Lesson: Ruth 1:6-11, 14-18; Time of Action: 1130 and 1120 B.C.; Place of Action: Moab

Golden Text: “And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

I. INTRODUCTION. The book of Ruth offers a glimpse of godly living from the era when public life was becoming more and more godless. This week’s lesson focuses on the loyalty and covenant relationship between Naomi and the young Moabitess Ruth, whose name has become the name of this book of the Bible.

II. LESSON BACKGROUND. The events in the book of Ruth occurred “in the days when the judges ruled” (see Ruth 1:1). The period of the judges was between about 1400 and 1100 B.C. Politically, these were chaotic days when Israel had no central government and no kings. Spiritually, there was frequent apostasy, and God chastened His people through foreign invasions. During those times, Israel experienced a cycle of actions. First, Israel would sin; second they would
suffer for their sins by serving foreign kings (see Judges 3:12-14); third, they could cry out to God, and fourth, God would deliver them via a judge; and fifth, God would give them rest in the land from their enemies (see Judges 3:7-11, 12-30). This cycle continued throughout the period of the judges who were men and women (see Judges 4:5-15) whom God raised up to represent Him and deliver His people from their enemies before they had kings. Sometime during this period of the judges, Elimelech (meaning God is King), his wife Naomi (which means pleasant), and their two sons Mahlon (meaning sickly) and Chilion (which means pining), were living in Bethlehem in Judah. There was a famine in Judah, so it’s ironic that Bethlehem means “house of bread.” To escape the famine, Elimelech and his family moved to Moab (see Ruth 1:1-2), a land of idol worshipers. By doing this they left the land God said that He would bless. Of course, famine did not seem like a blessing; it was probably punishment for Israel’s sin. But leaving a place in an attempt to outguess God, so to speak, does not bring relief. The death of Elimelech in Moab is evidence of that (see Ruth 1:3). His sons continued their father’s error. Instead of returning to Bethlehem, they married Moabite women. It is true that the Law didn’t specifically forbid marriage to Moabite women (see Deuteronomy 23:3), but that way of thinking ignores the clear intent of the Law’s prohibition against intermarriage for His people. However, it seems clear that while marrying Moabite women technically was not against the letter of the law, it certainly was against the spirit of the law. God’s judgment in this matter was again made plain when both sons died within ten years (see Ruth 1:4-5), and Naomi was left without a husband or sons. All she had were her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah.
This is where our lesson begins.

III. NAOMI’S FIRST PLEA TO HER DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW (Ruth 1:6-10)

A. Naomi decides to return to Judah (Ruth 1:6-7).

1. (vs. 6). Our first verse says “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 how that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread.” In the midst of all her sorrows, at least one piece of good news reached Naomi: “for she (Naomi) had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread.” The famine in Judah had ended, and the writer credited this to a divine visitation by “the Lord.” The word “visited” is an Old Testament expression that can imply punishment (see Exodus 32:34) or blessing (see Exodus 4:30-31). Here, God “visited” His people with renewed rain, crops, and food. Bethlehem could again live up to its name “house of bread.” Therefore, Naomi “arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab.” Hearing that the famine was over in Judah, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem and her two daughters-in-law accompanied her. She had relatives in Bethlehem and she could probably find financial support among them. Besides, that was her home and the conditions that had led her to Moab no longer existed. The land of Moab held no further attraction for her,
and she probably wanted to forget it. **Note:** Orpah and Ruth started on this journey with Naomi. Apparently, they intended to leave their homeland and go with Naomi. This in itself is remarkable, because they had as little reason to leave as Naomi had to stay. Besides, what could two young Moabite widows hope to gain by settling in a strange land? Their hope for security was in Moab not Judah. Their willingness to leave speaks well of their dedication and loyalty. It also speaks well of Naomi whose character and godly virtues had attracted such loyalty. Orpah and Ruth’s willingness to break ties with their homeland and enter a foreign culture also gives evidence of a close bond of loyalty. They apparently loved Naomi and refused to let her face the future alone. The lessons she had taught them by precept and example in those few years must have been remarkable. Naomi should remind us that older persons can play an invaluable role in shaping the worth of the next generation.

2. (vs. 7). This verse says “Wherefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters in law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.” Having made up her mind to return to Judah, Naomi, along with Orpah and Ruth “her two daughters in law” left Moab, “the place where she was.” These three women united by a common grief, the death of their husbands, “went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.” The willingness of Naomi’s “daughters-in-law” to break ties with their homeland and go to an alien culture also gives evidence of a close bond of
loyalty. Their affection for Naomi speaks well of their character. They would be facing an uncertain future, but they were determined to face it together.

**B. Naomi’s instructions to her daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:8-9).**

1. (vs. 8). This verse says, “And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother’s house: the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.” As they headed out of Moab, “Naomi” recognized the difficulties Orpah and Ruth would face in Israel. They were young Moabite women with hopes of remarrying and raising families. There was no other legitimate role for women in ancient Near Eastern society. But their prospects of finding husbands in Bethlehem were slim because of cultural barriers. So “Naomi” released them from any obligation to her and “said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother’s house.” Since “Naomi” told them to return to their “mother’s house,” one would think that in this patriarchal society she should have commanded them to “return” to their father’s “house.” It may be that she was referring to the women’s quarters in their respective homes, or she may have been contrasting their mothers with herself. As she asked them to “return” home, “Naomi” invoked the first of two blessing upon them. It is significant that after at least ten years in Moab, she was still firm in her faith in Yahweh. It was His blessing that she pronounced on them, not that of the Moabite god Chemosh. For Naomi, there was only one God and He was sovereign in every nation. First,
she asked “the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.” She wanted God to bless them by dealing with them just as they had “dealt with the dead,” referring to their husbands, and how they treated them when they were alive, as well as how they treated “Naomi.” Ruth and Orpah obviously had been good wives to “Naomi’s sons judging from the kindness she felt toward them. In addition, in using the expression “deal kindly” or “show kindness,” she used the Hebrew word “hesed” which is often translated “lovingkindness” and refers to the loyal love established by a covenant. It is often used to describe God’s covenant dealings with Israel, and that His love for them is so great that He will never break that relationship. Here “Naomi” prayed that God would extend His covenant love to foreigners, Ruth and Orpah, as well. She had seen this same kindness in them, which they had displayed to their husbands and her. In essence, “Naomi” felt that she and her “daughters-in-law” had joined in a mother daughter covenant of love.

2. (vs. 9). In this verse, Naomi invoked the second blessing upon Orpah and Ruth. She said, “The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.” The word “rest” here refers to the security a woman had through marriage. So, Naomi’s second blessing was that these women would find security and a restful life “in the house of her (their) husband” meaning any future “husbands.” In their case, it meant being released from the worries and troubles being a widow would bring. Marriage was a woman’s greatest security and Naomi
wanted that for her daughters-in-law. She knew the chances of them finding husbands in Israel were quite small. Their Moabite culture would provide greater opportunities for remarriage. So “she kissed them” and in a final farewell they all “lifted up their voice, and wept” together indicating very loud crying or wailing. Under normal circumstances, this would appear to be the end of the story, but God had much more in mind.

C. Ruth and Orpah’s reply to Naomi (Ruth 1:10). This verse says “And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people.” Both women assured Naomi that they wanted to “return” to her homeland with her. They were willing to leave behind everything that was familiar to them to accompany Naomi to Judah and stay with her and her “people,” the Jews.

IV. NAOMI’S SECOND PLEA TO HER DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW (Ruth 1:11, 14)

A. Naomi speaks out of desperation (see Ruth 1:11). This verse says “And Naomi said, Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?” Again “Naomi” told the two women to turn back and stay in their own land with their own families. She indicated her deep affection for them by calling them “my daughters.” They were truly family members in her mind, and no doubt it was painful for her to suggest that they
return home. “Naomi” was reminded of the law of levirate marriages which said, “If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband’s brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband’s brother unto her” (see Deuteronomy 25:5). So, “Naomi” went on to ask them a rhetorical question: “are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?” In other words, she was asking, “Do I still have sons in my womb that may become your husbands someday?” Of course that could never happen. Naomi’s point was that she had no other sons, nor would she ever have any who they would be willing to wait for to marry them. Note: Verses 12-13 are not part of our printed text, but it will be helpful to summarize what they contain. In keeping with her theme that there would be no other sons for them to marry, Naomi explained that she was too old to have another husband and she was past childbearing anyway (see verse 12). And in verse 13 she continued to ask them that even if she could have hoped for a husband and the ability to have children, would Ruth and Orpah want to wait for them to grow up to marriageable age? Naomi answered her own question saying “No, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me” (see verse 13). Her argument made good sense. Because of her age, Naomi most likely would never marry again, but her daughters-in-law were young enough to find husbands in Moab. But the phrase “the hand of the LORD is gone out against me” (see verse 13) indicates that Naomi had developed a bitter spirit. She grieved for her
daughters-in-law and also for herself. She understood that the two women were being adversely affected by what the Lord had allowed to happen in her life. Later, upon arriving in Bethlehem, she asked the women there who greeted her not to call her “Naomi” anymore for that name meant “pleasant.” She said they should call her “Mara” meaning “bitter” because the Lord had dealt bitterly with her (see Ruth 1:20). Our lesson continues with verse 14.

B. Orpah returns to Moab (Ruth 1:14). After hearing Naomi’s response, “they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her.” Sensing this was the final good-bye, the three women “lifted up their voice, and wept again.” The weeping described here and in verse 9, refers to the typical loud wailing that was common in that culture. Here it describes the deep sorrow of imminent parting. But the two women had different reactions. Orpah’s action indicated that she was returning to her home, for all that is said about her is that “Orpah kissed her mother in law.” But “Ruth clave” or clung to Naomi, indicating that she was going to stay with her, sticking to Naomi like glue. It appears that “Orpah” wanted to be a wife again, but “Ruth” wanted to be a daughter. Her action of cleaving to Naomi was a declaration of her determination to continue to go on with her. The Hebrew term “clave” is a form of the word “cleave” which describes the closest possible loyalty and affection. It is the word used to describe the ideal covenantal relationship between husband and wife (see Genesis 2:24). Note: This was a very significant choice for “Ruth.” When
“Orpah” left Naomi, she also left her connection with the people of Israel and their God. When “Ruth” chose to stay with Naomi, she not only became a part of the children of Israel, she also came into the family line of the Messiah, although that would not officially happen for a while. The far-reaching effects of “Ruth’s” decision become evident as the rest of the book unfolds. The idea of finding a husband will also unfold and it has huge ramifications.

V. NAOMI’S FINAL PLEA TO RUTH (Ruth 1:15-18)

A. A mother’s counsel (Ruth 1:15). This verse says “And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law.” Naomi continued to try to persuade Ruth to return to her home in Moab. She said to Ruth, “thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods.” Orpah, Ruth’s “sister-in-law” had made the choice to return to “her people, and unto her gods.” Naomi then encouraged Ruth to do the same thing by saying “return thou after thy sister in law.” In other words, Naomi was trying to convince Ruth to go back to Moab with Orpah.

Note: I’m not sure if it is justified or not, but sometimes Naomi is criticized for her actions; she advised her daughters-in-law to return to pagan gods and worship. This along with the bitterness that had developed in Naomi’s heart could lead us to believe that while she knew God and had a measure of trust in
Him, she was still somewhat immature in her understanding. Unfortunately, this is also true of many believers today. It’s sad that there are some Christians who have known the Lord for many years but still remain quite immature in their spiritual understanding (see I Corinthians 3:1-2). But the answer is simple. We must spend much more time in the Word and prayer and developing a sensitivity to the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit (see I Kings 19:11-12). However, unfortunately for some believers this does not happen until they go through painful experiences that tenderize their hearts.

B. A daughter’s resolution (Ruth 1:16-17).

1. (vs. 16). This verse says “And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.” By now, “Ruth” had heard three pleas from her mother-in-law to return home to Moab (see Ruth 1:8, 11-12, 15). But now she would no longer hear it. Her mind could not be changed. In one of the most beautiful expressions of commitment in the entire world’s literature, “Ruth” chose life with Naomi over her own family, over her own national identity, and over her religious idolatry. She said to Naomi “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee.” The word “intreat” means “to urge” or “to force.” “Ruth” begged Naomi not to urge or force her to stop “following after thee.” For “Ruth,” this phrase has more meaning
than just “following” or going to Judah with Naomi. What she really meant by “following after thee” is revealed in the next part of this verse when she continued to say “for whither thou goest, I will go.” This was a promise to accompany Naomi on her homeward journey wherever that might lead. “Ruth” was willing to face the same dangers, experience the same needs, and suffer the same fatigue as Naomi would on their journey. Then “Ruth” said “and where thou lodgest, I will lodge.” She was willing to live wherever Naomi decided to make her home. She also said “thy people shall be my people.” She would give up her Moabite culture and adopt the culture in Israel, making a clean break with the heritage of her past. In essence, she would live as a Jew. “Ruth” realized that identifying with Israel also meant breaking with the idolatrous religious views of the Moabites. So finally she said “and thy God (will be) my God.” Evidently, “Ruth” had seen a spiritual dimension in the lives of Naomi and her family that she wanted for herself. Either she already had come to trust the Lord or she was at that moment declaring her trust in Him. Her knowledge of the true God, Yahweh or Jehovah, may have been elementary, but she declared lifelong allegiance to Him. **Note:** Surprisingly, while Naomi may have possessed more knowledge of the Lord, “Ruth” demonstrated greater faith. Her words in this verse express faith even if that faith was not fully formed at this point. “Ruth” couldn’t know what lay ahead of her, but she knew enough at this point that she was ready to abandon her homeland and its religion to follow Naomi and Naomi’s God. But why did she? Obviously, as we mentioned earlier, there must have been something in
Naomi’s character that “Ruth” admired and found attractive. Does anybody see God in you as clearly as “Ruth” saw God in her mother-in-law? But maybe there’s a deeper explanation. God apparently did a work in Ruth’s heart so deep and complete that she made a conscientious choice to change her identity and loyalty. In New Testament terms we would call this Ruth’s conversion experience. Through her contact with Naomi and her family, she was no longer the person she once was. True biblical commitment takes place when God so works in a heart that the person can see no other option than to follow hard after Him no matter what (see Galatians 2:20; Philippians 3:11-15).

2. (vs. 17). Ruth continued to declare her allegiance to follow after Naomi as she said, “Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.” Ruth was so intent on keeping her word that she was willing to “die” and “be buried” in the same place as Naomi. She wouldn’t even ask for her body to be returned to Moab for burial. Instead, she would be so closely identified with Naomi and her people that she would be “buried” near her. Ruth was not satisfied with just promising these things, she sealed her vow with an oath saying “the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.” What Ruth was doing was invoking judgment from God if she ever broke the promise she was making at that time. When she said “the LORD do so to me” the word “so” may have been accompanied by some kind of gesture to indicate what kind of judgment she expected, or it may have left the
nature of God’s punishment to the imagination of the one being spoken to; in this case, Naomi. Ruth didn’t swear by any of her native gods, but by the name of the God of Israel. She used His covenant name, “Yahweh,” translated here as “the Lord,” again indicating her personal commitment to Him. She recognized that Jehovah is more than a mere tribal deity of Israel, for she expected Him to pursue and punish her wherever she might be if she should break her promise to Naomi. This was final proof that Ruth was once and for all forsaking her pagan ways and declaring complete allegiance to Naomi and her God. This was Ruth’s conversion to Jehovah, the God of Israel.

C. Ruth’s acceptance of her daughter’s decision (Ruth 1:18). Our final verse says “When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.” Naomi had been sincere when she advised Ruth to do what she believed was in her daughter-in-law’s best interests—return home. She was not trying to test Ruth’s true feelings. But now, this verse tells us that Naomi realized that Ruth had no intentions of going back home. She was fully determined to accompany Naomi to Judah. The words, “she was stedfastly minded” means that Ruth “was determined” that nothing was going to stop her from what she wanted to do. When Naomi recognized how deep Ruth’s conviction to go with her was, she “left speaking unto her.” In other words, Naomi ended all attempts to convince Ruth to change her mind and return to her homeland. There was nothing more to say about the matter after hearing Ruth’s solemn oath; so Naomi gave in, and the two of them went on their way to Bethlehem (see Ruth 1:19).
VI. Conclusion. In our day of loose family ties and light promises, we have to be impressed with the display of commitment in this week’s lesson. Loyalty to elderly family members is always admirable, and it is even more admirable when it crosses cultural lines and national barriers. This kind of devotion finds its highest expression among those who like Ruth, first commit themselves in faith to the one true God, and then let their faith express itself in practical goodness. There is much to learn from both Ruth and Naomi. We have to marvel at the loyalty of Ruth that led her to put another’s interests above her own and even to give up her cultural identity. But we also must admire the consistent godliness of Naomi that inspired such loyalty and drew Ruth to Israel’s God. These are traits we ourselves sorely need as we confront a godless, self-centered, and individualistic society.

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