



BACK TO BETHLEHEM

WEEK 13
08.28.16

FOCUS VERSE

Ruth 1:16

And 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.

LESSON TEXT

Ruth 1:8–10, 14–18

8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

9 The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.

10 And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people.

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14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her.

15 And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law.

16 And 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:

17 Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.

18 When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

Ruth 2:15–16

15 And when she was risen up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not:

16 And let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not.



FOCUS THOUGHT

God's blessings are often found where we experience our worst defeat. It is important to take advantage of divine opportunity.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Storm Collapses Cliff, Reveals Statue

Romans 8:28 states, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” This verse rolls so easily off the tongue when life is wonderful—when everyone is healthy, the retirement account is increasing, all bills are paid, the crops are growing, the children’s marriages are solid, and the grandkids are doing well in college. It’s another matter when pacing the floor of the ER, waiting for the doctor’s report, receiving a foreclosure notice, or discovering one’s fourteen-year-old granddaughter is expecting. But even then, all things do work together for good—to those who love the Lord and “are the called according to his purpose.”

A December 15, 2010, article from *CNN.com* stated, “A huge storm that collapsed part of a cliff on Israel’s central coast led to the discovery of a statue dating back to the Roman period, the Israel Antiquities Authority said Tuesday.

“The white marble statue of a woman wearing a toga and sandals is estimated to be 2,000 years old. It stands 1.2 meters tall, weighs about 200 kilograms and was found with no head or arms, according to a news release by the authority.”

Who knows what treasures will be uncovered if we allow God to work for our good during our life storms?

OUTLINE

I. ATTEMPTED TO AVOID PROBLEMS

- A. Journeyed to Moab
- B. Suffered Heartaches in Moab
- C. Cannot Run from Problems

II. EMBRACED OPPORTUNITIES

- A. Naomi’s Empty Return
- B. Ruth’s Determination

III. RECEIVED REWARD

- A. Ruth’s Devotion Rewarded
- B. Naomi’s Instructions
- C. Ruth’s Redeemer
- D. Redeemer’s Willingness to Redeem

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

There may be times when we are called upon to do the right thing and follow through with commitments even when things are difficult. In fact, our response to difficulties often reveals our true character. In the face of adversity, it is important to understand that by following the Lord’s plan and purpose for

our lives, unfathomable blessings are available to us.

The Book of Ruth contains a fascinating story about a Moabite woman who was redeemed by a relative of her deceased husband. In the face of great loss, Ruth made a commitment to her mother-in-law, Naomi, and chose to follow her to Bethlehem. Ruth’s devotion to Naomi exemplified embracing an opportunity to make the best choice in a hard situation. Ruth chose to cling to Naomi in her greatest time of difficulty and uncertainty. Leaving the land of Moab and following Naomi to a foreign land to serve the God of Abraham changed the course of Ruth’s life. Boaz becoming Ruth’s kinsman-redeemer beautifully illustrates the grace of God toward fallen humanity through Jesus Christ, our Kinsman-Redeemer.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. ATTEMPTED TO AVOID PROBLEMS

The Book of Ruth is filled with instruction for the believing heart, poignantly portraying the

romance of redemption. To survive a famine in the land of Judah, an Israelite family chose to move to the country of Moab. Set during the times of the judges, there is speculation the famine was a sign of God's chastening.

Believers should seek the mind of the Lord instead of relying on their own reasoning and abilities.

Our own lives often reveal the desire to avoid problems and provide human solutions rather than trusting the true source of our strength. In the midst of life's most difficult situations, believers should seek the mind of the Lord instead of relying on their own reasoning and abilities. When this family took matters into their own hands, they failed to rely upon the Lord or trust His provision in the middle of the famine.

A. Journeyed to Moab

Not only did Elimelech take his family from Judah, the land God had promised to the Jews, but he took them to Moab, a place with an environment that could be considered toxic to the children of the one true God. The people of Moab were pagans, steeped in heathen practices, who had made it clear over the centuries that they had little love for the people of Israel. The Moabites were a cursed people with whom the Israelites were forbidden to seek a treaty of friendship. The Book of Deuteronomy declared, "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever" (Deuteronomy 23:3).

Based on this information, it did not seem wise for Elimelech to take his wife and sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to Moab, even with a famine in Judah. The boys grew to become men there and eventually married two Moabite

women. Elimelech's name means "My God is King." However, he did not live up to his name, fleeing Bethlehem when he should have been faithful. Things may have been bad in Judah at the time, but for this family, things became far worse. The Book of Ruth describes the disastrous results of his choice.

B. Suffered Heartaches in Moab

"Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband" (Ruth 1:5, NKJV).

Life in Moab proved to be filled with heartache and despair for the family. After living in Moab for some time, Elimelech died, leaving his wife and two sons to fend for themselves in a foreign land. The two sons each married a Moabite woman and before long both sons also died. The passage does not provide the circumstances surrounding their deaths, but this loss left Naomi with her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, alone after this tragedy.

The moment we run from our problems or circumstances is the moment we lack trust in God and begin to place our faith in our own ingenuity or ability.

When Naomi heard that the land of Canaan had food once more, she determined to leave Moab and return home. The emotional pain and loss she experienced during her time in Moab caused Naomi to believe that the Lord was punishing her by removing His favor from her. She knew she had to get back to the land of her ancestors, to seek God and His ways

again. There was nothing more important than the blessing of the Lord. Even though a number of years had passed since her husband brought her to Moab, she hoped to regain God's favor by returning to her native land and to His people.

C. Cannot Run from Problems

One may wonder why people think they can outrun problems. The Bible is filled with people who attempted to outrun their problems: Jacob, Moses, and Jonah are some notable examples. A key lesson from the Book of Ruth is that problems cannot be avoided but should be faced through the guidance and power of the Spirit of God. With a famine in Bethlehem, Elimelech took matters into his own hands, running from the problem and leading his family away from the Promised Land into a foreign, pagan land.

In our own lives, we may sometimes have to choose whether to face the difficult issues or to attempt to run away from them. The moment we run from our problems or circumstances is the moment we lack trust in God and begin to place our faith in our own ingenuity or ability to solve the problem. In times of trouble, we are called to turn to the source of our strength rather than our own ability.

In some cases, God ordains an opportunity for change and the move is for our good. In other cases, however, we make changes because we would rather trust our own resources and skills to avoid the problem than to seek God's will in order to endure and survive. For example, suppose a person who is struggling financially were to be offered a new job that paid a substantial salary. Taking the job, however, would require the family to relocate, leaving the church in which they are actively involved, to move to an area where there is no church.

Such a dilemma should be faced with prayer and fasting to ascertain the will of God. On one hand, the job opportunity could be from God. He could be calling the family to relocate to that area to start a church, and the job would provide the financial means to support the family and the fledgling church. On the other hand, if God has not placed a burden on the heart of the individual to start a

church in that area, it would seem less likely that He would be calling the family to leave a place of spiritual safety for the sole purpose of having financial security.

This potential opportunity could simply be a test of faithfulness to the things of God. Scripture warns that there is no benefit if a man were to "gain the whole world, and lose his own soul" (Mark 8:36). Financial struggles could be providing a platform from which to evaluate the family's priorities through reviewing their stewardship and finding a way to live within their means. If the lack of finances is caused by poor budgeting and spending habits, no pay increase will resolve that, and relocating would only make the situation worse. When faced with a crisis, it is imperative to seek the will of God and move only when He says to move. Otherwise, an individual may be running from a problem, creating more struggles and heartaches in the process.

Decisions should be Spirit-led and based on the commands, promises, and power of God's Word.

II. EMBRACED OPPORTUNITIES

When her husband and sons died, Naomi was left with a choice: to continue living in a foreign, pagan land with her daughters-in-law or to return to the land of her birth. At a point of desperation, Naomi heard that the land of Canaan had food again, and she decided to embrace the opportunity to return home.

Had Elimelech waited out the famine in Bethlehem rather than journeying across the Jordan valley to the land of Moab, would he have lived longer? Would his faithfulness and trust in the Lord have been rewarded with a different end to his story and the stories of his sons? One can only speculate, but there is an element of bitter

irony in Naomi's return to Judah. The results of the famine must not have had long-lasting, devastating effects on their homeland. Upon Naomi's return to Bethlehem, she found relatives who were quite wealthy tending to land near the property Elimelech owned.

We can see only the temporary circumstances, but God sees the eternal.

We can learn a powerful lesson from this story. Believers should never make a decision based solely on the circumstances surrounding a dilemma. Decisions should be Spirit-led and based on the commands, promises, and power of God's Word. We can see only the temporary circumstances, but God sees the eternal. To Elimelech, maybe living in Judah during the famine looked like a lost cause. But to God, Judah was the land of promise for His people, and He would not forsake it. Believers must take God at His word and be willing to forsake the path of their own limited perspective to follow His voice in times of darkness.

A. Naomi's Empty Return

With her dire circumstances, returning home was the best choice possible for Naomi. Since her husband and two sons had died, she had no means to provide for herself or her daughters-in-law. She decided to return home to Bethlehem to recapture some semblance of stability in her life. However, she did not expect her return to be a joyful homecoming. In fact, as she arrived in Bethlehem, people were happy to see her. "Is this Naomi?" they asked. "And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty" (Ruth 1:19–21). Naomi returned home with empty hands and a barren, desperate spirit. She

had nothing left and faced the shame of her tragic losses.

A heartbreaking story of a family devastated by grief and suffering seemingly culminated in a widow's life filled with regrets and questions. While the residents of Bethlehem were glad for Naomi's return to her homeland, she experienced a deep sense of sorrow from losing her husband and sons, whom she had held so dear. Though she had overcome the famine, she may have felt that she could never overcome the loss she experienced in Moab.

B. Ruth's Determination

Naomi experienced feelings of desolation, for the loss of her husband and sons felt like the end of her dreams. But she did not want the same fate for her daughters-in-law. They had lost their husbands, but as young widows they had opportunities to remarry and have a full life. When Naomi announced to Orpah and Ruth her decision to return to Judah, she gave them permission to be freed from any responsibility they felt to care for her, and she encouraged them to seek a happier ending to their own lives.

It appears that both daughters-in-law cared deeply for Naomi and had a strong sense of loyalty to her, because they both protested her suggestion. Naomi would not entertain their wishes to go with her, and she insisted they return to their families, released to their care and free to remarry. After much weeping and sadness, Orpah eventually relented and kissed her mother-in-law goodbye. But the passage conveys one of the most beautiful expressions of devotion in all of Scripture, with Ruth clinging to Naomi and refusing to leave her. With no promise of provision or hope for a future, Ruth determined to stay by the side of her mother-in-law.

"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: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me" (Ruth 1:16–17).

In uttering these words, Ruth forsook her past—her friends, her family, and all that was familiar and comfortable to her. She cast herself on the mercy of a strange people, a people who did not possess a good track record of welcoming outsiders with open arms.

Ruth determined in her heart to loyally remain by Naomi's side, regardless of the direness of her situation. In her time of need, Ruth did not abandon Naomi. She desired for the God that Naomi served to be her God, and she was willing to leave her own homeland to journey with her. What is beautiful in this story is the love this Moabite woman had for her mother-in-law in the face of such tragedy. She not only pledged to follow after her and to be buried in the place Naomi would be buried, but Ruth also declared her devotion to the God that Naomi served.

Determination leads one to action that can ultimately change the course of one's life.

It is remarkable that the bond of love shared between these ladies was ultimately responsible for Ruth's salvation and her unique place in our salvation history as an ancestor to Jesus Christ. Naomi's love and kindness was strong enough to win Ruth's unwavering loyalty without regard for her own interests. Such determination is noble and stands as a testimony of the attitude this young lady had in the midst of uncertainty. This typifies how determination leads one to action that can ultimately change the course of one's life. In our journey with the Lord, such commitment is necessary to fulfill His plan for our lives.

III. RECEIVED REWARD

"And Boaz answered and said to her, 'It has been fully reported to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and how you have left your father and your mother and

the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before. The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge'" (Ruth 2:11–12, NKJV).

The story of Ruth's being rewarded for faithfulness exemplifies how we also may experience demonstrations of grace and providence in the face of difficult situations. Ruth made the decision to forsake her own family in Moab, foregoing any possibility of security, and followed Naomi back to Bethlehem to care for her. As there were no provisions from the household of Elimelech, Ruth was faced with the loss of all comforts of living. However, she resolved to serve the Lord God of Israel, whom she had learned to trust through Naomi's faithful witness. She discovered that Jehovah was a gracious, faithful, covenant-keeping God. Boaz had heard of Ruth's kindness to Naomi and that she had put her trust in the one true living God.

A. Ruth's Devotion Rewarded

"And when she was risen up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not: and let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not" (Ruth 2:15–16).

While gleaning in the field in order to provide for Naomi and herself, Ruth met Boaz, a rich landowner and a relative, or kinsman, of Elimelech. Clearly Boaz was drawn to Ruth from the moment he saw her. It is likely Ruth was beautiful, but her reputation of loyal, faithful love for her mother-in-law had preceded her, and those characteristics were what Boaz mentioned. He ordered his workers to treat her kindly, as if she were one of his own female workers, and to leave enough for her that she would have plenty at the end of the day. At the end of the workday, Ruth returned home with over a bushel of barley. When Naomi learned it was Boaz who had been so kind to Ruth, Naomi told her that Boaz was a near

kinsman. Naomi was grateful for the kindness Boaz extended to Ruth, and she encouraged Ruth to continue working in his fields.

Like Ruth, we also may experience demonstrations of grace and providence in the face of difficult situations.

B. Naomi's Instructions

Naomi realized Boaz was extending kindness beyond that which would be bestowed upon a family member, and she hoped there was the potential for Ruth to experience marriage again with Boaz. Naomi developed a plan to determine whether Boaz had feelings for Ruth that would compel him to take on the familial responsibility of a kinsman-redeemer.

The word *kinsman* meant the individual was a relative, and *redeemer* meant he would buy the land and marry the widow of the deceased relative. Naomi was familiar with Boaz's schedule and knew of a time that would be convenient for Ruth to meet him in private. Naomi instructed Ruth to bathe, put on perfume and her finest dress, and present herself to Boaz at the end of the day, after he had eaten and drank and lain down to sleep. When Boaz was comfortably asleep, Ruth was to uncover his feet and lie down at his feet. (See Ruth 3:1-7.) The full significance of Naomi's instructions is difficult to ascertain in today's context, as her actions reflect an ancient custom now foreign to us. What is clear is that Boaz understood Ruth to be requesting him to take on the role of a kinsman-redeemer.

C. Ruth's Redeemer

When Boaz awoke at midnight, he was taken aback by Ruth's unexpected presence.

But upon hearing her request, he blessed her and expressed that he was indeed willing to fulfill that role. However, he knew of a closer relative who should have first choice to become her kinsman-redeemer, and Boaz promised Ruth he would talk with him the next morning. Boaz sent Ruth back to Naomi with provisions for them.

Boaz wanted to marry Ruth, but it was customary for the closest kinsman to have the first right to purchase the land of the deceased relative and to marry his widow in order to perpetuate the lineage of the deceased man. The following morning, as Boaz promised, he met the nearest kinsman at the gate of the city. Gathering ten elders of the city together as witnesses, Boaz explained Ruth's situation to the relative in the hearing of the elders. Not wanting to lose his own inheritance, the nearest kinsman was willing for Boaz to purchase the land and to marry Ruth. Boaz bought the land immediately and took Ruth to be his wife. The sorrow Naomi and Ruth had experienced turned to joy. Ruth's faithfulness had been rewarded by the faithfulness of a kinsman-redeemer. The son born to Ruth and Boaz was named Obed, who became the father of Jesse, who became the father of David, king of Israel and the ancestor of Jesus Christ.

D. Redeemer's Willingness to Redeem

In Hebrew culture, only a relative could buy the land, and he had to be willing to purchase the land and marry the relative's widow as well as being able to pay the appropriate price.

In our lives, Jesus Christ is our Kinsman-Redeemer. Having been born in sin, we are held captive as Satan's prisoner, powerless to defeat his forces on our own. However, Jesus Christ was born, died, and resurrected to redeem us with His own precious blood, the ultimate price. In order to redeem sinners, God manifested Himself in flesh but lived a life without sin. At Calvary, He willingly took our place and paid the price for our sin with His own blood, thus redeeming us from the wages of sin. Just as Boaz's decision assured Ruth of hope for her future, we can rest in the knowledge that our eternity has been secured by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The Book of Ruth tells of two women whose lives appeared to be at a desolate place, one through circumstances and the other by choice. Losing her husband and sons, Naomi was left without hope. Ruth chose to forsake any chance for personal security by remaining by the side of her mother-in-law and traveling with her to a foreign land. Their stories became an amazing testimony to what God can do when we reach bottom but place our trust in Him.

Boaz paid the price as the kinsman-redeemer for Ruth, providing for her a loving, lasting relationship with a noble man. Most significant, Boaz's decision to redeem Ruth allowed this faithful Moabite woman to be

grafted into the most precious family tree of all time, the lineage of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Relationship with the Lord always brings blessings and rewards we cannot anticipate or even fathom.

When we are faithful to what the Lord calls us to do through the good and the bad times, in the end, He will reward us. By following Naomi back to Bethlehem to care for her, Ruth provided God a pathway to orchestrate favor and blessings in her life. Today, we are called to live in full commitment to the Lord regardless of our circumstances, and in due time we will reap if we persevere. Just as Ruth's faithfulness was rewarded, Jesus Christ has earned and purchased a full reward, freely giving it to each individual who follows His voice. ■

REFLECTIONS

- Why do people find it easier to run from problems than to surrender them to Jesus and trust His provision in their lives?
- What characteristics did Ruth possess that enabled her to demonstrate such faithful loyalty to Naomi, regardless of personal sacrifice?
- What obstacles do we experience today that prevent us from being faithful in our relationships and making decisions that benefit others?
- What does Boaz teach us about grace?
- How should we respond to the love we freely experience from our Kinsman-Redeemer, Jesus Christ, specifically as we relate to others?