

Returning

Ruth 1:1-22

One of the hard, mature things we all have to do is to make sense of the facts of our life situations. I heard a story about a kid who finally began to face up to the fragility of his belief in the Tooth Fairy. He confronted his mother and asked her, "Mom, are you the Tooth Fairy?" Mom gave a little sigh because this marked a rite of passage. The end of the innocence of imagination. But she gave a little nod and said, "Uh, yes, honey, I guess I kind of am."

Well, the kid accepted the New Theology without freaking out. But a moment later he asked her: "Then how do you get into all the other kids' houses?"

The facts and the truth are not the same thing, are they? Discovering the truth is a matter of interpreting the facts, making sense of the data, putting it into categories and assigning meaning to it.

Ruth 1:1-5 tells us the terrible facts of a tragic history. This book opens with grief, loss, hardship, and suffering. Here are the facts:

- 1 Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.**
- 2 The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion--Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there.**
- 3 Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons.**
- 4 Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years.**
- 5 Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.**

The opening sentence tells us of difficulties on the macro level. It says that it was during the period of the judges when this story took place. That was a time of moral chaos and national humiliation for Israel. Further, we're told that famine struck. And it was a lasting famine; ten years would go by while the famine blighted at least the region of Bethlehem.

Then we enter the personal story of this family, a man named Elimelech, which means "My God is King," and a woman named Naomi, which means "Pleasant." With such names, they were, we can assume, good people. Buffeted by circumstances, they moved to Moab so that they could survive the famine. Then in the land of Moab both the husband and the two sons who married there died, tragically, for reasons we don't know.

Standing in the front of the auditorium during worship services, I sometimes find my gaze captured by the many widows in this congregation, women who are now alone because their lifetime partner was taken away. It's heart-wrenching to remember the story of saying good-bye to the beloved partner. In many cases I was part of that process.

But Naomi's tragedy was compounded because she had two sons who also died, not as older men who had lived full lives and accomplished much, but as young men, recently

married. Neither of them had been able to produce children, so we can imagine they were in their prime when their lives were taken.

Some of you have also been through that painful experience. You know how deeply Naomi hurts. The emotional pain and loss of seeing her family die, in her arms we can well imagine, was made even worse, though. To be a woman alone was to be faced with ruin in that culture. There was no social security, no safety net, no way for a woman to predict good things for her future if she didn't have a man in her life. Naomi's future was filled with threat and fear and difficulty.

And having two widowed daughters-in-law didn't necessarily make the situation better either. Three helpless widows in many ways is worse than one.

Those are the facts. But what do they mean? What is the truth? In the rest of chapter 1 we will hear two voices, Naomi's and Ruth's, speaking about what the facts mean.

These two voices are very different from each other, although their situations are similar. Ruth was also a widow, childless, and poor; Ruth would also live a life in a land that was not her own, being dislocated and an immigrant. Yet Ruth's response to it was completely different. She saw the facts differently. Seeing the two of them side by side will help us understand much of what God has to say to us in this passage.

When you're asked to describe yourself, which facts come out? Most of us are probably not as bad off as Naomi. But we are also not the rich and famous, living a life of ease and luxury without a care in this world either. We're somewhere in between. But given the facts, whatever they are, the question that remains is, what is the truth about you? Where is God in this?

There are many ways we can take hold of the situations in our life and try to give them meaning. Remember what Job's comforters did to try to give meaning to his life when Job suffered blow after blow, like Naomi. They essentially told him, "You're suffering because you're guilty." A lot of people think that way, don't they? When life gets hard they say, "I must have done something terrible to deserve this." And they pile shame upon the suffering they're already experiencing.

But God has to figure into the conclusion someplace. We have to draw meaning ultimately from His purposes. Life has to make sense in His presence. And that's what this book is about. So listen as we hear Naomi and Ruth each speak about the facts. Verses 6-22:

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread.

7 Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

8 And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

9 The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

10 And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people."

11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?"

- 12 Turn back, my daughters, go--for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons,**
- 13 would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!"**
- 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.**
- 15 And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."**
- 16 But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever 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. The Lord do so to me, and more also, If anything but death parts you and me."**
- 18 When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.**
- 19 Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"**
- 20 But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.**
- 21 I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"**
- 22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.**

Let's look at what Naomi regarded as the truth of the matter, how she gave structure to her life situation. We'll see it as she prayed, gave advice, and drew conclusions about herself.

Verse 6 is an interesting statement. At the end of the famine, it says that she heard that God had visited his people. It doesn't say that she heard that the rains came back, or the meteorological conditions were now favorable. God came. The reason there was no more famine was that the Lord did something about it. God was kind to His people. So Naomi said to Ruth and Orpah, "May the LORD deal kindly with you...."

It's helpful and important to realize that the first thing Naomi did was pray. Twice she called on God to do good to these two young women. Naomi was absolutely certain that the biggest presence in the universe was the presence of God. Nothing happened outside His will, so He was responsible for everything that happened. He was powerful enough to do whatever He chose. Only a fool would not pray, given that. God deserved to be prayed to, and Naomi took Him seriously.

A woman whose first comment in the current situation was about her prayer life must have prayed and prayed during those ten years. She may have prayed that the famine would be over quickly, and that they could go back to their home. And when her

husband got sick she may have prayed. When her first son got sick she may have prayed. Burying her husband, burying the first son, burying the second son, she may have prayed, asking for relief from the God who was in charge of everything, because she was a woman of prayer. Over and over again the things she asked for were withheld, and yet she didn't stop believing or praying.

But it's significant that she said to these two young women, "May the LORD deal kindly with you," not, "May the LORD deal kindly with us." It seems that she had stopped praying for herself. She had concluded that God was against her. So she had stopped asking for her own future. She had reason to be pessimistic - she'd just lost her husband and 2 sons, and had no visible prospects for her future. In her lament she declares that she believes God is punishing her. BUT she doesn't curse God or turn from Him.

We could assume that Naomi and her husband Elimelech are cursed because they leave Israel and go to Moab, a land of unbelievers. They certainly have encountered tragedy, but are they cursed? Naomi thinks so, but that is not necessarily God's perspective. Would God curse Naomi and her husband for moving into an ungodly nation?

In the book of Genesis we see that Joseph brings his entire family into the ungodly nation of Egypt and instead of being cursed, Joseph's family was blessed. Even the family of Jesus flees to the ungodly nation of Egypt and is blessed there rather than cursed. God uses these places that are ungodly, these places that are far from morality, ethics and faith, to keep his people safe, until He can release greater blessing upon them.

Many times we are brought to a difficult place in our lives for, as impossible as it may sound, we are brought to a difficult place in our lives for safe harbor. Many times we are brought to a difficult place, where we stay for a time, so that we may be open to what God has for us next in our lives. Sometimes we are brought to a difficult place and all the analysis in the world will never reveal to us why we are in such a difficult place. There we are, in a difficult place. But in this difficult place, Naomi still prayed, she still believed.

Secondly, Naomi gave advice, and her advice is an interesting statement of her perspective on what was true. She was almost sarcastic at points in her realism.

Her daughters-in-law made an important statement in verse 10: "We should surely return with you to your people." Her people were the covenant people of God, the ones who were given the promises and the Law, the ones God had chosen especially to work through in all of history. They wanted to go and join the community of those who knew the Lord.

But Naomi said, "Don't be a fool. Who's going to marry a woman of Moab in Israel in the time of the judges, when everybody is selfish and lawless? You have no hope of getting a husband if you come back to Israel with me. Return to your own homes. At least you have a chance there." Then she says, "Yes, maybe if I had sons, but I'm too old to have more children. Even if I were to get married and have sons today"-and she makes the whole thing silly. What she was basically saying was, "We've petitioned God, now forget that. If I were rich, I'd help you. If I had sons, I'd help you. But I don't have anything I can do for you. Therefore, you have to help yourself."

In verse 15, when Naomi couldn't persuade Ruth to leave, she said, "Orpah has gone back to her gods." That is one of the heart-breaking statements in this book. Naomi sent that young woman back to the worship of Chemosh in Moab. Chemosh was a demon.

The Moabites worshiped an image of him that had an open mouth and a fire inside, by placing living children into the open mouth. Naomi urged Ruth to go back to that, too. It's heart-wrenching to realize how little hope Naomi had. After years and years of praying to God and seeing people die, she was even willing to send Orpah and Ruth back there, because she felt like all they could do was play the hand they were dealt.

Finally, we have two statements of Naomi's convictions about herself. In verse 13 she said, "...It is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." She had been at this a lot longer, and she knew for sure that God had it in for her. Things would be different if that weren't true.

Then in verse 20, she came back to the town of Bethlehem, and when the people come out to see her, she changed her name. "There's nothing pleasant about me. Call me wretched, bitter, angry. God has dealt bitterly with me. I went out full, and I've come back empty." Given the facts, this was the meaning she gave to her situation.

Ray Stedman used to tell the story of an old woman and a preacher. She would come up and list all her problems in life at the end of every service, and he would try to give her some positive reason to look at life differently. Her response to the preacher was, "You know, young man, when God sends tribulations he expects you to tribulate." But Naomi had gone beyond that. She wasn't just tribulating amidst her tribulations. She had decided that God was against her. She believed that God loved some people, but not her.

Now let me ask you a question of fact before we move on. Did Naomi come back empty? Was she alone when she came back to Bethlehem? No, there was a young woman with her. But as far as Naomi was concerned she came back with no one. As far as God was concerned, she came back with the whole future of the human race holding onto her arm. She came back with a young woman who would be the mother of Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David the king of Israel, the father of the Messiah of Israel and the Lord of the nations, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. That's who she came back with. Not empty, but fuller than she had ever been. Yet in her bitterness she couldn't see it. The facts became distorted for her: "I'm empty, nothing, nobody, God-forsaken."

Ruth

What was Ruth's declaration of the truth? It's interesting what she didn't say. She didn't say, "I'm going to go back with you to Bethlehem because God will surely provide a husband for me there." She had listened to Naomi give her all the reasons why that wasn't going to happen, and she basically agreed with her. There is no evidence that she believed she would ever have a husband again. She was certainly no catch: She wasn't a Jew, she had no money or property. She had nothing to offer-why would anyone marry her?

But what Ruth did say was, "God has given us each other." What she believed that Naomi couldn't believe was that they loved each other and that was worth something.

Ruth said, "You know, I may never have anyone but you. But you're enough for me. The relationship that God has given us as mother and daughter, as sisters, as friends, is enough for me. God has not been bad to us, he's been good to us in ways that we didn't expect. So don't send me away and forbid me to make my future with you. Where you go I will go. Where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. Where you die I will die and be buried."

The way we must read Ruth's speech in this setting is that at the heart of it was faith and gratitude. Naomi had chosen to focus on what she didn't have, and had grown

angry and bitter and had assumed God was against her. Ruth had chosen to focus on what she did have and was thankful, because everything had changed.

She had grown up as a worshiper of a demon and she now knew the God of Israel. She had grown up among a people who had no future, and she now had the possibility of joining the people of God, the heirs of the promise, the ones to whom the Law had been given, the ones from whom Messiah would come. She had the opportunity to have what she had never had: status in Israel, intimacy with God, a true friend. She didn't have a husband, but that was okay. She was grateful for what she had. She analyzed life 180 degrees opposite of the way Naomi analyzed life.

RUTH'S COMMITMENT

A. V. 16 She Commits To A New Land - She is willing to follow Naomi where ever she goes. She is willing to leave Moab behind forever and to follow Naomi to Israel.

B. V. 16 She Commits To A New Leadership - She is willing to submit to Naomi and to allow Naomi to guide her life. (III. This is seen in the various times that Naomi gives Ruth advise concerning the manners and customs of Israel.)

C. V. 16 She Commits To A New Lifestyle - She is willing to give up all the old ways of Moab and to conform her life to the way people live in Israel. She is ready to make a dramatic change in her life.

D. V. 16 She Commits To A New Lineage - Ruth is willing to cut all ties with Moab. She wants to be a part of the nation which she has married into. She is ready to claim a new lineage.

E. V. 16 She Commits To A New Lord - This is perhaps the greatest statement Ruth makes. She is willing to give up the gods of Moab and follow the true and living God of Israel. This statement is her declaration of faith in Jehovah God.

F. V. 17 She Commits With No Limits - She tells Naomi that she is willing to commit to this new plan for life for as long as she lives. She even invokes the curse of God upon her life if she lets anything but death come between her and the commitment she has made.

(III. As we consider the commitment Ruth made to Naomi, it paints a picture for us of the commitment we should be willing to make to the Lord Jesus Christ.

- We should be willing to cut all ties with the old life and enter into a new land of blessing before the Lord.
- We must be willing to commit to His leadership for our lives.
- There should be a commitment to a new lifestyle based on the Word and will of God.
- We should also consider ourselves dead to the old life and alive in a new relationship to the Lord Jesus. Our lineage has changed!
- Obviously, this all means that there must be a new Lord, a new master Who dominates every area of our lives.
- Then, we should be willing to commit to the Lord and His will without any restrictions. Our commitment to Jesus Christ must be complete. It must be absolute and it must be final!
- Does this describe the life you live? Or have there been areas where you can see you commitment slacking off? Can you honestly say that no matter what

happens in life, you are 100%, absolutely and completely dedicated to serving Jesus, both now and forever?

Here in the book of Ruth is a relationship of extraordinary commitment, one that has a future, substance, love. Just the fact that this story creates for us the possibility of serious, committed, loving relationships gives us a chance to offer the world what it needs.

Naomi was frustrated, angry, and bitter because she had decided that God was against her. Ruth, given essentially the same hand in life except that she was younger, concluded that God wanted her. And what made Ruth able to see that is that she saw what she had as a gift from God, and she was grateful for it.

They were completely different in their orientation toward the future, weren't they? Ruth said, "I have no idea what will happen, but I can be committed to you and your God and your people, and let him deal with the future." Naomi said, "The future will come only as you calculate it and make it happen." She was frightened, angry, and withdrawn. We'll see in the rest of the story that God had to pound on her to make her believe that anything could happen that she didn't do for herself.

We also have the option, given whatever set of facts we have, of determining what the truth is. If you're a Christian, you're a child of God, an intimate of Christ, the residence of the Holy Spirit. You have the option of being thankful, living by faith, leaning into the future, holding on to the Lord with all our heart. Or we can conclude that hard facts mean God's hand is against us. But the issue is not what your life is made of, the issue is how you respond to what God allows in your life.

One of the great things about this book is that God doesn't leave Naomi here. When people are frustrated and angry, and they pray with their fists clenched at God, yell at people, and struggle with life; they don't get left behind. Naomi is going to be changed. But you can start out right at the beginning-why go through all the hardship? Why not live like God loves you now?

Ruth kept on going in the face of adversity and she did not give up. Can the same be said about you this evening? Are you living a life that is steadfast and unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, 1 Cor. 15:58? Or has your devotion to the Lord tended to fluctuate with the changing tides of life?