

Ruth 1:6-21: The Return

Good morning everyone! Please turn with me in your bibles to the book of Ruth, chapter 1. We're going to start in verse 6 and go all the way through the end of the chapter.

Quickly before we begin, I just want to add to the reminder about the fact that we're having just one service next week at 10:30. Like a couple weeks ago, childcare will be available for 5 and under.

We're going to be talking about Vision 2020, what we believe the Lord is calling us to do next year specifically when it comes to some financial things. But we also want to celebrate what God has done in and among us in 2019. So we're going to have baptism, we're going to have a year in review video that David has been working hard to put together, and we're going to hear some testimonies from some of you guys about how the Lord has been working in your lives.

So make a point to be here next week at 10:30, and we'll celebrate what the Lord has done in 2019 and look forward to what he's calling us to in 2020.

Look with me at Ruth 1, I'm going to read verse 6 to the end of the chapter.

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. **7** So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. **8** But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. **9** The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. **10** And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."

11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? **12** Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, **13** would you therefore wait

till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." **14** Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

15 And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." **16** But Ruth said, "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. **17** Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." **18** And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" **20** She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. **21** I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" **22** So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Let's pray and then we'll jump in.

Father, we once again praise you for an opportunity to worship you together as one body. To lift up our voices in unison to praise you as the one true God. We thank you for your Word that testifies to the fact that you are the one true God. We thank you for your Son who you sent to redeem sinful man and restore your creation to perfection. We ask that you would be with us this morning as we seek to know you more in your word. Help us to see you more clearly, help us to trust you more fully, and help us to glorify you as a result. In Jesus' name, amen.

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This is week two of going through Ruth together, and as I've studied, something that's helped me is thinking of Ruth as a play.

When you think about a play, there's dialogue between the characters, and then someone says their final line of the scene, then a bunch of people dressed in black come on the stage and move the props around to set the stage for the next scene, and when everything's ready, the actors come on and begin their dialogue again.

Ruth is a play with four acts. There are 4 places where the story takes a big shift. And helpfully, they're the 4 chapters of the book. Act 1 is chapter 1, act 2 is chapter 2, and so on. And those acts are broken up into different scenes.

Thinking about Ruth in terms of its scenes and acts is going to help us slow down and get a sense for how the narrator is setting up the tension.

Last week was Act 1 scene 1. And in it, the narrator was setting up for us a hopeless situation. We were introduced to the main character, Naomi, and we learned that they fled to Moab during a famine.

And then we saw that complete and utter disaster struck Naomi as she lost her husband, both her sons, and had no grandsons. And so if this was a play, you can imagine the lights fading to black on the first scene as the woman was weeping all alone.

Thankfully the story doesn't end there. We're about to jump into scene 2. So you can picture the stagehands clearing the first set, and now the lights come back on and we have a new backdrop, as they are on the road back to Bethlehem.

Because at the beginning of scene two, we have a word of hope! A rumor, carried from far away, that there's food in Israel again! God has been gracious to his people, and Naomi and the women decide to return.

So the three of them started back home, but somewhere along the way it seems like Naomi was starting to have a conversation in her

head about what was best for these two girls. They obviously both thought highly enough of Naomi and loved her enough to leave with her, but Naomi starts thinking about their well being and she comes to her senses.

She says in verse 8: **But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.**

This is super emotional. Honestly what it reminds me of is like a hallmark movie about an animal and its owner getting close, and then the owner releasing the animal into the wild. Saying, "Go! You need to go be free! Don't stay here!" With tears streaming down his face.

That's what Naomi does; she stops in the middle of the road and tells them, for their own good, that they need to go back home.

At first it doesn't work. We hear both of them in unison saying, "No! We're coming with you!"

So Naomi tries again.

She basically tells them, if you stick with me, you're not going to find any husbands. You think this old widow is going to have a kid somehow and then you're going to wait for 20 years after that to marry him? Or are you just not going to get married?

She says, "seriously, you need to turn back, go back to your people, find a new husband, and live a happy life."

You might be asking at this point, "Why did Naomi think that the only way they could have husbands in Bethlehem was if they were Naomi's own sons?" I never really understood why Naomi didn't think they could find husbands in Bethlehem because —spoiler alert— obviously Ruth does find a husband. So why wasn't that even an option in her mind at this point?

I think there are two reasons.

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First, it was much more likely that they would find husbands in Moab. These women kind of had two strikes against them in that they were foreign, and they were widowed. So in Naomi's mind their prospects were much better off in Moab.

But there's another reason that had more to do with Naomi's state of mind than anything else. Look at what she says in verse 13, **“for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.”**

Naomi, as we see here and will become more clear in a few minutes, sees herself primarily as the unjust victim of the Lord's harsh hand. And as such, she's incapable of seeing any way that her circumstances will get better.

She has this attitude that's like, “Well for some reason God just likes to use me as his punching bag. My life is going to be terrible from here on out, might as well leave me because I'm cursed.”

In the midst of her genuinely excruciating circumstances, she was unable to see the goodness and tenderness and love and mercy of her heavenly Father in the ways that he was providing for her. She was choosing to wallow in pity instead of trusting the Lord.

And if I'm being honest, I can struggle with that too. It's super easy for me to get into that mental place. I don't know if I say it in so many words, but I can all too easily slip into this mindset when I'm walking through a difficult season where I think, “Well I guess this is how it's going to be. I guess God must be wanting to take his anger out on me. Better get used to this.” And I can lose the ability to think rationally about the ways that the Lord *is* able to provide, and his promises to do so.

And when I get stuck there, when I get stuck in a place where I feel like my current hardship is going to define the rest of my life, when I can't possibly see a way when it ever gets better, that shows me that I'm not trusting in God. I don't believe he really loves me or cares for me.

What we see here in Naomi is a woman who has lost her trust in the Lord's provision, and instead is choosing to blame him for her circumstances. And while that can be a temptation for us too in the midst of hardship, may we choose to trust God's steady, gracious, loving hand to guide us no matter what is going on.

Back to the story.

Naomi has told them to turn back to Moab for a second time, and, just like the first time, Ruth and Orpah both raise their voices and weep. But this time is different. Because instead of the two women speaking in unison, Orpah kisses Naomi and turns back to Moab. She agrees that her prospects will be better off there, and says her tearful goodbye to Naomi and Ruth.

Listen to what happened next.

15 And she (Naomi) said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

Isn't that interesting that she said “her people and her gods,” without any mention that it was wrong to worship other gods?

This would have made perfect sense in that culture, because different countries were associated with different gods. In our minds, we keep things like nationality, culture and religion separate. But in that culture there was no distinction.

So Naomi is reflecting the thinking of the culture around her, rather than a biblical worldview. She should know that her God, Yahweh, is the one true God of all the nations, but we see a little bit of spiritual immaturity here when she tells them to go back to their gods without any second thought.

Look at Ruth's response. Verse 16.

16 But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you.”

That word for leave carries with it the sense of “abandon.” She’s saying I’m not going to abandon you out here. Instead, she says this, which is one of the more recognizable statements of commitment in all of scripture:

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. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.”

A lot of times in scripture, the authors will list the extremes of something to show that they’re talking about those extremes and everything in the middle.

Psalms 113: “From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised.” Meaning there’s no time when God’s name shouldn’t be praised.

We do this too sometimes. It’s like if you say you were working “day and night” on something, it means you were working all the time. Or if you say you searched “high and low” for something, it means you looked everywhere.

That’s what Ruth is doing here. She’s listing the extremes to show that there’s no way she’s going to leave Naomi. She says “when you go somewhere, I’m going there too. When you’re not going somewhere, I’m staying with you. I’m so committed to you that I’m going to give up my own people and customs and now your people are going to be my people. I’m going to give up my gods and now your God is my God. If you die, I’m going to die right alongside you.”

So Ruth, in an incredible act of selflessness and commitment, vows to lay down her entire life to serve Naomi. What she’s saying is, “I am 100% committed to you. No matter what. For richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. I’m here.”

And Naomi’s response, of all things, is silence. Verse 18:

¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

Not even a thank you. Just silence. We are so amazed by these words that we read them at weddings, and we paint them on reclaimed barn wood and hang them in our houses, and yet Naomi says nothing. Further showing us where her heart is, and the fact that she had no eyes to see how God was providing for her.

Alright, that’s the end of scene 2.

So now you can imagine that the stagehands are moving the wilderness backdrop and wheeling in the Bethlehem set. Now scene 3 starts in Bethlehem. Naomi has finally returned home.

This is what it says. Verse 19:

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?”

Bethlehem, being the small town that it is, is all abuzz at the return of Naomi. They can’t believe she’s back after all these years. However, something’s different.

It doesn’t look like her anymore. Years of being destitute as well as the grief that she’s experienced have turned Naomi, who used to be the pleasant one—remember her name means pleasant— into a tired, haggard old woman.

And she speaks to that in verse 20. The first words she says to her fellow countrymen after returning home are in verse 20.

²⁰ She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

Don’t call me Naomi, don’t call me pleasant; call me Mara, which means bitter. Because God has dealt bitterly with me. Verse 21:

²¹ I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.

Really? Empty? What about Ruth?

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You can imagine Ruth standing to the side thinking, “Am I really worth nothing to you? I just gave up everything to commit myself to you. And this is what you think of me?”

Naomi goes on:

Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

Naomi, bitter, angry at God, complaining about her circumstances to anyone who will listen. She’s gone through true hardship, for sure, but instead of humbly submitting herself to the Lord and trusting him, she blames him for being too harsh on her.

And with those bitter words, the curtain closes on Act 1 of Ruth.

What do we learn from this? A few things as we close.

First, like we said before, I think many of us, like Naomi, have a tendency to miss the tender and gracious hand of God in the midst of hardship, and particularly in times of discipline.

Instead of seeing his discipline as loving and for our good, we can think of God as some sort of cosmic state trooper sitting on the side of the road just waiting to get us.

I was able to sit in with the Webster’s small group on Friday night, and we talked about this a little bit. I confessed that I can have a tendency to see God as someone who’s out to get me, that no matter what I do, he won’t be happy with my effort.

And I shared that becoming a Father myself has helped me understand God’s loving discipline better. When my son disobeys something I tell him to do, then the perfect harmony that was between us gets broken. If I tell him to come here and he runs in the opposite direction, we can’t enjoy the fellowship that we would enjoy if he had just obeyed me.

And my desire in that moment isn’t to exact revenge, it isn’t to get even with him, it’s to restore our relationship back to wholeness. To

remove the thing that is standing in the way. And sometimes that means discipline. But that discipline is loving, and it’s with the goal in mind of restoring our relationship and ensuring that as he grows in maturity, he disobeys less and less.

The same is true when God disciplines us. If Naomi had lived a long, fulfilling, happy life in Moab, she would have lived her whole life apart from God’s plan for her, *and* she would have missed the way he was using her in his ultimate plan of redemption. Even though she came back empty, she was ultimately filled far greater than she would have ever been filled had her husband and sons stayed alive and they lived in Moab.

Psalm 3:11-12 says, **My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof,**

¹² for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

So for us, let us not despise God’s discipline. He disciplines those he loves. And his plan is for our fullness. And while it might be painful for a while, we can ultimately trust that he is a good father, and that his discipline is for our good and his glory.

That’s the first thing. Here’s the second: The decision to follow Jesus can be hard, but it’s always the right one. There is a dichotomy here between Ruth and Orpah. Orpah turned back to her own people and her own gods, and Ruth committed herself to Yahweh, the one true God.

Now, I don’t think we have enough evidence to say that Ruth went with Naomi because she knew that Yahweh was the true God at the time, *but* ultimately Ruth did learn that, and her offspring became the royal line of David and ultimately Jesus.

Orpah made the easier decision. Ruth made the hard choice. Orpah was going to go back to what was comfortable, to what she knew, to the life she had before in Moab. To her people and to her gods.

On the other hand, when Ruth said, “Your God will be my God,” she had no idea what her life would be like.

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So if you're here this morning and you're at that same crossroads moment, whether it's trusting in the Lord for your salvation, or making a hard decision that the Lord might be calling you to make, let me plead with you, don't go back to Moab.

Don't go back to what's easy, to what's comfortable. Don't choose to keep serving yourself, when you're called to serve the Lord.

Following Jesus often means giving up a lot of what was once your normal way of life. A lot has to change: Your values, the people you spend your time with, the things you once sought after with your whole heart, the things you thought would make you happy.

It can seem like the most natural thing in the world to return to your old life, to your old people and your old gods and try to find some sort of happiness.

But don't believe it! Because, like we will see with Ruth, there is no ultimate satisfaction, no ultimate fulfillment in anything other than following Jesus. It will seem scary. It can feel like stepping off a cliff into the unknown.

But just because it's scary doesn't mean it's wrong. Choose to follow Jesus. Choose to seek him. Leave your old life behind. Where he goes you will go, where he leads, you will follow. It might be hard at times, but as anyone in this room who knows Jesus can testify, you won't regret it for a second.

So if you're walking through a season of discipline right now, remember that God's discipline is meant to restore us back to perfect harmony with him. And if you find yourself at a crossroads trying to figure out if this Jesus is really worth following, let me assure you that he is. And let me beg you to make today the day of your salvation. To ask the Lord to forgive you of your sin, and to tell him that you believe that he died for you on the cross, he paid the price for your sin, and that you've been forgiven of all your past, present, and future sin. Truly the most glorious reality on the face of the earth.

Praise God for the gospel, amen? Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your Word, thank you for the opportunity to study it together as a body. We thank you for your discipline. Because while it's not easy at times to be disciplined, your discipline is evidence that you love us. What loving Father wouldn't discipline his children for their own good? So we thank you for that and we ask that you would help us to not become bitter in those times, but to learn what you want us to learn and to grow in our relationship with you.

We also pray for anyone in this room who might not know you, and we pray for those you've placed around each of us who don't know you. I pray that they, like Ruth, would resolve to leave behind their former gods and follow after you, the one true and living God. There is no one else worthy of praise and honor and glory. You alone are our Father. We praise you. In Jesus' name, amen.