

BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

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Have you ever thought about how many things that define your story are completely out of your control? We could name hundreds, even obvious things like whether you were born in this century, or two hundred years ago. Just think about how different your story would be if that were the case; or if you were born in Afghanistan or India, instead of America; or if you were brought up in a home that was loving and taught good values, versus one that was highly dysfunctional and just kind of sent you out into the world, confused and wounded; whether you grew up in a home where you were protected, or a home where you were abused. I mean all of those things dramatically define your story, but you really have no control over those things. Concurrent with that, are the decisions that you make—the things that we can control. Our decisions are not independent of the things we can't control. As a matter of fact, if you grow up in an environment where you come away wounded, you come away abused, you come away confused, you can come out with some really bad values. All those things dramatically affect the choices you make, and bad choices typically don't happen in isolation. Bad choices give birth to more bad choices - they almost always come in a series - and pretty soon things are a mess. It's very easy to start to rationalize and start to excuse, because, "It's not really my fault because of all these things I couldn't control." And as soon as you find yourself in a frame of mind where you are excusing bad decisions, you have in essence given up in life. You have said, "My life is a mess; it's always going to be a mess; it's not my fault. That's just the way it is." But what if it doesn't have to be like that? What if it could be different?

Ruth was a scandalous woman through no fault of her own. She is very different from the first two women that we've talked about. She was a Moabitess. Now to us that may have no meaning, but to a Hebrew reader—a first reader—those words were scandalous. They hated the Moabites. The Moabites were their enemy; the Moabites were pagan, idolatrous people. It wasn't Ruth's fault that she had Moabite blood flowing through her. It wasn't her fault that she was born during one of the darkest periods in the history of the Hebrew people. It wasn't her fault that the origin of her people goes all the way back to Genesis, Chapter 19, in the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. When God was going to destroy the city of Sodom, Lot and his wife and his daughters escaped. His wife looked back and was turned to a pillar of salt, but Lot and his two daughters escaped. They find themselves living in a cave, and the daughters believe that they will never have a family, so they decide to get their father drunk, and they have relations with their own drunken father to produce children. Out of that would come a son by the name of Moab, who would be the father of the Moabites. These people were scandalous from day one. Yet, in the midst of the most difficult circumstances that Ruth had no control over, she made one

right decision after another, to the degree, that here we are thousands of years later, and people still talk about her, and people still admire her, and there's a book in the Bible actually named after her.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Ruth, Chapter 1: short, four chapters. It's a bit of a challenge to go through four chapters in just a few minutes so we'll read some of it and I'll just explain some of it.

We pick it up in Chapter 1, Verse 1:

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. And they took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other was Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband. (*NASB, Ruth 1:1-5)

That kind of sets the stage for our story. We're told this was during the time of the Judges. We were in the book of Joshua, and Joshua is a book of battles, and victories, and swords flashing, and faith to trust God. But, at the end of the story, they don't clear the enemy out of the land, and that would come back to haunt them the entire rest of their history. The book of Judges then, represents what many believe was the darkest time in the history of the Hebrew people. The repeated line was, "Every man did what was right in his own eyes." It was a time of pagan, idolatrous worship; they drifted far from God. It was a time of great violence; it was a time of great evil—just a very difficult time to be alive. The best way to understand the book of Judges is what we call these Cycles. There is a repetition of these cycles. It starts with the Hebrew people worshipping pagan gods and engaging in all kinds of idolatrous behavior. God sends along either a plague or an enemy nation to discipline them. They cry out to God for deliverance; God hears them. He raises up a judge, sets them free, for a while they get back on track, and then they go right through the same cycle again. That cycle repeats over and over and over again in the book of Judges. The story of Ruth is impressive, but if you put the story of Ruth up against the times in which she lived, it's really impressive—a remarkable woman, especially given in the time in which she lived!

This story takes place on the tail end of one of those cycles. They are experiencing a famine which is a part of God's discipline to get His people back on track, so He can bless them again. Rather than enduring that, and realizing the need to come back to God, Elimelech gets the idea that, "We're out of here; we're going to find greener pastures." And much to our shock, they decide to go to the land of Moab. Now earlier in the book of Judges, the Moabites actually conquered the Hebrew people and dominated them for about eighteen years—until they chased them back into their borders. Some time has passed, and it appears things are a little friendlier, but to a Hebrew reader, this would have been a shocking move—for Elimelech to live among the Moabites. He takes his wife and his two sons and, interestingly enough, his two sons have

Canaanite names. I think that tells us that Elimelech had been far from God for a long time. He was quite wealthy; he leaves and goes down into Moab. We aren't really told details; we just know that shortly after that, he dies. His two sons then marry Moabite women, which was directly prohibited by the Old Testament law. The Hebrew boys were not to marry Moabite women nor were the Moabites allowed to come into the worship of the Hebrew people. So, you get some sense as to what is being said here. So, the boys marry Moabite women and then they die. Then, to just kind of wrap up the opening setting, here is Naomi, a Hebrew woman in a foreign land, with two Moabite daughters-in-law, and that's how the story begins.

Verse 6:

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food.

Now one of the things that I love about the book of Ruth is just the way it is written. It is so skillfully written. For example, Verse 6 is very careful to word this in a way that we get a clear sense that she [Naomi] should not be in the land of Moab. The repetition there reminds us over and over again that she was somewhere she should not have been. We are told that the famine back home has now disappeared. But she's not living at home—she's in Moab. So, the repetition: she hears this in Moab, she needs to leave Moab, and needs to go back home, where there is food, and God's discipline has been lifted. So, you get the picture that it is time to go home.

Now I'm going to tell you just a little bit of the story from there in order to save time. She engages in a conversation with her daughters-in-law. She says, "You know I need to go back home and there's really no hope for you there. There's no future for you there; life would be a disaster for you, so you need to go back home. You need to go back home to your families; you need to go back home to your gods. I'll go my way and you go your way." Now there's a lot of discussion as to what exactly were Naomi's motives and I think they were probably mixed. I think on the one hand, she genuinely loved her daughters-in-law, and I think she believed what she was saying. There was no future for them. For a Moabite woman, to come into the Hebrew camp would have just been a very difficult life. They were young girls, "Go home, find a husband, have a life," and I think that was very legitimate. There was also discussion around the fact that for Naomi, it would have just added to the shame that her husband died; her two sons have died; they've been there ten years; these two daughters were unable to deliver children. So, she comes home empty handed. To add to that, two Moabite women would have just added to the shame, would have just added to the embarrassment, so it was probably also in her best interest that they not come. So, it's probably all of that. And at first, the daughters-in-law protested, "You know we love you; we want to stay with you," and so Naomi kind of "ups" the rhetoric. She basically says, "You know there is no future for you; I have no more sons." You know, it's kind of the idea that, "No Hebrew boy is going to marry you. Even if I got married tomorrow," she says, "and I had sons, by the time they were old enough to marry you, you would

be too old to have children.” She’s kind of being facetious to just emphasize, “There is no future, there’s no hope; you need to go home.” At the end of Verse 13, she says, “The Lord has gone forth against me,” kind of how she wraps up her argument. She knows now that the reason all of this has transpired is because they were disobedient. They are living in a place that she shouldn’t have been and she’s living with the consequences of that. In essence, she’s saying, “God is really angry with me; you need to go home. The last place you need to be is around me.” That is the argument.

Verse 14:

They lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

In that verse you kind of get a sense as to where this story is going. Orpah kisses her mother-in-law but it’s a kiss good-bye. Ruth clings to her—it’s a very strong word. As a matter of fact, it’s the very same Hebrew word that is used in Genesis 2:26. If you have a King James Bible, it talks about, “...Leave father and mother. Leave and cleave.” Well this is the word cleave.” It means “glued together”. It’s a very strong word. It means that Ruth was hanging on and she was not going to let go.

Verse 15:

Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus, may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.” When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. (Vs. 15-18)

Now this is one of the more remarkable statements of loyalty in the entire Old Testament. Ruth is a remarkable woman. Somewhere along the way she determined that the God of Naomi is God. Having been raised in a pagan, idolatrous environment, somewhere along the way she figured it out. She loved her mother-in-law, and she said to her, “I’m with you.” Basically, in that statement she is saying, “I’m giving up my future. I’m giving up any chance I have for much of a life because I love you and I’m going to take care of you until the day you die.” It’s just quite a statement of integrity and loyalty. She’s determined that Naomi’s God is God, and that’s where she’ll take her stand. Naomi decided there was no sense in arguing further, so on they go.

Verse 19:

So, they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?” (Vs. 19-21)

So, they arrive back in Bethlehem and the text tells us there is quite a stir. It would basically mean there was a lot of talk. There was some degree of shock—it's a pretty expressive term. Now was that because Naomi had just aged so much in ten years? Was it because they figured out that Elimelech and the boys were dead? Is it because she was walking through the door with a Moabite woman? I mean probably all of the above, but clearly, she was the center of a lot of talk. They asked the question, "Is this Naomi?" And she says, "Do not call me Naomi." Naomi, the name, means "pleasant", and what she's saying is, "I'm not pleasant anymore. Call me Mara." That name means "bitter". "I'm not pleasant; I'm bitter, and so just call me bitter."

Now how would you like to be Ruth, the daughter-in-law? How would you like it that your mother-in-law had become that crabby, that bitter in life? And you're thinking, "Maybe this is just a phase and in a couple of weeks she'll get over it." And then you hear her announce, "Don't ever call me pleasant again; I'll never be pleasant again. I'm bitter and I'll be bitter the rest of my life." Those wouldn't have been real pleasant words for Ruth to hear. It gives you some kind of sense as to what the circumstances were. It's also interesting that Naomi said, "We left full." We've said Elimelech was a wealthy man. They apparently still had a lot; they didn't need to leave. It's kind of a picture back to that, but she says, "I returned empty". Now again, how would you like to be Ruth and hear those words? Ruth has basically pledged her life away to love and take care of her mother-in-law. But as far as her mother-in-law is concerned, she has nothing. She's empty and, if anything, Ruth is a liability, not an asset, and she reflects that in her statement. So that kind of frames the circumstances, which are very difficult.

Verse 22:

So, Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. (Vs. 22a)

Again, this book is so skillfully written. Look at Verse 22; look at kind of the descending order—in terms of why Naomi is in the circumstances she's in. Naomi returned—okay we know she was gone - and with her Ruth the Moabite. This is the first time that Ruth gets the label. When Ruth was home, she was Ruth, but she won't be Ruth again. Now she's Ruth the Moabite. As you read through the story, that label never leaves her. It's just as scandalous as Rahab the prostitute was, in the eyes of the Hebrew reader. She is labeled now as an outsider, a foreigner, and life's going to be very hard for her.

Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabite, - Okay that's a problem, but -her daughter-in-law - oh that's a bigger problem! She's part of the family - who returned from the land of Moab. That's again reemphasizing they were somewhere they shouldn't have been. This isn't a Moabite girl that wanders into the camp and Naomi takes her in. There's this emphasis on they were gone, and they came back, and there's a Moabite with her, and, by the way, it's her daughter-in-law, and, by the way, it all happened because she was somewhere, she shouldn't have been.

Arnie: Bryan, once again, we see that women back in this time had a very tough life.

Bryan: Very tough life, devalued in so many ways, with very few rights.

Arnie: What was so bad about Naomi's family going to Moab? I mean there was a famine back home.

Bryan: Yeah. So, there's so many things in these stories that are so different than how we think. So, the Jews had a Land of Promise; they were to stay in that land. Oftentimes things like a famine or a drought were acts of discipline, because of their idolatry. So rather than running somewhere else, better to deal with whatever the issues are, and stay in the land.

Cara: So, Bryan, the Moabites were descendants from one of Lot's daughters and big-time troublemakers for the Israelites. So, no wonder the neighbors were shocked when Naomi comes back to town without her men and with a Moabite daughter-in-law. And that's pretty scandalous. And I'm from a small town and I don't even have to be doing anything, and there'll be a story, right?

Bryan: Yeah. It's just hard to imagine what that was like. You can kind of hear the comments, "That's what you get for leaving." But honestly, these two women, Naomi and Ruth, they were in survival mode. They remind me of the Woman at the Well, in John 4. They were just trying to survive.

Arnie: So, Bryan, it seems like Naomi is really a Debbie-Downer and just no fun to be around. Do you think though that her belief in God made an impression on Ruth?

Bryan: Yeah. So, I think she doesn't come across as being much fun. You know, she wants to change her name to bitter, but you do have to stop and think about, this poor woman has lost everything. She's lost her spouse; she's lost her sons. I mean it's a Job story, so I don't expect her to be too cheerful. But clearly there was something in Naomi that Ruth saw and was attracted to and that is part of the story.

Cara: Do you think it was out of survival though?

Bryan: It may have been, although she could have probably survived better if she just stayed home.

Cara: Yeah, because she was young; she could have found a guy. [Yeah.]

Arnie: So, are you saying we need to be prepared, because people are noticing our faith?

Bryan: I think that is what I'm saying. There's no question people are watching, and they may pretend like they're not, but they are. And one of the sobering things is typically it's only going to be in the most difficult times that our faith becomes obvious. That's when they're watching the most.

Cara: A lot of people get to feeling pretty hopeless during the holidays, because of lost relationships. You know, like my family. It's broken up. It's not like it used to...put on a Judy Garland album. And I'm getting misty. So, can you take a minute to talk about how this story helps us see the hope of Christmas?

Bryan: Yeah. So, as a pastor, I'm fully aware that Christmas is a really hard time for a lot of people. Life is hard and it gets really painful at times. And to me, that's the whole point of Christmas. Jesus didn't come because everything's good. Jesus came because life's painful and life hurts and we're sinners in need of a Savior. So, we need to be saved: saved from our sins and saved from the pain and the struggles of this life. So, there's great hope in the promise that one day Jesus will usher in the world to come, that's everything our souls long for today. And that's true for every believer.

Cara: One of my friends was feeling down at Christmas time, because she missed her dad; her dad had passed, and he was the guy who brought everyone together. [Mm hm.] And she said, I just felt so much better when I remembered, it's about Him. It's about Jesus at Christmas. And it put the whole thing into perspective for her. [Yeah.] Good stuff.

Bryan: I think as kids, we just get so excited and it's presents and all that, but that's a fantasy world. And then reality sets in and Christmas over the years just gets hard. It's about passings, it's about struggles. It's about disappointments. And the magic of those moments as small children doesn't last very long. [Right.]