

## “The Faith of Ruth”

**Devotional Reading:** Acts 10:34-38 **Background Scripture:** Ruth 1; 4:13-22

### Ruth 1:6-18, 22 (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud <sup>10</sup> and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—<sup>13</sup> would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!”

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

<sup>15</sup> “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.” <sup>18</sup> When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

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<sup>22</sup> So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

### LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To summarize Ruth’s faithfulness to the Lord and to Naomi.
- **Biblical Principle:** To know that God’s love is often expressed through other believers.
- **Daily Application:** To imitate Ruth’s model of courage and faithfulness.

### INTRODUCTION

Before and After

Tragedy creates a “before” and an “after” – before the job loss, the accident, the fight; after the break-up, the death, etc. When tragedy strikes, we might question God’s sovereignty or fear that He is using His strength to punish us through our pain. No matter how strong our faith, tragedy can leave us raw and feeling that we are merely surviving.

Reading the stories of tragedy found within the Bible can offer comfort. When we see examples of how others remained faithful to God, we are inspired to persevere. And even more, when we see how God demonstrated His faithfulness to others, we can regain confidence in His provision no matter our current circumstance. We don’t need easy answers in pain; we need God’s love, often expressed through the love of other believers. Ruth’s story is one biblical example of love expressed in the after time of tragedy.

### LESSON CONTEXT

The author of the Book of Ruth is unknown. The date of composition has been proposed as early as King Solomon’s reign (approximately 970–930 B.C.) to as late as 250 B.C., long after the return from Babylonian exile. This huge range speaks to the many factors one might point to as evidence of an earlier or later date as well as the text’s own ambivalence concerning these questions.

The setting of the events within Ruth are comparatively much better defined as occurring during the time of the judges (Ruth 1:1), that is, sometime between 1373 and 1043 B.C. The conquest of Canaan was completed with the Israelite tribes settled in the land (Joshua 23). But the Israelites experienced oppression from outside nations, Moab occasionally being one of them (example: Judges 3:12–31). The Moabites were descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot (Genesis 19:33–37). Conflict with Moab was already ancient by the time the time of the judges in Israel (Numbers 22–25). Unsurprisingly, the Moabites were banned from entering the assembly of the Lord (Deuteronomy 2:26–30; 23:3–6).

Despite these deep antipathies, a persistent famine in Israel motivated a certain Naomi’s Israelite family to leave Bethlehem and settle in Moab (Ruth 1:1,6, 22). Ten years are covered quickly in the text, beginning with the death of Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, and ending with the death of her sons (1:3, 5). In the meantime, these two sons had married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, before leaving them childless with their untimely deaths.

Widowhood was an especially precarious state for women. In the ancient Near East, including both Moab and Israel, men had far more economic power than women. A woman left without male relatives to care for her could be reduced to abject poverty, and prostitution might result. Fathers or sons were the best lines of defense to protect widows; in the case of younger widows, this protection lasted until new husbands could be found (compare Genesis 38:11; Leviticus 22:13). God had given Israel specific instructions for caring for widows, both within the family and the larger community (examples: Deuteronomy 14:28–29; 24:17; Ruth 1:11).

### **What Do You Think?**

What circumstances could entice you to start your life over away from home?

### **Digging Deeper**

What faith challenges and opportunities for growth could you anticipate experiencing?

### **First Exchange: Ruth 1:6–10**

After 10 years of tragedy (Ruth 1:3, 5), Naomi decided to *return* to her own country where she had now heard that *the Lord had come to the aid of his people*, probably indicating a time of deliverance under one of the judges (most likely Gideon). The aged widow returned to her native land as soon as she was assured that the famine had ceased, and made the necessary arrangements with her *daughters-in-law*.

Returning to her people was Naomi’s best option to be cared for in her widowed state. And God’s renewed provision in her homeland meant that her family’s legal obligations to care for her (see Lesson Context) would not burden an already famished community. The inclusion of *her* (Moabite) daughters-in-law might surprise us, as their families of origin would be expected to care for them in their widowhood. This tension drives the action to come. Regarding the journey from the country of *Moab* to Bethlehem, see Ruth 1:22 below.

That the Moabite women began this journey with their mother-in-law speaks to the depth of their love for and devotion to her (compare Ruth 1:11–13). Traveling with Naomi potentially put her well-being over the younger widows’ own future prospects for marriage and family. Following her initially may also indicate that the daughters-in-law were not thinking clearly, stricken as they were by grief at the tremendous loss they had suffered with Naomi (contrast 1:14).

### **1. In her widowed state, what was Naomi’s best option for care? What decision did she make? (Ruth 1:6–7)**

We might have expected Naomi to urge the young widows back to their fathers’ homes. But returning each to her *mother’s home* might mark a subtle shift in focus from the material benefit of marriage to the relational (Genesis 24:28–38, 67; Song of Solomon 3:4; 8:2). The language suggests that Naomi was relinquishing her rights to any support *her two daughters in law* might offer her. She was not their mother, and because of that, they were not obligated to share in the difficulties that widowhood would represent for Naomi.

As Moabite widows, Ruth and Orpah would be incredibly vulnerable in Israel (see Lesson Context). Naomi’s words *show you kindness* have a ring of covenant language. She intended to leave the women in

the Lord's care even though she also intended to leave them in the land of Moab. Naomi did not explicitly say but clearly believed that *the Lord* was not only able but also willing to bless the younger widows, even outside of Israel. As is true throughout the book, the Lord's kindness would be experienced through human relationships (example: Ruth 2:4–12). *Rest* for the widows was expected to be found in their mothers' homes before moving on to new families in the houses of new husbands.

Naomi's future was far from assured (compare Ruth 1:11–13); the gift she felt she could give her daughters-in-law was to free them to find more likely sources of stability than she could offer. In a typical farewell gesture, Naomi sealed her hopes for them with a kiss. It signified her love for what she expected to be her final act of care for them (compare 1:14).

## **2. What did Naomi do to free her Moabite daughters-in-law from any obligations to her? (Ruth 1:8-9a)**

*They wept aloud* is clearly lament language. In context it could be for the general position in which they all found themselves—husbandless and with uncertain futures—or it could specifically have been in response to the pain these two younger women felt at the thought of separating from Naomi. *We will go back with you to your people* does not constitute a binding oath but does communicate great devotion to Naomi. It was not a pragmatic response or a thought-out plan; it was the pleading of two daughters-in-law who didn't want to see their mother-in-law leave.

## **3. How did the daughters-in-law initially respond to Naomi's pleas? (Ruth 1:9b-10)**

### **Second Exchange: Ruth 1:11–14**

Naomi emphasized the darker, more painful truth about her motivation to send them home: she could not bear *any more sons* to grow up and care for her dead sons' wives. This concern was in keeping with a provision within the Law of Moses concerning care for widows. The brother of the widow's deceased husband was required to marry the widow in a levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5–10; example: Genesis 38:6–14). This not only ensured care for the widow but also allowed her dead husband's lineage to continue. Due to Naomi's own widowhood and age, she knew that she would not provide new *husbands* for Orpah and Ruth. Naomi saw clearly (if erroneously; see Ruth 4:16–17) the end of her family line.

The phrase *I am too old to have another husband* continued the "reality check" for the two daughters. Naomi's childbearing years were behind her, such that no man of her times would be inclined to marry her. And even if she had hope that she could remarry that very day and conceive *sons* that night, how could the widows be expected to wait years for those sons to be old enough to marry? These hypothetical sons wouldn't be ready for marriage until their early 20s, putting Ruth and Orpah somewhere in their 40s. Even today, a pregnancy is considered geriatric after the age of 35. Back then as now, pregnancy at that age and beyond was increasingly unlikely and dangerous.

*The Lord's hand* (v. 13b of today's lesson) can refer to God's blessing, guidance, and protection (examples: Ezra 7:6, 9; Nehemiah 2:8). But His hand conversely can refer to curse, discipline, and judgment (examples: Exodus 9:3; Judges 2:15). *Turned against me* illustrates Naomi's feeling that God had not so much abandoned her; rather, He was judging her. The writer doesn't outright confirm or deny Naomi's feeling. But when she returned home, Naomi asked to be called *Mara* (which means "bitter"), "because the Almighty has made my life very bitter" (Ruth 1:20). We can make too much of the fact that the writer never called Naomi *Mara*. But it subtly suggests that the writer didn't accept that Naomi's life was bitter, or at least that it wasn't irretrievably bitter.

However, ascribing motivations to God is a dangerous business—we need only read Job to be reminded of this. But in the middle of so much grief, one way of arriving at meaning, either legitimately or illegitimately, is to find God's judgment in pain. We do well to remember that we cannot know why God allows hard circumstances in our lives (Job 42:1–6). We are wise to remember that His ways are not ours and His thoughts are above ours (Isaiah 55:9). And we can rest in the hope that God uses all things to our benefit if we place our hope in Him, regardless of our circumstances (Romans 8:28–35).

## **4. What else did Naomi say to motivate her daughters-in-law to return to their people? (Ruth 1:11-13)**

### **What Do You Think?**

When have you interpreted God's hand in your life as punishment?

## Digging Deeper

Have circumstances since then changed your mind about God's intentions for you? How, or why not?

At first *Orpah* and *Ruth* had responded in unified lament following Naomi's goodbye kiss (Ruth 1:9a–10). But then Orpah *kissed* Naomi. As with Naomi's previous gesture, this was a kiss goodbye (see 1:15). We might be tempted to conclude that Orpah acted faithlessly toward Naomi. But the text does not indicate here or elsewhere that Orpah made a poor decision. She acted in keeping with the wisdom of her time and with Naomi's greatest hopes for Orpah's future thriving.

By contrast, Ruth would not be swayed by any argument Naomi could make. Ruth *clung to her* and would not change her mind.

## 5. What were the daughter's second response to Naomi? (Ruth 1:14)

### What Do You Think?

How do you discern whether to move forward with a risky plan or fall back on a more conventionally wise action?

## Digging Deeper

What biblical examples can you find of both moving forward and retreating as faithful action?

## Third Exchange: Ruth 1:15–18, 22

Naomi made one last plea to Ruth to turn back as her sister-in law did. The worship of Jehovah clearly made no abiding impression on Oprah and Naomi knew it, and for Ruth to return *to her people* would be a comfortable cultural fit for Ruth (v. 15).

But Ruth had her mind made up and was deliberately invoked by Ruth indicating her choice of the God of Israel. Ruth's vow not to leave Naomi was in itself a confession of her faith in the God of Israel (v. 16), and whatever provision Naomi would find among her people, Ruth would accept as well.

Naomi would expect to die well before Ruth. Yet Ruth's commitment was to *die* in Judah (v. 17) and *be buried* there (compare and contrast Genesis 50:1–6). In these ways, Ruth declared Naomi to be her mother and outlined the devotion that she would demonstrate as Naomi's true child. Ruth had carefully considered the cost of going with Naomi (compare Luke 14:26–33). Realizing this, Naomi stopped trying to convince Ruth to take a different journey.

## 6. What was Naomi's final plea to Ruth? (Ruth 1:15-18)

### What Do You Think?

What did you leave behind when you made the decision to follow God?

## Digging Deeper

What habits from your old life still need to be broken?

*Bethlehem* (in Judah; Ruth 1:1) can be translated as "house of bread," giving an ironic cast to the famine that had occurred there. Drought was a likely cause of the famine, as rain clouds would sometimes pass straight over Bethlehem and climb to higher elevations—such as in *Moab*—before bursting. The women's westward journey from Moab around the northern shore of the Dead Sea passed without incident.

The mention of the *barley harvest* confirmed that the famine was broken (Ruth 1:6z). The beginning of that harvest took place sometime in mid-March to mid-April. In later Jewish tradition, the book of Ruth was read at the feast of weeks in celebration of God's provision of the harvest (compare Leviticus 23:15–22).

## **7. What was the outcome of Naomi's and Ruth's journey to Bethlehem? (Ruth 1:22)**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Walk with One Another**

We are created to be in community with God and with others. Ruth's faithfulness to the Lord and to Naomi is an example for all of what living and loving in community might require of us. Ruth's words and actions demonstrated true commitment to carrying Naomi's burdens (compare Galatians 6:2). Showing up in the midst of pain and anguish is difficult, especially if we are dealing with our own feelings of loss. How we respond to tragedy will determine whether we are following Ruth's example as she followed Christ's example without even knowing her many-times great grandson (1 Corinthians 11:1).

### **PRAYER**

Lord, help us to demonstrate Your love in our relationships and in our communities, that we may be active in Your plan to bless others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

Remain steadfast in your love for the Lord and His people!