

Naomi Returns to Bethlehem with Ruth (1:6-22)

Modern times are much different from ancient times. Today, if a young woman becomes a widow, what options does she have? Her options are almost endless. She could get a job or pursue an education, or both. She could remarry. She could return to her original home. She could live alone or with others. Independent, single women are quite common in our world. There is nothing in our culture to hinder a young woman from doing whatever she wants.

The ancient world was not so accommodating to young widows. Women in those days were profoundly dependent on their husbands and their families. A *younger* widow would typically return to her parents' home. An *older* widow would depend on her children for support. A widow without a family was truly destitute. There is good reason that widows were often listed along with orphans and foreigners as the lowest and most vulnerable people in society.

Last time, we looked at the introduction and setting for the Book of Ruth. Naomi and her family were sojourning in Moab when her husband and two sons died. That left Naomi with her two daughters in law, Orpah and Ruth. These three widows had no means of support or protection. What would become of them?

Today we'll see how Naomi returned to Bethlehem with Ruth. Remember that the theme of the book is how God demonstrates His faithfulness by loving, superintending, and caring for His people. The journey back to Bethlehem is the beginning of God's plan to provide for these women.

Let's see how the story unfolds and what it can teach us today.

- I. .6-7 Naomi decides to return to Judah after hearing that the famine was over.
 - A. Naomi had somehow heard that “the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread” – i.e., the famine was over, and the people now had food. Bethlehem, the “house of bread,” has bread on the shelves again.
 - B. She credits “the Lord” with controlling the circumstances that had ended the famine.
 - 1. To “visit” his people in this case is a way of expressing God’s kindness in ending the famine and providing food. God had come to the aid of his people by ending the famine.
 - 2. Note the reason for this change: Naomi does not attribute this to weather patterns or climate change. The reason there is bread in Bethlehem is that “the Lord has visited his people.” God had ended the famine and given the people bread.

In ancient times, the people were absolutely dependent on nature. If it didn’t rain, there would be famine. During a famine, there would be no food. Without food, people died. Ancient people were very connected to the natural cycles of weather and farming.

Today, we are much more insulated from nature. Most of us go to the grocery store to buy bread, not to the fields to harvest wheat.

But we are still just as dependent on God to provide for us. God provides for us through the normal circumstances of life—through farmers and truckers and grocers. No matter how we get our food, we should realize that we are utterly dependent upon God for providing our daily bread.

Jesus taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” No matter where our bread comes from, ultimately it comes from God. That’s true with everything we have. We are just as dependent upon God as these characters were 3000 years ago.

- C. .7 The three women begin traveling toward Judah.
 - 1. Orpah and Ruth would have been dependent on Naomi at this time. She was the head of the household. They no doubt had developed strong bonds of affection over the years. They considered one another to be family.
 - 2. It appears that all three set out together, but eventually Naomi tries to dissuade the young women from coming with her.
- II. .8 Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their own families.
 - A. Naomi directs the women to “return each to her mother’s house.”
 - 1. Typically, if a young woman were widowed or divorced, that’s what she would do—return to her original family.
 - 2. The idea of a young woman living alone was almost unheard of in this culture. Single women didn’t live alone; they lived with their family. Younger widows would often remarry and begin a new family. A woman would almost always be connected to a family, not living alone independently.
 - 3. So the prospects for Orpah and Ruth would be better if they returned to their original homes. They could go home and begin a new chapter in their lives. Their Moabite families would no doubt take care of them. Their prospects for success were much better if they stayed in Moab than if they returned with Naomi to Judah.
 - B. .8b Naomi wishes that the Lord would deal kindly with the two.
 - 1. Note the word “kindly.” Here is the first instance of the use of the very important Hebrew word *hesed*. It means “loving kindness, steadfast love.” So Naomi entrusts them to the loving kindness of God. She’s invoking the blessings of God upon them.
 - 2. .8b Notice the language “as you have dealt with the dead and with me.” The picture we get of this family is quite positive. It seems that the relationship between these women and the men was warm and loving; they also enjoyed a good relationship with their mother-in-law. They felt sincere and deep bonds of affection.
 - 3. And these women must have been a comfort to Naomi as she grieved over the loss of her husband and her sons. They showed loving kindness through these terrible tragedies.

4. So Naomi desires that God would bless them because they have been a blessing. She hopes that God would be kind to them because they have been kind toward her and her family.

App: Family and friends need to uphold and support one another through times of tragedy and disaster. Families need to pull together to provide loving kindness, grace, and compassion to those who are grieving. In this case, all three of the women suffered great tragedy. Naomi lost both husband and sons; just imagine how tragic that loss would be. But these three women helped and comforted one another during this difficult time.

We need to be sensitive and sympathetic toward those who are grieving. The Bible tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. The church should act like a family in this regard.

C. .9 May the Lord grant you rest and a husband.

1. The word “rest” here signifies the blessing and security of a husband and family. She wants them to enjoy a happy and peaceful life, a life of security and comfort with their husbands.
2. In that culture, a woman’s wellbeing was directly linked to her husband. Without a husband, a woman was insecure and vulnerable; she would often face poverty and destitution.
3. But Naomi is hopeful that the Lord would grant these women a new family where they find security and blessing. Her prayer is that they would find husbands and enjoy family life.

App: BTW, there is nothing wrong with that belief—that women fare best with a husband and family. A stable marriage is the source of security, wellbeing, and provision.

Many women don’t think they need a husband; they can be happy and achieve all their dreams without a man. In modern Western culture, women have many privileges and rights that ancient women simply did not have. But even today, one of the best ways for women to enjoy security and wellbeing is to get married to a good man. Marriage and family are very good things, and we should encourage women to find rest and security in the home of their husbands. That ought to be the norm; it’s usually in the best interests for women to get married and enjoy family life.

- D. .9b She kisses them, and they all weep. No doubt, the idea of being separated from one another caused them great sorrow. They had lived together for several years and comforted one another through great tragedy. And now they had to separate. So they wept and wailed loudly; loud weeping was common in that culture.
- E. .10 The daughters-in-law both express their desire to accompany Naomi as she goes back to Judah. They were so attached to Naomi that they were willing to leave their home country and friends to stay with her. Their devotion to Naomi shows the deep, personal relationship that these three women had. Orpah and Ruth are attached to Naomi, and they are very reluctant to sever that relationship.

App: This shows us that a daughter-in-law can have a good relationship with a mother-in-law.

- F. .11 Naomi discourages the women from returning with her.
1. .11a “Why go ye with me?” This is something of a mild rebuke. It would be foolish for them to come along with her. Her situation is hopeless, and she doesn’t want these women to sacrifice their happiness for her.

She gives several reasons why it would be foolish for these young women to come with her back to Judah.
 2. .11b She’ll have no more sons for them to marry.

This is the first hint in the book of the practice of Levirate marriage. In Levirate marriage, if a woman’s husband died before any children were born, a brother of the dead man – i.e., the widow’s brother-in-law (*levir* is Latin for brother-in-law)—could marry the widow and “raise up seed” in the name of the dead man, thus preserving the dead man’s family line.

This practice was not merely traditional; it was a requirement of the OT law (Deut 25:5-10).

So Naomi is saying that there is no chance that a brother-in-law will step in to take care of this. The two dead men will have no other brothers to step in and do this duty. If they return with her to Bethlehem, there would be little or no hope for them to remarry and have their own families.

3. .12 She's too old to remarry. It's likely that Naomi is at least 50 years old at this point. That doesn't seem too old in our culture, but in those days, poor older widows were not very desirable. Typically, older widows would be dependent on their children. In Naomi's case, her children were dead. So she had no prospects for remarriage and no means of support. From all appearances, it was a hopeless situation for her.

And that's what makes this story so powerful. When everything seemed hopeless, God provided a solution. And we maintain that same confidence today.

4. .12b-13a Even if she bore sons, the women would not wait for them to grow up and marry them.

It seems rather ridiculous to point out all of this; the women could not wait around for potential sons of Naomi to grow up and marry them.

5. So she's trying to convey the idea that she has no hope for the future, and these women would also have no hope if they tag along with her.
6. From a human point of view, Naomi appears to be right. The women may as well go home and restart their lives. Their chances for success are better if they stay in Moab than if they go with her.

- G. .13end Naomi expresses her grief that the hand of Lord has "gone out against" her.

1. .13b The word "grieveth" is literally "it makes bitter." The statement here is a bit odd—"it grieveth me much for your sakes..." It perhaps means something like "My bitterness is greater than yours," or maybe "my life is too bitter to share."
2. The point is that Naomi's situation is even worse than that of her daughters-in-law. Orpah and Ruth could go back home, and their prospects for remarriage and children was good. Naomi's prospects were quite bad.

3. The reason for her hopelessness is “the hand of the Lord.” God is ultimately responsible for the loss of her husband and sons. This was not chance or bad luck. Naomi seems to think that God must be her enemy; he is against her. She blames God for the famine and for the deaths of her husband and sons.
4. It’s interesting that she doesn’t charge the Lord with being unfair for what he has allowed in her life. Perhaps that’s a hint that Naomi knew that it was wrong to have left the Promised Land to live in Moab. It seems as if she sees this tragedy as God’s chastisement or rebuke for their sin.

App: Do you ever feel like God’s hand has “gone out against” you? When disaster strikes, that’s a common response. If we believe in the sovereignty of God, then we also believe that God is in control of both blessings or disasters.

Job 2:10 ... *shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil [adversity/trouble]? ...*

If you’ve been living sinfully, then you should not be surprised when disaster strikes. God promises to chastise his children when they are disobedient. God is like a loving father who disciplines his children. You should expect discipline if you are living disorderly, disobedient lives. You should expect God’s hand to go out against you if you are living in willful, unrepentant disobedience.

H. .14 They all weep again.

1. Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye (and leaves—.15 “thy sister is gone back...”). Orpah is finally convinced that her best hopes for the future remain in Moab with her family. So she takes Naomi’s advice and goes home, no doubt with great sorrow in her heart.
2. But Ruth refused to leave.

I. .15 Naomi encourages Ruth to follow Orpah’s example—return to your people and to your gods.

1. Typically, people worshipped the gods associated with the land in which they lived. Moabites worshipped Chemosh, so if you lived in Moab, that’s the god you worshipped.

Note: That statement does not imply that Chemosh had genuine existence. We know that there is only one true and living God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the false god Chemosh was an object of worship even though these false gods were nothing.

Further, most pagans worshipped more than one god. Chemosh was a sort of national god, maybe the primary one, but most of the pagans worshipped multiple false gods.

2. In any case, it's rather unfortunate for Naomi to say this. A faithful Jewish person would never suggest that anyone should return to idolatry. In that sense, Naomi is not a good example.

Quote: Her theological perceptions at this point seem no more orthodox than those of many characters in the Book of Judges. If she represents the highest level of faith in Israel, it is no wonder Yahweh had sent a famine on the land.¹

So Naomi's character here is rather suspect/questionable.

App: The only options available to us is that we worship the true and living God or false gods. When people refuse to worship the God of the Bible, they resort to false gods. People we know may be educated, decent, kind friends, but if they don't worship the true and living God, then they are worshipping false gods. They are really no better than the pagan worshippers of Chemosh.

- J. .16 Ruth expresses her loyalty to Naomi.
 1. This is Ruth's first speech in the book, and it's a doozy. This is one of the greatest pledges of loyalty and devotion in all of ancient literature. It's one of the most memorable passages in the whole OT. It's a beautiful expression of loyalty and love.
 2. I mentioned that one of the key terms in the book is "loving kindness/steadfast love (*hesed*), and this is a very fitting expression of that characteristic.

¹ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 639.

3. .16b-17b She commits herself to going with Naomi, living with her, adopting her people, following her God, and even dying where she dies. She's committing herself to sharing Naomi's life and home, whatever the consequences. She feels obligated to accompany Naomi, and nothing is going to stop her.

We probably don't understand how radical of a commitment this was. Ruth was ready to leave her country and her own people in order to follow Naomi. A person's identity and sense of stability and security is often directly tied to family and home place. Ruth is willing to give up all of that to follow Naomi. And all of that is despite the fact that Naomi believes that the future is hopeless. So Ruth's commitment to Naomi is really remarkable.

So while Naomi's character is somewhat questionable at this point, Ruth's character begins to shine. She proves herself to be more godly than Naomi in some respects.

4. .17b She swears a solemn oath/vow; she swears in God's name that nothing but death will separate them. She invokes God to hold her accountable for her promise. She's ready to be severely punished if she goes back on this promise—"and more also" – i.e., "may God add any curse on me if I renege on this promise."
5. .16end Her statement "thy God [shall be] my God" suggests that she had not yet converted to worshipping the God of Israel. But then in .17b, she swears in God's name, as if she already believed in him.
6. **Is this** the point of her conversion, or is this just an occasion on which she affirmed her pre-existing faith? It's hard to know. But after this statement, we can assume that Ruth believes in the God of Israel. She has switched allegiance from Moab to Israel and from Chemosh to Yahweh. That fact will prove itself as the story unfolds. Ruth's good fruit reveals that she is a genuine follower of the God of Israel.

Cf. 1Th 1:9 ... *ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;*

Ruth's confession is a statement of true conversion. This kind of turning from and turning to is often missing in evangelism. "Just believe in Jesus" is the common approach. But we must emphasize both repentance and faith.

- K. .18 Naomi finally agrees to allow Ruth to return to Judah with her. She recognized that Ruth was “steadfastly minded” to stay with her no matter what, so she stops protesting and allows Ruth to accompany her to Judah. It probably helped that Ruth had made a commitment to the God and to the people of Israel. And there does not seem to be anything Naomi can do to stop Ruth, so Naomi concedes.

III. .19-22 Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem.

- A. .19 “they went until they came” – This was probably about a 50-mile trip. If the two were walking, which is probable, the trip would have taken at least 3-4 days, perhaps a bit longer. It must have been a dangerous journey for two unaccompanied women, but apparently they made it with no serious problems.

- B. .19b Everyone in town notices that Naomi has returned. Bethlehem was not a large town, and most of the people knew one another. Although about 10 years had passed, the people still remembered Naomi.

The verb “was moved” (תָּהוּ) is kind of an interesting word. It means “to hum, to groan, to make a noise, to be in an uproar.” So the town was humming or buzzing with news of Naomi’s arrival with her daughter-in-law Ruth. Their sudden, unexpected appearance made quite a splash in this quiet, little town.

- C. .19end “Is this Naomi?” The question suggest that Naomi’s appearance had changed considerably. She apparently looked different from how she looked 10 years before; she had no doubt aged. Perhaps the stress and grief she had experienced had changed her appearance. Or maybe they are surprised that she came back home.

- D. .20 Naomi (“pleasant, beautiful, good”) changes her name to Mara (“bitter) because of the Lord’s affliction.

1. .21 She’s bitter because she’s lost everything she had; she left “full,” but she came back “empty.” She had left 10 years ago with her husband and sons, and now she has returned without them. She left with security and stability, but she returns vulnerable and destitute.

And it’s kind of insensitive to claim that she is “empty” when Ruth is standing right next to her.

Naomi's words here are rather self-centered. She's throwing something of a pity party—woe is me. She no doubt has suffered great disaster, and her focus is on her own grief.

App: It's natural for us to focus on our own grief and our own feelings when disaster strikes. We can't pretend we don't have feelings. We may be prone to bitterness and even depression in the wake of disaster and death. Grief is a natural response to such things, and Naomi had good reason to grieve.

When people are grieving over the death of loved ones, we should give them time to grieve and express their sorrow. People naturally go through stages of grief, and we must be compassionate when people suffer.

However, we must not let sorrow and grief allow us to become bitter. We continue to believe that God is for us, that he is working all things according to the counsel of his will, and that all things will ultimately work out for his glory and for our good.

2. .21end The Lord has testified against her and afflicted her. Once again, we see that Naomi affirms her belief in God's providential control over the events of her life. And God used his sovereign power to allow these calamities/disasters.
3. And it's further evidence that Naomi admits that it was wrong to go to Moab. To "testify against" someone is to bring charges against, to indict of a crime. To her way of thinking, Yahweh had called her to account and declared her guilty.² She believes the Lord caused these things to happen because of her sin or her family's sin.

App: It's not unusual for people to get mad at God for allowing disaster in their lives. But often these calamities are the result of sinful personal decisions. People make sinful decisions and then they get mad at God for bringing chastisement into their lives. We should not get angry at God when he allows us to experience the natural results of our sin. Cf. Gal 6:7-8. From all appearances, Naomi was reaping the bitter fruit of her previous choices.

² Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 647.

I wonder how often we become angry with God for the consequences of our own sins. We should not blame God for allowing us to reap what we have sown.

- E. .22 summary statement: Naomi and Ruth are now living in Bethlehem. The author throws in a little detail—it was the time of the barley harvest. That time of year was the spring—April and May.
1. That’s an important detail because, according to the OT law, poor people could glean in the fields after the harvest. These two poor, destitute women have a means of feeding themselves. So there is a glimmer of hope that these two may find a way to keep body and soul together.
 2. It’s an important detail because it gives us a hint about what’s going to happen next. A critical part of the plot revolves around the barley harvest. The author very skillfully prepares us for the next part of the story.

With the end of chapter 1, we come to the end of the first part of the story. As readers, we are not quite sure what to think about Naomi. She seems to believe that God is good, and she invokes God’s favor on her daughters-in-law. She believes that God is sovereign over the events of her life.

Yet she also encouraged Orpah to return to her false gods. Instead of repenting of her sins, Naomi complains that God has been unkind to her. God unfairly took away her husband and her sons. She went out full and has returned empty.

So the picture we get of Naomi is not entirely positive. She’s a believer, but she’s deeply unhappy about God’s work in her life. Tragedy has made her bitter. She doesn’t seem to think that Ruth is of much value.

Ruth, on the other hand, has made a beautiful and memorable statement of loyalty and support to this old, bitter woman. She’s left her homeland and ventured to a new city where her future is uncertain at best.

Will Naomi’s emptiness be filled? Will her bitterness be turned to joy? Will Ruth prove to be an asset or a liability? Tune in next time...