

“Your People, My People; Your God, My God”

(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 68)

Ruth 1

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“During the days when the judges ruled” ... it was a time of instability. There were wars, there was fear, there were people trying to eke out a living in the midst of the gradual decline of a society. Gone were the days of great leaders like Moses and Joshua who held all Israel together. Now each tribe fended for itself, periodically assisted by regional warriors like Deborah and Gideon and Samson who tried to hold Israel’s enemies at bay. Sometime during that two-hundred-year time span, the biblical record tells us, there was a famine in the land that affected the tribe of Judah, and specifically the town of Bethlehem. That’s ironic: the word “Bethlehem” literally means “House of Bread” – *Beth Lehem*. There is no bread in the House of Bread. Families had to leave the House of Bread to find bread. The book of Ruth tells us how the providence of God was at work in the life of one of Bethlehem’s families.

A man, his wife, their two sons: four individuals, in search of bread. They go east. Maybe they’ve heard that there’s bread across the river. Maybe others went with them. They head east, down from the hills, across the Jordan River, then steeply up again, curving around the northeastern corner of the Dead Sea, rising steadily and turning southward towards a high plateau some 3500 feet above sea level, where on average there would be about 16 inches of rain a year. It was a journey of about 50 miles, and it took them out of the land of Israel ... and into the country of Moab.

Moab. Two centuries earlier, the Israelites had passed near the land of Moab on their way to the Promised Land. The Israelites remembered that the Moabites were distant relatives – descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot. But those kinship ties meant little: when the Israelites had requested passage through Moab, Moab had refused; when the Israelites had asked for food and water, Moab had not come to their aid. Moab had even hired a prophet to curse the Israelites (Deut. 23.4), although Deut. 2.28-29 presents the details a little differently). The Israelites felt betrayed by Moab – with the result that there was now a prohibition, recorded in the book of Deuteronomy: “Moabites can’t belong to the LORD’s assembly. Not even the tenth generation of such people can belong to the LORD’s assembly, as a rule.” (Deut. 23.3-4) The Moabites had their own god, Chemosh, whom many Israelites were starting to worship – abandoning faithful worship of the Lord. Then, early in the time of the judges, Moab oppressed Israel for 18 years. (Judges 3.12-30) By the time we get to the story of Ruth, there is a lot of bad blood between Moab and Israel.

Yet when there was no bread in the House of Bread, one Israelite man took his family to the land of Moab to find bread. They settled down there. The man died, leaving his wife Naomi to raise her two sons in a foreign land. They grew up and married Moabite women,¹ but both of the young men died early in their marriages. Naomi was alone: a stranger in a strange land, far from home, bereft of her husband and her children, with two young Moabite daughters-in-law as the only family she had left, as together they buried the men they loved.

Naomi resolves: it's time to return home. She's lived in the land of Moab for least ten years. She knows that the famine is over; she's received word that there is once again bread in the House of Bread. She packs up her belongings and begins retracing her fifty-mile journey back to Bethlehem. Her Moabite daughters-in-law want to accompany her. But Naomi says to them: "Go, turn back, each of you to the household of your mother." She blesses them, in the name of Israel's God: "May the LORD deal faithfully with you, just as you have done with the dead and with me. May the LORD provide for you so that you may find security, each woman in the household of her husband." (Ruth 1.8-9) She kisses them, and – in tears – she says her goodbyes.

But they persist. "No, instead we will return with you, to your people." (Ruth 1.10) Naomi shakes her head. "Turn back, my daughters," she exhorts. She has no more sons to offer them as future husbands to replace the ones they lost. She insists that she's too old to get married, too old to bear children, and even if she could bear children, why should they wait *years* to remarry? No, they should go back to *their* home, the land of Moab, and find suitable men there. "No, my daughters," she says. "This is more bitter for me than for you, since the LORD's will has come out against me." (Ruth 1.13) She describes her feelings like this: "The Almighty has made me very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has returned me empty.... The LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has deemed me guilty." (Ruth 1.21) She is bitter: bitter over the death of her husband, bitter over the death of her sons, bitter over all the losses she has experienced. She blames God. She is grieving; she's angry; she's devastated – feeling the whole range of human emotions that Ralph talked about last week. (She should have been here to hear that sermon!)

One of her daughters-in-law capitulates. Orpah gives her mother-in-law one last embrace, and turns back towards Moab, towards home. But the other, Ruth, stays with Naomi. "Look," says Naomi, "your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law." (Ruth 1.15) Ruth replies: "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you." (Ruth 1.16-18)

Famous words. Beautiful words. Perhaps the most passionate set of words by a woman anywhere in the Bible. Ruth expresses absolute, utter, faithful, steadfast devotion to Naomi, her mother-in-law. This is "cleaving to one another" of the highest order, and these words have found their way into countless wedding celebrations – for both Jews and Christians. Ruth is leaving *everything*

¹ There was precedent for Israelite men marrying foreign women: Joseph had married an Egyptian; Moses had married a Midianite.

behind to follow her mother-in-law: her home, her family, even her *faith*. She will no longer worship Chemosh; she will worship the Lord instead, and she is already uttering solemn vows in the name of the Lord. It's not unlike what the first disciples do, when Jesus calls them to leave everything behind to follow him, except in the case of the disciples they didn't have to change their religion – they just needed to get serious about it. In Ruth's case, she is leaving behind her whole *faith life*, choosing instead the faith life of her mother-in-law. She cares about Naomi – and Naomi's God – that much.

That's some serious devotion.

And so the two women make their way to Bethlehem. For Naomi, this was coming home again; for Ruth, this was a whole new venture, into unfamiliar territory – territory where she knew she might not be welcome. She was a foreigner, after all. A Moabite – one of the worst of the worst, in Israel's eyes. Disrespected. Untrusted. Unwanted. We humans have a remarkable way of setting up barriers to keep unwanted people away. Sometimes we do this in the name of “national security” – you never know when those Moabites might decide to oppress Israel again; you never know if Ruth might be secretly sending messages back to Moab about how to attack. *Fear* can be a powerful driving force that makes newcomers – foreigners – feel unwelcome. Maybe there are some historic reasons for our fear – nobody then or now wants a repeat of certain tragic events in the past, in which so many citizens died – but at the same time, we have to make sure that *appropriate caution* does not give way to *inappropriate prejudice*. Just because somebody looks or talks different doesn't mean they have ill will at heart. Just because somebody wants to leave their country of origin and come live in our own doesn't mean we have to be suspicious of them. Just because somebody comes from a certain foreign country doesn't mean they intend to do harm. Ruth wasn't coming to Israel to be some kind of saboteur. Ruth was coming to Israel because in her heart of hearts, she wanted to be with her mother-in-law. She was coming to Israel as an expression of faithful devotion. She was coming to Israel because of *love*.

Consider this. One of the books of the Bible is named for a *foreigner*. A non-Israelite. In Israel's eyes, one of the worst of the worst. When the ancient biblical editors were deciding what to keep and what to throw away, what to preserve and pass down to future generations, they included Ruth. They included this book, named in honor of this Moabite woman who is remembered for her faithful devotion and her steadfast love. Honestly, Ruth's devotion to the Lord was far stronger than that of many born-and-bred Israelites, who were turning away from God to worship Chemosh. When the biblical editors were deciding who was worthy of remembrance, they chose this foreigner. This Moabite. They granted her a place right alongside the likes of Moses and Joshua and Samuel. The fact that she wasn't an Israelite *didn't matter*. Or, maybe it did. Maybe the fact that she was a Moabite is part of the reason *why* her story was included – to remind Israel that not all Moabites were bad.

There are some things that are far more important than your race, your ethnicity, your country of origin. Your faith in God is one of them. God will welcome *anybody* at his table, from *any* tribe or nation, for the critical ingredient is not *what country you come from* but rather *where your heart is*. You can be born and bred Israelite – born and bred *American* – but in the eyes of God, *that's not what matters*. What matters is *where your heart is*. What matters is *whom you choose to worship and serve*.

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