

Naomi and Ruth Return to the Land of Israel

Ruth 1:19-22

Ruth 1:19-22 - *“Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?”²⁰ But she said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, 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?”²² So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.”*

Background Notes

Verse 4 tells us that at least 10 years had gone by since Naomi went to Moab with her husband Elimelech and her two sons Mahlon and Chilion. Now Naomi was returning to Israel, a widow with no sons. Elimelech had died unexpectedly, and so had her two sons. Maybe all three deaths were a sign of God’s discipline for leaving the Promised Land, going to live in a pagan land and intermarrying with the Moabites, who worshiped pagan gods. Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 13 tell us that God considered intermarrying with Moabites to be a sin that required discipline.

In any case, Naomi finally decided to return home to Bethlehem. Naomi had heard that the years of famine were over and once again there was food in Israel. One of her widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah, decided to remain in Moab. In a great demonstration of faith, Ruth, her other daughter-in-law, returned with Naomi to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the people of the town were excited to see them. The women of the city said, “Is this Naomi?” This was probably more of a statement of surprise and shock rather than joy – “Can this be the same Naomi who used to live here?” Time and sad experiences had taken their toll on Naomi.

In verse 20 Naomi responded, *“Do not call me Naomi (or pleasant, the meaning of her name); call me Mara (or bitter), for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.”* Naomi certainly did not have the joy of the Lord. Although she was not necessarily angry and bitter towards God, she evidently realized that her bitter experience was discipline from the Lord. Notice what she said in verse 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?”*

Notice, by the way, that the people who stayed in Bethlehem, who did not move away during the time of famine, did not starve to death during the famine. They fared much better than Elimelech and his family, who left the land during the time of famine.

Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. This would be in the springtime, in April or May. Verse 22 prepares us for the happy events that will follow in the rest of the book, where we will see God continuing to work out his sovereign plans for the lineage of Christ.

Doctrinal Points

1. Naomi's life is a picture of the history of Israel.

Throughout the Old Testament we have many spiritual pictures that God has included in his Word to illustrate the teaching of Scripture. In the book of Ruth we have several spiritual pictures from the characters in the book. The outstanding picture, of course, is Boaz, the "kinsman redeemer." We will see that Boaz is a wonderful picture, or "type," of Christ, our Kinsman Redeemer. The Lord Jesus Christ is our Kinsman – He is related to us in that he became Man -- and He is our Redeemer.

In Naomi we have a picture of God's dealings with the nation of Israel. Naomi's life is a picture of the history of Israel. In fact, in the beginning of the story Naomi and Elimelech together are a picture of Israel. Elimelech's name means "My God is King." At the beginning of Israel's history God was her King, but just as Elimelech did not live up to his name, so Israel did not continue to make God her King. She turned away from the Lord and his laws.

Just as Elimelech left God's land of promise and went to live in a foreign land with its pagan gods, so Israel turned away from the living God to worship foreign idols. As God brought discipline to Naomi though the hard times she suffered, so God has had to discipline the Jewish people. They have suffered greatly -- and they will continue to suffer hard times until they return to the Lord, and until the Lord returns.

The nation of Israel has been set aside – temporarily -- from the place of privilege and blessing. All of this is pictured in Naomi's statements of verse 20 and 21: *"But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, 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?"* Because of God's discipline and the hard times, she suffered in the foreign land, the widow Naomi returned to Israel and to the God of Israel. Because of the hard times, Naomi recognized and acknowledged that God rightly afflicted her. We've seen that in the verses we've read.

This brings us to the good news about Israel's history! In the same way, because of the hard times the Jewish people have suffered over the years, and the terrible Tribulation period that is yet to come, the nation of Israel, like a widow in need, will return to the Lord. They will not only return to the Land, as we see them doing even now, but they will return to the Lord. Read Romans 11 in this connection. They will acknowledge the Messiah that they have rejected all these years, and they will acknowledge that they have been rightly afflicted and disciplined by God. Then there will come a time of great blessing for Israel, just as there was a great time of blessing for Naomi after she returned to the Lord. The Hebrew name "Bethlehem" means "house of bread," and Israel will once again be living in the "house of bread," spiritually speaking.

The blessing that came to Naomi after she returned to Bethlehem came to her because of Boaz, who is a picture of Christ in this spiritual picture. In the same way, the future blessing that will come to Israel is only because of Jesus Christ. Israel will one day recognize him as their true Messiah.

Do you see the spiritual picture? Naomi's life is a picture of the history of Israel.

2. Ruth's commitment is a picture of the faith of the Church.

Ruth's commitment is a picture of the faith of the Church. We've already discussed Ruth's great demonstration of faith. Ruth is not only a model of faith for us to follow, but her commitment is a picture of the faith of the Church. Ruth was not a Jew. Ruth was a Gentile – she was outside the covenants and promises that God made to Israel. But in verse 6 Ruth said to Naomi, *“Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.”*

In the same way, the faith of the Church, which is primarily composed of Gentile believers, is placed in the God of Israel -- the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Naomi, the God of the Bible! As Ruth turned her back on the gods of her native land and by faith turned to the true God, so the members of the true Church around the world have turned from all “foreign gods” to place their faith in the one true God. As Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, *“...you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...”*

And of course Ruth became the bride of Boaz, the kinsman redeemer. We've already mentioned that Boaz is a wonderful picture of Christ, our Redeemer. What a beautiful picture of the Church, the bride of Christ, we see in Ruth, the bride of Boaz. Ruth's commitment is a picture of the faith of the church.

Practical applications

1. Remember -- the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence!

The grass is not greener on the other side of the fence! I'm sure you've often heard that expression stated in the opposite way -- “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” We use that expression in reference to our jobs and our life situations. We're never satisfied. We're always looking for “greener grass.” The next job (or someone else's job) always looks like greener grass. Another house is always a much better place – it's the greener grass on the other side of the fence.

This expression comes from the world of sheep. Sheep tend to stray from their pasture to get what they think is better grass or greener grass on the other side of the fence. I remember seeing a number of dead sheep along the road when we were driving through the countryside of Scotland. How did that happen? These were sheep that thought they saw greener grass on the other side of the fence, so they strayed out of their pasture and were struck by cars.

Well, our practical application certainly applies in the spiritual realm. The grass is not greener on the other side of the fence! As Elimelech and Naomi found out, the greener hills of Moab were not really greener – certainly not, in the spiritual sense. In the same way, many Christians have learned the hard way that the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence, spiritual speaking. The grass of this world may look greener, and it may actually be greener in the sense of more money and other material things and temporary “pleasures” -- but it is not greener in the spiritual sense.

Recently one of my former Bible College students told me that he had tried the grass on the other side of the fence. He said it tasted great for a while – but he soon found out that it wasn’t really greener at all. The sad point of his story is that he has lost out eternally on those years that he could have spent following and serving the Lord. Fortunately, he has returned to the Lord, but he regrets those wasted years on the other side of the fence. Remember -- the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence!

2. Remember -- it’s not yet too late to return.

Right now you may be “living in Moab,” spiritually speaking. You’re not living in God’s will. You know you’re not doing what God wants you to do with your life, and you know you’re not where God wants you to be in your life. Listen -- it’s not too late to return!

I would like to say that it’s never too late to return, but I can’t. The time will come when it will be too late, because you have only a certain amount of life to live. What are you doing with your life? Are you living in Moab – or are you where the Lord wants you?

A number of years ago a Christian man told me that he planned on “getting his act together” with the Lord -- in a few years! When he related this to me, he was already in his forties. To my knowledge, he is still living in the land of Moab, spiritually speaking.

Where are you? Remember -- it’s not yet too late to return!