

The Return of Naomi to Israel

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – Naomi returns to Israel a bitter woman, with Ruth clinging to a faith in her God
2. aim – to cause us to choose trust in God over bitterness in the face of difficult circumstances
3. passage – Ruth 1:15-22

b. outline

1. The Return of Naomi (Ruth 1:19a, 22)
2. The Bitterness of Naomi (Ruth 1:19b-21)
3. The Faith of Ruth (Ruth 1:15-18)

c. opening

1. the *focal character* of the book
 - a. (**again**) Naomi is the *central* character of the book – it's really about her, but ...
 - b. Ruth is the *focal* character of the book because of three (3) specific events within it:
 1. her place as the mother of Obed and the great-grandmother of David in **chap. 4**
 2. her kindness towards Boaz in **chap. 3**
 3. her response to Naomi (**here**) in **1:15-18**
 4. so, the focus becomes Ruth *at this point in the story* because of what she says to Naomi – we are introduced to this first great statement of Ruth, which is where the author will take the story
2. the *bitterness* in the book
 - a. however ... to properly engage the rest of this chapter, it is better for us to work *from the end*
 1. **LOW**: it is better for us to *continue* first with the reaction of Naomi to her circumstances started in the first half of the chapter
 2. **LOW**: it is better for us to *end* this sermon with Ruth's great statement of faith than to end it with Naomi's whining about her circumstances
 - b. so ... we will start by continuing the storyline (**i.e.** what is happening), then finish Naomi's view of her situation (**i.e.** completing her words from last week), then look at Ruth's great exclamation

I. The Return of Naomi (Ruth 1:19a, 22)

Content

a. the return of Naomi to Israel

1. (**at this point; v. 15**) Naomi has decided that her circumstances in Moab are dire
 - a. she is convinced that returning to Israel is her only possibility of survival
 1. maybe she can find some kindness in Israel that would difficult to find as a foreigner in Moab
 - b. she is convinced that Orpah and Ruth cannot benefit from following her
 1. they would then become foreigners in a strange land themselves
 2. she cannot provide for them either financially or for husbands (without one herself)
 3. they would be better off remaining Moab to find comfort amongst their own family
 - c. she convinces Orpah to remain behind
 1. **note**: we must be careful *not* to judge Orpah for her decision to stay in Moab
 2. it is the reasonable choice *given the circumstances* (the argument of Naomi is not faulty)
 3. although Naomi may have "introduced" Orpah to Yahweh (the God of Israel), there should be no assumption that Yahweh has introduced himself to her (**see below for more**)
 - a. the faith of Ruth should not be construed as *also* belonging to Orpah
 1. in fact, it is the *uniqueness* of Ruth's faith that makes her the *focal character* of the story
 - b. and, the way in which Naomi *speaks of God* would have a tendency to *dissuade* Orpah
 4. **LOW**: Orpah does what is reasonable and logical for a woman in her place to do at that time
2. (**now; vv. 19a, 22**) Naomi (with Ruth) goes back to Bethlehem, arriving at the barley harvest
 - a. she returns to her *original* town (**i.e.** any chance of finding help would be from relatives and friends)
 - b. the timing is significant (**i.e.** the harvest is when the people would be most generous to help)

II. The Bitterness of Naomi (Ruth 1:20-21)

Content

a. Naomi is received by the town

1. the arrival of Naomi in Bethlehem causes the town to be “*stirred because of them*”
 - a. questions that would inevitably arise: who is this woman (“*Is this Naomi?*”), why has she returned after 10 years, where is her husband and her sons, and *who is this Moabite girl with her?*
 - b. **LOW:** the “stir” in the village may be the questioning of the **motives** of Naomi
 1. why did you leave Israel for Moab, and why did you stay away for so long?
 2. why do you think that you can come back here now and expect our support?
 3. **IMO:** the nature of Naomi’s response (**see below**) is designed to elicit *sympathy*

b. Naomi renames herself

1. in Israelite culture, names of people and places often came to be associated with their *character*
 - a. **e.g.** “*Jacob*” = “he takes by the heel” or “he cheats” (at his birth in **Genesis 25**); later “*Israel*” = “strives with God” (after wrestling with God in **Genesis 32**) – his descendants are then known as those who “strive with God” (**i.e.** in their relationship with God, they will often “strive” against him)
2. “*Naomi*” originally meant (or may have come to mean) “pleasant” = she believed that her life (when she left Israel) was pleasant and comfortable (in spite of the error of her husband to leave)
3. she now asks the town to call her Mara = meaning “bitter”
 - a. (**probably**) taken from the incident in **Exodus 15** when the Israelites came to Shur and found a water source that was bitter (they named it **Marah**) – Moses made it drinkable by throwing in a log

c. Naomi recounts her bitterness

1. Naomi now recounts *how* God (“*the Almighty*”) has “embittered” her (**it is clearly God’s fault!**)
 - a. she went away (from Bethlehem) “*full*” (**i.e.** with a family), but returns “*empty*” (**i.e.** a widow)
 1. note the “limited view”: the family fled Israel to escape a *famine*; hardly being “full”
 2. note the “limited view”: she has returned *with Ruth*, a loyal and faithful daughter-in-law
 - b. the Lord has “*testified*” against her (**i.e.** spoken negatively about her; rejected her)
 1. note the “limited view”: what she refuses to consider is that God has (in fact) **spoken positively** towards her in bringing her back to Israel and establishing a future for her (remember, she saw none in Moab; she returned to Israel in the *faint hope* that someone would help her)
 - c. the Lord has “*brought calamity*” upon her (**i.e.** ordained only difficulty and suffering)
 1. note the “limited view”: she is convinced that her circumstances are nothing more than “evil” rather than an opportunity to trust in the Lord to bring good out of evil (**see below**; the statement of Ruth will *utterly contradict* this mindset)
 - d. **question:** who (in their right mind) would want *anything to do* with someone whose outlook is such that they want to be *called by the name* “bitter?”
2. Naomi’s response to her circumstances is absolute **self-centeredness** – anger, jealousy, lack of hope, lack of faith, bitterness are all born out of an utterly *inward* turn of focus (**O woe is me!!**)
 - a. **principle: it is utterly sinful, as followers of Christ, to become bitter over our circumstances – to do so is to proclaim that we are the arbiters of our destiny, not God**
 - b. we must remember that it is *through evil* that God has redeemed a people – the evil that befell Jesus is *infinitely* more painful than any circumstance we have ever faced, thus our response should never be to *assume* that our situation cannot be turned to good by God
 - c. and, we must remember that God is *sovereign* over everything – there are no “random” events in life, because God has *decreed* all that will be *for a purpose*

III. The Faith of Ruth (Ruth 1:15-18)

Content

a. the background of Ruth’s exclamation

1. **question:** what exactly would support this great statement of faith from Ruth?
 - a. remember: she is a *Moabite* woman that has never lived in Israel
 - b. the knowledge of Yahweh is *scant* both *at this time* and *in this place*
 1. this is a very early period in the revelation of God into the world (**i.e.** the Torah only)
 2. the Moabites have *not* received *any* revelation from God (**i.e.** it has only come to Israel)
 3. Israel has been “spread” throughout the hill country, and regular worship and teaching of the law is difficult (**i.e.** there is no temple and no regular synagogue system yet)

4. the period is one in which “everyone did what was right in their own eyes” – a time of **spiritual anarchy**, with little “maturity” from which to glean any sense of commitment and trust in God
- b. (obviously) the *only* way that Ruth could have known about Yahweh is from Naomi
 1. but (based on the above), Naomi’s view of God is rather “stunted” – Elimelech led his family away from Israel *and they have been amongst the pagan gods of Moab for 10 years*
 - a. **note** Naomi’s statement in **v. 15** – Orpah has “gone back ... to her gods”
 - b. such a length of time away from Israel would have “degraded” her relationship to Yahweh
 2. however ... there is apparently “enough” knowledge of God left in Naomi to transfer to Ruth

b. the substance of Ruth’s exclamation

1. it *starts* with Ruth *making her connection and commitment to Naomi* (**vv. 16a, 17a**)
 - a. “where you go I will go, where you lodge (live) I will lodge, where you die I will die” ...
 - b. this is a tremendous statement of loyalty and friendship – Ruth *believes* in her mother-in-law
2. it *ends* with Ruth *making her connection and commitment to the God of Naomi* (**vv. 16b, 17b**)
 - a. “... your people will be my people, and your God my God, may the Lord do so to me ...”
 - b. this is a tremendous statement of **trust in the God of Israel** (**i.e.** beyond her pagan beliefs)
3. **but:** although it is a tremendous statement of faith, it is a *limited* statement of faith **in this context**
 - a. **i.e.** Ruth’s faith is mostly a trust in the God of her mother-in-law and the Israelite people
 - b. **i.e.** it is a trust based on very limited understanding and (frankly) it has very little substance – however, it is *faith* nonetheless and it is considered by God to be “enough” (as history will show)
 - c. **which means (like everyone):** the ability to trust in God must be *a work of God over and above* the situation in which we find ourselves in (**i.e.** in our spiritually “incapable” place)
4. **principle: the measure of our faith is expected to be in direct proportion to the level of what God has made known to us and we have access to from him**
 - a. **i.e.** to whom much is given, much is expected (**Luke 12:48b**)
 - b. **i.e.** we live in a time in which God has revealed *everything about himself* we need to know and all of what it takes for us to mature in that knowledge
5. **application: we have absolutely no excuse for bitterness in our circumstances – our ability to trust in God by the power of his now-present Spirit and ever-present Word is far beyond what Naomi had in her day, so there can be no root of bitterness in us, only hope**