

The God Who Cannot be Ignored

Ruth 1:6-22

August 2, 2020

Big idea: Ruth whole heartedly commits to Naomi and the Lord. Naomi's complicated faith wrestles with God.

Intro –

There are some things that are hard to ignore: the sounds of a ticking clock late at night that you hadn't noticed before and now can't *not* notice; a scratch on your sunglasses that you see every time you put them on, a crying baby at night (unless you're a dad; dad's can be really good at ignoring that sound), the sound of a buzzing mosquito in your tent when you're camping.

For Naomi in chapter 1 of Ruth, God seems to be someone she can't ignore. She may be angry at Him. She may not understand Him. But she can't ignore Him.

As a reminder, the first five verses of this short book started it with suffering that is broad as well as focused. The broad suffering has to do with a famine that leads a small family to leave Israel. The focused suffering has to do with a series of 3 deaths within that family – Naomi lost her husband and then 10 years later she lost her two sons. Placing yourself in her shoes, it's not hard to imagine the emotional pain of those losses. That pain is reflected in her words in this chapter as she returns to her home city of Bethlehem.

1. Naomi urged her daughters-in-law to return to their own people rather than follow her to Israel. (1:6-13)
 - a. She has heard that the Lord had visited His people and gave them food (1:6)
 - i. Woven throughout the story are statements like this that show God's hand in ordinary events.
 - ii. It might have said, "she heard they harvest was more successful and now they have additional food."
 - b. At first, she gently says goodbye to Orpah and Ruth and sends them back to their homes.
 - i. Return to your mother's house
 1. Typically would say "father's house" but "mother's house" is used in a few other places to refer to marriage and romance, so that is likely what's implied.
 - ii. She provides a sweet blessing
 1. May the Lord deal kindly with you, recognizing their kindness to her sons and to her
 2. May the Lord grant that you find rest with a husband.
 - iii. There is emotion and affection, and they stubbornly refuse to go, so she turns up the pressure.
 - c. Naomi doesn't give them a rosy picture that will surely await them if they follow her.
 - i. "What is there for you if you come with me? Nothing!"
 - ii. No promise of a new husband, prosperity, and children. Not trying to seduce them with empty promises.
 - iii. Notice the way she emphasizes the hopelessness of going with her
 1. Points out the folly and hopelessness of coming with Naomi – even IF she married that day AND she became pregnant AND she ended up bearing multiple sons (not just children), they wouldn't wait 18 years until they could marry, would they? There's no hope of marriage if they come with her (foreshadowing the surprise of God's provision in the chapters to come).

iv. Appears to be a reference to the practice known as levirate marriage, from the latin word *levir* for “brother-in-law.”

1. **Deuteronomy 25:5-6** "When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be *married* outside *the family* to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. ⁶ "It shall be that the firstborn whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

2. It may seem strange to us. You ladies might be thinking of your brother-in-laws and thinking, “I wouldn’t want to marry him!” But it was put in place to protect the woman and continue on the inheritance of a family line that could have been cut off. It met a very real need but isn’t a practice continued into New Testament times.

a. Awkwardness when we talked about this in Matthew 22:24 when this is brought up in a hypothetical situation to Jesus and I explained the policy. One woman had been sitting by her husband and her brother in law!

2. Orpah chose **Moab** and her gods but Ruth chose **Israel** and the Lord. (1:14-18)

a. Orpah is not criticized in her relational commitment to Naomi

i. She intended to go, she wept with her, she kissed her, but she did ultimately go back to her people and to her gods. She is portrayed as a “nice person” – she was loving to her husband and Naomi, willing to leave her country, but she didn’t believe in the Lord.

ii. She ultimately chose what seemed rational.

iii. She is still probably a young woman in her mid-twenties with a lot of life left ahead of her. She can marry a Moabite man, bear children, and worship the idols of her people. Nothing of any real promise awaits her in Israel, besides the God of Israel and her Mother-in-law.

1. The true God *minus* everything in Bethlehem

2. Everything *minus* the true God in Moab

a. She chooses Moab – she returns to her people and her gods (v. 16)

b. Marriage for a young woman meant security in that society.

b. Ruth clings to Naomi and links herself with the true God and His people (1:15-18)

i. Each of these statements ramps up her level of commitment – she’s not merely relocating to a different area, she is expressing loyalty to Naomi and to the Lord.

ii. These words are indicative of her conversion – she is a follower of the true and living God and wants to be identified with the Israelites, his covenant people.

1. **Leviticus 26:12** 'I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.

2. **Exodus 6:7** 'Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

iii. Even the statement about being buried where she is buried would have been a significant commitment in the ancient near east.

iv. She wraps it up with an invitation for the Lord to strike her down if she goes back on her promise, a common phrase found in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings.

- v. Perhaps Ruth's conversion is part of the answer for why Naomi was allowed to experience such dark circumstances.
 - 1. Easy to say they experienced tragedy as God's judgment for their rebellion, but that might be too simple. It could be, but we aren't told and must beware of reading that into it.
 - 2. Already we see a glimpse of light in the darkness in Ruth. She is faithful to Naomi and to the Lord in a time of great unfaithfulness.
 - 3. Spurgeon - This was a very brave, outspoken confession of faith. Please to notice that it was made by a woman, a young woman, a poor woman, a widow woman, and a foreigner. Remembering all that, I should think there is no condition of gentleness, or of obscurity, or of poverty, or of sorrow, which should prevent anybody from making an open confession of allegiance to God when faith in the Lord Jesus Christ has been exercised.

3. Naomi returned empty and believed the Lord has dealt ***bitterly*** with her. (1:19-22)

- a. The excitement of her return only seemed to highlight her sadness.
 - i. She asked them to call her "Mara," like the spring named Marah in Exodus 15 that was so named because of its bitterness.
 - ii. **Exodus 15:23-25** When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah. ²⁴ So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" ²⁵ Then he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree; and he threw *it* into the waters, and the waters became sweet.
- b. imagine this – who is to provide for her? This is a different society. Few opportunities for women. No social safety net. Who is to provide? Her husband. But he dies. Who is next? Her sons. But they both die. Now there are three widows. Imagine that you are in your 50's with a decent job, a modest saving, and retirement. You lose your job. Your savings were embezzled and are gone. Your retirement collapses and you are left with nothing and you wonder, how will I make it? You go to unemployment that they turn you down because of a minor technicality. Add to this to the pain of close relational death. That's Naomi.
- c. I'm intrigued by Naomi's faith. I can't quite figure her out.
 - i. Consider her statements in this chapter:
 - 1. 1:8 May the LORD deal kindly with you
 - 2. 1:9 May the LORD grant that you may find rest,
 - 3. 1:13 for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.
 - 4. 1:20 for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.
 - 5. 1:21 I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty.
 - 6. 1:21 the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me
 - ii. There's a complexity to Naomi's faith – at the one hand she is wrongly bitter at the Lord, but on the other hand, she continues to come back to the Lord in her thinking and talking. She has a wounded faith, a deformed faith, an uninformed faith, but it's still faith.
 - iii. Joins others who have accused God of wrong doing
 - 1. Moses - **Exod. 5:22-23** Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did You ever send me? ²³ "Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all."

2. Elijah - **1 Ki. 17:20** He called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?"
- iv. Her (and their) accusations were wrong but real – they were inaccurate or at least inadequate theological statements but real because that’s how they felt – perhaps you’ve had similar outbursts against the Lord that you now recognize as inaccurate.
- v. What has she *not* done?
 1. Concluded God isn’t real
 2. Walked away from God to follow the gods of the nations around her
 3. Given a cliché answer that didn’t reflect where her heart was at
- vi. Like Peter, where else am I going to go? You have the words of eternal life.
 1. **John 6:67-68** So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?"⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life.
- vii. Like the man who prayed, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."
 1. **Mark 9:24** Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, "I do believe; help my unbelief."
- d. Like many of us, Naomi is focused on what she doesn’t have rather than what the Lord has provided.
 - i. She is empty, but she has a devoted daughter in law.
 - ii. We might be focused on our desire for different parents, different job, better health, different spouse, or any spouse, rather than recalling what the Lord has given us.
- e. The narrator summarizes the chapter in v. 22
 - i. Naomi returned
 - ii. With her Ruth “the Moabitess” – 5 more times in Ruth she will be called this. It emphasis her identity, as does the repetition that they returned “from the land of Moab.”
 - iii. But there’s also a glimmer of hope and the stage is set for the next chapter – it’s the beginning of barley harvest.
 1. The chapter opens with a feminine and closes with a harvest.
 2. It opens with a departure from Bethlehem and ends with a return.

4. Truths that matter

- a. God is ***faithful*** and active.
 - i. OT stories and characters are more than examples to us. They are pointers to God’s character. They are figures in God’s steady march towards the Messiah.
 1. I had one professor in seminary that would warn against sermons that were “the killer bees” . . . Be like David, be like Jonathan, be like Abraham.
 - ii. And that’s true. The main point of Ruth is the faithfulness of God
 1. But we can learn lessons – both positive and negative – from real life people in the Word.
 2. **Romans 15:4** For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.
- b. Like Orpah, will we choose the familiar “***safe***” path over the Lord?
 - i. She walked out of the Bible in v. 15 and we never hear about her again. Did she marry and have a nice life with a Moabite man? Probably. She seems nice. Naomi said she was kind to her late-

husband and to Naomi. But if Naomi's assessment is right and her path never changed, she went back to her people and her gods.

ii. Jesus is clear that allegiance to Him comes first for a disciple.

1. **Matthew 10:37** "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

iii. Several years ago, a friend said about some students in a college ministry, "I think they are one boyfriend away from walking away from the Lord."

c. Like Ruth, will we ***cling*** in allegiance to the Lord?

i. Grace is not merely for "covenant insiders" who have lost their way, but for "outsiders." All can come, the doors are open even in the OT, but they are flung wide in Christ.

ii. Would Ruth have known the traditions and the ceremonies? Would she have felt lost during the Passover? Would she have struggled to absorb the dietary restrictions? Would there have been unfamiliar language – the OT version of "christianeze" that she would need to learn to interpret? Sure. Yet she clung to the Lord.

d. Like Naomi, will we wrestle with a complicated ***faith*** in the Lord?

i. There's no pretending or putting on the "church face" with Naomi and many other Biblical characters. It doesn't mean they are always right in the way they approach God or talk about God, but there is honesty.

ii. I get the sense with Naomi that God cannot be ignored. She may not understand Him. She appears upset at Him. She believes He has caused her pain. But she can't ignore Him. Her worldview is saturated by God, even in her despair.

iii. But we have more information than Naomi. What her generation looked ahead to in cloudy faith, we look back to with clear revelation. They had the sacrificial system that portrayed the seriousness of sin and the necessity of substitution. We have the fulfillment of that foreshadowing in Christ. So whatever we don't know about our suffering, we do know that God deeply loves us. We do know that He did not exempt Himself from suffering but suffered Himself in our place. And every time we take communion we remember anew.



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