

Repentance is Costly

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Date: 01 May 2020

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[0 : 00] In from Ruth chapter 1. Reading from Ruth chapter 1.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.

The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Marlon and Helion.

They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went to the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.

These took Moab's wives. The name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other, Ruth, and they lived there about ten years.

[1 : 12] And both Marlon and Helion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Nile.

For she heard in the fields of Nile that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. 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.

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've dealt with the dead and with me.

The Lord grant you to find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

And they said to her, No, we will return with you to your people. But Naomi said, Turn back, my daughters.

[2 : 23] Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters. Go your way. For I'm 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, 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. Then they lifted up their voices and wept again.

And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law. But Ruth clung to her. And she said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods.

Return after your sister-in-law. But Ruth said, Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go.

[3 : 31] And where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people. And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die.

And there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me. And more also, if anything but death parts me from you. And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said, No more.

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? She said to them, Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara. For the Lord 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.

[4 : 39] 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 the barley harvest.

Okay. Okay. Yep.

Okay. We're up and running. Alrighty. Thanks so much for reading there, Catherine. And I'm sorry for speaking over you at that point. Partly through your reading, I didn't realize that I could actually

unmute myself.

I thought, girl, but then maybe I'm a host. I don't know. Anyway, it's great. It's learning experience, isn't it? Another thing that I've, I've learned is how slow I can be on the uptake, because it wasn't until about 630 this morning, when I woke up, that I realized that, not that it was Mother's Day, I figured that out, but I realized that it was Mother's Day and we were going to be talking about some pretty tragic events.

In fact, the events in the life of a particular woman who lost not only her husband, but both of her children as well. And so if, if, you know, if on this Mother's Day, it does, it seems insensitive to you that we should be talking about these kinds of things.

[6 : 05] What I'd encourage you to consider is that we didn't actually plan it with that in mind. So it wasn't actually an intentional thing. So under God, this is how it's worked out. And perhaps even in that kind of tragedy, the Bible actually has something to say about the orientation of our lives and how we should be living them.

And so hopefully that'll come out through the, through the course of both as what you've seen and read and also from what I say. Because we are in, we are in, regardless of the tragedies we've experienced, we're, we're going through a crisis at the moment and we're in the interesting times, aren't we?

Where these, the way our life unfolds and the values that we have in life and the ways that we actually seek rest, it's, it's all changing.

It's, it's all being challenged. And where some of the ways that we saw rest in the past, we can't, we can't go to anymore. Some of, you know, whether, that, I mean, fulfillment and that sense of peace of mind so you can sleep through the night without worries.

Or, you know, the, the ways that we actually built that around us aren't all there for us now. And so we're actually having to start to think through, well, what is it we're building then?

[7 : 17] What are we building our lives on? And again, this is a point at which Ruth really enters into our lives and, and, you know, really engages us and challenges us to think these things through. But then even before we start, what I want to say is those kinds of challenges are coming as we enter into Ruth, but I don't want you to enter into Ruth with the, what, how can I describe it?

More reader oriented response. Now, when I was young, when I was going through English classes and things like that, we actually had to do reviews of literature and comment on literature.

And the idea of it was that you actually looked at what the author's initial intent was and how it actually worked through. Nowadays, we have a more reader oriented approach in which some people would say that the story doesn't exist.

So the characters of the story don't exist until I personally start to read them and recreate them in my mind. And I'm free to interact with them however I like and get the kind of meaning that I want from them. So rather than actually having a reviews of literature these days, what we have is people asking questions like, what did you get out of the book?

Or who is your favorite character in Little Women, for example, and why? And they expose how we interact with a book. But they, but I've got to say to you now that the Bible isn't like that.

[8 : 30] The Bible, we are meant to interact with it. Don't get me wrong. It does take us on a journey, but we don't set the destination. God does. He knows the place that we need to go.

And so he guides us there. And to make sure we don't get lost, he actually provides markers along the way. And, and one of these markers is the context. So when we turn to Ruth chapter one, we read in the very beginning, in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the lands.

And a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. That's Ruth chapter one, verse one. So what we, what we read straight away from here, if we get this sense of context, the judges ruled, it's in the days when the judges ruled and the judges period was a time of instability and unrest.

And I've got that. I don't know if you remember our judges series, but we actually had this judges cycle and I'm hoping that Simon can put it up for you just to remind you of it, refresh you of it. If it's going to be difficult, just send it out in the chat and everyone can have a look at it in their own time. But the judges period was a, was a time of real instability and unrest in, in Israel. And if, even if you just turn the page back to, to the very end of the judges period, which is literally just over the page, we can read these words.

[9 : 45] In those days, there was no King in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. So you've got this sense of instability and unrest that goes right to the very heart of each individual

person.

And society is fractured into individuals living for themselves. It's a summary of how things were for them back then. So when we read there was famine in the land, one of the things that we can actually start to glean from that is that in that, in terms of that judges cycle, which goes, God's savior, God sends a savior to rescue his people.

And that was Joshua initially bringing them into the land. And then we have this time of peace with God. And then from there are the people abandoned God and turn to idols. And from there, God punishes them usually by allowing another nation in to actually conquer them.

And, and then they cry out to the Lord, not necessarily in repentance, but they cry to him for help at least. And then God sends a savior again. So when we read the words famine, we can start to think that this word famine is more than a bad year.

It's a, it means a lengthy period of time with no food, but it perhaps it means more than that. And the, and the third thing we discover in those verses is that they were in the lands. They were in the lands.

[10:59] This was meant to be the place of rest. This was meant to be the place of security and plenty. It's almost an oxymoron to start to read these things. In famine in the lands.

So, yeah. So when we read that, there's a certain response expected of us. The initial readers knew what stage they were in. They were in the punishment stage of that cycle that I just mentioned. And they knew what response was necessary to cry out to God for help, to repent. But instead, Elimelech and Naomi choose to leave.

And this point is, this emphatic point is brought out in the series of contact contrasts that are almost emphatic to the point of comic. Have you ever been to a, I'm sure you've been to a puppet show or perhaps have you been to a pantomime?

Or is that too British for you? I'm not sure. But if, when you go to those things, what they do is they actually make a point, but they make it so emphatically. It's almost, it's almost comical. He's behind you, you know, over there.

[11:59] No, don't do that. And so on. And they get the audience to participate. And, and I think this is the kind of thing that's happening here. It's such a punchy introduction that just brings to mind.

So many key things that the Israelites can not just see in the practical realm, but actually can see theologically in the spiritual realm. And they can see the conflict that's going on and they can see the craziness of what actually happens.

So let's have a look at a couple of those. So for example, origin and destination, Bethlehem to Moab. Bethlehem is in the land of bread of blessing.

Bethlehem is actually the home of King David. Bethlehem means house of bread. In a famine, they're leaving the house of bread. Moab is the opposite. Moab is a land under curse.

Curse to the 10th generation for not actually aiding Israel when they were entering into the promised lands, leaving Egypt, exodus from Egypt and entering into the promised lands. So why leave the land of blessing for the land of curse?

[13:04] And then we see some contrast in the names and addresses too. Now let's have a look at this. The family that turns its back on God are Ephrathites. They're from the clan of Ephrath.

And they, and that's, and that actually means fruitfulness. Elimelech, the head of this family, God is King. Naomi means delight.

But then we go onto the sun and we discover Marlon and Chile on means sick and pining. And maybe there's a hint in these names, these latitude names as to why they actually left the land the way they did. Whatever the reason for the famine, their children were sickly.

Wouldn't you leave under those circumstances? But then we actually start to see some more that unfolds in the story. And, and we see, see it in the, in the emphasis of drama at this point.

And we see the way that they leave, even their departure unfolds dramatically. In verse one, we read, they went to sojourn. That's a kind of a temporary affair. Isn't it? It means you go and, you know, you go and visit a place, but you're not actually counting yourself as part of that.

[14:09] You're just going for a trip. And you fully intend to come back at some point. Then in verse two, they remained. And that kind of gives you a sense of this under change allegiance here. And then in verse four, they lived.

There's a change of identity that comes with living in a land for, you know, Joe and I can tell you about this. When I went to England, I went to England on a British passport that I got through my parents.

And my accent started to change, you know, over the course of 10 to 15 years that I've been there, my accent started to change. I started to sound more British. And, and so it got to the point where you could barely, you know, I could barely tell that I was from Australia.

There was just that little hint and the same thing, things happening to Joe now. She doesn't realize it probably, but it is. She's starting to become more Aussie. And starting to feel more Aussie and starting to think about going back to England is less like going home and more like visiting friends and relatives.

They lived there for 10 years. And that represents the change of allegiance that happened here. So alongside this gradual departure, there's actually a dramatic unfolding of emptying.

[15:18] Did you notice that? The tragedy begins with the story of Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, and they have, you know, they have the two boys and, and off they go to find food. But then boom, in verse three, Elimelech dies.

And when he dies and Naomi, Naomi is described as being left with her two sons. And then in verse five, two verses later, Naomi is described as left without her two sons and her husband.

Naomi's life or the, all that she does or the, she perceives it as is being, is like a container that's just being poured out. And now it's empty. That's a lot of tragedy in a few short verses.

And Naomi is broken by it. Without her men means she's a cast adrift from her Israelite heritage. She is alone in a man's world without protection. And even as we read it, it is a story of tragedy, but it's a story of expected tragedy.

Everyone who knew this story and passed it on would have felt this because in this story, two perspectives collide. One, the practical and the other is the spiritual.

[16:34] It's that rubber hits the road theology of life, whether the choices that we struggle with all every day, when we push to choose which one gives, when one comes under strain, how do we go without how we balance the two?

Practically, if we look at these, this family, they needed food. The country was in a state of political and social unrest. The most common form of famine or lack of food in Israel at the time was the oppression of the, of the countries that had come in and captured, captured them.

And we see that in the story of Gideon, who was driven to such extremes. That he does the foolish thing of trying to thresh his grain underground. You need wind for that. And he tries to thresh his grain underground to try and avoid it being stolen from him by their oppressors.

So practically they needed food. The country was in unrest. The children weren't strong. And spiritually, they were part of a nation, a generation in a nation that had rebelled against God.

And they didn't respond with repentance. They went into voluntary exile. And when they did, they suffered and died. Now it's worth saying at this point that we don't live in the time of the judges.

[17:52] In the time of the judges, God brought his people to the land to experience his rest. His, his rest and his blessing was tied very strongly to the physical presence and occupation of the land.

But for us, we come to Christ. One of the things he described himself as the Lord of the Sabbath, the Lord of rest. One thing, one thing he also does is he, he tells us to come to him for rest.

And so for us, we don't go to the land. We come to Christ. Jesus is our rest. But friends in times like this, where there's so many different challenges and difficulties and change for us to, to navigate.

Is that what we see when we look at our lives? Is Jesus the one we go to for rest? When we consider what we go to for refreshment is Christ.

The direction that our hearts are yearning for. When we consider what meaning and purpose our life has. Is Christ the foundation of those thoughts?

[19:01] A crisis like this, a COVID-19 crisis will reveal who we truly live for. Just as Naomi's Christ revealed who she lived for. But friends, we have to recognize the same issue that Naomi faced.

And that is that, that, that, that leaving is a mistake, but returning is costly. Naomi was faced with, with, with some choices.

And what would she do? What can she do? Well, Naomi decides to return to the land. We read in the next verses in verse six, we read this. Okay.

So then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return to the country of Moab, from the country of Moab. For she had heard in the fields of Moab, that the Lord had visited his, visited his people and

given them food.

The tragedy had broken her spirit, but the Lord had visited her people, his people. Why did she decide to go back now?

[20 : 02] Well, perhaps these words reminder where she is. She's in a foreign country. Now, notice how often Moab is mentioned in that verse. She's in a foreign country and it's the wrong country for her to be in.

And don't get me wrong. It's an ambiguous moment in the story. It reads like there's some distance. And they're even in Naomi's mind, there's some distance between Naomi and God's people. The Lord has visited his people. We're not really clear how much Naomi has moved in her heart either. I mean, the judges cycle appears to have moved for the rest of Israel because the Lord has saved them and now they're prospering. So the rest of Israel has moved, but has she?

And then even as they go, even as they decide to, they decide to return. The next thing that Naomi does is firmly in the practical realm. It appears that she and her daughters got so far on their trip and then stopped.

It's some, for some reason that there was a crunch time kind of moment in their decision-making. Was it the border that they got to that can, that caused this? Who knows? But for some reason it was crunch time.

[21 : 10] And, and three times at this moment, in this moment. So when they stopped three times, the whole, in most of the chapters of this chapter is actually about this moment, this brief moment of time, three times.

Naomi tries to convince her daughters-in-law to return to their families. And three times is emphatic. That's not accidental. That's systematic attempt to actually convince.

And each time, the basis of her concern is for what it will cost them to continue. Practically speaking. In verse eight, we read, we read this, go return each of you to a mother's house.

May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me, the Lord grants that you may find, notice this word, rest each of you in the house of her husband. And then in verse 11, turn back my daughters.

Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? This is something that Matt alluded to earlier in the complexities of how things worked in, in families in, in Israel.

[22 : 19] And then in verse 15, the third time, see your sister-in-law has gone back to a people and to a gods return after your sister-in-law. They will give up the rest that they could have in Moab.

Will they really do that along with their family, with a new husband and children of their own, among their own people and gods? That's what they give up.

If they go with Naomi, they'd have no chance of any of these. A Moabites in Israel would never find acceptance, let alone a husband. So practically, it was a kind thing for Naomi to do.

And she probably did it out of a kindness of hearts, but it may have been kind, but it was spiritually blind too. And even as she does, provides her, you know, goes through her attempts to convince them, there are two responses from the daughters.

The two daughters, daughters and they'll respond very differently. Well, similarly initially, but then very differently. Orpah. Well, Naomi's logic actually reaches Orpah.

[23 : 29] Her tears of anguish from the first round, and ultimately turn into a kiss of farewell. Then there's Ruth. But Ruth steadfastly refuses to leave Naomi.

Her tears of anguish turn into clinging. Now this word is significant. It's the same phrase used in Genesis 2. And there it describes the marriage relationship.

Do you remember that? The man will leave his father and mother, and the two will become one flesh. He will cleave to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is the word that's being used here. Ruth has not just refused to leave.

She's emphatically chosen to stay. A third time, Naomi tries to convince Ruth to change her mind. See, your sister-in-law has gone back.

Her people, her gods. But Ruth refuses. Ruth actually means friends, and we discover what kind of friend she is. She's the faithful kind.

[24 : 32] Ruth's commitment to Naomi is deeply personal, and it's profoundly theological, as she reveals when she says, where you go, I will go. Where you live, I will live.

Your people shall be my people. Your God. My God. Don't you think it sounds like marriage vows? It's really interesting, isn't it? And it does sound like marriage vows, because it is actually covenant language.

And she even seals the covenant with a very marriage-type, like, oath. She says in verse 17, the end of verse 17, may the Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts me from you. For Ruth, rest isn't found in a husband. Rest is found, it's that sense of fulfillment and peace, is found in faithfulness toward Naomi.

And that faithfulness is self-consciously lived out before God. She willingly gives up family, friends, job, any hope of marriage.

[25 : 38] She willingly empties herself. That's a costly path to walk. And finally, we get to the end section, where they continue their journey, and actually arrive in Bethlehem.

And we read these words in verse 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?

Is this Naomi? What I want to suggest to you at this particular point, is that it's something that maybe Naomi doesn't quite realize. And that is that returning is an act of God's grace.

The fact that she has been brought back into the land is an act of God's grace that perhaps she doesn't realize yet in a pain. But it is. And the reality is that all that Naomi can actually see and contemplate is the calamity that she's experienced.

And she says that. You know, when they say, is this Naomi? You know, it really isn't the Naomi that's left, is it? After all that she's been through. But in a brokenness, we need to understand that while she sees some things clearly, she doesn't see everything clearly.

[26 : 50] She said to them, do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara. Or you could read, do not call me delight or delightful. Call me miserable or bitter.

See, Naomi goes on to sum up her life in two ways. Firstly, from the perspective of how the Lord has treated her. And secondly, from the perspective of how her life has actually turned out.

Look at how she describes how the Lord has treated her. The Lord has dealt bitterly with me, she says in these verses. So we're looking at verse 19 to the end. The Lord has dealt bitterly with me. The Lord has testified against me.

The Lord has brought calamity on me. The reality is that the Lord has not given Naomi what she wanted. He's allowed the treasured contents of her life to be poured out.

Interestingly, to be poured out to the point of reaching the emptiness that Ruth chose in order to go with her. That's what God did in Naomi's mind.

[27 : 53] This is how God's dealing with her. And then she looks at it from the perspective of how her life has turned out. Naomi says, I went away full and the Lord has returned me empty or brought me back.

It's the same word there, that return word, a word that actually appears 12 times in this section in different forms. The things that Naomi treasured. She sees herself as empty.

The things that Naomi treasured became more than God to her. They were her delight. They were her rest. In reality, they were her God.

From her perspective, she was empty. But even so, she realized, at least in the back of them, enough to acknowledge that the Lord had returned her.

Naomi was back in the land of blessing, where she belongs. God used her loss to bring her home. How often does God do that?

[28 : 54] Let us experience a futility of choosing our own way, only to bring us back full circle around to his, perhaps even with a deeper realization of the goodness of his way.

Naomi sees the calamity. But in both of these perspectives, there's also a consolation. And there's even more consolation in the last verse. We read in the very last verse, Ruth, 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.

Ruth, the Moabite, is there with her. Did you notice earlier that the women of Bethlehem, they knew she was there, but they ignored her. They just blanked her out. Even Naomi describes herself as empty with Ruth right there with her.

How must that have felt for Ruth? The Moabite from Moabite gets the treatment. But there she is by her mother's side, mother-in-law's side at the very end of this chapter.

And then we have the barley harvest. The barley harvest is beginning. Remember, Naomi left due to famine. And here, we're seeing the land is actually fruitful.

[30 : 17] Naomi returned empty. But the barley harvest seems to be a promise that she will be filled again. Now, as I conclude, what I want to say is that we're not like Naomi.

We can't just extrapolate straight from this into our lives. There's so much that we need to take into account. And in particular, one of the things we need to take into account is this.

We are not called to return to a physical land to find rest. That land concept is fulfilled for us in Christ. In the words of Jesus in the gospel of John, when he says, abide in me, when we abide in him, we find rest.

When we come to him, he gives us rest. In Matthew 11, we read these words. And the ones you probably already know.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

[31 : 24] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. However weary or heavy laden we are, Jesus has taken the ultimate burden of suffering from us on the cross.

That burden of suffering that we face on judgment day, alone without him. But that burden which he willingly took in our place.

We are invited into a rest, a rest that penetrates the depth of our souls. Christ is our rest. And even as this story unfolds, we will begin to get a glimpse of how closely linked to the rest that Christ provides the story of Ruth is.

But no more spoilers. Let's leave it at that for there. Thanks, guys.