

People Who Returned – the Story of Naomi and Ruth
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Introduction

Yesterday, our church participated in an event called “The Return”. It was a very important event. Today, I’d like to follow up with some thoughts about someone in the Bible who returned. The person left something, and then came back.

The story centers around two women. We’ll focus on one named Naomi. All the stories of the Bible contain profound truths for us, but this is one of the most famous. There is a short, four-page, stand-alone book in the Bible telling this story. You normally hear about it because of the other woman in the story whose name was Ruth.

Here’s one of the things that makes this story profound. It is one of the most tragic stories in the Bible. And yet, it’s one of the most wonderful. How can a story be tragic and wonderful at the same time?

Let’s find out.

I. The Story Starts with an Error in Judgment.

We’re going to find that this story starts out with a terrible error in judgement.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. 2 The man’s name was Elimelek, his wife’s name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. (Ruth 1:1-2)

This seems like a simple story. A certain family lives somewhere. Let’s call them “Naomi’s Family”. There’s a problem. So, they decide to go somewhere else. We’re told, “For a while”. Not long. They’re just going to go away until things get better. Then, when things are better, they can come back.





Palestine in the time of the Judges

Add to this, the place they're going to isn't all that far away. This family lives in what is today Israel. Let's look at it on a map. They live in a little town called Bethlehem (top arrow). They're not too far from the Dead Sea. I've read that you can see Moab from that place across the sea. (bottom arrow)

This is a common story in today's world. Got a problem? Move! We're going to learn through, that this was a terrible error in judgment. Here's why: This story occurred over 3000 years ago. When the children of Israel entered the promised land all those years ago, God made many promises to his children. They can be summarized in two words, both beginning with the letter "P". They are "Provide" and "Protect".

This was described very well in a well-known passage of Scripture:

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 - 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.
 - 3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
 - 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- (Psalm 23:1-4 (ESV))

So, here are God's promises: God will provide: "I shall not want." God will protect: "I will fear no evil." God promised to do these things for the Hebrew people. Incidentally, this are promises today to all people who follow God.

There are many different ways of characterizing faith. These two words are one way to look at it. People with faith in God base their lives on these promises.

So, Naomi's family is a Hebrew family, living under these promises. Add to this, most of their lives, they had evidence that these promises were true. For example, their home was called "Bethlehem". That's a Hebrew word that means, "House of Bread." Did you ever visit the House of Pancakes? That name means, there are lots of pancakes there. In those days, bread was everyone's main food. In this place, they had so much bread, they named the town after it. They must have had good soil, great fields and good weather that gave them abundant harvests. And Naomi's family wasn't poor. They owned land in this territory. Life was good. There is every evidence that God was true to his promises.

Until one year. Sometimes, God wants his children to grow in their faith. So, he presents a challenge. In this case, there was a famine. Something went wrong with the harvest.

How would the people of Bethlehem and the surrounding regions respond? Would they respond with faith in God's promises? Everybody looked at each other. They asked, "What should we do?" Apparently, most people said, "Let's stay put." "Let's trust that the Lord will come through on his promises."

Sadly, not Naomi's family. They said, "You all can stay here. We're going to go someplace else." In other words, they said, "We are not going to work on the assumption that God will be true to his promises." To Naomi and her family, God was somehow deficient. He was not to be fully trusted when it came to protection and provision. So, they left.

And the place they went had a very distinct quality. In Israel, the people worshiped the God of Abraham. We believe this is the one true God. So, at the time, this was the best place on the planet to be. In Moab, the people worshipped a god named "Chemosh". Chemosh was a false god. The people who worshipped him were evil. They taught that Chemosh demanded extreme sacrifices that sometimes included people - Human sacrifice. Naomi and her family essentially said, "Here in Israel, it looks like God isn't to be trusted." "We'll go someplace else where their god is doing a better job." Naomi's family wasn't just leaving a physical location when they left Israel to live in Moab. They left the promises of God.

How does this work out?

II. Things don't work out very well.

Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. (Ruth 1:3)

How did this work out? Very badly. Naomi's husband died. We don't learn how, but apparently, not long after arriving in Moab, Naomi and her two sons suffered a terrible tragedy. Maybe it was time to suggest that moving was a bad idea? Maybe Naomi's family should go back to the promised land and trust the God of Israel?

No, instead, they doubled down.

They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. (vs. 4)

The two boys each take wives from Moab. Today, nobody would give this a thought. If you're Irish, and you want to marry somebody who's Italian, no big deal. I'm glad to say that in today's world, you can marry anybody you want, no matter what their nationality. I think that's great.

However, this turned out to be another bad idea. Here's why: Ethnicity wasn't the issue here. The issue was faith. Faith is very different than nationality or people-groups. Faith involves ***your direction in life***.

Let me give an illustration: Let's say that I'm a medical researcher, and I discover a pill that cures cancer. I'm very proud of my pill, and I tell everyone I meet about it. If someone has cancer and they take my pill, they will be cured. For the sake of illustration, let's assume this is true. But let's say that everywhere I go, my wife follows after me and says, "My husband is a wonderful man, and I love him very much, but his pill doesn't work - Don't believe a word he says." That would be exasperating. This relationship would be under great stress.

Faith is like that. We're told in the Bible that God spoke to Abraham one day. Here's what he said:

I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.
(Genesis 12:3)

Look at that: "...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." God said that he would bless the world through Abraham. For that reason, young Jewish men were encouraged to marry Jewish women. In those days, that was part of their mission. They were going to bless the world, and it had to be through Abraham. The only exception to this came if a young woman held the same faith. They could marry someone from another people group, but only if the person believed in this mission. Otherwise, you get a husband saying, "The world will be blessed through the God of Abraham. You should follow him". His wife would say, "no, you need to follow my gods." Life in that case would be a mess.

When Naomi's boys took wives from Moab, they were demonstrating that their faith in their God was weak. They didn't believe in the mission of blessing the world. They only cared about themselves.

Recall also that this was supposed to be short-term. Taking local wives means there's more incentive to put down roots.

So, how did ***this*** work out?

After they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:4-5)

Again, this worked out very badly. In fact, it was even worse - The boys also died.

So, here's Naomi. She's living in a foreign land. She's lost her husband and her sons. She intended to be in Moab for "a little while". "A little while" has become ten years. She has nothing to show for those ten years. In fact, she's lost what little she had. That's why we started by saying that this is one of the most tragic stories in the Bible. This is horrible.

But we also said that this is one of the most wonderful stories in the Bible. Let's find out why.

III. Naomi Decides to return.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. (ruth 1:6)

Imagine this: Naomi's in a bad spot. She's lost anything she came with. And now she finds out that if she had just stayed put and trusted God, she would have been fine. What would that feel like? It would feel bad.

At any rate, she packs what few belongings she has and starts off with her two daughters-in-law. Then she has a realization: She asks herself, "How am I going to take care of these girls". The answer is, she can't. So, she thanks her daughters-in-law for their kindness, and sends them home - Or at least she tries. One of them, a woman named "Orpah", goes. The other is a very special young woman named Ruth.

"It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!" At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." (Ruth 1:13-15)

There's something about Ruth that was different than Orpah. We'll find out in a just a minute.

Let's look in the meantime at Naomi. Understand, she's not going back because she had a sudden personal revival. During the ten years she lived in Moab, at any point she could have said, "I realize that I made a bad decision. It's time to go back and rely on the promises of God!" That's not what she's doing. She got word that God had been faithful to his people, just as he promised. So now, there's more food back home than where she is. That's it. She's hit bottom, and there's no place else to go.

So, here is a person who is no giant of faith. She started out with a faith that was wanting. That's why she left her homeland, the land of God's promise. Currently, she has a distorted kind of faith. She believes in God, **but she believes God hates her**. She says he has turned his hand against her. She believes God is mean-spirited and unforgiving.

She says to Ruth, "Your sister-in-law is going back to her gods. You go, too." Naomi doesn't say, "Chemosh is terrible! He's a false god. Yes, life will be hard if you come to Israel, but there we worship the one true God. Whatever you do, don't go back to worshipping Chemosh!"

No. Naomi says, "I've got my 'god', the Moabites have their god. It doesn't matter. In fact, my God doesn't care about me. He's mad at me. You're better off staying here with Chemosh and his followers."

Naomi is not the best example of a woman of faith. That makes what is about to follow even more remarkable.

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me. (Ruth 1:16-17)

Wow! What has happened here? Here is a young woman, Ruth, who grew up surrounded by false gods. She's got a home in Moab - A home where she's welcome. If you read the whole story, there are hints that she's an attractive woman who could have her pick of men. But God places something in her heart. It starts as a spark that quickly grows into a flame. She develops a love for her mother in law. She develops a zeal for the one true God. She says, "I'm not staying here. Your people will be my people. **Your God will be my God.**" She even appeals to God's authority. "May **the Lord** deal with me, be it every so severely, if even death separates you and me."

Here's Naomi, a woman lacking in faith. She's made mistakes - big mistakes. Because of errors in judgement, because of weak faith, she's lost everything. But still, she does something. You know what it is? She decides to return. She decides to return to her home. She decides to return to the one true God, even though she's not sure why. She thinks he hates her. But she returns anyway.

Because of that, God grants her a miracle. He sends a kind of an angel - A young woman named Ruth. A woman with far more love and faith than Naomi. Those things could only have come from God working in Ruth's heart. Together, they return to the land of the one true God, the land of Israel, the little town of Bethlehem.

What happened there? We don't have time to read the whole story. Because she returned, the Lord blesses Naomi. Because Naomi returned, God works in the life of Ruth. Ruth becomes a person of great character - And it's obvious to everyone.

In order to eat, Ruth becomes something called a "Gleaner". If you were a field worker in those days, you got paid. However, there were those who were not even to the level of a common worker. They were poor. In the Law of Moses, there was a provision for the poor. They were to be allowed to follow field workers during the harvest. Anything the harvesters missed could be picked up by these people. The process is called "Gleaning." So, Ruth works as something below a common laborer. Here's something important: She works so hard all the other field hands notice.

She is eventually noticed by the owner of the field, a man named Boaz. Here's what Boaz says to Ruth:

All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. 12 The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!
(Ruth 3:11-12)

Boaz was a man of faith, and a man of character. Because of her great faith, and her good character, Boaz and Ruth eventually married and had a child together. Naomi lived with them and they all lived happily ever after. So, this turns out to be a wonderful story.

It would be a wonderful story if it ended there. But there's more. The story isn't over until you learn about Ruth's son. His name was Obed. Obed grew up, got married, and had a child name Jesse. Jesse grew up, got married and had a boy named David. *David grew up to be king of Israel.* And not just any king – David was one of the greatest of the ancient Hebrew kings.

That would be a wonderful end of the story. But there's even more. If that wasn't wonderful enough, David had many descendants. He had sons who had sons who had sons. We read earlier that God would bless the world through Abraham. David was a descendant of Abraham. Many generations after David, another child was born in Bethlehem. He was a descendant of David. *His name was Jesus.*

Jesus died for the sins of the world, so that anyone who believes in him can return to God.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

So, we have one of the most tragic stories in the Bible. Yet, it's one of the most wonderful.

We have a woman who left. She left the land of promise. She left because her faith was lacking. One day, she decided to return. Not because her faith had become perfect, but because she hit bottom. When she decided to return, God started doing amazing things in her life.

At this point, we need to understand something: There is not always a one-on-one relationship between bad decisions and bad outcomes. And sadly, there is not always a one-on-one relationship between good decisions and good outcomes. However, there are times when God brings challenges into people's lives. At those times, people can choose based on faith in God's promises. Or people can choose something else. For now, that's the point.

Now, notice what happened. All Naomi had to do was decide to return. God took it from there.

Yesterday, the nation prayed that God would help us to return. Because of that, people all over the country are going to return to God. Some people return physically. We want to welcome them into our churches.

Some people return mentally. They may sit in churches every week, but their minds and their hearts aren't there. Those people need to return, too.

Some return from far away. Others are close by. Some return from lives of sin. Others just sense a need to come home.

To all who have returned, mentally or physically, whether from far or not-so-far, whether from hitting the bottom or just a quiet sense that it's time to come home. To all those people, welcome. May the Lord bless you, "...under whose wings you have come to take refuge"

No matter why you returned, you need just one more step: You need Jesus. Earlier, we used the illustration of a pill. The pill cured cancer. Consider this: when Jesus died on the cross, it allowed him to offer the world a cure for death itself. Let us tell you how Jesus can help you to completely return to God. Visit our web site, TrinityTeaneck.org. Or, visit Billy Graham's site, PeaceWithGod.net.

Naomi didn't return because she had great faith. But because she chose to return, someone else knew where to go. That someone else was Ruth. Maybe there's someone in your life that just needs to know you're a follower of Jesus? You don't need to be a great evangelist – you just need to point your friends in the right direction. You just need to ask them to follow you to church.

Amazingly, Naomi's decision to return allowed God to raise up another person whom he used mightily - Ruth. God used her in a line of people who eventually produced the Messiah, the

Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle Matthew wrote a biography of Jesus, “The Gospel According to Matthew”. In chapter one of his book, he started his biography with all the important people in the lineage of the Messiah. Ruth’s name appears there (See Matthew 1 with focus on verse 5).

If you have returned, welcome. I hope you’ll stay. If you stay, maybe God will use you in wonderful ways. Maybe he’ll use someone close to you.

You just need to return.