



# Family as Community

March 21, 2010

***BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:***

***RUTH 1:1-16***

***PRINTED TEXT:***

***RUTH 1:1-9, 14b-16***

*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.”*

*—Ruth 1:16*

## Opening Song

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### Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

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### Opening Prayer

*RUTH 1:1-9, 14b-16 (NIV)*

**1**<sup>1</sup> In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.<sup>2</sup> The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.<sup>3</sup> Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.<sup>4</sup> They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years,<sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.<sup>6</sup> When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.<sup>7</sup> With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.<sup>8</sup> Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me."<sup>9</sup> May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud

<sup>14b</sup> Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.<sup>15</sup> "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."<sup>16</sup> 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.

***INTRODUCTION******A. FAMINE AND FAITH***

It was the early part of the twentieth century. A family in one U.S. county heard that a family in an adjacent county had the same last name. Those who had seen both groups said that members of the two families resembled one another. Curiosity grew, and the time came when a trip was made to see if the families were related.

As the two families engaged in conversations and compared information, they discovered that they were rather closely related. Shortly after America's Civil War, a young married man living in the hills of an eastern state decided to move to a place with more opportunity, for there was no available land where he lived. The couple bade farewell to their respective families and started west. They never expected to return to their place of origin. The emotions of such a transition in that era are described by one author this way: "A departure to a distant land, with its last farewells to beloved friends and familiar scenes, has in it much of the bitterness of death."

A few months later, a young brother who had recently married made the same decision. It was a coincidence, but the two brothers settled in neighboring counties in the same state. Many years passed before their descendants found each other and experienced the joy of discovering relatives they did not know existed.

History shows that families move for three primary reasons: fortune, faith, and famine (or food). The faith factor may be seen when a couple or an individual decides to take the gospel to a foreign land. Today the trauma of separation is not as great as in the past. The communication and transportation methods that now exist tend to nullify some of the stresses of separation.

The lesson for today is about a family that moved because of famine. But it becomes evident that faith in God was a vital part of the family's orientation; thus there was an issue of faith as well. The lesson begins in Bethlehem, and the Lord will bring people together who will become ancestors of David and ultimately of Jesus.

***B. LESSON BACKGROUND***

Today's text from Ruth comes from one of the two books of the Bible named for women. (The other is the book of Esther.) The date for the events in the book of Ruth is uncertain. David was the great-grandson of Ruth, and he became king over Judah about 1010 BC, then over the entire nation of Israel in 1003 BC. The primary account in Ruth can therefore be no later than 1100 BC, and it may be earlier.

The author of the book is not given. Jewish tradition ascribes it to Samuel, who had anointed David as the king to follow Saul on the throne (1 Samuel 16:1–13). Samuel died before David became the king, so it is sometimes thought that a person such as Nathan, a prophet who was prominent in David's life, may have written the book. Solomon is not mentioned, and that is significant in this regard (allowing for cautions of using an argument from silence).

The book of Ruth is considered one of the finest literary works in all of ancient literature. There is drama in each chapter, and the lesson for today is from chapter one.

## ***I. CHALLENGES FOR A FAMILY (RUTH 1:1–5)***

### ***A. DECISION TO MOVE (vv. 1, 2)***

#### ***1a. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land,***

The first phrases of the book give the historical background. An entire book of the Old Testament is dedicated to the period of *the days of the judges*, meaning about 1375–1050 BC. In this time frame, God raises up people called *judges*, who are military deliverers or magistrates. God allows times of suffering or oppression to come on the Israelites when they sin. When repentance takes place, God rescues his people by using one of the judges as a military deliverer. A period of peace follows, and the cycle starts again.

The time frame in view here is narrowed to an occasion when there is *a famine*. Famines are usually caused by lack of rain, the presence of insects (such as a locust invasion), or the fact that oppressing nations rob the people after the harvest is complete. Famine is one of the judgments that God promises if the people of Israel do not comply with the terms of the covenant (Deuteronomy 28, especially v. 24). It seems likely that this time the cause of the famine is drought-related.

#### ***1b.... and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.***

Geographic locations are given, and in the centuries ahead *Bethlehem* will become prominent as the hometown of David. This village is first mentioned in the Bible as being near the site where Rachel died when she gave birth to Benjamin, the twelfth son of Jacob (Genesis 35:19). The town will be cited later in Micah 5:2 as the place where the Messiah will be born.

This account is more than just a time, a tragedy, and a town. It is about people who

live in that time, in that town, and who experience the tragedy of a famine. It is about a *man, his wife, and their two sons*. In the midst of these circumstances the father makes a major decision: they will move to *the country of Moab*. The word *Bethlehem* means “house of bread,” and it is ironic that the family feels compelled to move to Moab to have bread.

On a clear day the hills of Moab are visible from Bethlehem when a person looks to the east across the Dead Sea. The journey to reach Moab involves going toward Jericho and crossing the Jordan River just before it empties into the Dead Sea. That is the lowest point on the planet that is not covered by the ocean. It is about 1,380 feet below sea level at the north end (as of 2007, with the water level dropping about 3 feet per year). The climb to Moab then begins.

#### ***2. The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife’s name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.***

Personal names in biblical times are often significant in their meaning. The name *Elimelech* means “my God is king.” *Naomi* means “pleasant.” The son who will marry Ruth (Ruth 4:10) is *Mahlon*, meaning “weak.” His brother is *Kilion*, or “pining.” The latter two names suggest physical weaknesses. The decision to move and the health of the brothers may be related factors. To move from a place that had been assigned to an ancestor is difficult, but parents will make such sacrifices for their children.

The entire family is designated as *Ephrathites*. Ephrath seems to have been a former name for *Bethlehem* (again, Genesis 35:19). The word *Judah* is added to the designation to distinguish it from another Bethlehem that is in the northern tribe of Naphtali (Joshua 19:15, 16).

### ***B. DEATH OF A FATHER (v. 3)***

**3. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.**

Naomi has already experienced the emotions prompted by moving to another land. Now she has the grief that is associated with the loss of her *husband*. She and *her two sons* have to bury their loved one in a foreign country instead of the familiar environs of Bethlehem.

#### **C. DECISIONS TO MARRY (v. 4)**

**4. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years,**

The choice of a spouse is very important. One of the deciding factors for the Israelite brothers should be the god or gods whom the young *women* worship. The brothers may know that it was *Moabite women* who had seduced some Israelite men into false worship when the Israelites were waiting to cross the Jordan River (Numbers 25:1–5), but it is possible that they feel they have converted their prospective brides. Several hundred years later (about 450 BC), Ezra will demonstrate very strong reactions when he learns that Israelite men have married women of Moab and other nations (Ezra 9:1–3). The attendant circumstances at that time may be different from what is described here.

The fact that the family remains in Moab *about ten years* indicates that they have become relatively comfortable there. Apparently there is no serious thought about returning to Bethlehem.

#### **D. DEATHS OF THE SONS (v. 5)**

**5.... both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.**

In the culture of the time, it is usually essential for a woman to have a *husband* to provide for physical necessities. Naomi has become dependent on her *sons* after her husband's death, but the deaths of the sons place all three women in difficulty. They are

without husbands to provide support and protection.

Ancient Jewish interpretations of these events suggest that the deaths of the father and his sons are a divine punishment for their leaving Bethlehem and for their lack of trust that God would provide. These thoughts are not mentioned in the biblical text, so to suggest such is speculation.

## **II. CHOICES IN A FAMILY (RUTH 1:6–9, 14B–16)**

### **A. NAOMI'S DECISIONS (vv. 6–9)**

**6–9. When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.**

Naomi becomes aware (perhaps from traveling merchants) that there is *food* back in her homeland. Bethlehem, the “house of bread,” has been blessed by *the Lord*. She decides that she can now *return* to the familiar surroundings she had left a decade earlier. When things are not going well, there is no place like *home* to find comfort.

It is interesting that the three women have remained together thus far. Their mutual losses and sorrows perhaps have helped them work through their situations. But now Naomi is suggesting a change that jars the comfort level of the young women. Naomi wants to go home—back to Bethlehem.

It has been suggested that this book of the Bible could be called *The Book of Naomi*, for it is at this point that she becomes the leader who makes plans for herself and others. She has the lead in the recorded conversations. Every social unit needs someone to rise to the top to give purpose and direction for those involved.

**7. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.**

The initial indication is that the three women want to stay together. The common bond they have forged in their shared grief is very strong. But to leave Moab will take them away from the place where they experienced grief, and sometimes that is good therapy. The process of packing their few possessions will provide an opportunity to think about what they are doing. Do they really want to leave Moab, or is this decision made in haste?

**8. *Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me.***

Naomi is genuinely grateful for the loyalty that her *two daughters-in-law* have for her. But she concludes that it will be best for them to remain in their native Moab. She therefore directs them to stay. This is the first of four such statements by Naomi. She can add that being a childless widow in Judah may be a stigma in being able to marry again, since barrenness is associated with women, not men.

Naomi’s request that *each* daughter-in-law go to her respective *mother’s home* may seem strange, especially in view of the fact that Ruth’s father is later said to be alive (Ruth 2:11). It is sometimes said that widows are to go to the house of the father (Genesis 38:11; Leviticus 22:13). But when Rebekah first met Abraham’s servant, she went to her mother’s house (Genesis 24:28). Naomi knows the background of each daughter-in-law, and she makes the appropriate recommendation.

**9. *“May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”***

***Then she kissed them and they wept aloud.***

This is often said to be the key verse of the book—Naomi’s desire that Ruth and Orpah *find rest* through remarriages that will

relieve them from the anxieties and stresses of being widowed. The three women have been through much together, but Naomi is persuaded that what she is recommending is best. The kisses of separation are routine, but the weeping *aloud* shows the closeness that has developed.

***B. RUTH’S DEVOTION (v. 14b)***

***14b. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her.***

Orpah accepts the suggestion of Naomi, but Ruth demonstrates that she is at a different level. It may be that she feels an obligation to her deceased husband and that she chooses to show loyalty to him by caring for his mother. We may conjecture that Mahlon was the second son to die, and that in his final days his concern for his mother was recognized by Ruth. Thus she may have pledged to him that she will care for Naomi.

So Ruth clings to Naomi. Her concern for the older widow is in keeping with what is described as the pure religion that God recognizes (James 1:27). Ruth, however, has additional motivation, and that is given in the final words of today’s printed text.

***C. NAOMI’S DISSENT (v. 15)***

***15. “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”***

Naomi urges Ruth to imitate the example of Orpah, and two very strong appeals are used: family (*her people*) and faith (*her gods*). The primary god of the Moabites is Chemosh (see Numbers 21:29; 1 Kings 11:7). But it is customary for people to worship the gods of neighboring nations also—just to be sure that they do not offend any of the gods. The famous Moabite Stone of about 850 BC tells of the revolt of Mesha, king of Moab, against Israel (see 2 Kings 3:4, 5). It refers to Chemosh several times, and it states that Moab had become subservient to Israel because Chemosh was offended.

It is somewhat strange that Naomi is willing to make the trip to Bethlehem by herself, but she is doing what she thinks is best. It may be that she is not aware of Ruth's inner feelings or commitments. Naomi's decision undoubtedly is colored by her grief and perhaps even depression. A return to Bethlehem offers the promise not only of physical sustenance but also emotional support.

***D. RUTH'S DECLARATION (v. 16)***

***16. 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."***

Ruth's statement is one of the most beautiful expressions of devotion in all literature. It begins with a response to the fact that Naomi has given four separate exhortations to her daughters-in-law to return to their own people and their gods (1:8, 11, 12, 15).

Ruth affirms her commitment to be with Naomi, and it is evident that she esteems her mother-in-law very highly. Negative jokes are sometimes made about mothers-in-law, but this has no place in Ruth's mind. Ruth and Naomi shared a mutual grief when Mahlon died. The strength, beauty, and power of Ruth's declaration have their foundations in both family and faith.

The determination of Ruth is especially revealed in verse 17, which is not part of today's lesson text. There Ruth makes a pledge that only death will separate her from Naomi. Ruth binds the statement with an oath that a judgment from God on her should result if she goes back on what she has just said. This is what proves beyond all doubt that Ruth really means what she says. Naomi no longer protests the decision of this devoted young woman. They will make their sojourn to Bethlehem together. They do not know the future, but they will have each other and God to strengthen them.

## ***CONCLUSION***

A college student said that when he was young, his grandmother often influenced him to do what was right. After she died, he had the idea that she was in Heaven watching him from that vantage point. He did not want to disappoint his grandmother, so he tried to do the right thing.

It is a certainty that the lives of Christians are under scrutiny. In some cases this is a good thing, for others want to know if a person's faith is genuine. They want to know if the Christian's example will show how to handle the tough situations or special trials that are a part of life.

Sometimes, however, there are those who actually want the believer to do what is wrong. This provides an opportunity to throw the *hypocrite* label at Christians, or it is interpreted that the claims of Christ are of no significance in the person's life. In this lesson, Ruth is one who makes a right decision for the right reasons after observing her mother-in-law for a length of time.

How then shall we live? The answer is obvious: in a way that pleases God and sets good examples for others! Both he and they are watching.

## ***WHEN THERE'S NO CHOICE BUT TO MOVE***

Statistics from [www.moving.com](http://www.moving.com) indicate that among the U.S. population people move about 12 times in their lifetimes. About 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. will move each year. Moving is one of the most stressful events in life.

People move both voluntarily and involuntarily. Voluntary moves result from getting married, finding a new job, or simply desiring to live in a different neighborhood. Involuntary moves may result from mortgage foreclosure, health problems, and natural disasters. Naomi's move was involuntary. She found herself in a foreign country without sufficient means of support. At that time and in that culture, the only recourse she could see was to move back to Judah to be with her extended family. Survival was at stake.

How would Naomi be received when she showed up? That's a question that's relevant yet today. Perhaps you will have a relative who needs to move in with you. Perhaps your church has members who are facing the stress of an involuntary move (either arriving or departing). What will be your attitude when this ministry opportunity presents itself?

### *TREASURED WORDS*

Some of the most poignant, enduring words ever spoken in American history are found in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The address was given on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of a cemetery on the site of one of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War. Fought in July of that year, the Battle of Gettysburg resulted in upwards of 51,000 soldiers from both sides being dead, wounded, or missing.

Edward Everett, widely known as an eloquent orator, was the main speaker. He spoke for two hours, but few today know what he said. Lincoln spoke for two minutes, but his words became timeless. The speech reshaped the thinking of the nation regarding the nature and purpose of that violent conflict. (Some propose that Lincoln, in effect, rewrote the U.S. Constitution with his speech.) Lincoln gave meaning to the carnage as he spoke of the cause in which the dead "gave the last full measure of devotion."

Ruth's words of commitment to Naomi have also become treasured, at least among those who are biblically literate. There is a sense in which Ruth was "dying"—she was abandoning her culture and homeland for Naomi's. If there ever was a "full measure of devotion," that was it! Should our devotion to Christ be any less?

### **LET'S TALK IT OVER**

**1. What do individuals and families lose when they move? What is the church's ministry in these situations?**

**2. What are some godly things to do when circumstances go from bad to worse?**

**3. Was Naomi's counsel to "go, return" good advice or bad advice? Why? How do we go about rejecting bad advice when it comes from someone who is sincere and well-meaning?**

**4. What does Ruth's affirmation to Naomi say about the right reasons for being committed to another person?**

**5. In what ways does Ruth's break with her past life parallel the decision we make when we accept Christ as Savior and Lord?**

### **LET'S TALK IT OVER**

**1. What do individuals and families lose when they move? What is the church's ministry in these situations?**

One loss can be that of extended-family cohesion. (For dysfunctional families, that may be a gain!) Long-term relationships become difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. This truth was magnified in the circumstances of Elimelech and Naomi, since that was a time before telephones, e-mail, and social networking sites such as *MySpace*.

Often a move separates a family from its religious tradition as well, for "the home church" is left far behind. Involving oneself in worship, fellowship, and service in a new place can be very difficult. This truth speaks loudly to those of us in the "new" church. We like to think we are friendly and welcoming, but are we? Try this test: sometime over the next year, visit three churches to see how you are made to feel (or not feel) welcome. The Lord may convict you through this experience to take the lead in improving your church's outreach to those who are new in your church.

**2. What are some godly things to do when circumstances go from bad to worse?**

The temptation to pity self presents itself in such circumstances (compare 1 Kings 19:10). Rejecting God may run through our thoughts (compare Job 2:9). Neither, of course, is godly. Naomi demonstrated right thinking: returning to the place where God was demonstrating love and concern, returning to be among people who cared about her.

Leaving a place one associates with tragedy and loss may be a good choice. Those who are widowed sometimes find they simply "cannot stay" in a house they shared for decades with a departed love one. Seeking the emotional and physical closeness of those whom one knows will care is a good step. God created family and friendship for such times; the godly person does not consider such benevolent requests to be inappropriate.

**3. Was Naomi's counsel to "go, return" good advice or bad advice? Why? How do we go about rejecting bad advice when it comes from someone who is sincere and well-meaning?**

Naomi's daughters-in-law faced just such a dilemma. The advice they were given by their godly mother-in-law sounded good on the surface. Staying in one's homeland and looking for new husbands there—what could be wrong with that?

We must realize that faulty advice may come from sincere, well-meaning people such as Naomi, especially if they are in a conflicted state of mind. Ruth was wise enough to realize the blessings of serving the true God (v. 16). Any advice that got in the way of that service was bad advice. "Stay (or go) where you can worship God; stay (or go) where you can be with the one(s)

you trust to help you in that task.” Now, that is good advice! Such factors must be a part of our decision process.

**4. What does Ruth’s affirmation to Naomi say about the right reasons for being committed to another person?**

Ruth’s final expression is key: when we share the love of God, any relationship can be full of love and success. Paul’s challenge to “be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6:14) is a principle for all relationships.

There are other significant principles involved in Ruth’s affirmation. Ruth’s statement “thy people shall be my people” recognizes the importance of community. When we socialize, we usually do not do so strictly in one-on-one settings. Marriages occur between individuals of course, but also in a sense between families. To be disliked by a spouse’s extended family is a recipe for misery. There should be no barriers to effective relationships if we share with others a common allegiance to Christ.

**5. In what ways does Ruth’s break with her past life parallel the decision we make when we accept Christ as Savior and Lord?**

Such changes involve not only going *to* something, but also leaving something behind. Both are absolute commitments, a matter of personal will, based on faith that life can be better. Both involve taking on (being adopted into) new families. Ruth joined Naomi’s family in Bethlehem; we join the family of God in Christ. Both involve an element of trust. Naomi had credibility, so Ruth trusted her to lead them to a better life. Our witness in leading others to Christ is effective when we demonstrate ourselves to be trustworthy.

***PRAYER***

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the example of faith in the choices of Ruth. May her example help us in the choices that we make today as we walk in the way that leads to eternal life. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.*