

The House of Bread

Series on the book of Ruth

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Bible Text: Ruth 1

Preached on: Sunday, June 9, 2013

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Do take your Bibles and turn to Ruth 1. Last week we saw the action beginning in Bethlehem. You have heard of that place before. Bethlehem in Judea. A man and his wife and their 2 boys. A famine comes to the land. They leave that land and go to Moab where there is no famine. Were they right or wrong to do so? Is it right or wrong today for someone to leave one area and go to another area because there is economic disadvantage and hardship? Or because there is political oppression? Or religious persecution? And the answer is, of course it isn't. There would not be America if it was wrong for people to do that because people have been doing that for the last over 200 years, leaving places of persecution or famine or political instability and coming here to find a safe haven in which to live.

But it was sin for them to leave Israel and go to Moab. Israel was the one place on planet earth where God had said he would be present with his people. The people of Israel were the only people on the face of planet earth who had covenants and promises and who had a relationship with a God who was there. And even though that nation was under the judgment of its own God at this stage, to leave there and to go to a sworn enemy of Israel to live, was an act of blatant disobedience to God. That's how this story begins. It starts with a conscious act of disobedience and a deliberate failure to trust in God and that is reproduced in our lives every time, every time we listen to the world's wisdom rather than the wisdom of God's word. Every time we think the culture knows better than the Scripture. Every time we are tempted to complain about the providence of God in our lives, the good hand of God, because things have gone bad for a moment or things seem to be going bad regularly for us. Every time. Every time we complain about what God has sent into our lives, whether it's our job or our career or our spouse or whatever it is that is getting up our nose at this particular moment and we complain and we want a way out. Every time this word from God addresses that mentality.

But we're moving on in the story tonight and when we get to verse 6, we come across a great awakening and you can see this. We know the story so far, the story so far is that Naomi, the man's wife has lost her husband and her 2 sons and she is left with her 2 daughters-in-law for good or ill. Yet we come to verse 6 and we discover, we're told right at the very beginning of that verse that, "she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab to Israel." There is something going on here, something new

has happened, something different is occurring here. There is a change in this woman's attitude and now in her circumstances. She is getting up and she is going back home.

What has done this after over 10 years in which she has settled down in Moab, in which they are home in Moab, in which she now has family in Moab, she has these 2 daughters-in-law? What has happened is this: here is someone who has turned away from God, who has committed himself to care for his people. What has happened is this, look at verse 6, "she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD," that is Yahweh, "had visited his people and given them food." You notice how the writer reminds us of how far she is from home and land, how far away she is from the way and will of God. She has gone, she is living, she is earning her living in the fields of Moab.

Now, in studying the Bible, one of the things that helps us is to pay attention to the words that are used. We noticed this last time. We looked at the name of her husband, Elimelech. Elimelech's name is significant because what it means is, it means "God is King." We saw that Elimelech's name may have said that but Elimelech himself did not believe that. He never lived up to his name despite the constant reminder every time somebody said his full name, "Elimelech. Elimelech." Every time they said his name he was being reminded that, "God is King. God is King. Come here, God is King. Come here." I would be embarrassed. I don't know if you remember being in school but I used to get embarrassed when anybody said my full name, William, it just seems such a mouthful. I hated it. I hated it so I ditched it and just went to part of it. Liam was so much easier to say. Anyway, Wyatt Earp on television was a man called Liam O'Brien so that was even more incentive to just keep with Liam. Well, every time Elimelech's name was used, he was reminded "God is King," yet in spite of that, he resisted. He goes his own way. He does his own thing in direct violation to the will of God.

Now, there are other words in the Bible that we need to pay close attention to. We must always remember that the Spirit of God inspired the Scriptures and gave us the message in words and these are not just an arbitrary collection of words or religious ideas. These words are important. The Holy Spirit superintends the writing. It's not so much a dictation thing, that's not what's in view but nonetheless, using the character and the background and the experience in the vocabulary of the men God uses, what is produced even in the very words and grammar that are used is the very word of God. The writers, we are told by the Apostle Peter, were carried along by the Holy Spirit, holy men of God wrote as they were borne along, carried along like a ship being carried by the tide, by the Spirit of God so they wrote. And according to the Apostle Paul, they wrote in words taught not by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual, using spiritual words.

So with that in mind, we come to the story tonight. And the thing that strikes us as we read the story this evening, did it strike you, is that as word comes to the country of Moab, she learns this lesson that God has visited the land of Judah. Look at verse 1, "there was a famine in the land." Verse 7, "she went on her way to return to the land of Judah." So both times Judah is mentioned, it's "the land," and then whenever Moab is mentioned, you'll notice, it's the word translated into English "country." "There was a

famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab," verse 1. Verse 2, "They went into the country of Moab and remained there." And verse 6, Naomi "arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab." Verse 7, "they went on the way to return to the land of Judah."

Now, what is significant about that difference? You notice it's a very deliberate difference. The author is being very deliberate in the way he's using those words. It's not just that he's using multiple words for the same thing as we do often in English so that we don't get boring. No, he's quite deliberate in what he does and what's interesting is the way in which those words are used. The word "land," for example, is used over 300 times in the Bible and every time it's used, it actually refers to the whole world, to the whole earth, everything that there is. "The land" refers to everything, the whole world. A vast expanse of territory, while the word "country," wherever it's used, means a specif, defined, limited, allotted portion of territory.

So the Hebrew describes these events very carefully. There was a famine in the land, the Promised Land, the vast land of Judah, even though it is geographically small and tiny compared to Moab. Because it is the place on which the promises of God rest, it's like a vast thing. It's huge because the promises of God are huge. And they went to live in the limited territory of Moab. It's almost as if the writer is saying, "They thought that Moab was going to give them so much. They thought Moab was the answer to their problem. They thought Moab was full and they were going there because they felt empty. They didn't realize, they didn't realize that they were leaving the greater for the lesser. They were leaving the unlimited for the limited." Whenever you walk out of the church of God, the place where God meets with his people, you are leaving a vast universe of promises, of blessing. You are leaving a vast place where there are unlimited possibilities and you are leaving that for anything that is limited and narrow and so very little in the end.

Well, there she is in Moab. Moab has been good to her. They haven't starved there. They have been fed and they are settled down and her boys get wives there. But there standing in the field of Moab one day she heard the news, the news of the Lord visiting his people and somehow or other that day it struck her how small and narrow and little Moab was in comparison with what she had left. The word that is used, you'll notice, is the word "the LORD," and the way it is printed with those upper case letters tells us this is the word "Yahweh." This is God's personal name, his covenant name for his people, his own people. She realizes Israel represents the Lord. She has left the Lord for this patch of dirt in which she has buried her husband and her 2 boys and she has discovered a lesson that when you turn from the one place where God has promised to bless, anything you turn to, however attractive it may be, however able to provide for you at one level it may be, in the end you are turning from the greater to the lesser and everything the world has to offer you, everything the world has to offer you pretending to be enormous and big and satisfying, in the end it will wither. It will die in the end. It will vanish. "These things shall vanish all," wrote Martin Luther.

You see, the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures are basically one long record of failure. The failure of God's people time and time and time again to live rightly. Failure

to rescue themselves. But all the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures are getting us ready for the main actor in the drama, the main hero, the true King, the true Prince, the true Servant, the greater David, the Rescuer. And here is this woman who has turned away from all of that. She, like the prodigal son in Jesus' story, has gone far away from her home and her God but there is a moment there in the fields of Moab, verse 6, when something she heard awakened a conviction within her. Something was born in her heart. She must have reasoned that back home, knowing what she knew about the God of Israel, back home there must have been some people who repented. There was a cycle of the days of the judges. People got involved in idolatry, God sends judgment, people repent, God sends a rescuer or he shows mercy and she knew that cycle had been going on for over 200 years. She understood that cycle very well. She must have reasoned that back there in Israel somebody must have repented and God had relented the disaster and had shown mercy to his people. She must have worked that out for herself. God had been gracious to Israel. Now in the fields of Moab, she woke up to her real condition and she saw her dire straits and began to think of the things of God.

In another place in the Old Testament in Psalm 73, we read about a man called Asaph and he had nearly slipped. He became convinced for a time that the wicked had everything going for them. He became convinced that the wicked, his word to describe those who don't know God, not necessarily describing their character or their behavior but simply because in the language of the psalmist, to be wicked means not to know God and not to love God no matter how good you are or nice you may be, he reckoned that the wicked were doing famously. They were doing very well. It seemed nothing bad happened to them. Life went easily for them. He reckoned this and he wondered why it was that he washed his hands in vain. Why was it he kept the law in vain. Why was it that he worshiped God in vain while these ungodly people, these people who had no times for the things of God were getting on so well without him. There are times you feel like that. There are times many of us feel like that.

But as the Psalm goes on, Psalm 73 goes on, Asaph tells us about the day he went into the sanctuary and as he was thinking of the things of God, it suddenly dawned on him, "This is all these people will ever have." We watch the wicked party, this is the only time they will party. We watch the wicked prosper, their prosperity will vanish the day they die. We listen to the wicked mock the things of God, they will be speechless on the day of judgment. The psalmist says, "There in the sanctuary I understood their latter end," and he heard the word of God say to him, "Whatever you feel like, however badly you may feel about what's going on in the world, nevertheless, whatever you feel, whatever you feel is falling apart, nevertheless," says God, "I am always with you. Always with you and afterwards I will receive you. You into glory."

Somewhere in the fields of Moab, something of that thinking, perhaps not as articulate as the psalmist but something of that thinking entered the mind of Naomi and what was it that sparked it? This great awakening in her mind? Well, what sparked it was a royal visit. We've talked about the importance of noting words that the Spirit uses and I want you to notice what it is she hears. She hears something. It is news that brings about this great awakening. By the way, the Gospel is good news. The good news of the Gospel

brings a great awakening to the minds of people who don't know God just as it does here in the life of this woman. What is it she hears? Look at what she hears: Yahweh has visited his people. Again, his covenant name, the name that always reminded them of the promises to Abraham and the words to Moses. That name that is an indicator of his character. The name that means "I AM THAT I AM." The self-existent, self-sustaining, self-sufficient God, Yahweh, I am. It's his personal name. I mean, many of the titles for God that we find in the Bible mean the sovereign God. They are titles but this is his name. This is his name, Yahweh, the one who keeps his covenant.

And there is something we miss if we only read the English translation here. Remember, that the word "Bethlehem," the name of the town that they came from in Judah means "the house of bread," and literally watch what we read in verse 6 is this: she heard that there was bread in the house of bread. Literally, that's the news that she heard. The word for "bread" is the word "lechem" in verse 6. Bethlehem is Bet-lechem. "Bet" meaning "house, lechem" meaning "bread." The house of bread. In the bigger story of redemption, a story that takes in all of the Bible, the place they came from, the bread of heaven place they came from was going to be the very place where THE bread from heaven would come down and become one of us, put on our skin and become one of us. The bread of heaven would one day visit the house of bread and be born there and he would visit. When he was just a little baby, the bread of heaven was cradled in the arms of a man called Zechariah in the temple in Jerusalem and as he held the newborn baby, Yeshua, as he held that little baby in his arms he said, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David!" The house of bread. The bread of heaven. The bread of life would be born in Bethlehem.

Now, that's where the story of Naomi and Ruth is going as you'll see if you look at the epilogue because it's the lesson of how we read the Bible. Some of us read the Bible as if it were packed with rules that you had to keep or God won't love you. Or heroes who set examples that you have to copy or God won't love you. In short, we think the Bible is all about us and what we should or shouldn't be doing or God won't love you. But of course, that's not what it's about. Underneath the stories of the Bible there is this really big story, this mighty undercurrent underneath all the other stories of how God loves his children and God comes to the rescue of his children and that's what we see happening here.

Elimelech's problem was that when the famine came he thought he could save himself and save his family and he took it on himself to be the Savior of his wife and his boys and he died in Moab and his boys died with him. You can't be your own Savior. Israel had been taught that lesson over and over and over again. Judgment comes. People repent. God sends the rescuer. God sends a rescuer. And it was the good news story that God had visited his people that aroused this change in her thinking, that brought this awakening of spiritual life into the mind and heart of this woman.

So there's a turning point. That's the third thing: a turning point. The world is full of conversion stories. The drunk who becomes sober, that's a conversion story. The student who turns to the teaching of some Eastern mystic or the consumer who turns from using

Microsoft to using Apple, that's a conversion story. Or a deacon version story, whatever way you look at it. And one of the things we notice as we come to this story is the repetition of a word that's translated in many of our versions by the word "return." It's the same word "shuwb" in Hebrew, translated to "turn back or brought back or gone back," and the same word "shuwb" is used in verse 6, 7, 8, 10, 15, 16, 21 and 22. So it's all over this story which means it's very important for us and it's a conversion word. It's a very important word. It's a turning point word. It's not only the Hebrew word for return, it's the only word in all Hebrew which comes close to our word "repentance" or "conversion." Throughout Deuteronomy, the people are warned not to convert, turn, turn back, return to the gods, the idols. And when they do, they are told to turn, return, come back to God, repent, turn back to God and in this story, this word is used over and over again to describe this conversion in the heart of this woman. Something has happened in Judah. God has visited. Now something deep and lasting is happening to Naomi. She arose to return, verse 6. She set out to return to the land of Judah, verse 7. However disobedient she's been in the past, now she is going back to God.

What is it that's driving her repentance? This change of mind? You notice the link that there is in this story with Jesus' story of the prodigal son. The parallels are I'm sure intentional. The prodigal son leaves his father's home and goes to a far country. In the far country, the foreign country, life is good and he enjoys everything that there is to enjoy in the faraway country. Then things go wrong. Things go wrong in the foreign country and he starts to think of home and his father's house. He thought of the things that happened there and he reasoned with himself, Luke 15:17, and here is what he reasoned. As he thought about his father's home, he thought there was more than enough bread in my father's house. Do you see how Jesus is making an intentional connection here? So he chose to return and go back home to his father. Jesus is building his story upon this story. He builds a parable on history in order to teach us the nature of Naomi's repentance. Naomi returns home to Bethlehem, not just to Judah but to Bet-lechem, the house of bread and in a sense, every conversion has to involve this process of leaving and going. Leaving life as it is and going towards God, turning to God, turning to him and that's what she does here.

Then the last thing in this passage is there is a crucial test. Naomi sets off and she has her 2 daughters-in-law with her. Here are these 3 ladies, Orpah, Ruth and Naomi and they are making their way and it's a great witness, isn't it to, to the great affection these daughters-in-law have for Naomi that they are intent on going with her even when she tries to fob them off. We're not quite sure why she is fobbing them off. I think I'll give you the official line in a moment but there are many possibilities. Naomi stops and speaks to them, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" She is giving them good of advice. They were young, they were still of childbearing age. She is saying, "I give you permission to go back. Don't come with me. You have no idea what you're going to. We don't know what is ahead of us. We're going back to Judah. All we know is that they are not in famine circumstances anymore but we have no idea how they are going to treat you Moabitesses coming with me back to Judah. You know this place. This is your home.

You stay here. Get married, settle down and have kids. You have my permission. You don't have to come with me." She is being gracious. She is being generous. She is giving good advice. She is giving them permission.

The road to Judea would not be an easy road. There was bad blood between the Moabites and the Israelites. What she is doing is she is spelling out the cost of belonging to Israel, of going to Israel. She is putting a test before them, the kind of test Jesus once put to a bright young man with a religious bent of mind who came to him interested in the things of God and Jesus puts a test in his way and the man fails and he falls. You'll notice the effect of this test was that all of them, they just started crying. They wept all the way we are told, verse 9, "they lifted up their voices and wept." Well, there's a bunch of 3 women together and what do you expect? I'll get in trouble for that one but you know I like getting into trouble.

Verse 14, Naomi talks with them and they talk with Naomi, "Then they lifted up their voices and wept again." They are weeping all over the place here. "And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her." That's where we ended the reading because these 3 women were crying different kinds of tears for different reasons. Orpah regretted that she had ever left Moab at all. We know that from something Naomi will say in verse 15, "your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods." Naomi regretted that she had ever left Bethlehem, the land of the covenant promise. Hers were tears of repentance. Ruth's tears were tears of regret too. She regretted that they hadn't taken the road back to Judah earlier because God was working in her heart.

But what about Orpah? She accompanied Naomi and Ruth as they left Moab but she found it surprisingly easy to return because she had never really left Moab in her heart. She began well and she set out. She went with the others. She had a good beginning. She was even crying at the very prospect of leaving Naomi and Ruth. And when Naomi suggests going back, she cries all the more. If you had been there and you were looking on, you would say, "Orpah is really taking this very seriously. There has been a change in Orpah. She seems so sincere. These tears are the tears of someone who is sincerely wanting to go with them back to Judah." But you would be wrong. There was nothing in her that had changed. Naomi tells us, verse 15, "she is going back to her gods." She had never left them. She had never left them. There was no heart change. There was no transformation. There was no true repentance. There was a good beginning. Somehow or other she had been enlightened which is why she wanted to go with Naomi and Ruth like the people in Hebrews 6:4, having been once upon a time enlightened and having tasted something of the powers of the world come, they turn away. They go back. And Orpah walks off the pages of holy Scripture and you will never hear of her again because in abandoning the road to Israel, she is abandoning the God of Israel and she is forever denying herself a place among the people of God. She is forever denying herself eternal life and Orpah is lost. Lost to Israel. Lost to the people of God. Lost to the church of her day. And above all, lost to God himself.

And you may be here this evening and like Orpah you have started out well. You are here this evening perhaps like Orpah there was a time when you too shed tears over the

Gospel, when something of the reality of God so struck you, so impressed itself upon you that you were moved. You were moved to the very depths of your being. You were interested in the things of God. You would have gone further in the things of God. You wanted to go further in the things of God. You wanted to reform your habits, perhaps you did, to change your practices and maybe you have. But you have not given your heart to the God of Israel, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus and where are you now? Back in Moab. No nearer God. No nearer the blessings of his covenant salvation. How we begin is not nearly as important as where we get to. Where we get to.

Jesus told a parable in Luke 18 and with this I close. In that parable, he talked about 2 men who went into the temple to pray. One of the men was a tax collector. It was good that he was in the temple. It was good that he went to pray but Jesus doesn't commend him for going to the temple. He doesn't commend him for praying. All that Jesus commends is that having gone to the temple and having prayed, he left that place justified before God and the only blessing that you will carry with you from this room this evening is if you leave this place justified before God because you trust in Jesus.

Let's pray.

Father, will you please write your word on our hearts. Let us not be like Orpah, who turned away back to her people and her gods but let's be like Naomi who realized that God had visited his people and we praise you that you have visited us in Jesus Christ our Savior and we pray that you would please use your word tonight to bring us to life and trust in him. In his strong name we pray. Amen.