

Orpah - So Near And Yet So Far

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[0 : 00] Chapter 1, Ruth chapter 1, and we read verses 14 and 15.

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Now that's Naomi 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. The book of Ruth, as we know, is really a love story. And although there's a lot of sorrow and tragedy, actually, within the story, it's also a real love story.

It's a story that shows us tremendous love that Naomi has for her daughters-in-law, and the love the daughters-in-law have for their mother-in-law.

The love that Boaz has for Ruth, but above all, God's love for his people. A love that never, ever lets go. And while Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth, is really the focus of the story, and rightly so, I want us today to think more of the other daughter-in-law, who gets really very little mention, but there's quite a bit to learn from her life as well.

[1 : 39] Now, as we know, this incident took place at the time of the judges, and that was quite a bleak time in the history of Israel. It was the time when it was a generation after Joshua and the elders had come out from, remember how the children of Israel had been taken from Egypt, they had gone into the promised land, Joshua led them throughout their time of conquering the land, and so everything was settled down.

And as long as Joshua was there, and as long as the people who had actually come out through the wilderness, that generation, the younger generation that had come into the land of promise, as long as they were living, then everything was all right.

But it didn't take long to change, because the whole society began to go on a downward spiral. And the book of Judges is actually a really sad reading, but it's so reflective of human nature.

Because there was this cycle where, very quickly, they would forget God, and they would begin to develop the practices of the people round about them, and they would turn into idolatry, and God would say, No, no, listen, you are my people. You are my special people.

It is through you that I am going to bless the whole world. It is through you that my Son, the Saviour, is going to come. You cannot live like that. And so God would allow some form of judgment and chastisement to come upon them.

[3 : 19] Sometimes it would be invading armies, like the Midianites or the Philistines. Other times he would allow famine to take hold of them.

Always with the intention of bringing them back to himself. That's what God was doing. It wasn't random. There was a purpose. He was getting their ear, their attention, until they began to cry to him.

And once they would begin to cry to him, he would hear their cry, and he would send a deliverer. There were deliverers like Gideon and Jephthah and Samson.

Some of you read about them. And there would be a time of stability. And again, the worship of the Lord would be restored. But it wouldn't take long until it would spiral back, go the same way.

And it's quite incredible how these things happen. And even in our own society, when you look back, and I think even in my own lifetime, I could never envisage our nation being where it is just now, spiritually and morally, where there is just almost like a sustained effort to remove and to undermine the Christian faith.

[4 : 31] And what people don't realize is, if you take the gospel out of society, if you try and remove God from the throne of a particular society, you are reaping fearful consequences for yourself.

History has shown that over and over and over again. The history of the children of Israel showed it. And our own history has shown it. And so we are moving into a very serious condition.

Because that seems to be the whole thrust, the movement of society today, is moving more and more into a godless and into a secular society where God has no place.

And that is as bad a judgment as we can get. I can't think of much worse judgment than if God says, Right, I wipe my hands off you, I hand you over to yourselves.

That would be a fearful situation. So we have to plead that the Lord won't do that. So the Lord, it was in his mercy that he would be sending, sometimes invading forces into Israel to try and get them back to himself.

[5 : 40] And he always did. Now, when God is dealing with us in this way, it is vital that we submit to him. There are usually two things that we are liable to do.

One is to try and run away and escape God. And the other is to fight against God. When God is at work in our heart, trying to bring us back, if we wandered away, we are liable to do one of two things, or maybe a combination of both, to fight against God, or else to run away from it.

Well, that is exactly what this family tried to do. Because there was a famine in the land. There was a famine there in Bethlehem. And from a human point of view, what Elimelech decided to do, you would say, well, nothing wrong with that.

Because there is a famine there. The fields in Moab, they are fine. They do not have a famine in Moab. So logic says, I am going to leave Israel, and I am going to head to Moab. And maybe Elimelech might have shared his plans with some of his neighbors, and he might have said, oh, good on you, Elimelech.

If I had the chance to do that, I would do the very same thing. You are doing a good thing. Good for the boys. Good for the family. Take them where there is food. But what Elimelech was doing was wrong.

[7 : 03] Because God had said, there were two nations that Israel were not to seek the peace of prosperity of. Because there were two nations that had brought so much trouble upon Israel.

One was the Ammonites, and the other was Moab. So Israel were warned, don't have truck with Moab. Don't go to Moab. Don't be involved with Moab. So Elimelech, it is fair to say, he is making this decision without consulting the Lord.

Because if he had consulted the Lord, the Lord is saying, don't go to Moab. But Elimelech is going to Moab because there is bread there. So his decision that he is making is purely a human decision.

And I am sure, to begin with, when they went there, they thought, as everything was going well, they would have said, I am sure many a time, Elimelech said to Naomi, boy, you know this, we made a good decision coming here.

But, as we read the, narrative, tragedy strikes. And Elimelech dies. And there were the two boys, Melon and Chilean, they grew up, and they married two girls from Moab, Ruth and Orpah.

[8 : 10] But then tragedy struck again, because both the boys died. And here is Naomi, all of a sudden, in a strange land, and she's lost her husband, and her two sons.

And she was feeling there, straight away, that her whole world, had caved in. And, we find, of course, that, for Ruth and Orpah, and Naomi here, that, they're plunged into this awful situation.

And particularly for Naomi, she's in a strange land, and right away, all she could be thinking about is, I want to go home. You and I know, when things go wrong, if we're ill, or if real difficulties come into our lives, something, something really sore, or painful, or difficult, we want to go home.

We want to be with family. We want to be with those, that we feel comfortable with. Don't like being in a strange place. And there's no doubt, straight away, the first thought, Naomi would have, would be, I want to go home.

But then, side by side with that, she heard, in the fields of Moab, in verse 6, that the Lord had visited, his people, and given them food.

[9 : 33] In other words, the famine was over. One of the translations is, that the Lord had visited his people, in giving them bread. And in giving them bread, in Bethlehem, we can never think of that, because, without thinking of Jesus Christ, because that's exactly, what happened, 2000 years ago.

That God, visited, this world, by giving his only begotten son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who Jesus himself declared, I am the bread of life.

And Jesus, was born in Bethlehem. And, of course, we know that there is, no other, nothing else, will satisfy, the deepest needs, of our life, but Jesus.

Jesus. And if you're here today, and you've gone through life so far, and you don't have Jesus Christ, as your savior, let me assure you, you are missing out.

Because, this world, will satisfy you, at one level, but it cannot, satisfy you spiritually. There's nothing in this world, that will satisfy you spiritually.

[10 : 41] The world is not made, to satisfy you spiritually. It might satisfy you, at certain levels, might satisfy, there might be many things, in this world, and you're saying, you know, it's pretty good this.

Change the circumstances, change what's happening, in your world, and all of a sudden, the enjoyment goes. And so many people have said, they've reached stages, where they said, they just discover, one disappointment, after another.

But you know, in Jesus Christ, you have, the one portion, that you need, for your soul. Life, and nourishment, and vitality, everything you need, is found, in Jesus Christ.

He is the bread from heaven. I am the true bread, Jesus was saying, to his people. So Naomi hears, this wonderful news, that the Lord, has visited his people, in giving bread.

And Naomi says, I'm going back. Now, obviously, she would find it difficult, telling the girls, her daughters-in-law, that she's going back, because you can see, that they have formed, a really deep bond.

[11 : 55] And although, these are Moabite girls, who, obviously, were heathen, they were, from a natural point of view, they are obviously, lovely, they were lovely women.

Because Naomi, you could see, couldn't speak highly, enough of them. Because they were, so good to Naomi, and they had been, so good, to Naomi's children, to the two boys.

But, the thing is, that Naomi feels, really, really responsible, for them. And she's saying to them, look, it's because of me, all of this bitterness, has come into your life.

And she felt, that God's hand, had gone out against her. And that these poor, innocent girls, were suffering, because of her. And so she says, look, I'm going back home.

You go back, you've suffered enough, with me. You go back, to your ways, to your people, to your culture, to your gods. But they set out, and they said, no, we're going with you.

[12 : 58] And so we find, that they, they make their way. And, that's what she's saying, in verse 13, that, she was saying, Naomi says, my daughters, for it is exceedingly, bitter to me, for your sake, that the hand of the Lord, has gone out against me.

So she's trying to, make them, go back. And, the thing is, when you look at Naomi here, you can see that, at one level, she's a backslidden, believer.

Because the advice, that she's giving, again, you see, all the advice, she's giving, is human advice. If she wanted, the welfare, the spiritual welfare, of these two women, she would have said, yeah, come back with me.

I know it might be tough. Because when you come back, to Israel, you won't have any rights, you won't have any protection. It could be really, really dangerous, for you.

So that's, the way she's looking at it, at a human level. But she should have been, looking at it spiritually, and saying, but God has come back. God's favor, God's presence.

[14 : 10] God is at work, again in Bethlehem. You've got to come with, that's what you would expect her, to be saying. As a believer, you would say, yeah, come where God is.

You come, that's why you invite people, to church. Because God's presence, has promised to be there. That's why you will give, somebody a scripture, to read. And praying, that that person will, will I say, read the word, that the word, will be blessed to them.

But no, he's not saying that. It's like Elimelech's decision, earlier on. It wasn't a, a God-centered decision, it was a man-centered. And her decision here, sending the girls back, back to their gods, back to the, the way that, you can see how, she really is not, not thinking straight.

But of course, she is overcome with grief. And so we have, this incredibly moving scene, where the, three women, you can see them, draped together, their arms round one another.

And they're howling, because they're broken hearted. They love one another. But then we find, that something happens.

[15 : 24] She says, then in verse 14, then they lifted up their voices, and wept again. And Orpah, kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So it's very obvious, at this point, that Orpah, has dropped her hands, off Naomi, and that she's taken a step back.

Because Ruth, is still clinging, to Naomi. And so Naomi says, see your sister-in-law, she has gone back, to her people, and, to her gods.

And you know, that's one of the saddest things, we can read. Because here's this, from all accounts, a lovely, lovely person, Orpah. If Naomi was asked, to write a reference, for Orpah, I reckon it would be, as good a reference, as you would ever see.

She couldn't praise her, highly enough, for her kindness, for her care, for her compassion, for her love, for all these virtues, and qualities. she looked at her, more than, more than, looked at her, more likely, as a daughter, than as a daughter-in-law.

And yet, Orpah, has gone back. You know, these are really sad words. Gone, back. You see, Orpah had lived, for a good number of years, in, in, the Israelite home.

[16 : 50] And they, however, backslidden, they may have been, as a family. They still, as Israelites, would have had, a form of worship, with God, would have spoken, about God, would have reflected, upon the living, and through God.

And Ruth, and Orpah, would both, have heard, about the living, and through God. And it shows us, that Ruth, had heard, so much about God, that she wanted to go.

I want to go with God. That's what, I want to go, and be with the living, and through God. That's why Ruth, said to Naomi, no, I'm not going back. Your God's, going to be my God.

I have heard, so much about the living, and through God. And indeed, I have begun to, come to this living, and through God. I'm going with you, Naomi. I'm going back to Bethlehem. I'm going to embed, Bethlehem with you.

But not Orpah. The pool, of the old ways, and the culture, and the gods, were so strong, that she, began, to go back.

[17 : 59] And so, it's a very, it's a very powerful, and a very, very moving, scene there. And you know, we don't understand, just how, how dark, a heart is.

This is what somebody said. How much, loveliness, there is, in the affections, of, of nature. And who would believe, that sometimes, that can, cover over, and hide, a heart, as black as hell.

And that's something, we don't understand. Because, the human heart, deep down, underneath, all the, elements, of common grace, that are there, within a person's life.

All the good, that, God, bestows upon us, and, where there's a loveliness, of nature, and character, underneath, a heart, that is in rebellion, against God, is still, as black as hell.

And that is why, the Bible says, that the heart, is deceitful, above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it? That there is nothing, more twisted, or deceitful, anywhere, than the human heart.

[19 : 15] But it can be, there can always be this, covering, over it, where you wouldn't, you would never ever know, that that's what's really, down there. And so, here is Orpah, who has tasted, who has seen, who has experienced, and she has been so close, but she goes back.

Orpah doesn't stand, for those who, have never heard the gospel. Orpah doesn't stand, for those who have, refused, to come under, the sound of the gospel.

Orpah stands, for those, who have been, under the gospel, have known, everything, about God, the Father, have known, everything, about the Lord, Jesus Christ, have known, the way of salvation, would be able, to tell others, how to become, a Christian.

They've known, all these things, and yet, they go back. They say, no. when the crunch comes, they, will not, commit.

They will not, yield. They will not, say, Lord, all have mercy, upon me, and save me. Can come to church, week in, week out.

[20 : 36] Can appear, to be so close, and yet, still so far. Because, there's no, halfway house, with regard to salvation. You're either, in the kingdom, or you're out, of the kingdom.

There isn't somewhere, where you can, straddle the two, and be half in, and half out. You're in, or you're out. And Orpah, may have appeared, when she set out, with Ruth, both these girls, and you would say, oh, what lovely girls, these are.

And you would see them, they're both, intending to head, to Bethlehem. They both set out, to go, with Naomi. But when they reach, the border, there's a dividing.

The one shall be taken, the other left. We see it so often, in the Bible, the Jacobs, the Esau's, the two on the cross, beside Jesus. One, both had the exact, same opportunity.

Both are dying, beside Christ. Both would be, exactly the same, distance, from Jesus, physically. Both heard, Jesus speak.

[21 : 43] And one, accepted Jesus, as the Savior. And the other died, rejecting him. It's solemn.

And here we have this picture, of two lovely, ladies. And, both setting out, to go, where God, has visited. And God's favor, and presence is.

And yet, when push, comes to shove, one of them says, no. Well, I hope there's nobody, in here today, that's going to be like that.

Going to be so close, and so far away. Hebrews 6 says, it is impossible, it's impossible, in the case of those, who once, have been enlightened, who have tasted, the heavenly gift, and have tasted, the word of God, and the power, that is to come, and have fallen away, to restore them, to repentance.

That is people, who have, it's not that, they've become Christians, because you, once you become a believer, you can never fall away, even although you might, your life may go ski whiff, and you might plunge, into all the things, that are wrong.

[22 : 56] But if you're still, in Christ, you will always, be in Christ. But the dangerous place, is to be nearly there. to be so near, and yet so far.

And that's what happened, with Orpah. She just, as it were, slipped off, the pages of scripture, never to be seen again. Please, please, do not, have that happen to you.

May you, instead be a Ruth, who clung, who, would not let her mother-in-law go. And she says, I'm going back with you, because, your people, God's people, are going to be my people.

Your God, is going to be my God. And I hope today, that that's the decision, that you're making. And you're saying, the living and true God, is going to be my God.

Please, don't go away from, under the presence, of the word, under, the open invitation. Heaven's door, is open, and the invitation, is coming again today.

[23 : 57] Say, come on in. What are you going to do? Go back. Oh no, don't. Please, reach out, and take the hand, that is outstretched, to you.

Let us pray. Oh Lord, our God, we, we pray to bless us. And we give thanks, Lord, for all your goodness, and mercy to us. We give thanks, Lord, that, there are so many, encouragements, in your word, but there's also, so many warnings.

We pray, Lord, for any in here today, who, may be very close, to the kingdom, but they're not there yet. Oh Lord, lead them in. We pray, if there are those, who are like the Orpas, who are going back, Lord, turn them back round again, so that, they become like the prodigal, making their way, back to you.

Lord, we pray, for all those, who are going through, difficult times, times of, maybe, issues, within their mind, or illnesses, we commit them, to your care, and keeping.

We pray, Lord, to bless us all, we pray, to bless, the road, to recovery work, we give thanks, for Stan, who's with us today, and the work, that he, has done, for so long, and, we give thanks, for Davy as well, and we pray, Lord, when, what is often, a very difficult work, and where they will see, so often, people going back, we pray, Lord, that you will encourage them, in all that they've done, and that you will continue, to prosper, that work, we pray, Lord, for those, that we know, who are struggling, struggling, with all the different issues, in life, we pray, that we might be, able, and willing, to help, but, oh Lord, our God, we give thanks, that the great, and deep issues, belong to you, and so we ask, Lord, today, to reach out, in your love, and in your mercy, and that you will touch hearts, and that you will bring light, and life, into souls, that right up till now, have been dead, that they might come, to see Jesus, and embrace Jesus, take away from us, our sin, in Jesus name, we ask it,

[26 : 07] Amen. We conclude singing, in Psalm 80, the 80th Psalm, we're going to sing, the last three verses, Psalm 80, Scottish Psalter, the tune is Evan, it's on page 334, Amen.

O let thy hand, be still upon the man, of thy right hand, the son of man, whom for thyself, thou madest strong to stand, so henceforth, we will not go back, nor turn from thee at all, O do thou quicken us, and we upon thy name, will call, turn us again, Lord God of hosts, and upon us, vows saved, to make thy countenance, to shine, and so, we shall be saved, Psalm 80, 17 to the end, O let thy hand, be still upon, tune is Evan, Amen.

O let thy hand, be still upon, Being trainer, o, from good stands.

So henceforth we will not go back, nor turn from thee at all.

For to God we give us and we upon thy name will call.

[28 : 06] Turn us again, Lord God of hosts, and upon us mercy to make thy curtain unto shine, and so we shall be saved.

Now may the grace, mercy, and peace of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest and abide upon each one of you now and forevermore. Amen. Amen. Amen.