

“Return to Bethlehem”

October 18, 2015

Ruth 1:6-22

I. Introduction

One of the major themes of the Book of Ruth is that God is in control or as Paul wrote in **Romans 8:28**, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Sometimes it seems as if God only steps in at given key moments in life, but, as Romans says and the Book of Ruth shows, God is actually and actively involved every moment—“in all things.” As we will see in our study of the Book of Ruth, God, in a detailed and delicate way, works all actions together in His plan.

At this point in her life, I suspect Naomi couldn’t see God’s hand directing “all things for good.” Ten years earlier she and her husband, Elimelech, with their two sons had left a famine ravaged Bethlehem to start a new life in the heathen country of Moab. Sometime after moving to Moab, the sons had taken wives and life seemed to be OK at last. But soon Elimelech died and then Naomi’s two sons died before they even had children. All Naomi had left after ten years were her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Life wasn’t “*peachy keen*”—Naomi had gone away from Bethlehem full but came back some ten years later empty. Where was this loving sovereign God?

In today’s Scripture we see the sovereign God use a variety of circumstances and attitudes to accomplish His will for Naomi and Ruth as Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem. In these verses we see two scenes beginning with Naomi and her daughters-in-law on the road to Bethlehem.

II. Two Scenes

A. On the Road to Bethlehem At last, the famine was over in the Promised Land and there was bread in the House of Bread—in Bethlehem. Naomi heard the good news—at last something good has happened—and she decided to return home. But Naomi’s decision led to a problem for her daughters-in-law—to go with their mother-in-law to a foreign land or stay where they were.

Naomi’s decision to return to Judah was right, but her motive was wrong. She was mainly interested in food, not in returning to a place where she could worship the one true God with others. She was returning to her land and not to her Lord. This led to her counsel to her two daughters-in-law.

1. Naomi’s Counsel Naomi didn’t want her two daughters-in-law to go with her. Three times (**verses 8, 11, 12**) she said to “return home.” Having come to Moab as a foreigner, Naomi certainly understood the problems and the difficulties her daughters-in-law would face if they went with her back to Bethlehem. Moabites and Israelites didn’t have anything to do with each other. If her Moabite

daughters-in-law returned with her to Bethlehem, these young women would never marry again. As hated foreigners, they would be ostracized. Going back with Naomi would mean continual widowhood and poverty for them for the rest of their lives. Naomi even prayed for them that as they stayed in Moab that the Lord would be kind to them and find them new husbands and give them rest after all their sorrow. Naomi was sure that hope for a better future was not to be found with her. Naomi's counsel: "Return home."

But they said to her in [verse 10](#), "We will go back with you to your people." So Naomi began again to reason with them—to be logical, "Return home, my daughters; I am too old to marry again. And even if it were possible, and I were to get married tonight and bear sons, then what? Would you wait for them to grow up and refuse to marry someone else? No, of course not, my daughters!" You see, Mosaic Law said that when a man died, the nearest of kin was to marry his widow. If there were a brother he was the one to marry his brother's widow. Naomi was saying that there was no chance for her to have sons for them to marry. If they followed her to Bethlehem, they would be miserable without husbands, without support. They would be better off returning to their mother's house, to be with their families enjoying life.

2. Orpah's Decision After listening to Naomi's arguments, Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and made the decision to go back home. Sadly, she left any possibility of knowing the one true God as she returned to Moab and to worshipping the false god Chemosh. Her decision proved that her heart was back home where she hoped to find a husband. Orpah left the scene and is never heard of again.

3. Ruth's Decision Ruth's decision was the opposite of Orpah's. She made a decision for God; she said in [verse 16](#), "Your people will be my people and your God my God." Ruth refused to listen to her mother's-in-law counsel. Like Naomi, Ruth had experienced trials and disappointments, but instead of blaming God, she had trusted Him. In spite of in-laws who had not obeyed God as they fled the Promised Land and allowed their sons to marry foreign women, Ruth had come to know the true and living God. She wanted to be with His people and dwell in His land. Because of this decision, she is mentioned in the first chapter of the New Testament in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

Ruth's decision went against her background. She, like Orpah, was from Moab where they worshiped the god Chemosh ([Numbers 21:29](#)), who accepted human sacrifices ([2 Kings 3:26-27](#)) and encouraged immorality ([Numbers 25](#)). Her circumstances were also against her and could have made her bitter against this God of Israel. First, her father-in-law died, and then her husband and her brother-in-law had died. She was left a widow without any support. She could have thought, "If this is

the way the God of Israel treats His people, why follow Him?" Even Naomi was against her as she urged Ruth to return to her family and her gods in Moab. But, in spite of all these obstacles, Ruth must have been moved by the glimmers of faith she saw in Naomi as she faced all of her trials and Ruth wanted to share that faith. Ruth responded to God's call and mercy and followed Him.

Verses 16 and 17 express Ruth's decision, *"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."* Ruth confessed her love for Naomi and her desire to stay with her mother-in-law even unto death. Then she confessed her faith in the true and living God and her decision to worship Him alone. She was willing to forsake father and mother in order to cling to Naomi and live in Bethlehem with God's chosen people.

Ruth made a real decision for God. Basically she was saying, *"I accept poverty. I accept being an outcast. I also accept the fact that I will remain a widow the rest of my life."* She was willing to accept all of that in order to take a stand for the one true God. She made a total commitment to go back to Bethlehem with Naomi.

B. Naomi and Ruth arrive at Bethlehem

Recognizing that Ruth's decision was sincere and final, Naomi took Ruth to Bethlehem with her. Perhaps as they traveled, Naomi taught her daughter-in-law the basics of the Law of Moses. Perhaps Ruth asked questions about the Jewish faith and the Jewish people and her new home in Bethlehem.

Naomi had been gone over ten years and when the women of the town saw her they were shocked; they said, *"Can this be Naomi?"* Their question seems to indicate surprise and perhaps even amazement. Naomi's ten difficult years in Moab and the sorrows that she had experienced there had taken their toll on Naomi's appearance and her personality. James 1:2-3 says, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."* But instead of making her better, the trials had made Naomi bitter, she said, *"Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, i.e. call me 'Bitter,' because the Almighty, El Shaddai, has made my life very bitter."*

Naomi felt that she had come to the end of the story. She accused God of making her bitter. She had left Bethlehem with a husband and two sons and had come home without them. She had left with all the necessities of life and had returned home with nothing. Life was futile; there was nothing

to celebrate—she was all alone. She had come home to shrivel up and die. Naomi was selling herself and her God short—she even ignored the love of her daughter-in-law Ruth.

Contrary to Naomi’s attitude, the chapter finishes with hope. Ruth was with Naomi. It was barley harvest when they arrived in Bethlehem, a time when the community would be filled with joy and praise to God for His goodness at the harvest. It was spring, a time of new life and new beginnings. Unknown to Naomi, she was about to make a new beginning, because God had just begun to do a good work in and for her.

III. Conclusion

Like Naomi and Ruth, we all go through crises in our lives. Sadly, many of us respond like Naomi, “I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (Ruth 1:21). Or we feel like Job who cried out in Job 19:6, “God has wronged me and drawn his net around me.” We can’t control the circumstances of life, but we can control how we respond to them. That’s what faith is all about, believing that God is working everything for our good even when we don’t feel like it or see it happening. We can choose how we respond to the difficult circumstances of life.

God gave us the Bible so that we can see how He worked in other people’s lives—for some of them, like Naomi and Ruth, we can see the whole picture; we can see how God used individual decisions to accomplish His good. (If you haven’t read the rest of Ruth, why not do so sometime this week.) But there are others, too, turn to Genesis 50:20. Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob, had been sold into slavery by his own brothers when he was a teenager. Later Potiphar had him thrown into prison. But, after about 15 years, God had brought him out of slavery and prison to be the 2nd in command of all Egypt. Looking back over his life, Joseph was able to say in Genesis 50:20. Many of you know about the miserable trials Job had, but turn to his words at the end of his ordeal in Job 42:1-6. With the thoughts of the sovereignty of God, Solomon gave some good words to live by, turn to Proverbs 3:5-7. In Jeremiah 29:11, God said, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” If you truly trust God, you can have the attitude of the prophet Habakkuk; turn to Habakkuk 3:17-19. God loved us so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross in our place—we can trust Him in the hard times as well as the easy ones. Because of His love, we can trust God in the difficult times as well as the good times.

Often, in our own lives, we cannot see the big picture, but we can still trust God who loves us to use all things for our good. You can choose how you respond in difficult times as well as good times; as Hebrews 12:2 says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the

joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” We can choose to have joy in all things—that’s why Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, “Be joyful always.”

There’s one more thing to see, turn back to Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” For whom does God promise to work? For “those who love God.” These promises of doing good are only for Christians—those who agape love God. For a non-Christian, God may do good for them, but He isn’t obligated to do so. If you haven’t made Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior, why not do so today so that His promises of an eternal life in heaven as well as His promises to watch over His children in this life will be for you? Once Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, you, like all of God’s children, can choose to have joy—He has “plans for welfare not calamity to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11 NAS).