

At the Crossroad of Decision (Ruth 1:7-18)

Context (v.1-6): While in Moab, Elimelech and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, die. The narrator provides no additional details. Prior to Mahlon and Chilion's death, they married Moabite women (Orpah and Ruth). Within ten years of their stay in Moab, Naomi's nuclear family dies. Her identity shifts from wife to widow, from mother, to no mother. She has no husband, no sons, and no grandchildren to care for her. She has heard that the LORD had visited his people in Bethlehem, and there is no more famine. She departs with her two daughters-in-law towards Bethlehem.

1. The Conversation (v.7-13)

- The narrator has been the sole commentator from v.1-7. Somewhere along the 60-mile journey Naomi breaks the silence of this narrative and speaks.
- Culturally and religiously, as Moabites and Israelites, there is nothing binding on Orpah and Ruth to accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem. Death severed any legal, moral, or customary obligation to in-laws.

Naomi's "Good-bye and God-bless" (v.8-9, 11-13)

- She tells her daughters-in-law to return to their mother's house for three reasons: typically, daughters are closer in relationships to their biological mothers than mothers-in-law. Second, their biological fathers may have been dead. Third, Moab is where their future is. Not Bethlehem.
- In Naomi's silence, she would be securing for Orpah and Ruth a dismal future in a country that is not their own. Following her back to Bethlehem would entail certain hardships that could be avoided if they were to return to Moab.
- The LORD will deal "kindly" with them in Moab because of their virtuous life as wives to her sons and as faithful daughters-in-law. There is no such promise if they followed her to Bethlehem. The ESV word "kindly" (v.8) in the Hebrew is "hesed." It is a term of endearment and commitment which incorporates all the positive attributes of God: loving faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, and loyalty demonstrated through acts of devotion. Hesed goes beyond the stipulations of the law.
- Naomi pronounces a blessing and benediction on Orpah and Ruth because she is powerless to repay them for their kindness. She petitions God to do for them what she, herself, cannot do for them.
- Naomi feels as though she would be not only a burden, but hindrance to them as well. Naomi may be in her late 40's to early 50's. She is a widow and has no sons. No husband in this culture would choose to marry a barren woman. Even if she was to find a husband, conception would be nearly impossible. Even if she was to give birth, she must have two sons. Even if she has two sons, she assumes that they will be virtuous men worthy of marrying Orpah and Ruth. Will Orpah and Ruth wait 15-20 years for all of this to transpire, if it transpires? Ironically, if this were to hypothetically happen, both women would be at least double the age of Naomi's sons. They will be in the same biological predicament as Naomi is right now! Too old to perpetuate the family line. Naomi is alluding to "levirate custom" (Deut. 25:5-10).

- Naomi's desire for them is that they would "find rest." All three women are mourning over their losses. The "rest" of Orpah and Ruth would be secured through a husband and children.
- As Moabite women living in a foreign country (Judah) during the time of judges, life would be difficult for these single women. Beyond that, they would have to care for their mother-in-law who is a widow with no husband or sons.
- Naomi is bitter towards the LORD (v.13). She feels that the covenant-keeping God is against her. For Orpah and Ruth to yoke themselves to her would be equivalent to God's hand being against all of them. She believes that she has become the LORD's enemy. God's hand has gone out against her. She believes that the LORD has been harsh to her for all that has transpired. She also believes that He has been unreasonable. The same hand that struck Egypt (Ex. 9:3), destroyed a generation of Israelites in the desert (Deut. 12:5), and punished the apostate nation of Israel in the land of Canaan (Judg. 2:15) is now stretched out against her. The famine, death of her husband and two sons, barrenness of her two daughters-in-law is all evidence of God's hand against her. She is the victim of the LORD's violence. Ironically, she blesses the women with God's favor (v.9) yet accuses Him of wronging her (v.13). She knows the LORD is sovereign but is unwilling to accept it.
- There are two separate scenes in which all are weeping. In the first scene, Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth and all of them weep (v.9). In the second scene, all of them weep as Orpah kisses Naomi and returns to Moab (v.14).

2. The Crossroad (v.14-17)

- Orpah and Ruth appeared to be equally committed the whole time through definite claims of loyalty (v.10). Orpah eventually departs from Naomi, but Ruth clings to her. This "clinging" expresses a loyalty, intimacy, and affection (Gen. 2:24). As Orpah is kissing her mother-in-law goodbye, Ruth clings to her. This is included to provide a stark contrast between the two.
- Interestingly, Orpah is not rebuked by the narrator, Ruth, or Naomi. No additional comments are made. Orpah did what was sensible, reasonable, and according to sight. Orpah did what is naturally expected. Ruth did what was extraordinary. Orpah did what was right in the eyes of the world. Ruth did what was right through the eyes of faith.
- Naomi attempts now, for the third time, to dismiss Ruth back to Moab. Ruth will not return and responds with an idem per idem (v.16-17). Ruth is laying aside her traditions, customs, language, prospects of marriage and child rearing, and gods. She confesses with her mouth her faith in the LORD (v.16) and then follows through with that commitment. The seed of faith has taken root in Ruth's heart.
- Ruth is content with whatever lot falls on her, unlike Naomi. Naomi, who is the recipient of the covenant promises of God, as an Israelite, is bitter towards the LORD for all that has happened to her. Ruth, as a Gentile, possesses no covenant promises, yet is content.
- Ruth is the personification of hesed love: she is willing to give up whatever is necessary for Naomi, irrespective of the personal cost of that commitment.
- Ruth took on an uncertain future with a bitter widow in a land where she knew no one, enjoyed few legal rights, and faced possible ethnic prejudice. Ruth's renunciation of her previous life foreshadows the cost of salvation and discipleship for the sake of the kingdom of God (Matt.8:21; 10:37; 19:29).