

Message #4
Ruth: A Woman for All Seasons

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7/31/2022

THREE LADIES RESPOND TO GOD
RUTH 1:14-22

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Rockie Naser (PROJECTOR ON--- ROCKIE NASER) was born in Moab, what we know today as the country of Jordan. She was raised in an Islamic culture where worship of Allah was central to the life of her family. When she was eight years old, the family moved to Chicago. Job opportunities were much better in the US than in Jordan. The family was not impressed by what they saw of cultural life in this supposedly Christian country. They were turned off by what they saw on TV, what they heard of Western music, and what they learned about the prevalence of alcohol and drugs among the youth.

So when Rockie reached her teen years, her father sent her back to Jordan. There she was again immersed in the Islamic culture. But she was not happy. She begged her father to let her come back to Chicago. He agreed, upon the condition that she attend an Islamic school. She consented, and she came back to the US.

A few years after graduation from high school, her father arranged a marriage for her with a first cousin back in Jordan. Her father went to Jordan to make preparations for the wedding. Rockie's brother brought her to the airport. After passing through security, Rockie decided that she just could not go through with this wedding. So she left the airport and went on the run. This decision brought great shame to her family. Rockie's brother was tasked with the mission to track her down and kill her. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Such are the stakes involved with family and marriage and religion in modern Moab. Such were the issues in the time of the Old Testament books of Judges and Ruth. Some of these issues are relevant in our culture today. We are still trying to figure out how to do marriage and family and religion.

On Sunday mornings we have been looking at the little Old Testament book of Ruth. We have seen that the setting was the period of the Old Testament judges, which ran from the 1300s BC until about 1000 BC. The last verse of the Book of Judges describes the moral climate of the time with these words: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." During this several century time period the people of Israel repeated this cycle of following God, falling away from God and worshiping Canaanite idols, being judged by God, crying out to God, and then being delivered through a judge, or military leader, raised up to throw off Israel's bullying neighbors.

Sometime in this era the Melech family, composed of Elimelech and Naomi and sons Mahlon and Chilion, were faced with a famine in their hometown of Bethlehem. They decided to go 50 miles west into the country of Moab (PROJECTOR ON---

BETHLEHEM TO MOAB MAP) to the east of the Dead Sea. There are indications in the earlier part of the Old Testament that God's people were supposed to stay in the land of promise. The Moabites were traditional enemies of the Hebrews. The general consequences described in the Law of Moses that would befall Israel as a whole when they strayed away from God included famine and barrenness and death.

These were the judgments which the Melech family experienced. First husband Elimelech died. Then the sons chose to marry Moabite women, which was contrary to God's directions. The wives were unable to have children. Then both sons died.

Naomi was left with two daughters-in-law. There was news that productivity had returned to the fields of Bethlehem. So Naomi decided to return to her home area. Her daughters-in-law wanted to go with her. She tried to talk them out of it. She was bitter toward God because of the tragedies which had befallen her. We pick up the story in v. 14 of Ruth #1.

I.

In v. 14 of Ruth #1 (p. 222) we encounter ORPAH AND THE APPEAL OF THE WORLD. (I. ORPAH AND THE APPEAL OF THE WORLD) The daughters-in-law of Naomi like her, despite her bitterness toward God. But Naomi tries to talk them out of following her to Bethlehem. Back in vv. 11-13 she said to them, **“Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am 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, 13 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.”**

Verse 14 describes what happened next: **“Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.”** This was a very emotional scene of separation. The separation was probably going to be permanent. There would be no e-mails or Zoom meetings or phone calls or even letters. Traveling long distances was just too difficult in that era, especially for women.

The kiss of Orpah was a farewell kiss. She was returning to the family of her origin. This was a logical decision. This is what Naomi encouraged. Home offered familiarity and security. Remarriage would be a definite possibility. To go with her mother-in-law would be a much riskier adventure. It would mean a whole different culture where she would be an alien. Naomi was probably a kind of mentor to Orpah, but she encouraged her daughter-in-law to return to her family. So she did.

The one problem from a religious and spiritual perspective was that the land of Canaan was where the true people of God could be found. YHWH the God of Israel was not limited by geography. But Israel was where His people were and where His worship

could be practiced. It was where His religious shrine was located. Orpah was returning to a culture which did not recognize the one true God.

II.

(II. NAOMI AND THE BITTERNESS OF THE...) We come then to NAOMI AND THE BITTERNESS OF THE WAYWARD BELIEVER, which is described in v. 15 and vv. 19-21. We read in v. 15: **“And she [Naomi] said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’”** This is the common sense, practical course of action that the situation suggests. In speaking to Ruth, Naomi is appealing to peer pressure.

But this decision being encouraged by Naomi also includes going back to the Moabite gods. How could a faithful Jew encourage that? We don't know very much about the Moabite gods. We do know that the chief god was Chemosh. We are also told later in 2 Kings #3 v. 27 that the king of Moab offered his son as a burnt offering to this god. It seems pretty disappointing that Naomi would encourage this woman whom she obviously loves to go back to a culture which includes worship of this false god. She does not even offer Ruth the option of coming with her.

In vv. 16-18 Ruth determines to go with Naomi to Bethlehem. We will explore her decision in a moment. Now we will skip down to v. 19 as we focus on the behavior of Naomi. According to v. 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?’”**

It probably took a week to make this trip to Bethlehem. The last part of the journey was a challenging climb. The two women had to cross the Jordan River, which is over 1000 feet below sea level. Then they had to hike up to Bethlehem which is 2500 feet above sea level, the same elevation as Boulder City. This was in March or April when it is already getting pretty warm in the Jordan Valley in the daytime.

So the two ladies show up in Bethlehem, and the text says that the whole town “was stirred because of them.” The original verb is a form of the Hebrew word *hum*. This is an example of onomatopoeia. The word sounds like the noise that is being described. The whole town was humming.

This was a small town. People were related to each other. They knew one another's families. This was not a very mobile society. So people remembered Naomi. The men may have been at work in the fields. Perhaps that is why the text says that it is the women who give the first reaction: “Is this Naomi?”

Do you think that this was a positive response? Doesn't Naomi look great and wonderful? I don't think so. Life has been hard. She has aged. She is downcast. She is bitter against God. She left Bethlehem ten or more years ago with a husband and two sons. Now they are gone, and all that she has is this Moabite woman with her--- a foreigner who is part of this country which has been an enemy of Israel. The community

will welcome her back. She is family. But they are shocked and saddened by her appearance and by her story.

Verse 20: **“She said to them, ‘Do not call me Naomi; call me Mar, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.’**” “Naomi” means “pleasant.” “Mar” means “bitter.” This has become her outlook on life. The name she uses for God is “Shade,” which is often translated as “Almighty,” although we are not certain about its original meaning.

I find it somewhat interesting to see how her response differs from that of many people in our culture who experience hard things in life. So often people around us who have hard things in their lives decide that there is no God. If God was really there, these bad things would not happen to me. I don’t believe in Him any more. Naomi still recognizes that there is a God. In fact, she believes that He is the God of Israel. It is just that He is unjust. He has dealt unfairly with me.

My argument has been that the Melech family disobeyed God in going off to Moab and marrying off their sons to Moabite women. Death and barrenness were the results that God warned would happen from such behavior. Naomi is unwilling to recognize that wrong behavior. She is unrepentant. God has only done what He warned that He would do.

Naomi continues her complaint in v. 21: **“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?”** Naomi still recognizes God’s sovereignty. It is just that He is unloving and unfair. She pictures a courtroom scene where God is testifying against her. The Almighty has judged her, and Naomi claims not to understand why. We do have some insight into that. We have also seen that the Lord has brought her back to the land of promise. He has brought her news of a good harvest. There is reason for hope here, though Naomi does not seem to yet realize it.

I pointed out last week that there are many reasons why the people of God experience hard things in life. It often has nothing to do with any wrong behavior of which we are guilty. But wrong behavior is an issue here. Sometimes it is with us also. When that is the case, we need to acknowledge our wrongdoing. That is called repentance. Fortunately the God who is there is a forgiving God. He is a God of grace.

In the face of hard times that eventually come across the path of all of us at some time, we need to avoid developing bitterness toward God. In the New Testament Book of Hebrews (HEBREWS 12:15) we encounter this admonition in #12 v. 15: **“See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled...”** Bitterness is corrupting. It makes us unpleasant people. It makes us complainers. It can be contagious. It can promote a wrong view of God among other people.

What we need is grace. Naomi needs grace. But in order for her to obtain that grace, she has to recognize the error of her own ways. She also needs to recognize the grace

that He is already showing her. He has brought her back home where she is among people who will care for her. He has also brought back the rains which are responsible for producing a good harvest.

In the midst of hard times we also need to be sensitive to any responsibility for the hard times that we may have created. We also need to be on the lookout for signs of God's grace around us. God is soon going to show that grace in clearer ways to Naomi.

III.

We come then to Roman numeral III in the outline (III. RUTH AND THE ATTRACTION...) and RUTH AND THE ATTRACTION OF AN UNSEEN FORCE. That is the subject of vv. 16-18. Notice first the last clause of v. 14. The text says, "**...but Ruth clung to her.**" The reference is to Ruth clinging to Naomi when Naomi is telling both daughters-in-law to return home. The original verb is a very strong word. It is the same word that is used in Genesis #2 v. 24. (GENESIS 2:24) That is a verse familiar to many of us. It says, "**Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast** [or cling] **to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.**" Ruth was making a strong commitment to Naomi. This was in spite of all of the forces working against that commitment, including Naomi herself. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Look then at vv. 16 & 17: "**But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.'**" Ruth is making an amazing commitment. Her words are sometimes used today in wedding vows. But the original context was the commitment of a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law.

There were many reasons not to continue this commitment on the part of Ruth. Her husband and Naomi's son had died, No children had been produced as a result of this union. Naomi herself was telling Ruth to go back to her family. Ruth was close to her sister-in-law Orpah. Orpah had returned to her home. Ruth might be able to continue that relationship if she stayed in Moab. Returning to Ruth's family meant a friendly and familiar environment. She would be among her own people who would probably welcome her back. There was a better chance of finding another husband among her own people.

Then to stay with Naomi meant all kinds of risks. It meant a somewhat different culture with a somewhat different language. People in Judah worshipped a different God. She would be a foreigner. Ruth knew the history of Moab-Israel relations. The Moabites had often bullied the Hebrews. What sense did it make to stay with Naomi?

If Ruth was simply motivated by concern and loyalty toward Naomi, she could have promised to stay with her until she died. Naomi was somewhat older. Life was especially fragile in that day. Perhaps Naomi was not likely to live a long time. Life had

certainly worn her down. Yet Ruth was making a commitment to be buried in this new land. She was going to stay there no matter what.

Ruth was also making a commitment to take on worship of Naomi's God, the God of Israel. This was the same God whom Naomi said had made her life bitter. This is the God whom Naomi said was unfair and unloving. Yet Ruth made a commitment not only to follow Naomi but also to follow Naomi's God.

So the issue is: How do we explain this commitment on Ruth's part? We are not privy to her innermost thoughts. We don't know all of the details of her circumstances. We don't know how much she knew about the God of Israel. But from the information we are given, it is hard to explain her decision.

My suspicion is that there was an unseen force at work. Jesus talked about that force in the New Testament Gospels. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 6:44) In John #6 v. 44 Jesus is quoted as saying, "**No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.**" Some of us have experienced that force. We have been exposed to the gospel. We have heard the message that we can only get to heaven by believing in Jesus who died to pay the penalty for our sins. There is something within us which has told us that this is true. We just know with certainty that this is true. I suspect that it was something like this which happened to Ruth. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Ruth concludes the statement of her commitment with a solemn vow. It was the kind of vow that we find in other parts of the Old Testament and in other cultures in the Ancient Near East. The negative consequences of failing to live up to her vow are not specifically stated. But it is implied that she is willing to take on the most severe of consequences if she does not live up to her vow.

According to v. 8 Naomi finally gives into Ruth's desire to go with her to Bethlehem: "**And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.**" Perhaps Naomi had some awareness of what God said in the Law of Moses about the importance of keeping vows and the consequences for breaking them. (PROJECTOR ON--- DEUTERONOMY 23:21) According to Deuteronomy #23 v. 21, "**If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.**" Thus Naomi gives up her protests.

IV.

We come then to v. 22 where we learn about YHWH AND THE ACTIVITY OF A SOVEREIGN GOD. (III. YHWH AND THE ACTIVITY OF A SOVEREIGN GOD) That activity of a sovereign God seems evident in the motivation of Ruth to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem. But there is other evidence of that miraculous activity in v. 22. Verse 22 tells us: "**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 barley harvest.**"

The text implies that not only Naomi returned to Bethlehem but also Ruth did. Ruth had never been to Bethlehem. How is it that it could be said that she returned there? Perhaps it is because of her connection with Naomi. Perhaps there is a hint that she is reconnecting with the God who created her.

The note about the time of this return has significance for us. The barley harvest was the first harvest of the agricultural year. That harvest happened in the first month of the religious calendar of Israel. That was the month Nisan, which corresponds to our March or April. What else of significance happened in Israel's history in the month Nisan?

Consider this reference in Joshua #4 v. 19 (JOSHUA 4:19): **“The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho.”** It was on exactly Nisan 10 when the children of Israel under Joshua first entered the Promised Land of Canaan after having spent 400 years in slavery in Egypt plus forty years of wandering in the wilderness. They entered Canaan after crossing the Jordan from the land of Moab. It was in the plains of Moab where Moses recited the Law of Moses contained in the Book of Deuteronomy. It was in that book where Israel was commanded to occupy the land and destroy its inhabitants and to refuse to intermarry with the pagans. It was there in #28 where curses were pronounced for failure to follow God's law. It was at this same time of year when Naomi and Ruth were making the same crossing from Moab into the land of promise.

What else happened in the month of Nisan? Consider Exodus #12 v. 3. (EXODUS 12:3) Moses writes, **“Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month [He is talking about the month Nisan] every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household.”** Moses is talking about preparation for the Passover, which commemorates Israel's escape from Egypt. Nisan 10 was the day years later when Israel would enter the Promised Land,

Four days after the unblemished lamb was set aside Moses describes in Exodus 12:6 (EXODUS 12:6) what was to happen: **“... and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.”** This killing of the unblemished lamb marked the beginning of Passover.

During the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which immediately followed Passover, a sheaf of the barley crop was taken by the priests and waved before the Lord at the tabernacle. This indicated that the harvest of the barley crop was dedicated to the Lord. This is how Leviticus #23 v. 17 (LEVITICUS 23:11) describes it: **“...and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it..”**

It is at this season of the year that our text notes that Naomi and Ruth crossed the Jordan and showed up in Bethlehem. A Moabite woman is showing up at this festival season. Was the Passover being celebrated in Israel at this time? There is no hint in the text that it is. But we know that during much of Israel's history it went unobserved.

According to 2 Kings 23:22 the Passover stopped being observed some time during the period of the Judges. But this was the season in which it should have been celebrated. (PROJECTOR OFF)

What else happened at the beginning of the barley harvest and the time of the Passover? A thousand years later Jesus Christ was crucified as the unblemished lamb of God at the time of the Passover sacrifice. Three days later as the priests in the temple in Jerusalem waved the barley sheaf before the Lord, Jesus rose from the dead.

Is all of this timing coincidental? I am inclined to think not. If not, perhaps we should look for more spiritual significance in this story. Perhaps we could look at Orpah as symbolic of most people in the world around us. Most of us choose to follow our own gods, whoever and whatever they may be. Most of us are inclined to choose the path of least resistance, the path that seems to provide comfort and security, the path that leads us back home to family and friends.

Perhaps Naomi is like Jesus in a certain respect. She made it difficult for Orpah and Ruth to decide to follow her to the Promised Land. What did Jesus say to people who were attracted to Him and inclined to follow Him? (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 14:26) In Luke #14 v. 26 He told the people who liked to hang out with Him: **“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”** What did Ruth’s decision to follow Naomi involve? It meant the rejection of her own family. It meant a sacrifice of her old life to an uncertain and risky future.

(MATTHEW 10:37) In Matthew #10 beginning at v. 37 Jesus declared, **“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (MATTHEW 10:38) And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (MATTHEW 10:39) Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”** The point is that Jesus wants to have the first place in our life, even if that means a break from family. This was Ruth. She responded to the work of God in her heart. She left family and culture and religion behind. She chose a risky path. But it was the right path. For it led to a connection with the true God and the true people of God.

Such was the story of Rockie Naser. (ROCKIE NASER) She left her family and culture behind for a future that was uncertain. She did not show up for an arranged marriage, and her father and her brother wanted her killed because of the shame which it brought to her family. She lived on the run for several months. Then she decided to join the Illinois National Guard. She wrote a letter to her family in which she said, **“I’m a soldier of the United States Army, and if you try to hurt me in any way, shape, or form, that’s going to be considered a federal offense for you.”** Her family backed off.

Several years later Rockie took a job with a new company as a sales representative. That job took her to Dallas. When a delivery man showed up at her apartment with new furniture and offered to assemble it for her, she was freaked out. She grabbed a

neighbor who was walking her dog and asked her to come inside with her while this assembly happened. It turned out that this woman was a committed Christian lady. She began to develop a close relationship with Rockie. Over an extended period of time this neighbor introduced Rockie to church and other Christians, including an Iranian Christian pastor. This Muslim woman from Moab became a follower of Jesus. Eventually she even attended the seminary that I did in Dallas. Today she is the executive director of an organization called Hope Impacting Souls, which provides support for refugees who are victims of war, persecution, and human trafficking.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

The same God who drew Ruth from Moab to Bethlehem with Naomi, and who drew Rockie Naser from Moab to the US and the Christian faith, is available to us if we will put our trust in Jesus.