

Christian Life Builders' Class
 Sunday School Lesson 10-4-2026

“Don’t Call Me Naomi!” Ruth 1:20

Introduction:

Today we start month two in this series of lessons from the Old Testament narratives relating event in the early centuries of Israel’s occupation of the Promised Land. Last month, our lessons were from the book of Joshua. Next month they will be taken from 1 Samuel. One would think that this month our lessons would be taken from the book of Judges, one of the most depressing periods of Israel’s history, and one of the most unique books which relates the story of Israel. Instead of studying some events in Judges, we will be looking at each of the four chapters of the book of Ruth, what some people might call a minor episode in the life of Israel which took place at some point during the period of the Judges. The story of Ruth presents an entire town which lives up to both the law of God and God’s goal regarding Israel’s witness to foreigners in the Promised Land. The story appears to contradict the general description of the people of Israel as they are characterized in the book of Judges.

With that introduction, let’s get into the story.

I. Triple tragedy. Ruth 1:1-7

I’m quite sure that we all know the story so far. But there are a couple of things that we need to understand before we take this story too lightly. First issue is that of distance from Bethlehem to Moab and how they would get there. From Bethlehem they would go to Jerusalem, a 6-mile journey; from Jerusalem to the Jordan River via Jericho, another 24 miles; from the Jordan River to the King’s Highway on the Transjordan Plateau (the highway is still there and has been paved within the last decade or so), 20 more miles; then on the King’s Highway down to Moab, a final 34 miles. That means Father, mother and two teenage boys *walked 85 miles* to the border of Moab, and beyond that to where they finally settled. That distance will become important as we continue looking at chapter 1 of this book.

The second issue is the age of everyone involved. With girls marrying young, Naomi might not have been older than 20 by the time both her boys were born, and no older than 35-40 when this story begins. The real problem is what to do with the number, ten years, in v. 4. The way much of dating calculation is done in the Bible, it is more likely that the 10 years represents the time between the family’s arrival in Moab and the death of the last of the two sons, rather than the marriages of the two sons having lasted 10 years. There certainly would have been children born to both Orpah and Ruth in 10 years of marriage. That puts Naomi at about 45-50 and her two daughters-in-law somewhere between their late teens and early 20’s. Those ages become important as we look at the next section of the biblical text.

The third issue has to do with hope for a future. For Naomi, a future in Moab would have been one of destitution, because she had no man to care for her, and the prospect of

remarriage was quite out of the picture. Her daughters-in-law, however, could still possibly remarry. However, in Bethlehem, Jewish law recognized Naomi was in control of Elimelech's land as long as she lived, and it stood to provide a livelihood for her. This point becomes clear in chapter 4, verse 3, and her only hope for a future was for her to return to Bethlehem.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. To this point in the text, we read nothing about any of the women suffering grief. What are the sources of grief that are listed here that we can't escape as we read the story? NOTE: Acceptable ways of processing grief are culturally specific. The original readers of this text would have thought the women processed their grief in a culturally appropriate manner. And since we don't see them doing what we expect widows to do, we might interpret their actions as inappropriate.
2. Why is it important to know that Naomi still has control over Elimelech's land in the area surrounding Bethlehem?
3. Put yourself in Naomi's shoes. What is she thinking as the three of them leave their homestead to return to Bethlehem?

II. Two choices. Ruth 1:8-18 (one verse beyond the printed portion in the quarterly)

They have arrived somewhere at the border between Moab and the tribal territory of Reuben east of the Dead Sea, with the full 85 miles to go to get back to Bethlehem. Then Naomi prays the LORD's blessing on each of her daughters-in-law and tells them both to go to their homes, specifically their 'mother's home.' 'Mother's home' being a euphemism for where marriage arrangements are made. Both were still young enough to attract husbands. She then said that the possibility of levirate marriage was not available to them because Naomi had no more sons, and that she would have needed to start over and they would all have had to wait a long time before they were old enough to marry them. Orpah obeys her mother-in-law, so she should not be criticized or condemned for going home.

The rest of this section is basically the introduction to Ruth and the narrative shifts from Naomi to Ruth as principal character. Ruth responded with the only time in Scripture we see a solemn vow made by one female character to another. This vow is well known in both religious and secular circles. Furthermore, it is included often in wedding liturgies, even though it doesn't have anything to do with a wedding. Let's look at the points in this vow:

I will go where you go
 I will stay where you stay
 Your people will be my people
 Your God [will be] my God
 Where you die I will die
 [Where you are buried] there will I be buried.

NOTE: This verbage of this vow is probably the most explicit example in the Old Testament of what Jesus meant when he said “take up your ‘cross,’ and follow me” where ‘cross’ literally means ‘a property claim marker.’

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

1. Is it right to think ill of Orpah since she did what her mother-in-law said to do?
2. Of the 6 lines in Ruth’s vow, which do you see as the most significant, given the overall situation? (There is no right or wrong answer.)
3. What does Ruth see in Naomi, that Naomi doesn’t see in herself, that causes Ruth to choose Naomi’s God rather than those worshipped in her culture?

III. Arrival in Bethlehem Ruth 1:19-22 (not in the printed quarterly)

What’s interesting to me at this point in the narrative is the contrast between what we read about the people of Israel in the book of Judges, and what we see here in Bethlehem. the cycle of Israel’s behavior in Judges is that, as long as their deliverer lives and life becomes good again, they remain faithful to God. But when that leader dies, they go back into idolatry and God responds with calamity in hopes to draw them back to Him. In the life of Naomi’s family and back in Bethlehem, the people have been faithful to the LORD all along, in spite of their circumstances, and, as we will see in chapter 2, are exercising the regulations for caring for the poor and the widows which He had incorporated in His social regulations in the Book of Exodus.

Central to this paragraph in Chapter 1 is Naomi’s soliloquy in verses 20-21, from which I elicited the title for this lesson: “Don’t Call me Naomi.” Naomi means ‘pleasantness.’ The other name Naomi tells the women to call her, ‘Mara,’ means ‘bitterness.’

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What’s happening to Naomi in verses 20-21?
2. (In this narrative, there’s a lot left to the imagination.) What role do the other women in Bethlehem play in this scene?
3. What does v. 22 say to you about the working of God in Naomi’s life?

Conclusion:

Verse 22 points out both the irony and the agony of Naomi’s statement in verse 21, “[the Lord] has brought me back empty.” The writer of Ruth follows up immediately by saying Naomi is “accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law.” The commentator for this lesson, Karen Winslow, acknowledges the irony of Naomi’s statement by her comment, “anyone who returned with Ruth was not empty at all.” Bethlehem was a community of faithful people.

We, also, are part of a community of faith. In that community, at times, God allows us to be good listeners and helps us assist in carrying the grief of others, even when that grief comes from experiences we have not gone through ourselves. In that community, hopefully, we also

have the freedom to bare our soul, especially when our emotions disagree with what we know to be true. We all need each other, and we all need to be as good at listening as we are at speaking. May our participation as members of the community allow others to express freely their pathos, and to then experience a freeing catharsis. We really need the Church.