

FPFWC Christian Development



Profiles in Faith

December 2023

Winter Quarter

December 2, 2023

Lesson #1 – The Faith of Ruth

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Ruth 1:6-18, 22

ICE BREAKER –

1. How do you discern whether to move forward with a risky plan or fall back on a more conventionally wise action?
2. What is one characteristic you see in the life of Ruth that you want to have?
3. In what specific ways can we demonstrate loyalty or devotion to God?

Key Verse – “Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God”. Ruth 1:16

LESSON BACKGROUND

A. Before and After

Tragedy creates a “before” and an “after”—before the job loss, the accident, the fight; after the break-up, the death, etc. When tragedy strikes, we might question God’s sovereignty or fear that He is using His strength to punish us through our pain. No matter how strong our faith, tragedy can leave us raw and feeling that we are merely surviving.

Reading the stories of tragedy found within the Bible can offer comfort. When we see examples of how others remained faithful to God, we are inspired to persevere. And even more, when we see how God demonstrated His faithfulness to others, we can regain confidence in His provision no matter our current circumstance. We don’t need easy answers in pain; we need God’s love, often expressed through the love of other believers. Ruth’s story is one biblical example of love expressed in the after time of tragedy.

B. Lesson Context

The author of the book of Ruth is unknown. The date of composition has been proposed as early as King Solomon’s reign (approximately 970–930 BC) to as late as 250 BC, long after the return from Babylonian exile. This huge range speaks to the many factors one might point to as evidence of an earlier or later date as well as the text’s own ambivalence concerning these questions.

The setting of the events within Ruth are comparatively much better defined as occurring during the time of the judges (Ruth 1:1), that is, sometime between 1373 and 1043 BC. The conquest of Canaan was completed with the Israelite tribes settled in the land (Joshua 23). But the Israelites experienced oppression from outside nations, Moab occasionally being one of them (example: Judges 3:12–31). The Moabites were descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot (Genesis 19:33–37). Conflict with Moab was already ancient by the time the time of the judges in Israel (Numbers 22–25).

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Moabites were banned from entering the assembly of the Lord (Deuteronomy 2:26–30; 23:3–6), though marriage to Moabites was not banned specifically (contrast 7:1–3).

Despite these deep antipathies, a persistent famine in Israel motivated a certain Naomi's Israelite family to leave Bethlehem and settle in Moab (Ruth 1:1; see commentary on 1:6, 22, below). Ten years are covered quickly in the text, apparently beginning with the death of Naomi's husband, Elimelech, and ending with the death of her sons (1:3, 5). In the meantime, these two sons had married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, before leaving them childless with their untimely deaths.

Widowhood was an especially precarious state for women. In the ancient Near East, including both Moab and Israel, men had far more economic power than women. A woman left without male relatives to care for her could be reduced to abject poverty, and prostitution might result. Fathers or sons were the best lines of defense to protect widows; in the case of younger widows, this protection lasted until new husbands could be found (compare Genesis 38:11; Leviticus 22:13). God had given Israel specific instructions for caring for widows, both within the family and the larger community (examples: Deuteronomy 14:28–29; 24:17; see commentary on Ruth 1:11, below).

LESSON COMMENTARY

Testing the Judean Woman (1:5b–7)

1:5b–7. With the death of the men, who were the direction-setters and final decision-makers of the family, Naomi was left as the default leader of her diminished family unit, then comprised of her and **her** two Moabite **daughters-in-law**. Her first decision in this role—and one that stood in marked contrast to that of her husband's—was to arise and **return from the land of Moab**. Note the narrator's—and hence the reader's intended—perspective from *within* the promised land. Though the following causal statement, **for she had heard ... that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food**, would appear to diminish from the spiritual motivation of Naomi's decision, more should not be read into this statement than is warranted. The text does not state that this was the only reason for her decision. Considering that her daughters-in-law and their families would unquestionably have provided for Naomi in Moab, she evinced a clear preference for being in Israel. Indeed, any disparagement of Naomi's spiritual maturity at this point would not only be premature, but would also be unjustified in view of her obvious sensitivity to the will and solicitude of God (who is mentioned for the first time in v. 6). This sensitivity is borne out in the ensuing narrative—beginning with her profound concern for the spiritual welfare of her **two** Moabite **daughters-in-law** who had apparently decided to return to Judah **with her**.

C. Testing the Moabite Women (1:8–18)

1:8–18. Though many scholars have considered Naomi's statements in this section to be expressions of spiritually immature complaining and unjustified bitterness, a careful

reading reveals in fact just the opposite. Rather, Naomi had a keen perception of and concern with spiritual matters—specifically, a focus on the will and work of God *as well as* the spiritual welfare of her daughters-in-law. This was borne out, perhaps most significantly, by Naomi’s culminating challenge at the end of each of her three rhetorical addresses to her daughters-in-law (vv. 8–9a, 11–13, and 15).

In the first instance she expressed her hope that **the LORD** would grant them **rest, each in the house of her husband**. The challenge centers on the term **rest** (*menuha*), which is employed elsewhere in the Bible to describe the *spiritual rest* (relationship with God) that one experiences through faith in the True God (cf. Ps 95:11 with Heb 4:3, as well as our comment on Gn 2:15, in which the same Hb. root is used). Such rest was therefore hardly to be found in the house of a pagan husband. In the second instance she challenged them by observing that **the hand of the LORD has gone forth against** her. That is to say, living with her will not be easy, since she was experiencing the bitter consequences of the sinful decisions of her husband and two sons. In the third instance, when Orpah had already “thrown in the towel,” Naomi presented her third and most direct “challenge” to Ruth: **Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law**—which is to say, “return to your gods”!

It is only when Ruth decisively answered this challenge and affirmed her commitment to Naomi (**where you go, I will go ...**), to her people (**your people shall be my people**), and to her God (**your God, my God**), that Naomi **said no more to her** on this topic. Naomi’s three appeals are thus to be understood as carefully worded expressions of *evangelistic warning*, in which—contrary to the method often practiced today—she was seeking *not* to “smooth out” the hardships entailed by conversion, but in fact to highlight them in all of their potentially unappealing detail. In this, Naomi was in quite good company, for Jesus Himself adheres to the same method, never paving the way to “easy” faith, but always making sure that the potential disciple understands the true and potentially painful cost of following Him (cf., e.g., Mt 8:18–22; Mk 13:9–13; Lk 18:18–30; Jn 10:24–26).

In this respect Ruth and Orpah also provide a vivid real-life example of two of the “seeds” of faith described by Jesus in Lk 8:4–15. The seed that “fell on rocky soil,” represented by Orpah, was “those who, when they hear, receive the word [of God] with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation [*peirasmou*, which is synonymous with Hb. *massa* (“test(ing)”); cf., e.g., the LXX Ex 17:7] fall away.” The seed that fell into the “good soil,” represented by Ruth, was “the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.”

It is unusual that **Ruth the Moabitess** should be described as having “**returned**” **from the land of Moab**. Grammatically there is no question that this expression is referring to Ruth. The same expression is also used in 2:6. The reason may well be that the same verb which here denotes a physical-locational “return” is elsewhere commonly employed to denote a spiritual “return”—which may otherwise be rendered by the English verb “(to) repent” (e.g., Is 19:22; see further Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance*, s.v. *sh-w-b*, meaning “d”). This verb use is all the more apropos here by association with **the land of**

Moab. Considering the close association in the Hebrew Bible between ethnicity/geography and religion (as in 1:15) saying that she “returned from” Moab is the same as saying she repented of *her faith in the gods of Moab*. This maintains the focus on Ruth’s spiritual commitment as the basis of her perseverance in upright conduct (i.e., her “valor” as a “woman of excellence” [3:11]) as described in following verses.

LESSON NUGGET – Naomi sinned by getting bitter and blaming God for her plight. Naomi means "pleasant" and Mara means "bitter". But it was her decision to go to Moab, so why blame God? A "root of bitterness" can poison your life and the people around you (Hebrews 12:15), so avoid carrying grudges. Although God does not prevent the painful consequences of our sins, He does overrule so that His purposes are fulfilled. By the grace of God, Naomi’s emptiness will become fullness, and her sorrow will turn to joy.

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary