

Last week we began a series of sermons on the OT book of Ruth. We looked at the first 5 verses which tell the story of a family living in Bethlehem during a time of famine. They decided to move to Moab, a nearby country, where there was no famine. We saw that this was a move of spiritual compromise because Bethlehem was part of the land where God had promised to dwell with his people and Moab was a pagan country where the people worshipped other gods. The family put their economic wellbeing before their spiritual wellbeing and the result was spiritual catastrophe for the family because the two sons ended up marrying pagan wives. The first paragraph ends with the woman of the family left without her husband and her two sons who had all died. Her name is Naomi. The story continues describing what happens next to Naomi and her two daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth.

First, we read that the three women set out to leave Moab and travel to Judah which was the territory which Naomi and her family had left because of the famine. Naomi is heading back to the promised land where she would again live among the people of God in the land that God had given them. Her two daughters-in-law are travelling with her. The reason given for Naomi returning to Judah was “that the LORD had visited his people and given them food.” The other reason suggested by the story is that Naomi had lost her husband and her two sons. She was in a country where she had no relatives except her two daughters-in-law. With all that had happened and the fact that God had once again given food to the people of Judah, it seemed to the three women that it would be easier for them to survive in the place from which Naomi had come.

Now the rest of the story to the end of the chapter is about the spiritual condition of each of these three women. Ruth is held up as a positive example. Naomi and Orpah are here as negative examples. Most of the verses relate Naomi’s words. And we will begin with them. In dealing with these verses, we will ask the questions: What are we to think of Naomi? What are we to think of Orpah? What are we to think of Ruth? In answering those questions, we will learn what God is teaching us in this passage.

So, what are we to think of Naomi? She is on her way back to her homeland. That is a hopeful sign. But it is clear from Naomi’s words in these verses that she has a long way to go before she has the kind of relationship with God that God is seeking with his people. What Naomi says next is very puzzling and it shows us that she has very little spiritual understanding. She sends the two daughters-in-law back to Moab. “Verses 8-9, “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. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!’”

The girls refuse at this point. Verse 10, “And they said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’” But Naomi insists. She reminds them that she has no more sons to give them and that even if she could have more sons it would not make sense for them to wait until the sons were grown up. Her point here seems to be that she has nothing to give them. In that society women needed men to provide for them. Widows had a very difficult time surviving. They were three widows. The prospect in Israel for those Moabite girls were not good

as far as marrying was concerned. To have security and prosperity Orpah and Ruth needed husbands and the best chance for them to get husbands was back in Moab.

Naomi was right as far as their physical wellbeing was concerned. The Moabites were Israel's enemies. The likelihood of Orpah and Ruth finding husbands in Judah was small. They were much more likely to have comfortable and prosperous lives in Moab where they had family and where there was a much better chance for them to marry.

But what about spiritually? Naomi has some strange thinking going on for an Israelite. She speaks about the LORD blessing the girls in Moab. Verse 8, "May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me, The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Naomi had an expectation that the LORD would bless them in Moab. It seems that Naomi did still not see that Moab was not a good place to nurture a relationship with God. It seems that she did still not see what a spiritual disaster it had been for her family to move to Moab. The fact that she is sending the girls back to Moab shows an incredible lack of understanding of the significance of belonging to God's chosen people and serving God in the promised land. She is still putting economic wellbeing before spiritual wellbeing.

Perhaps that is understandable given how far Israel had fallen from the Lord during this period. If we consider the state of things the book of Judges describes, it is not surprising that someone like Naomi was so ignorant of God's truth. Even though she talked piously about the LORD blessing Orpah and Ruth back in Moab, we are expected to disapprove of her sending them back to the Moabite gods instead of encouraging them to endure whatever hardship awaited them in Israel so that they could come to know the God of Israel and be included among his people. There is no question that that would be a hard road for them. The choice is between hardship in Israel where they might come to know the God of Israel or a better chance at this-worldly comfort while worshipping the gods of Moab.

The story is holding up Naomi in a negative light. As the story proceeds it is clear that Orpah made the wrong choice by returning to Moab and Ruth made the right choice in sticking with Naomi and going with her to live in Israel. That makes it clear that Naomi was very ignorant about some very basic things. She felt that her daughters-in-law would be better off in Moab with a better chance for prosperity than they would be in Israel with the likelihood of a harder life in the place where they might become incorporated into the people of God.

And the point for us is the same as one of the points of application from the last sermon so I won't dwell on it. But there is nothing more important than our relationship with God and that is inseparately connected with belonging to the people of God. There is no this-worldly prosperity or advance that is worth jeopardizing our relationship with God. And this story emphasizes the importance of dwelling among the people of God – even if those people of God are far from what they ought to be. The place where God reveals himself and dwells on earth is among the people of God. Applying this text to our situation, it is a call for us to be engaged in the life of the church because it is in the context of the people of God where God nurtures faith and the blessed life of

obedience. Those who spend more time among the people of the world than they spend among the people of God are making a choice that is similar at least to the choice that Orpah made.

But there is something else the story highlights about Naomi and that is her bitterness and in connection with that her distorted understanding of God. It was perfectly legitimate for her to be sad because of the losses she had endured. The Bible never teaches that honoring God means that we should not grieve. The Psalms, for instance, are full of lament and those Psalms of lament encourage us to cry out to God in our suffering and sorrow. The life that the Bible calls us to live is a fully human life and not some kind of subhuman existence that does not feel pain and suffering.

But there is a right way and a wrong way to respond to suffering and Naomi in these verses is an example of the wrong way. Hear again how Naomi expresses how she is responding to her suffering. In verse 13 she says to her daughters-in-law, “No my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” She is telling her daughters-in-law that they should separate themselves from her because God is against her and if they are with her, they will share in the results of God being against her.

Then toward the end of the chapter, when Naomi and Ruth have made it to Bethlehem, Naomi says to the women who meet her, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 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?”

Now we might be tempted to agree with Naomi. The Lord certainly had brought calamity upon her. She had lost her husband and two sons. The Bible certainly teaches that such things happen by God’s providence. Nothing happens outside of God’s providence. Naomi was certainly correct in her understanding of God’s sovereign control over everything that that happened in her life.

But there are a number of things that the text is asking us to ponder. There is her bitterness against God. This speaks to her conception of God. She feels that God treated her unfairly. She feels that the LORD has not given her the life that she feels he should have given her. Bitterness towards God is rooted in viewing God as treating us badly. It is a recognition of God’s sovereignty, but denial of his goodness and his mercy. What she fails to understand is that one of the reasons that God sends or allows trouble in our lives is to call us back to himself. That does not mean that suffering of God’s people is always related to any specific sin, but it does mean that God’s purpose in suffering is always to encourage us to seek him in humility and also to seek him for help and relief. We see it over and over again in Israel’s history that God sent hardship into the lives of his people and that the hardship caused them to cry out to God for deliverance. And time and time again, God heard those prayers and sent relief for his people.

What is conspicuously absent here is Naomi crying out to God in her suffering. She complains to the people around her, but she does not cry out to God. Crying out to God implies some hope rooted in God’s mercy and

goodness. And that is what is missing in Naomi's bitterness. She is heading back to the promised land, but she is not yet turning to God. Her face is turned away from God in bitterness. She feels that God has treated her badly and has no understanding of God's goodness and mercy even in the suffering that he sends upon his people.

Job is a helpful contrast to Naomi. The book of Job is all about the mystery of the suffering of God's people. Job was a righteous man and yet God allowed Satan to take away his wealth, all of his children and his health – everything except Job's life. And Job had his issues with God. Job wanted answers from God. But Job wrestled with God. Job was not silently bitter. He turned to God for answers. Job 1:20-22 describe the essence of Job's response to God in his suffering. <sup>20</sup>Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. <sup>21</sup>And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." <sup>22</sup>In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong."

Naomi was bitter and she saw only the sovereignty of God. She did not see his goodness and his mercy. She does not cry out for help and strength in her suffering. But the author of this text wants us to see things that Naomi failed to see. The first is recorded in verse 6. "Then she arose with her daughter-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." Earlier God had visited his people with chastisement and sent them a famine. But now the Lord had shown mercy to his people and had visited them and given them food. The word "visited" refers to God acting either with chastisement or with mercy. Here it is mercy. That was at least one of the reasons that Naomi was heading back to Jerusalem. But she only saw the food. She did not see God's mercy in giving the food. But the author of this story wants us to see God's mercy in ending the famine and giving Israel food again. God was showing grace and mercy to his sinful people.

Then there was Ruth's faithfulness to her. This was an amazing example of loyalty and love, but Naomi says nothing about that when she gets back to Jerusalem. Verse 21, "I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty." And there stands Ruth next to her. Naomi is blind to the goodness of God to her. She saw only her suffering, but she was blind to God's goodness to her.

And then there is the fact that God was working in and through the suffering in her life to bring her to a place of blessedness in his love and mercy. She does not know that yet, but we do because we know how the story ends. And we are meant to see what Naomi does not yet see. We are meant to see how God is working through the difficult circumstances in her life to bring her from emptiness to fullness. When she and her family had left Bethlehem to live in Moab, she may have felt that she was full, but she was really empty because she and her family were living apart from God. And through the real agony of losing her husband and sons, God was bringing Naomi to a place fullness under his blessing.

There are insights here for us when we suffer. Suffering is real and nothing in the Bible minimizes the reality of the pain of suffering. But bitterness is unwarranted and sinful because God is never unfair or unjust. For those who turn to God in their suffering, there are always many blessings from God that we must be aware of and thankful for. Naomi should have acknowledged how God provided Ruth for her who would be such a blessing for her. And there is the long perspective. For us the perspective of eternity. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:17 "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

And for us living after the time of Christ on earth we can think of our suffering in the light of Jesus' suffering for us. This is the greatest possible evidence that God does not send suffering into the lives of his people in a heartless and uncaring manner. There remains much mystery in the suffering of God's people. But alongside the mystery is the love of God in sending Jesus to suffer in our place and the love of Jesus who willingly gave himself to suffer the hell that we deserve to suffer. As Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:18, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God." And Paul in Romans 8:32 writes, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave us up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" Naomi should have seen the grace of God in blessing his people with food after he had chastised them with famine. We have a much greater reason to see the grace of God when we suffer because we see in the suffering of Christ how much God was willing to give of himself in order to bring us to himself which is the place of blessedness and includes the hope of the end of suffering when God will wipe away all tears from our eyes.

So, what are we to think about Orpah and Ruth? We will consider them together because they made opposite choices in response to Naomi's insistence that they return to Moab. Orpah went back to Moab. Naomi says to Ruth, "See your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods...." And in response to that Ruth utters one of the most beautiful commitments in the Scriptures. Verses 16-17, "<sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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.""

Now there are two parts to this. First there is Ruth's commitment to Naomi. Ruth is determined to stay with Naomi. Instead of going back to Moab where her prospects of finding security and a husband seem much greater, Ruth commits herself to staying with Naomi. And that certainly is commendable. As a younger widow with an older widow, Ruth will be caring for Naomi in her old age. No doubt Ruth feels responsible to care for Naomi. Naomi was her mother-in-law. Naomi was all alone. And Ruth was not going to abandon her. Ruth shows the grace of loyalty to her mother-in-law. That care for her mother-in-law was recognized and expressed later by Boaz when he said in 2:11, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death

of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.”

But behind Ruth’s commitment to Naomi is God’s commitment to Naomi. Ruth’s commitment and faithfulness went beyond what was expected of her. And through it, God was showing a love for Naomi that went beyond what she deserved. And in that God is showing us what his love to his people is like. Ruth is demonstrating what the Bible often refers to as steadfast love. That is a translation of a rich Hebrew word that most often refers to covenant loyalty. It is a love that is faithful to the relationship that God had made with his people. It is a love which goes above and beyond what the people of God might expect because of their sin and rebellion. Ruth’s love for Naomi is a reflection of God’s faithful committed love for his people.

And certainly, Ruth is an inspiration for us in showing steadfast love to our parents as well as our fellow believers in Christ.

But Ruth commitment is more than just a commitment to Naomi. It is a commitment to Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God. “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” This is an amazing commitment. Ruth had been raised a Moabitess. She had married into an Israelite family, but it was a family that was not a very good example of living in fellowship with Israel’s God. We have seen how poorly Naomi understood the God of Israel and the life he was calling his people to live. And yet somehow, by God’s grace, Ruth had picked up enough about the God of Israel that she was willing to leave her family and country and the gods whom she had been raised to serve and commit herself to Israel’s God and the people of that God.

No doubt she had learned something of Israel’s history from the family into which she had married. Perhaps she had heard things about Israel’s God in other ways. Remember how Naomi had heard “in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them good.” Israel and Moab were not sealed off from one another and so they would know something about each other’s beliefs and history. However, it happened, Ruth makes a remarkable commitment to Naomi, Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God. And she is held up for us as an example of true faith in the true God which resulted in remarkable faithfulness to her mother-in-law. And she clearly much more mature in her faith than her mother-in-law was.

This story was remembered and recorded for instruction and encouragement of the people of Israel. One of the great temptations throughout Israel’s history was the temptation to worship the gods of the pagans around which she lived. The story of Ruth is an example of someone who had been born a pagan who had more spiritual insight than many who had been born and raised within the covenant community. And it has the same message for us today. God’s covenant people can often be weak in their commitment to the God who has chosen them to be his people and promised to be their God. Often, we are tempted to worship the gods of the world – in our case the gods of our time – money, pleasure, sex, personal autonomy and many more. Ruth is a rebuke to all of that and a call for us to be committed to the true God and his people.

Ruth commitment is a wonderful example of what it means to commit one's self to God and his people. She turned her back on the idol gods of her people. She chose God and his people before her own family. She embraced a path that where it was more likely that she would suffer hardship and rejection due to the fact that she would be a Moabite living in Israel. And she turned her back on the path that would more likely lead her to family, a husband and security.

But the path she chose was the infinitely better one because it was the path that would lead her to the God of Israel – the true and living God. And that is choice we must all make **decisively at one point** in our lives where we commit ourselves to Jesus and take him as our God, but also **daily and hourly** as we make choices that either reflect a commitment to follow Jesus or which reflect the choice to walk towards living for this world going our own way. Jesus taught us that Matthew 10:39, "<sup>39</sup>Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." That is what we see going on here in the contrast between Orpah's choice and Ruth's choice. And we are called to consider our lives in the light of these two choices.