

“The Long Road Home”
Ruth 1:19-22
September 28, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

The first chapter of Ruth comes to a close with the return of Naomi to Bethlehem after her ten-year absence. In case we've not yet understood the point of the chapter, the author has the narrator of the story repeat it in the final verse of the chapter. It lies in the word that occurs twice in verse 22. **“So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab.”** The word “return” occurs 12 times in this first chapter, and forms its theme. As we saw last week, this word refers to more than a report of Naomi's travels. It is a metaphor for what is happening spiritually. She is returning to the Lord, repenting of her self-sufficiency and coming once again to put her trust in the promises of God.

When Naomi left Bethlehem ten years prior, she and her husband, Elimelech, were full of self-sufficiency. There was a famine in the land, and instead of letting the famine have its intended purpose of drawing her to trust God, she trusted herself. Taking matters into their own hands, they did what God had told them not to do. They left the Promised Land and immigrated to Moab. After undergoing the hell of self-sufficiency, she is now returning to her true home.

This movement from the hell of self-sufficiency to our true home with God is the big story of the Bible. It is also the story of our lives. We are all homesick for Eden, for life in the garden of God. We long to walk with him in fellowship, unhindered by our sin and its ensuing guilt and fear. This is what we were created for. The good news of Ruth 1 is that God knows how to bring his people home to Eden. Like Naomi, he usually brings us home kicking and screaming, but he gets us to the place where life can flourish once more. C. S. Lewis says that he came to faith “kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape.” In his mercy, God didn't allow him to escape, but brought him home to the place of true blessing. God does that for Naomi and for us as well. The road home is marked by three qualities.

I. The Way Home – Repentance

There is only one way home to God, and that is through repentance. Repentance is a turning away from self-sufficiency and turning back to God. That is what Naomi has done. God had taught her what she failed to acknowledge when she left Israel, that he is enough for her and he can be trusted. When the famine struck, she resorted to self-trust and decided to leave

Israel. But God did not give up on her. As she returned to Israel, God was teaching her still that he is enough and he can be trusted. Someone has said that we will never know that God is enough until God is all we have. The famine ten years before this was an opportunity to experience that, and she now has another opportunity for that same experience. Her summary of her own circumstances now is that she is empty. She had left full, with a husband and two sons, and now she returns without any of these. He brings her back to the place she would have been ten years earlier had she stayed in Israel. We repent when we turn back to trusting in God. In the words of Boaz in chapter 2, it is when we come to take refuge under the wings of God (v. 12).

A second feature of repentance we can see in Naomi's return to Israel is that repentance means returning to the limits God has placed on our lives. When Naomi left Israel, she was rebelling against the limits set up by God for his people to live in the land he had given them. There is a word for accepting these limits. It's called obedience. Accepting God's limits usually puts us in a place where we must trust God. For example, God tells us not to seek to bring about change in others' lives through manipulation, coercion or seeking to control them with our words. Rather, we are to pray for them and love them. Accepting such a limit requires trusting God instead of ourselves. Marriage is the acceptance of God's limit for intimacy with only one person for as long as both are alive. But in some marriages, there may be a famine of intimacy, forcing you to trust God instead of venturing outside of his limits in search of intimacy. We live in a world that doesn't like limits. What we like instead is feelings. "If it feels good, do it," was a slogan of the 60's, and it still seems to be the slogan of our day. How many people have you heard justify a divorce based on feelings? "I just don't have any feelings for her anymore, and I have to be true to myself." Such a statement reveals an unwillingness to trust God with the limits he has established for us. In his book, *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton writes about coming to recognize how life has a fairy-tale structure to it. In a fairy tale, a limitless opportunity, such as Cinderella at the ball, has a limiting factor (be home by midnight). Naomi here has decided to come home by midnight, to accept the limiting factors God has placed in her life.

A third feature of repentance that we can see here is that it is messy. Naomi is still a mess as she returns to Israel. She enters Bethlehem silently. There are no joyful reunions here. When the women think they recognize her and ask "Is this Naomi?" she snaps at them. She has some bitterness, even suggesting that a more accurate name for her would be Mara, which means "Bitterness," instead of Naomi, which means "Pleasant." And her lament, as we are going to see in our next point, is more complaint to people than a prayer to God. So Naomi still has a ways to go. That's the way repentance works. We don't clean up our acts in order to repent; we repent in order to clean up our acts. If we think of repentance as a performance that we need to get right, then we are simply bringing this sin of self-sufficiency to our repentance. Repentance is

taking that first step back to God, putting our hopes again in him and trusting him to take care of the mess we've made of our lives.

The last feature of repentance I want to point out from these verses is that it stirs up and encourages others. It is reported in verse 19 that **“the whole town was stirred because of”** Naomi and Ruth's arrival. This stirring is due to more than the return of Naomi after a ten year absence. It includes the striking presence of this Moabite woman accompanying Ruth. It becomes known that she is a convert to the worship of Jehovah, indicated in the next chapter in the words of Boaz. When God brings someone to repentance, as it seems here he has done with both Ruth and Naomi, it encourages everyone. I have seen the way that works at our church. Let's pray that God would stir us up by bringing about more conversions in our midst.

II. Responding to Suffering on the Way Home – Lament

When Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem, she is obviously a sad woman. It was a place that brought back many memories. These were the streets where her sons had played when they were children. There was a home here where she and Elimelech had lived when newlyweds. Those memories must have led to sharp pain as they reminded her of all she had lost. Few of us have suffered losses as extensive as hers, but all of us have suffered on this road back to Eden, back to God. Naomi's response to her suffering is something that can be seen throughout the Bible, but not something so common these days. She responded in what is called a lament. A lament is simply a complaint brought to God in prayer. We know that God is not opposed to our laments because several of them are recorded in the Scriptures, particularly the psalms.

Naomi's lament includes three metaphors. She is like a jar that used to be full, but now is empty. The reference is to the men in her family, which have gone from three to none. Second, she is in a courtroom on trial, and the star witness against her is none other than God himself. She has no chance of prevailing because God is against her. Third, God is like a great king who has used his power and authority to bring calamity upon her.

A lament is the honest response we make to God when our suffering seems to be senseless. There are two parts to that statement that are important. First, a lament is honest. When your suffering is great and God seems not to be responding, it is wrong to pretend that you're not suffering. To do so would be the hypocrisy of putting a happy face on to mask the deep sadness of the heart. The way forward is always to bring your true self to God. To do anything less makes God inaccessible. The second important part of that statement is that we make this response to God. A lament is primarily a prayer to God. There is a big difference between complaining to God about God and complaining to

someone else about God. The first one draws us closer to God, while the latter leads to an increase of bitterness.

Lament is the proper response when life is hard and we can't make any sense of it. Lament is the only response that delivers us from the dilemma commonly presented in the problem of evil. This problem is that in light of the abundance of suffering in our world, either God is good or powerful, but he can't be both. There is another possibility. God is both good and powerful, but the road to the good runs through great suffering, and we lack the perspective to see how this road can possibly lead to good. That was exactly Naomi's situation as she endured the kind of suffering that in her culture would have been about the greatest a woman could endure. It made no sense to her, and as a result God made no sense to her. That's when lament is proper.

It needs to be pointed out that just because Naomi could make no sense of her suffering didn't mean that there was no sense in it. Those of us who are able to see the bigger story know that even though Naomi may have been empty at this precise moment, she didn't stay that way. Through Ruth, God would raise up children for Naomi, and those children would be the ancestors of the great King David, and ultimately of David's greater son, our Lord Jesus.

Here's the application before we move to our next point. If your situation is like Naomi's, with great suffering that makes no sense to you, then stop beating your donkey by complaining of your situation. The donkey I have in mind is from the story of Balaam's donkey. When he was on his mercenary trip to curse Israel, God sent an angel with a flaming sword to take his life. Balaam's donkey saw the angel, but Balaam did not. When the donkey stopped, Balaam started beating him to proceed. The donkey Balaam was beating saved Balaam's life. It may be that the circumstances you are beating by complaining about them are the very things God is using to save your life. So take your pain to God in prayer, but don't become bitter about the sufferings of life.

III. The Gifts of God on the Way Home – Faithful Friends

One of the effects of great suffering such as Naomi's is that it tends to isolate us from others. Naomi's perspective has been narrowed to the point that she's not seeing things as they are. She forgets a gift God has given her. When Naomi says, **"I've come back empty,"** (v. 21), Ruth is standing right there beside her. She is not empty, but has a faithful friend who has pledged her loyalty no matter what happens.

Ruth is a great example to us of what is involved in loving someone undergoing great suffering. She doesn't do what I've noticed is people's

tendency in such situations. When we encounter those who are suffering from situations where there are no easy answers, we tend to withdraw. Our preference is to go in with some quick advice or help, solve a problem, and then move on with the confidence that everything is better. But when the problems are great, such as was the case with Naomi, there are no easy answers. When that happens, people just tend to withdraw. Ruth doesn't do that. She has no words to offer that will solve this, so she simply offers her loyalty and friendship. She also refrains from retaliatory words. Naomi's words would have been hurtful, and I would have been tempted to respond to her statement that she had returned empty. "Excuse me, but what am I? I've given up everything to stay with you and you act as if I don't exist." But no such words come. What does come is faithful, sacrificial love. She simply loves the mess that Naomi was. And she does this in the midst of her own great pain and suffering. Ruth has lost everything as well, and in some cases her situation was worse than Naomi's. She is now in a foreign country with no resources except a mother-in-law who is swimming in her own suffering. But Ruth didn't allow her own suffering to shrink her world into one dominated by her concerns. She looked to love this bitter woman God had put in her life.

Ruth reminds me of the son who would be born of her line many centuries later. When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane praying to God about his own suffering, and being let down by his closest friends, his heart was for them, asking them to watch and pray so they wouldn't fall into temptation. And when he was on the cross suffering so much, his concern was for the care of his own mother. Like Ruth, he was silent throughout his ordeal, except to speak words of love and forgiveness for others.

CONCLUSION:

Let me mention an application in closing. This story calls us to stop living in the small story we write for our own lives and enter instead into God's greater story. Naomi wrote a small story for her life, living in Moab with her husband, children and grandchildren, probably dying there as well, but at least with enough food to eat. But God had a bigger story, one in which she would serve a key role in the conversion of a Moabite woman who would become an ancestor of Jewish royalty. What's your small story? Do you just want to live a comfortable, predictable life? God has something much grander in mind. The kingdom of God is breaking forth into the world, and you have a part to play. You play it as you repent of the hell of self-sufficiency and enter into the life of trusting God and obeying him.