

“A Surprising Conversion”
Ruth 1:6-18
September 21, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

The conversion of Ruth to a worshiper of Jehovah is a surprising gift from God. Surprises can be either good or bad. No one likes the surprise of discovering on the hottest day of the year that your air conditioner has malfunctioned beyond repair, and it will cost \$5000 to replace it. But the surprise of an unexpected kindness from a friend is quite the opposite. Today’s text describes this second kind of surprise. God reached down and brought to himself a Moabite woman who had worshiped the god Chemosh her entire life. But through a variety of circumstances and through God’s work in her heart, she is brought to faith in the God of Israel.

God still brings about surprising conversions. A member of our church was telling me this week about the surprising conversion of his uncle years ago. He was notorious in the community for his drinking problem. He worked in construction, and more often than not he wouldn’t make it home on Friday with his weekly pay, money desperately needed by his wife and children. It would be spent on alcohol on Friday night. But alcohol wasn’t his only love; he also loved music. He lived up on Valleydale Road, and one day, he heard music coming from an old-fashioned tent meeting that had been set up at Valleydale and Caldwell Mill roads. When he went to investigate, one of the musicians, knowing his love for music and his ability to play the guitar, handed him a guitar and asked him to come play with the musicians. He gladly did so, only to realize that he was stuck up front when the preaching began. It turned out to be one of those “fork-in-the-road” nights, because God worked in his heart and he walked the aisle that night to express his faith in Jesus. Even though he was by then in his 30’s and had a family, he decided that God was calling him to be a pastor. He said he had to be a Presbyterian pastor because his salvation was so obviously God’s sovereign choice. Let’s look now more carefully at the surprising conversion of Ruth and how it comes about.

I. The Repentance of Naomi

In a book that carries the title “Ruth,” she gets an unusually small amount of attention in this first chapter. The opening paragraphs of this book seem to be almost completely about her mother-in-law, Naomi. Why is that? It is because God’s normal pattern is to use his people to bring men and women to faith. He uses Naomi as an important instrument in the conversion of Ruth. We all have a variety of people God has brought into our lives, just as he brought Ruth into Naomi’s life. Not all will be converted, even among those closest to

us, as was the case with Naomi's other daughter-in-law, Orpah. But some will, and we need to be open and ready for God to do so. He will use us in similar ways that he used Naomi. I notice three things about how God used Naomi.

The first thing Naomi did in this passage was to repent. The key word of this first chapter is the word "return," used eight times here, the first of which is in verse 6. When it is reported that Naomi arose to *return* from Moab, it is doing more than recording her travels. We noted last time how her trip to Moab arose out of a heart not trusting the Lord. God had told his people to live in this land and, if a famine should arise, they were to understand it as God's discipline of his people for their unfaithfulness. The answer for unfaithfulness is to repent, but Naomi and her husband did not want to repent. They wanted to take matters into their own hands and attempt to provide for themselves by immigrating to Moab. Now, ten years later, Naomi finally comes to repentance and undertakes the return trip to Bethlehem.

When we think of repentance, we often think of it in negative terms, something akin to taking distasteful medicine. Further, we believe that the motivation to take this nasty medicine of repentance is a fear of the judgment of God. While we certainly should fear the judgment of God, I notice here, as well as elsewhere in the Bible, that it is the kindness of God, not warnings about the judgment of God, that leads Naomi to repentance. She decided to return because she heard **"that the Lord had visited his people and given them food"** (v. 6). Paul said the same thing in Romans 2:4, where he said **"that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance."** Our Westminster Confession of Faith teaches this as well, that repentance comes when a sinner understands God's mercy in Christ to those who repent (15:2).

Repentance is a word of great hope. It requires that we believe that our biggest problem is sin, and that there is an answer to sin. Our biggest problem is not our own failures or difficult circumstances or the wrong parents or wrong environment. We can change very little in those categories. Our problem is sin, and that is a hopeful statement because of the mercy of God. We noted last week how Naomi had come to a dead end in her life. She was in a foreign land with no husband, no sons and no heirs. She had no past, no future, and only the prospect of a living death before her. But the good news is that the story doesn't end at verse 5. There is a verse 6, and with Naomi's repentance, everything starts to change. Perhaps you're feeling like Naomi in verse 5, that life is just a big dead end. The good news is that there is a verse 6 in this story, and there is a next verse and chapter in your life too. Its starting point is to see the ways you've not trusted God and repent of that, turning back to God. Ruth had a front row seat to Naomi's repentance, and God used that in Ruth's life.

The second thing God used in Naomi's life that became an instrument for Ruth's conversion was Naomi's commitment to truth. We can see that in her

blessing of verse 8, where she told Ruth and Orpah to return to their homeland and prayed for the Lord to show his love to them there. That blessing would have sounded strange to anyone outside Israel in that day. She wanted Israel's God, Jehovah, to show his love to them while they were in Moab. What is so remarkable about that is that people in this day believed that all gods had power only in their own land. The god who supposedly had power in Moab was Chemosh, and all the nations outside Israel thought that Jehovah, Israel's God, only had power in Israel. But Naomi didn't believe that, because the God of Israel claimed to be the true God, and all other gods were false gods. He had power not only in Israel, but throughout every corner of the earth. This is the truth Naomi taught to Ruth.

Naomi also showed love to Ruth, the same kind of love she believed God possessed. The first words recorded of Naomi are words of blessing, asking that the Lord would deal kindly to Orpah and Ruth. The verb that is translated "deal kindly" is the common Hebrew word *hesed*. It is a word that is most often used of God's faithful love to his people. It blends the two ideas of love and loyalty. Naomi prays this for her daughters-in-law and she shows it to them in her insistence that they return to their own land and people. Naomi has already lost all the men of her family, and now she is willing to lose the women as well. Her motivation is their benefit. She is willing to give up what little she has left in order to secure benefit for them. Naomi pulls out all the stops in making her case. She uses her authority as their mother-in-law and commands them to return, saying, "Go, return." She then turns to logic. The only source of future husbands she can imagine for them is for her to have more sons who could grow up to marry Ruth and Orpah, reflecting a custom that was present in this day. Then she traces the best case scenario for this to point out how unlikely it would be. So she asks them to imagine that she had a husband this very day, something that would be a miracle at her age, and on her wedding night she got pregnant, a second miracle at her age. She goes further to say that she conceives twins and both are boys. The odds against this scenario would be astronomical. But even if it did happen, they would have to wait for the boys to grow up.

Naomi is showing them the *hesed* love that she prays God will show them. Paul Miller calls this kind of love "love without an exit strategy." It is a love that commits to someone no matter what happens. I have seen that love in this congregation. I have seen it in the commitment of many to love ailing spouses, rebellious children, self-centered spouses or difficult fellow Christians. Naomi's love challenges our American view of love that sees it principally as a feeling. Instead, it is principally a commitment, a commitment without an exit strategy. Love that is primarily a feeling has no staying power. This kind of superficial love is always starting things but never finishing them.

Let me make an application before moving to our next point. As God's people, we are called to spread the good news of Jesus to a world that desperately needs the hope that can be found only in him. How do we do it? We do it by using these old tools that we see in Naomi, repentance, truth and love. We walk with God as humble, repentant people, we stand firmly for his truth and we love with his love those he puts in our lives. God used these things to bring Ruth to faith, and he can and will use them again.

II. The Conversion of Ruth

Despite Naomi's best efforts to persuade her daughters-in-law to return to Moab to look for husbands, Ruth refuses. The first words recorded of her are among the most often quoted verses from this book. **"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 will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you"** (v. 16-17). These are strong words indicating both faith and love. We can see her faith in the statement, "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." This was an Old Testament expression of faith, using the covenant language common there. Ruth was doing something people rarely did in her day. She was changing her god from Chemosh, the Moabite god, to Jehovah, Israel's God. We can also see her faith in her statement that she would be buried in Israel. Presumably, she would outlive her older mother-in-law. But she doesn't plan to return to Moab when that happens. Her commitment is to Jehovah, his land and his people.

Whenever the true God of Israel is embraced in faith, the one trusting him becomes like him, and that can be seen in Ruth. God is a God who does *hesed* love, and now Ruth does as well. She commits herself to Naomi with no exit strategy. Naomi had earlier called out to God in a lament when she said **"the hand of the Lord has gone out against me"** (v. 13). She was still holding to the Lord in faith, but she was grieving her many losses and bringing her pain and confusion to the Lord. One of God's answers is to send Ruth to commit herself completely to Naomi. She doesn't offer easy answers or try to fix Naomi, but simply weeps with her and stands with her. Her commitment to Naomi was a costly one. As someone has said, "There was nothing kosher about Ruth. She knew she would be about as welcome in Bethlehem as a ham sandwich at a bar mitzvah." I like how Paul Miller summarizes the love of Ruth here. "Call it boldness, courage, or daring; Ruth goes right after life. She does not waver in her response to Naomi. In fact, she is so powerful that she leaves the ever-articulate Naomi speechless. And she's an artist. The beauty of her love matches the beauty of her poetic response. Ruth sparkles when she loves."

CONCLUSION:

God continues to be the author of surprising conversions today. Rosario Butterfield tells the story of her conversion in her book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*. She was a professor of English and women's studies at a university in Syracuse, New York, and she hated Christians. She was living in a lesbian relationship, and much of her exposure to Christians and the Bible was when she saw Bible verses on placards at Gay Pride marches in which she participated. "Stupid. Pointless. Menacing. That's what I thought of Christians and their God Jesus, who in paintings looked as powerful as a Breck Shampoo commercial model." So she decided to do what she could to attack Christianity. "I launched my first attack on the unholy trinity of Jesus, Republican politics, and patriarchy, in the form of an article in the local newspaper about Promise Keepers. It was 1997." That article elicited a barrage of responses, and Butterfield said that she kept two boxes on her desk, one for hate mail and one for fan mail. But then she received a letter from the pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church that defied her filing system. Instead of attacking or supporting her, he asked questions that invited her to examine her presuppositions. They were questions like, "How did you arrive at your interpretations? How do you know you are right?" She didn't know how to respond, so she threw the letter away. But the questions got under her skin and she later fished it out of the trash can.

Thus began a two-year relationship with the pastor of that church and his wife. She describes this pastor, named Ken, like this. "When we ate together, Ken prayed in a way I had never heard before. His prayers were intimate. Vulnerable. He repented of his sin in front of me. He thanked God for all things. Ken's God was holy and firm, yet full of mercy." She began reading the Bible and eventually decided she needed to go to church. She went to Ken's church, where she says she was conspicuous with her butch haircut. She describes her eventual conversion like this. "Then, one ordinary day, I came to Jesus, openhanded and naked... Conversion was a train wreck... I weakly believed that if Jesus could conquer death, he could make right my world. I drank, tentatively at first, then passionately, of the solace of the Holy Spirit. I rested in private peace, then community, and today in the shelter of a covenant family, where one calls me 'wife' and many call me 'mother.'" I might add that the one who now calls her wife is a Presbyterian pastor.

The one who really sparkles in Ruth's conversion, and in all others, is God himself. He reached deep into Moab and brought life to a young Moabite woman. He used a flawed instrument in the process. Naomi lived in sin for ten years before she finally returned to the Lord. But God is ultimately the one who does *hesed* love. He is fully committed to us, with no exit strategy. God is trapped by his love for us in Jesus.