

Ruth 1:7-22

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Date: 05 June 2011

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[0:00] Lord Jesus, you tell us that your word is like a seed that a farmer scatters in the ground. And when it falls on good soil, it takes root and it springs up and it brings forth an abundant harvest. God, we pray that as we turn to read your word now, that it would become like a seed on good soil. God, that you would be even now tilling our hearts and softening it up so that we might receive what you're saying to us by your spirit and your word. And Lord, that you might be glorified by the fruit that comes forth in our lives and in our community. In Christ's name, amen.

Well, we're continuing our series in the book of Ruth tonight. We're doing a few weeks in the book of Ruth and then with the rest of the summer, we're going to be looking at the book of James. Tonight, we're going to look at the second half, really, of Ruth chapter one. Ian got us started last week looking at the first few verses of Ruth. We're going to continue through the rest of chapter one tonight. That's page 187 on the Pew Bible. If you want to follow there, I'm going to read again all of chapter one just so we get some of the context of Ruth and where we're going to be going tonight looking at chapter one. So page 187 in the Pew Bible, Ruth chapter one.

The book of Ruth starts like this. Now, Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died and she was left with her two sons.

They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about 10 years, both Machlon and Kilion also died and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, go back each of you to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you as you have shown to your dead and to me.

[2:34] May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, we will go back with you to your people. But Naomi said, return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters. I'm too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me, even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons, would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It's more bitter for me than for you because the Lord's hand has gone out against me.

At this, they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye. But Ruth clung to her. Look, said Naomi, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.

But Ruth replied, don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go. And where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women exclaimed, can this be Naomi?

Don't call me Naomi, she told them. Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me.

The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by Ruth, the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

[4:27] It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* begins with these famous words. You remember the story, right? Mr. and Mrs. Bennett have five unmarried daughters and no sons. And lo and behold, Mr.

Bingley, a man of some standing, has just moved into the neighborhood. So the Bennett family is electrified with the hope that perhaps this Mr. Bingley, a single man in possession of a good fortune, will fancy one of the five daughters. So begins *Pride and Prejudice*. Nearly all of Austen's novels, actually, if you read through them, are structured around the ups and downs of finding a suitable spouse. Of course, in 19th century England, there was more to marriage than just romance and courtship, right? You see this actually in particular in the story of *Pride and Prejudice* because Mr.

Bennett doesn't have a son. So when he dies, the family will practically lose everything, property, estate, the whole thing. It will all go to some male relative, whoever happens to be closest on the family tree. So if the daughters don't marry, they'll have nothing. Socially and financially, for them, everything depends on marrying a suitable husband. In the most recent film version of the novel, there's this poignant scene, actually, that captures, I think, the predicament of many women of the day. The protagonist of the story is, of course, Elizabeth Bennett, and her friend Charlotte has just agreed to marry the ridiculous but established Mr. Collins. Of course, Elizabeth thinks this is an awful idea. How could she marry such a buffoon? But Charlotte replies, not all of us can afford to be romantic, Lizzie. I've been offered a comfortable home and protection.

That's a lot to be thankful for. And then Lizzie makes like she's going to speak, but Charlotte interrupts her. I'm 27 years old, Lizzie. I've got no money and no prospects. I'm already a burden to my parents, and I'm frightened. Well, if such was the case for women in 19th century England, in biblical times, marriage was all the more important.

Marriage, of course, meant companionship, to be sure, but it meant a lot more than that. Marriage meant provision. Economically, of course, men in the ancient world were the primary laborers and property owners, so having a husband meant you would be financially stable. It meant you would be provided for. Marriage also meant protection. In the ancient world, it wasn't an incredibly safe place, let's be honest, especially for women. We'll actually see next week in Ruth chapter 2 that even the single women in Israel had to be careful about violence, oppression, being caught off guard in the fields. But having a husband was a means of being protected against such things. And of course, marriage also meant the possibility of children. And having children meant not just having someone to take care of you when you grew old, but having the honor of continuing your family line.

[7:53] And finally, we can see how all these factors combined in the ancient world to make marriage intimately connected with a woman's social standing, your social credibility. That's somewhat commonplace in traditional culture is your place in the community. Your honor, your sense of being a whole person was tied to whether or not you were married. Provision, protection, children, honor. Of course, in the 21st century, we sort of look back on such days with our nose a bit in the air, don't we?

And of course, there's a lot to critique about it. But whether right or wrong, that was the reality. And with that in mind, now we can feel some of the weight of what's going on in the opening chapter of Ruth. Whereas Jane Austen's novels almost all begin with the scramble of young women to find a husband, this little book of Ruth tragically begins with all of the women losing their husbands.

Naomi's husband, Elimelech, dies. For a little while, there's hope for Naomi that she's got two sons. But as we find out 10 years later, they die as well, leaving no sons behind them. So here we have three women, Naomi, Orpah, Ruth, all stripped, not just of their beloved companions, but stripped of protection, provision, children, social standing. It was a frightful thing.

And that's why Naomi is so adamant in this opening chapter to send her daughters-in-law back to Moab. There's no hope for them in Judah. There's certainly no hope for them of having another husband from Naomi. Even if she could miraculously find a husband that very night, consummate the marriage, conceive, and give birth to two sons on the spot, even though she's probably well past the age of childbearing, if she could do all that, would Orpah and Ruth still wait around to actually marry those sons? Of course not. For Orpah and Ruth, it's absurd for them to stick with Naomi.

It's illogical. It's nonsensical. But if they go back to Moab, they can find husbands, start families, and live in peace and security maybe once again. If they go with their mother-in-law to Judah, however, they're most likely trading provision for destitution, protection for oppression, children for barrenness, and honor for shame. Because don't forget, the two women that we're talking about here are Moabites. Ethnically and religiously, these two women were outsiders in Israel. No upstanding, self-respecting Israelite was going to marry a woman from Moab. So functionally, following Naomi back to Judah was essentially consigning yourself to bereavement.

[10:46] From a literary perspective, this first chapter is setting the stage for the rest of the story of Ruth. Naomi returns from Moab, empty and bitter. She's coming home in grief and anger, maybe even in a little bit of shame. Maybe at some point you've had to return home feeling that way. How about it? You return home for the holidays or for the summer family reunion. And the first question everyone will be asking is, are you still single? When are you going to meet someone and settle down? Surely there are plenty of eligible men and women up there in Connecticut, aren't there? Aren't you just setting your standards a bit too high? Or aren't you focusing too much on your career? You know, there's more to life than work, right? When are you going to meet someone? On and on and on your family goes. Well-meaning, of course, but all of that is just like little barbs in your already disturbed soul. And the worst part sometimes isn't what people do say, it's what people don't say, isn't it? They treat you with kid gloves, they pity you and avoid certain topics because they think it's sort of sensitive. And the look on their faces says it all. Oh, poor so-and-so, not married yet. Poor so-and-so, struggling with the loss of your spouse or child. Poor so-and-so, unable to find work. And coming home in the midst of all that, it's easy, is it not like Naomi, to grow just a little or even a lot, to grow just a little bitter.

God, why haven't I met someone yet? God, why have you taken my loved one away? God, why did you let me lose my job? Naomi returns home with no husbands, no sons, completely empty, and maybe even in a small way, you felt like you've been in her shoes. And maybe like Naomi, you've felt that subtle slide into bitterness. How do you know? One way you know that bitterness is coming on is when you start comparing your suffering with others. At the end of verse 13, did you notice that? Naomi says to Orpah and Ruth, it's more bitter for me than for you because the Lord's hand has gone out against me.

What a strange thing to say. After all, hasn't the Lord's hand gone out against all of them? I mean, they've all lost someone, right? And whether they've lost only a husband or a husband and their sons, haven't they all lost everything? What ground does Naomi have to compare suffering of that kind of magnitude? It's as ridiculous as trying to say whether Tuscaloosa, Alabama, or Joplin, Missouri, is suffering worse disaster than the other. They've both been devastated.

Why compare them? But when grief starts to take a selfish turn and it starts crouching into bitterness, that's exactly what we do, isn't it? You start comparing.

You start thinking that you've got it worse than everyone else. You think there's a black cloud that follows only you around and no one else knows what it's like. In fact, you feel like that you've got it so bad that if people hang around with you, it's going to start rubbing off on them as well.

[14:22] That's essentially what Naomi's saying in verse 13. The Lord has got it out for me so bad that he'll even go after people that are close to me. So go back to Moab, daughters-in-law. If you don't want to get painted with the same brush that I'm being painted with, leave me. I'm in a worse state than you are and coming with me is only going to make things worse for you. But another way you start to see bitterness taking root is when your hurt or loss starts to define who you are. It starts to take root as your identity. That's what Naomi starts doing in verse 20, isn't it? Don't call me Naomi, she says to the women in Bethlehem. Call me Mara. As the footnote tells us, the name Naomi means pleasant or lovely, but Mara means bitter. Have you ever met someone who defines themselves by a loss or a hurt from their past? Something they feel as if they didn't deserve seems to always come up in their conversation, seems to color their outlook on life, what they think is possible, what they think is impossible. It starts to dictate their decisions. Bitterness, you see, like all sins, eventually becomes enslaving. It takes us over. It dominates us. At first, when we fester over our losses, when we harbor our anger and bitterness, it gives us an illusion of being in control, doesn't it?

It gives us a sense of agency, a way to get back, a way to actually do something in the face of our anger, our grief, or our loss. But eventually, at the end of the day, we find that it's the thing that's controlling us. Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara. Now, of course, we don't want to be too hard on Naomi, do we? She has undergone an unimaginable loss. To tragically lose your husbands and both sons is devastating. And the Bible certainly would have us grieve such a loss deeply and for an extended period of time. And we even see when we read through the Psalms and when we read, especially in the book of Lamentations, we have biblically warranted examples of people lamenting in such a way that they're crying out in honesty to God, questioning him, saying, why, Lord, have you allowed this to happen? But at the same time, God also warns us against bitterness. Because bitterness is ultimately self-regarding, self-centered, is it not? It's focused on my hurt, my loss, my tragedy, my anger, my rights, me. And such self-obsession is the essence of sin, isn't it?

In light of all this, the question we're left asking at the end of chapter one is, what is the Lord going to do for this aging widow? How is God going to respond to her bitterness, to her accusations, to her emptiness? And as the story unfolds, what we find is that above all, this is a story of God's grace to the undeserving. Naomi is bitter at God, but by the story's end, God will bless her with a sweetness and a fullness she could have only imagined. We even see signs of God's grace at work as early on as verse six. The Lord comes to the aid of his people by providing food for them.

He lifts the famine, and this triggers Naomi's return home. You see, although Naomi is wrestling with bitterness and with God's hard providences in her life, the Lord is not finished with her.

He's not giving up on her. The book of Ruth is a prime example of the biblical truth that's repeated over and over and over and over again from Old Testament to New, that God's heart goes out to the fatherless and the widow, to the outcast, to the stranger.

[18:41] But the real highlight of chapter one is Ruth's promise to Naomi in verses 16 and 17. It's beautiful language, isn't it? Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.

Beautiful language. It's no wonder we read this at weddings, right? But when you think about what Ruth is actually saying here, it's stunning. Ruth is willing to sacrifice practically everything to care for her aging mother-in-law. She's willing to forego all that a husband would bring to do her familial duty for Naomi. In fact, the word *clung* in verse 14, where it says Ruth *clung* to Naomi, is the same verb used in Genesis chapter 2 to describe the way a man and a woman *cling* to one another in marriage. That's the kind of bond that Ruth is going to have with her mother-in-law.

And you'll notice that Ruth isn't just saying that she's going to take care of Naomi until Naomi gets settled in, maybe. Ruth is completely changing her allegiance here. She's going to become one of Naomi's people. She's going to become a follower of the Lord. Your God is going to be my God, she says.

And she's going to continue through with that, not just as long as Naomi lives, but as long as she herself lives. Where you die, I will die. Ruth is all in, completely devoted. I'm doing this for the rest of my life.

Now, the extraordinary quality of Ruth's devotion, if we needed something to set it off in relief, if we actually needed something like that, well, we've got it. In Ruth chapter 1, we've got it because we see Orpah's response. Orpah's response kind of sets Ruth's response off in highlight. After all, didn't Orpah do the sensible thing? Didn't she do the expected thing, right? She went back to Moab.

[20:45] She went back to her people. She went back to her gods. I don't know about you, but I think I would have been tempted to do the exact same thing. Cut ties and run. Choose comfort and safety and prosperity.

And yet, Ruth remains. And the other thing that sort of makes Ruth's promise stand out as all the more magnanimous is Naomi's response to her. Or rather, her lack of a response, right?

Did you notice that Naomi says nothing else? Ruth pours out her heart. She makes this oath. One of the, probably one of the most beautiful examples of sacrificial loyalty and love in the whole Bible. One of the most beautiful professions of that in all of scripture. And literally, the Hebrew text says, Naomi stopped talking. She just doesn't say anything and continues down the road to Judah.

She doesn't even acknowledge Ruth's existence, actually, for the rest of the chapter. Did you notice that? She gets to Bethlehem. Here's Naomi. Naomi doesn't even say a word about this woman who's bound herself to her. Instead, she's still absorbed in her own loss and bitterness. But Ruth, even in the face of such an implicit rejection, keeps her promise. So what we have in chapter one is Naomi's bitterness and Ruth's devotion sort of setting one another off. They're set side by side in the narrative, showing us the depth of each. Naomi's bitterness is so heavy that even Ruth's sacrificial devotion can't break through and elicit even a thanks. But Ruth's devotion is so steadfast that not even Naomi's thankless self-pity can derail it. Of course, it's tempting to read such a passage and say, okay, here's the lesson. Don't be like Naomi and be like Ruth. We can all go home, right?

What would that look like? Don't be like Naomi. Don't get bitter at God for his hard providences in your life. Realize their ultimate purpose for good. God uses them to bring them back to yourself, to make you more like himself. In addition, realize how God, even in your loss and pain, is providing for you? In other words, who are the Ruth's in your life that you're maybe ignoring in the midst of your suffering? Or where is God giving you the simple blessings of food and family and harvest? Don't be like Naomi. And technically, that wouldn't be wrong. It's all good advice so far as it goes, isn't it?

[23:23] And on the other side, we could say, be like Ruth, yeah? Forgo temporary security, like a husband or a home or other worldly comforts, to do what's right. Live a life of devotion on behalf of the weak and needy whom God has brought into your life, no matter what the cost. As one commentator says, Ruth models for us an adventurous faith, one willing to abandon the apparently sensible and venture into unknown territory. And there's some truth to that as well, isn't there?

After all, Jesus Christ calls us to complete an unflinching devotion to himself and to the service of others. Ruth is a model of utter loyalty and love. And if we keep pressing it further, look what God does as a result of her loyalty. If you take into consideration, as we find out at the end of the book of Ruth, you take into consideration that Ruth becomes King David's great-grandmother, and King David, of course, is the sort of type of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, comes from the line of David. Well, perhaps you could say that Ruth's simple decision to care for her elderly mother-in-law resulted in the salvation of the world. How about that for seeing our simple acts of obedience from a kingdom perspective, right? You never know what God has in mind to bring about, even through the most mundane acts of love and service that he's calling us to perform, the salvation of the world.

But what if instead of looking at this chapter through the lens of moral examples, we looked at it from a different angle? What if we look at it through the lens of God's salvation history?

What if we look at it by considering this theme of departing and returning that frames the whole chapter and really runs through the whole book? The Hebrew verb meaning to return occurs over and over and over again in chapter one. It's the word that the author wants us to hear, wants us to listen to, wants us to see. They're returning, they're returning, they're returning. But of course, there's a contrast, isn't there? Naomi, the insider, she departs from the promised land with husband and sons, only to return home full of emptiness and bitterness. But Ruth, the outsider, the Moabite, returns full of faith and full of devotion. Now we might ask, how is it that Ruth is returning in chapter one if she's not actually an Israelite? Well, one way to look at it is to realize that Moabites are actually distant descendants of Israelites. They're descendants of Abraham's nephew, Lot. So you could say in one sense that as a Moabite, as a descendant of Lot, Ruth is actually returning into fellowship with Abraham's family. And when we look at it that way, when we look at this chapter as being all about coming home, as returning, we realize that the whole Bible is really about leaving and returning, isn't it? Jacob and his sons had to leave the promised land.

God brought them back through the exodus. The Israelites were exiled by Assyria and Babylon, and God brings them back from exile. Even Jesus tells the story of a prodigal son who goes into the far country and spends everything he has, and of a father who runs out to greet him and welcome him home. You see, ever since Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, we've all been living in a distant country. We're all far from home. We're all separated from God. We're all on the outside looking in, wondering and waiting and trying to get back. And the difference between Naomi and Ruth is that one realizes it and one doesn't.

- [27 : 12] Naomi doesn't realize that even though she's an Israelite, even though she's an insider, she doesn't actually deserve God's favor. So when the hard times come, when tragedy strikes, she not only grieves like she should, but she starts to become bitter. She starts to shake her fist to God and say, God, you took what was rightfully mine. But of course, nothing is rightfully ours with respect to God. He created us and gave us everything we have as a gift. And especially as rebellious sinners, we have no right to demand anything from him. But Ruth, on the other hand, she doesn't think she has any sort of claim on God. Keep in mind that she lost her husband here too. But she knows that anything she receives from the Lord's hand is purely by grace. It's incredibly ironic. The Moabite pagan gets it and the Israelite doesn't.

But the amazing thing that we see through this little book is that the grace of God extends to both of them. To the unquestionable outsider Ruth, God's grace comes.

And to the hardened and bitter insider Naomi, God's grace comes. Even chapter one ends with a hint of this grace. The narrator mentions that the harvest is beginning.

Jesus once said that the Father makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust. And the question is, what do we do with it? Will we soak in the rain? Will we go out into the harvest? Will we enter into the feast?

Or will we nurse our bitterness? Will we cling to what we've lost? And will we allow self-pity to consume us? And in so doing, will we reject God's grace and stay forever separated from him?

- [29 : 10] Seems like an easy choice, right? But it's not that easy, is it? After all, not even Ruth's extraordinary kindness could melt Naomi's heart.

So what has the power to break the hold of bitterness in our hearts? And to free us to return to God?

You have to see that Ruth points us to the one who had even greater loyalty and devotion. You see, Ruth left her homeland, her family, even her physical safety, to love and provide for bitter old Naomi.

But at the end of Ruth, we find out that this book is all about the coming of a king. And Jesus Christ left heaven, was separated from his Father, and died on a cross to love bitter men and women like you and me.

Or think about it this way. Ruth, in this chapter, makes a lifelong covenant to put herself at great risk so that her mother-in-law can come home and be comfortable and stay home.

- [30 : 19] But Jesus Christ has made an eternal covenant with his Father to go to the lengths of death itself so that you and I could return home and stay home in the presence of God himself.

Ruth clung to Naomi and Jesus Christ clings to all those who have faith in him. And he will not let us go.

Do you see the love of Christ for you? Do you see how his loyalty and devotion meant that he left everything for you to identify with you, to rescue you, to preserve you?

If you see his loyalty and his devotion, then it will start to melt the bitterness in your heart. Then you'll see that no matter what the Lord allows in your life, that his love for you is unquestionable in Christ.

And when you realize that in Christ you have a fullness that nothing in this world can take away, you can start to love again, to hope again, to take risks again, and even to pour yourself out in love and devotion for one another.

[31 : 40] Jane Austen said that we're all desperately searching for a spouse. And she was right. But the gospel says that in Jesus Christ you have the true spouse who loves you with a devotion and loyalty that can fill your emptiness, that can melt your bitterness, and that can make you lovely once again, just like Naomi.

Let's pray together. Jesus, we thank you that you have tasted bitterness for us on the cross so that we could taste the sweetness of your righteousness given to us freely.

Lord, thank you for what we see in this chapter, that your hand is at work in all of the details of our life, in the hard things and in the good things and the blessings and in the struggles.

Your presence is there. Lord, we thank you for the undying and faithful love and devotion that you've shown to us in Christ to rescue us out of our self-centeredness and bitterness and sin so that we might dwell with you forever and live now as people who know what it means to have experienced that loveliness, that pleasantness, that sweetness of the grace of the gospel.

God, make us as a community of believers pleasant, lovely, at peace with you because we know your love for us.

[33 : 20] In Christ's name, amen. We're going to sing a song together now, sort of meditating on some of the themes that we've seen in Ruth chapter 1, and then in a few minutes we'll go to the Lord's table.

So use this time to reflect on what we've heard and also to prepare your hearts for coming to the Lord's Supper.