

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

The Faithfulness of Ruth

Ruth 1 Continued

6. Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people by giving them bread.

Naomi is left in a sad situation here, yet she does not just pine away in mourning. She hears a report out of the land of Israel. Yahweh has visited His people, and they now have bread! Her family died in Moab in the midst of famine while God's people back in the land were enjoying His bounty. If only Elimelech and his family had waited on Him! Yet now, hearing this, Naomi determines what she must do. She will return to her own land with her daughters-in-law.

7. Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

So Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth leave their home in Moab, and head down the road to Israel. Her daughters-in-law follow her at first, probably not knowing what else to do. When a woman got married in those days, she was considered to have switched families. This was because families were very much like what we would think of as "family businesses." Your family was your work, and the family was responsible for its own food, its own trade, and even making its own clothes. The father was like the CEO, and he was the one who would run the family and make all the important decisions. Children, on the other hand, were like employees. The male children especially were important, as they would stay in the family and help it run in the future. The firstborn son would even take over the running of the family when the father could no longer do so, either from death or old age. Yet the girls were only temporarily in the family. When they got married, they no longer would work for the family. Instead, they would move to the family of the man they married, and from then on, she would work for them. They would be responsible for her, and it would be her job to spend her life supporting them.

Thus when a woman was married, they considered it that she had switched families. Though she was still "related to" the family she was born in, she was no longer working for them, so she was no longer really part of their life. That means in many ways she was forgotten out of the family she was born in, and became part of the family she married into. Her children did not have two sets of grandparents: maternal and paternal. They really only belonged to their father's family, and had no connection to their mother's family, except under unusual circumstances. That was because they would only really work for their father's family, and not their mother's, so this was all very practical. Yet no doubt there are many grandparents today who love their daughter's children very much who would object strongly to any such arrangement! Yet that was how they did things at the time. This was not something that God had commanded, but was simply custom and practicality. It is certainly not something that there is any reason for us to go back to.

So now these two women who had married into Elimelech's family are widowed. Though they still belong to Elimelech's family, and theirs was the first responsibility to care for them, a widow whose husband's family could not care for her could return to the family of her birth, especially if her father was still alive and willing to take her back in. Elimelech's family certainly seems in no shape to take care of these women at this point, so this is the choice that is before them.

8. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. The LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

Partway along on the trip back to Israel, Naomi seems to be bothered by her conscience. She knows she is now in the place of mother to these two young widows, yet she realizes that the sad circumstances she is in leaves her with no ability to take care of either of them, as it was her responsibility to do. She had been taking them with her back home, but she realizes that she has little to offer them when they get there. Therefore, she advises them therefore to return to their families, and to their own mothers. Though she could no doubt use their help and support, she does not begrudge them this, knowing that this is by far the safer and easier course for them. Their families will no doubt take them in and find them new homes and husbands, whereas she can offer them little but beggarhood in a strange land.

9. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

Naomi blesses them in the name of her God, Jehovah. She wishes them to find rest, each in the house of a new husband. It would be unlikely that the families of their birth would want to take them back in permanently. Yet they would probably be happy to get a second bridal price for them, and these are young and beautiful widows, almost sure to be able to find new families if their parents search for them. Thus Naomi wishes them new homes and husbands for themselves, the two things that would bring them security that she herself could not provide them, nor guarantee them when she returned to her own land. There is no doubt but that their families would be much more likely to find these things for them than Naomi.

Now Naomi kisses them, a kiss of farewell. Yet now we find evidence of the kind of woman Naomi must have been, for we see that both her daughters-in-law, in the short time they had been married to her sons, had come to love her dearly. These two women, not much more than girls themselves (for women married young in those days,) had come to look to Naomi as a mother indeed, and it is hateful to them to have to leave her.

10. And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people."

Orpah and Ruth protest. They are reluctant to leave this kind foreigner who has taken them in as her daughters and showed such love to them. Naomi had perhaps been a very different kind of woman from their own mothers! The simple fact that their families married them to foreigners shows that they may have had little regard for their welfare, for this was not a favorable match, no matter the wealth of the family you married into. Therefore their first inclination is to return with her to her own people.

11. But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?"

Naomi must have been touched by their kind offer. If she had accepted at this point, they might both have come with her. Yet Naomi loves them indeed, and knows that they are probably better off if she convinces them to go. If they come with her, they will be foreigners in a strange land. If we think it is hard to be a foreigner today, it was much more so then! Few left their homeland, and so people were not used to strangers. People around the world had a real hatred and fear of strangers, and would tend to show little kindness to them. You were working together and partially dependent on your friends and neighbors, yet you had no stock in a foreigner, and so no reason to look on one as anything but a person come in to steal from your community what rightfully belongs to you. For this reason, strangers were often treated in the very worst way. Orpah and Ruth would have a much better chance at a happy life among their own people.

In attempting to persuade them to go, Naomi cites a tradition that a brother marry his dead brother's wife. This was one way that the widow's family (for remember her married family was her family now) would take care of her. God actually codified this in the law, as we can read in Deuteronomy 25:5.

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the widow of the dead man shall not be married to a stranger outside the family; her husband's brother shall go in to her, take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.

Yet this law would do little for Orpah or Ruth. Naomi had no sons but Mahlon and Chilion, and they are now dead. Naomi points out how ridiculous it would be that her daughters-in-law could ever hope to get a husband from her at this point.

12. Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons,

Naomi urges her two daughters-in-law to turn back and go home to the families of their birth. She cannot provide a son for them to marry, for she knows she will not find a new husband at her age. Men interested in a family were looking for younger wives. Moreover, she points out that even the best possible scenario is impossible. Even if she did count on the hope that she might find a husband, or even if she had one that night and immediately conceived a son or twin sons, that would not solve the predicament for Orpah and Ruth.

13. would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!"

The reason this would not help is that Orpah and Ruth would have to wait for these boys until they were grown. By that time, they both would be old, and nearly past the child-bearing years themselves. Would they then restrain themselves from having husbands on this vain and tardy hope? No, this would not do at all.

Naomi grieves that these are the facts in the case, but nevertheless they do not change. For the sakes of these two women she has come to think of as daughters therefore she mourns the condition her family is in. Again, however, her grief does not change reality.

Notice that Naomi blames the LORD for going against her to bring her to such a state. Yet she is ignoring the fact that it was she and her family who had left the LORD's land to sojourn among foreigners who neither know nor worship Him. Yet how often this is the case, that we blame the results of our foolish and disobedient actions as the LORD just not treating us fairly!

14. Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

This word convinces Orpah. She cares about her mother-in-law, but she must look out for herself first. The situation Naomi describes does indeed seem like an intolerable one. Thus Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye, and leaves her. Yet Ruth does not leave. Instead, she sticks fast to Naomi. So it is that the beautiful Gazelle flits away home, but the true Friend will not leave her.

15. And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

When Naomi sees that Ruth has not left after Orpah, she urges her again to leave, this time using her sister-in-law's example. Orpah saw the sense in Naomi's words, and went back to her own people and to her own gods. Will not Ruth do the same?

*16. But Ruth said:
"Entreat me not to leave you,
Or to turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;*

*And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.*

Ruth will not hear of leaving Naomi. Instead, she requests that Naomi cease from entreating her to leave her or go back to Moab. Then, she speaks her mind. She will go where Naomi goes. She will live where Naomi lives, be it a permanent residence or an endless series of temporary dwellings. She will forget the Moabites and make the Israelites her people. Moreover, she will forget the Moabite gods and make the God of Israel her God.

How much Ruth knew either of Israel or of Israel's God is hard to say. There is little doubt but that a young Moabite girl like herself would never have been over the western border to actually see the land of their neighboring country of Israel. The stories of both Israel and its God that they heard in Moab, though they might have been quite impressive in some ways, would have been filtered through the resentment of a people who had already aligned themselves as Israel's enemies. They had gone to war with Israel, both at the time of Moses during the incident with Balaam, and also in the time of their king Eglon and Ehud the judge of Israel, assuming Ruth takes place after this incident that was relatively early in the period of the judges. Thus, the opinion of Israel in Moab could not have been that good.

On the other hand, Ruth has had a first-hand look at what one family of Israelites are like, first through her marriage to Mahlon, and then through her relationship with the rest of the family, including Naomi. Whatever she might have thought of the rest of them, it is clear that she loved her mother-in-law dearly. Perhaps she had never met a woman like her in all of Moab. And from her new, married family, she would have learned of their God, Jehovah. How much they taught her and how much she learned of Him through them it is hard to say. Nevertheless, Ruth may have seen something in this God of the Hebrews that seemed better than all the gods and goddesses she had learned of in Moab. Yet the bottom line seems to be her relationship with Naomi. How much these other considerations affected her, it is hard to say, but we do know that she had determined to stick with Naomi through thick and thin. Whatever vow she might have made to Mahlon when she married him, she now makes a similar vow to her mother-in-law. She is not going to leave her. She is part of her family now and forever. She truly is in this thing for the long haul.

Ruth's protest is an Old Testament example of the New Testament idea of *metanoia*, or of having the after-mind. Ruth does not know for certain what Naomi's homeland is like, what her people are like, or what her God is like. She does know they will be very different from what she grew up with and the things she has known. She has heard something of Israel from Naomi, yet she has never seen for herself that what Naomi told her is true. Yet she is determined that whatever the truth may be, nothing will change her mind to make her leave Naomi. This is a true example of what it means to be after-minded, to be truly submissive. Thus the friendship of the Friend Ruth was an impressive friendship indeed, and is a great picture of the kind of dedication we today as believers in Christ should have for God. We can all learn a lesson from this young Moabite girl.

*17. Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The LORD do so to me, and more also,
If anything but death parts you and me."*

Ruth takes her pledge to the extreme, and promises to stay with Naomi until death and beyond, promising even to be buried where Naomi is buried. In other words, even Naomi's death will not part Ruth from her, but Ruth will stay where Naomi is buried until she dies herself! This was a more extreme vow than even many who get married will care to make. Yet what Ruth clearly means is that she is cutting herself off from her own people, and truly making Naomi's people, land, and God her own. She is not just doing this for Naomi's sake, and if she happens to die Ruth might decide her obligation is over and return to the land of her birth. No, she has made this as a permanent decision, and she will never go back.

So now Ruth swears to her statement, and she swears it in the name of her new God Yahweh, whom she has just made her own. We do not know how much she has already learned about Yahweh from Naomi, and if this had anything to do with her now being ready and willing to serve Him. Yet what she is doing for certain is showing her determination to do just what she told Naomi she was going to do by swearing in the name of the God she knows is Naomi's God, showing that she truly has made Naomi's God her own.

This strange phrase "The LORD do so to me, and more also," introduced as part of an oath, is a phrase that was a common Hebrew figure at the time, and is used twelve times in Scripture. The exact meaning of the phrase is hard to determine, as it is never stated what the oath-taker was calling upon the LORD to do if he failed to keep his oath. It may be that some gesture was made to accompany the words, like when we move our index finger across our throats as a gesture to indicate death. The phrase certainly implies something like death, though it does not state what. Those who take this oath in the Bible do not always keep it. Like all vows, the value of the vow lies in the intention and follow-through of the one making the vow, and not upon the words of the vow itself. Ruth was one who certainly both meant her vow, and kept it. She stayed with Naomi, and never left the place where she was the rest of her life, and even after she had died.

18. When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

Naomi realizes she can't change Ruth's mind, so she stops trying. Their conversation over, they continue the long journey back to Bethlehem together.

19. Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

So at last, with only her daughter-in-law to accompany her, Naomi returns to Bethlehem, the House of Bread. An older and a sadder woman she is who returns than the woman who left.

Bethlehem being a small town, the people there immediately notice the two visitors. The women seem to recognize Naomi, though the years and cares have probably changed her a great deal. Therefore they think it is her, but they are not quite certain, so they ask if it is indeed she.

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

Naomi does not bother to acknowledge to these women that it is she, for they all seem to have guessed that anyway. Instead, she calls upon them not to call her Naomi, which means "Delight" or "Pleasantness." Rather, she wants them to call her Mara, which means "Bitterness." She is no longer a delight, but a bitter woman, after all that has happened to her. Yet interestingly she blames this on God the Almighty (Hebrew *Shaddai*.) It is His fault, she feels, for dealing bitterly with her. Of course, she conveniently forgets the fact that she and her family were the ones who left His land to sojourn in a place where they worship false gods.

21. I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

She left Israel full, she says, since she had a husband and two sons. Now, she says, the LORD has brought her home again empty, for she comes back with none of them, and only a Moabitess daughter-in-law to accompany her. Why would they call her "Delight" then, she asks? Hasn't the LORD testified against her that she is not a Delight to Him?

Again, notice that she blames the LORD for all the calamity that happened to her in Moab. Yet just because Naomi thinks this is no reason for us to conclude that she is right. The Divine Narrator of this story does not say a word to us about the LORD causing the calamity that happened to her family. We

might notice that all this happened after they left the land and the protection of the LORD behind, but just because they experienced calamity in a foreign land does not mean that the LORD brought about that calamity. It may only be that, away from His land and the place He had given His people, the LORD had not helped them, and what came upon them came upon them. Tragedies do happen in this world, yet when His people were obeying Him and the LORD was looking out for them, He did work to keep these things from happening. Yet no such thing was true when they abandoned the land He gave them.

22. So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

So this finishes the story of how Naomi returned from the country of Moab, with Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law accompanying her. They have arrived at Bethlehem, and have gotten there as the barley harvest is beginning. This was a very major event for a farming community like this, and probably every able-bodied person in Bethlehem would turn out to help on this important occasion. Yet what place will the two, newly-arrived widow women have in all this? Will there be a harvest for these two women? We will come to find this out as we continue the story in the next chapter.

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