naomi ("pleasant"). She said they should call her Mara ("bitter") instead (vs. 20).

3. What major change did Naomi face after ten years in Moab (v. 5)?

Naomi's Decision (Ruth 1:6-8)

There is a sense in which the main theme of the book of Ruth begins in verse 6. The first five verses have set the scene, and now the plot begins to unfold. Dialogue is the main feature of this book, with fifty-nine of its eighty-five verses containing dialogue from the characters involved. The first of many dialogues took place between Naomi and her daughters-in-law.

It appears that it was not too long after the deaths of her sons that Naomi heard that God had once again blessed His nation with rain and the resulting food crops. This was good news for Naomi, for if she returned home, she could find companionship and care among her relatives and former friends. Soon she and her daughters-in-law were ready to travel, and they began their journey to Israel. Both Orpah and Ruth understood it was their duty to accompany her even though it meant leaving their own homeland.

4. What is the first dialogue recorded in the book of Ruth (v. 6)?

We can only imagine what was going through Naomi's mind as she began her journey home. She was accompanied by her daughters-in-law at the beginning, but it seems that as she thought about how things might go for them, she realized she should release them from the obligation of going with her. Life alone was always difficult for women and even more so for widows, but it was worse still for women living in a foreign land. If it was hard for Naomi to live in Moab, how would these young women do in Israel?

We surmise that when Naomi finally reached a decision, she stopped walking, turned to the women, and addressed them. She said, “ *Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me.*” She was referring, of course, to their husbands, for whom they had obviously been good and loving wives. Naomi had nothing but appreciation for them and sincerely wanted the Lord to bless them in the years to come. They had been good to her, and she asked that the Lord be good to them in return.

It is a little curious that Naomi would refer to each one's mother's house rather than her father's house (cf. Lev. 22:13; Judg. 19:2,3). While some Bible students think she did this knowing this would be the best place for consolation for the women, there seems to be something more significant in the statement. Naomi was not only releasing them from accompanying her to Israel, but she was also freeing them to remarry without any concern that she might not be in favor of such a move.

5. Why did Naomi decide to encourage her daughters-in-law to return to Moab (vs. 7,8)?

Ruth's Decision (Ruth 1:14-18)

In verses 9-13, not included in our printed text, both Ruth and Orpah voice their loyalty to Naomi and state their desire to accompany her to Judah. Naomi then tries to persuade the two of them to look at their situation realistically. She herself has nothing to offer Ruth and Orpah in the way of providing the "rest" mentioned in verse 9. Naomi's advanced age makes childbearing an impossibility for her. Even if through some means she is able to become pregnant and bear sons, it does not make sense for Ruth and Orpah to wait until these sons became old enough to marry. It is far better for both of the younger women to resettle in Moab.

Naomi concludes her appeal by declaring, "*the Lord's hand has turned against me*" (v. 13). From her viewpoint, her current situation appears hopeless. She has resigned herself to the fact that the Lord has determined to bring disaster upon her.

Yet it is out of such seemingly hopeless scenarios that the Lord often does His greatest work. In His time His hand will provide abundant blessings to Naomi. However, that thought probably gives little comfort to her at this particular moment.

It was an extremely emotional situation involving many tears. Finally, Orpah became convinced it was all right for her to return home. After more tears were shed, she kissed her mother-in-law good-bye and walked away. Ruth, however, had decided otherwise; so she clung to Naomi and refused to leave. Her actions revealed a deep sense of love and loyalty and a determination to stay with her in order to be a help and encouragement to her. Ruth probably concluded that as a result, she would never marry and have children.

Naomi made one more appeal to Ruth, using her sister-in-law as an example. She pointed out that Orpah had just gone back to her people and her gods. The mention of her people and her gods was an indirect reference to the land of Moab. Each nation was thought to have its own gods, and to leave that nation meant to leave the area over which those gods ruled. It amounted to a change of religion and worship. Orpah was returning to her land, where Chemosh was the primary god (Num. 21:29).

6. What were the two different responses of Orpah and Ruth (vs. 14,15)?

Scripture teaches that we are to "weep with them that weep" (Romans 12:15). God has created us with the desire for fellowship. He established the home and the church to provide this fellowship. God declared that it was not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18).

People who are "on their own" during times of grief have no one to help them work through the pain. They have no one to remind them that they are still loved. People in grief need someone to reassure them that certain feelings and thoughts that they have (denial, anger, etc.) are natural parts of the grieving process.

It is a mistake simply to tell a grieving person, "If you need anything, just let me know." It's rare that they will respond to that offer. Much better is to see exactly how the person needs to be helped, and then just do it.

7. Why is it important to "be there" for those going through times of grief? How can we do a better job at this?

Ruth's Pledge (vs. 16,17)

This beautiful, poetic statement from Ruth is evidence of her complete turning away from the worship of Chemosh to that of Yahweh, the God of Israel. While these verses have been set to music and are often used in wedding ceremonies, there is much greater depth here than an expression of human love. It began with a plea from Ruth to Naomi to stop asking her to leave. Ruth wanted to stay with her. It was a heartfelt entreaty so full of emotion that no caring person could possibly ignore it.

Ruth uttered a fourfold statement of loyalty to Naomi. First, she would go wherever Naomi went, meaning that if Naomi was going to leave Moab, so would she. Second, wherever Naomi decided to settle permanently would be where Ruth would live also. That is the meaning of the word "lodge." Third, she would make Naomi's people her own: meaning she was willing to leave her national identity behind. Fourth, Naomi's God would now be her God as well. There would be no more worship of Chemosh; Yahweh would be her only God.

Ruth concluded her solemn statement by vowing that nothing but death could separate her from Naomi. In fact, she would live in Naomi's land until her own death and would then be buried there along with Naomi. This may be a reference to family tombs, which were common in biblical times. The bodies of all family members would be placed in a common repository or tomb.

The vow of Ruth was no mere poetic verbiage but rather an expression of faith. Her final statement was an oath invoking her willingness to have the Lord take her life if she broke her vow in any way. Ruth's commitment to Naomi and her God was a deeply felt heart commitment.

8. What fourfold statement did Ruth make that revealed her desire to stay with Naomi (vs. 16,17)?

In the modern world there are many things that attack the very fabric of the family unit. Family members are separated by distance and divorce. Internally, family structures fall apart from bitterness, apathy, etc. It is imperative for Christians to realize that the foundational societal structure given by God is the family (see Exodus 20:12).

The old concept of "quality time" is inadequate. Families need to set aside quantity time to be together. It is not the giving of gifts or the buying of things that are needed to build strong homes; it is instead the investment of time and energy in each other's lives that is required.

9. Family loyalty is a lost concept in many cases today. How can we demonstrate loyalty to family? Or is this really that important?

How could anyone refuse such a plea and promise? When Ruth invoked the name of Yahweh in her oath, it was obvious this was not merely an emotional outburst. She was adopting Israel's God as her own God and thus identifying herself with His people forever. Naomi could tell that Ruth "*was determined to go with her.*" Naomi

knew the conversation was over! She immediately stopped discussing the matter, and the two of them moved on.

In the following scenes, we read of the women's arrival in Bethlehem, where Naomi expressed some of the bitterness of her soul. The events that followed ultimately led to Ruth's marriage to Boaz and the birth of their son. There were difficult days for both Naomi and Ruth, but their trust in a faithful God was richly rewarded later. It is often hard to maintain trust in God when things are going badly in one's life. What is important for believers is getting to know God well during the good times so that they will be prepared for the bad.

Grief must run its course of shock, denial, anger, guilt, and acceptance. The order may vary at times, but grief is very real and must be faced. It is not wrong to grieve, but believers have a faithful God who will always be present to strengthen and encourage.

10. What did Ruth really reveal in her statement to Naomi (v. 18)?

CONCLUSION

We have seen the dedication of Ruth in following the true God, whom she had discovered through her relationship with Naomi. She decided to give up her old lifestyle forever. This also was the answer to her grief, for the true God is a loving, compassionate, comforting God.

When we turn to the God of the Bible, we find answers for our pain. We overcome our grief by leaning on Him.

PRAAYER

Father in Heaven, thank You that in Your Son Jesus we can be "more than conquerors." Whenever circumstances such as death tear us away from those we love, may we remember that nothing can separate us from Your love. Grant us remembrance as well that there will be a day when tears are no more. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

His oath, His covenant, His blood,
Support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay.
-Edward Mote (1797-1874)