

Naomi's Decision to Return to Israel

Ruth 1:6-18

Ruth 1:6-18 - *"Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people by giving them bread. ⁷ Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸ And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband."*

So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, ¹³ would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!"

¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever 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. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me." When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her."

Background Notes

When Elimelech and his family left Israel during a time of famine and moved to Moab, he expected that it would be for a short time. But Elimelech died in Moab. His early death was possibly a sign of discipline for leaving the Land of Promise and taking his family to live in a pagan land. His two sons also died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, widowed and alone in Moab, without any human means of support.

In verse 6 and 7 we read that Naomi and her daughters-in-law decided to move back to Israel. Naomi had heard that the years of famine were over, and once again there was "bread in Israel." Notice, by the way, that it was the Lord who brought bread to Israel -- not nature, and not the pagan gods who supposedly controlled the fertility of the land. God provides the bread, then and today, and that is true of physical food as well as spiritual food.

So it was the Lord who triggered Naomi to make the right decision and return to Israel. God in his sovereign grace is always the one who makes the first move to help us make right and proper decisions.

Somewhere along the road back to Judah the three widows stopped, and Naomi began to urge her daughters-in-law to return home to their families in Moab. Naomi probably said something like this: “Look girls, you don’t have to return with me to Judah. In fact, it’s crazy. There’s no future for you there. I’m too old to remarry, and even if I did remarry, I’m too old to bear more sons for you to marry, according to the levirate laws in Israel. Use your common sense, girls! Return home and find yourselves new husbands in Moab. You’ve been wonderful daughters-in-law to me, but I can’t offer you any hope and security if you stay with me. You’re under no obligation to go with me. Don’t be foolish. Turn back!”

Orpah took Naomi’s advice and she returned home, but Ruth would not turn back. Nothing Naomi said could persuade Ruth to separate from Naomi! Verses 16 and 17 again: “ Entreat me not to leave you,

Or to turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.”

Now before we go on to our doctrinal points, we should say something about Naomi’s advice to Ruth and Orpah to return to Moab. What kind of counsel was this? Was it proper counsel from a godly woman? Moab was a pagan nation that worshiped false gods! We wish that Naomi had counseled both Ruth and Orpah to go with her to the land of Israel and the God of Israel. God would have certainly taken care of Orpah as well as Ruth. But remember that Naomi’s faith was not strong at this point. She had made the right decision to return to Judah, but her relationship with the Lord was very good at this point. She certainly didn’t have the joy of the Lord! Look at what she said in verse 13: “*The hand of the LORD has gone out against me!*”

And then look what she said in verses 20 and 21: ²⁰ *But she said to them, “Do not call me Naomi (which means pleasant); call me Mara (which means bitter), for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?”*

So why we can understand why Naomi counseled Orpah and Ruth to return to Moab. After all, in that day poor widows had no means of support, and Naomi was concerned for Ruth and Orpah’s security and well-being. But still, surely Naomi ought to have advised both Ruth and Orpah to come with her to Israel, and to come to know the God of Israel, and put their trust fully Him.

Doctrinal Points

1. The right decision may not be an easy choice.

Although the right decision may not always be an easy choice, many times the right decision **is** an easy choice. For example, next week Margie and I will be leaving the Chicago area to be involved in a camp ministry in the beautiful state of New Hampshire. Accepting that ministry invitation was not a hard choice, especially because we will be able to see our grandchildren along the way! Seriously speaking, we believe we made the right decision, but it was an easy choice! But

not all decisions are easy choices. Our recent move from our home of 21 years to a much smaller apartment was not an easy choice, but we believe it was the right decision. The Lord has confirmed it in many ways.

Ruth made the right decision, but it was not an easy choice. From Ruth's perspective, she was giving away any possibility of future marriage and family. After all, what Jewish man would want to marry a widow -- and not a rich widow, but a poor widow! And not only a poor widow, but a poor widow who was a Moabite from the pagan land of Moab? Put yourselves in Ruth's position. When she left Moab she was leaving her family, her security and any chance for a future, humanly speaking. She would have the additional burden of caring for her aging mother-in-law, with no known means of support. It was not an easy choice, but she knew it was the right decision because she was following the true and living God.

Some of you may be making important decisions right now. The right decision may not be an easy choice. It may involve sacrifice. It may involve swallowing your pride, and no one likes to be humbled. It may involve ethics -- business ethics or medical ethics. If we pray for the Lord's help, he promises that he will guide us into the right decision. James 1:5 says, *"5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."*

But that does not mean that the decision will be easy. The right decision may not be an easy choice.

2. The right decision may involve considerable change.

Our right decisions may involve considerable change. Ruth's right decisions certainly involved considerable change. She was leaving familiar surroundings and going into a totally new culture and situation. She would have to adapt and adjust to significant changes. But Ruth was willing to flex because she knew it was the right decision. Adapting and adjusting to new situations is not "a piece of cake," especially as you get older, but your right decision may involve considerable change.

There are a lot of ways that this doctrinal point can be applied. Let's apply it to becoming a Christian. Becoming a Christian will probably involve considerable change in your lifestyle. What you do in your free time will change, and it may be a considerable change. What you read and watch will change, and it may be a considerable change. What you do with your money will change, and it may be a considerable change. So becoming a Christian may involve considerable change in your lifestyle.

Being a Christian may involve considerable change! Just this past weekend I learned that two of my former students who are now married and are serving the Lord in Kazakhstan, one of the former Soviet Republics. As students, these two young people were certainly not interested in foreign missions, and they weren't at all interested in leaving the good old U.S. of A.! But God called them, and they said yes. Their decision has made a very considerable change in their lives, but they have flexed and adapted and adjusted -- and they're doing a terrific job. The right decision may involve considerable change.

Practical Applications

1. Is your commitment more than words?

Many times in Scripture, the faith of one biblical character is highlighted by contrasting it with the lack of faith of another biblical character. For example, Abraham's faith is highlighted when it's contrasted with Lot's lack of faith. Jacob's faith is highlighted when it's contrasted with Esau's lack of faith. Joseph's faith is highlighted when it's contrasted with Judah's lack of faith (Genesis 37-38).

Here in the book of Ruth, Ruth's faith is highlighted as it is contrasted with Orpah's lack of faith. Notice that both Ruth and Orpah were committed in words. They were both on their way to Judah with Naomi, and they both affirmed with statements of commitment that they would stick with their decision to go to Israel with Naomi: *"And they said to her, 'Surely we will return with you to your people'"* (v10).

But Orpah changed her mind. She went back to Moab and the gods of Moab (v15). Ruth's commitment, however, was more than mere words. Ruth's commitment was one of true faith in the one true God.

Is your commitment more than words? A lot of people **say** they are Christians. They go to church and make a good profession of faith -- but it is only words. Is your commitment more than words?

2. Is your commitment more than emotions?

Orpah not only said she was committed but it looked as though she was just involved emotionally as Ruth was. Let's read the end of verse 9, verse 10 and verse 14 once again: *"So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept."*¹⁰ *And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people."* And verse 14: *"¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her."*

Notice that they were both emotionally involved in their commitment, but Orpah turned back to Moab and the gods of Moab. Why? Because Orpah did not have true faith. Orpah had emotions -- but no **true** faith in the one true God of Israel.

Is your commitment more than emotions? There are many people who not only say they are Christians, and they are even emotional about it. They cry during sermons, they raise their hands in prayer, they sing hymns and songs with lots of enthusiasm -- but there is no true faith in Christ as their personal Savior. Is your commitment more than emotions?