Naomi And Ruth

Ruth 1:1-22

Key Verse: 1:16 “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.”

The book of Ruth is known, written by Samuel around 1,000 BC during the era of the monarchy. It is a short love story between Boaz and Ruth. But it is more than just a love story between the two because it reveals God’s divine kindness and plan for the fallen men. Ruth is a gentile woman, but her name is written in the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew’s gospel (Mt 1:5) She is the great- grandmother of King David. The theme of this book is kindness (redemption). Let’s see how such a gentile woman Ruth became the ancestor of King David and how God’s kindness was revealed in Ruth’s life.

First, Naomi’s sorrowful family story (1-5) Verses 1-5 describes the family background of Naomi. Look at verses 1-2. “***In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man’s name was Elimelek, his wife’s name was 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.***” The day when the judges ruled Israel’s was around 350-400 years long. The day of the judges is described well in one sentence: In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit. (Judg 21:25) When God established a covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, he wanted them to become a godly people whose God is their Lord and king. (Ex 19:5,6) But they hated to receive God as their king. They wanted to do whatever they wanted to do. They lived as they thought best. This indicates the spiritual anarchy due to the absence of God. Today we believe Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. When we confess that Jesus is Lord, we admit his lordship over our lives and we become his people. We deny ourselves to obey his words. But, when we do not accept his lordship over our lives, we live as we think best. We push out Christ away from our heart so that we may become our own king. In the book of Romans Paul warns this error, “*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*” (Ro 1:21)

Elimelek also lived as he thought best. So, he moved to the land of Moab to avoid the famine. He knew that it was against God’s law. By Moses’ law God forbade the Israelites to associate with the Moabites. The Moabites were the descendants of Moab who was born between Lot and his first daughter. (Ge 19:37) Deuteronomy 23:3 says that no Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, not even in the tenth generation. This is because the Moabites worshiped idols and they seduced the Israelites to practice idolatry and sexual immorality. (Nu 25:1) Despite the warning against the Moabites, Elimelek, a descendant of Ephraim, moved to the land of Moab. What was the result of his decision? Look at verses 3-5. ***“Now Elimelek, Naomi’s husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.”***  What a tragedy! What a sorrowful story of Naomi! The loss of her husband was more than she could bear in the foreign country, but she lost even her two sons. Before we talk about the cause of her tragedy, we have to acknowledge that sudden tragedy may come to everybody, even to the people of God. Elimelek was a people of God, a descendant of Ephrathite, but his life in the land of Moab took everything from his family. Naomi lost her husband and two sons in ten years’ life in Moab. Naomi didn’t expect this tragedy. But the things happened to her. As the people of God, we wish tragedy free. But reality does not go as we expected. Sudden and unexpected tragedy continue in our life. There is no difference between the believers and the unbelievers in the reality of tragedy. Then, what makes us different from the unbelievers in the time of tragedy? What benefits do we receive from God as his people? Let’s learn from Naomi how she lived differently from the unbelievers and how she responded to her tragic life.

Second, Ruth’s choice (6-18) Naomi was a widow who lost her husband and two sons. When she heard that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she decided to return to Judah. This means that the famine was over in the land of Judah. Before she moved to Judah, she gave a choice (an option) to her two daughters-in-law. In verses 8-9 Naomi said to them, “***Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.***” (8-9) Naomi was mindful of her two daughters-in-law because they were still young enough to remarry and start new life with new husbands. Indeed, Naomi needed a helper and an aid as a poor widow. But she was not selfish. She thought about the future of her daughters-in-law more than herself. So, she gave the first choice to them. At first, both refused to leave her. (10) Both said that they would follow Naomi to the end. But Naomi insisted them to go back to their mother’s house for new life. Look at verse 14. “***At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her***.” When Naomi saw Orpah leaving, she told Ruth, “***Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her***.” (15) This was Naomi’s third suggestion for Ruth’s returning home.

What was Ruth’s response? Look at verses 16-17. “***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. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.***” Ruth determined to follow Naomi to the point of her death. She said that only death could separate them. Realistically speaking, following Naomi seemed to be a foolish choice. Naomi was a poor widow. There was no guarantee for Ruth to find a new husband and start new life in the land of Judah. It could be better for Ruth to return to her mother’s home as Orpah did. Then, why did Ruth determine to follow Naomi? What motivated Ruth to make such a decision? We find an answer through her reply. Ruth wanted to be the people of God of Naomi. She wanted to serve the God of Naomi. Not to mention that Ruth had learned the God of Israel through Naomi. Ruth heard about the story of God’s creation and his divine power and nature through Naomi. Ruth had a personal faith in the God of Israel. Ruth was not the first gentile woman who believed the God of Israel. There was Rahab, a prostitute in the city of Jericho, who had believed the God of Israel. In the book of Joshua, before the two spies of Israel, Rahab said, “*We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og…When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below*.” (Jos 2:10-11) Because of Rahab’s confession of faith, the two Israelite spies went back with great courage and faith. Both Rahab and Ruth were the gentile women, but they had faith in the God of Israel. Here, we learn that regardless of the difference of race, culture, and nationality God values those who have faith in him. Both Rahab and Ruth were the gentile women, but they pleased God with their personal faith. Both became the people of God of Israel. In the past we were not a people of God. But now we are his people, belong to God, through faith in Jesus Christ. Praise God!

There is another woman who pleased God with her faith before Rahab and Ruth appeared. She was Tamar. Humanly speaking Tamar was an immoral woman who had slept with her father-in-law Judah. But her action was credited as righteous because she did it by faith in order to continue her husband’s line. Tamar wanted to be faithful to her dead husband and to continue his family line despite blame from others. Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, all of three were recorded in the book of the genealogy of Christ Jesus. Their faithfulness, loyalty, and devotion to God was highly valued and praised. When we live by faith, our faith is credited as righteous before God. It reminds us of the word of God, “*The righteous will live by faith*.” (Ro 1:17) Look at verse 18. “***When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her***.” Naomi was a prayerful and mindful mother. She respected Ruth’s choice which came from her personal faith in God. Here we learn the importance of a spiritual mentor in the time of crisis. Do you have any spiritual mentor who you share your problem and deep thoughts? If you have one, you are blessed. There have been spiritual mentors behind those who became great servants of God. There was a spiritual mentor Rebekah behind Jacob. There was Mordecai behind Esther. There was Elizabeth behind the Virgin Mary. Naomi was the great spiritual mentor and shepherd for Ruth. I pray that God may raise many spiritual mentors and Bible teachers from among young people in this country.

Third, Naomi’s personal faith (19-22) Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem. When they arrived, the whole town of Bethlehem was stirred because of them. The women exclaimed saying, “***Can this be Naomi***?” (19) When Naomi left for the land of Moab 10 years ago, she was a wealthy and good-looking woman with a handsome husband with two children. But now she came back home poor and single with her only gentile daughter-in-law. She told them, “***Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter***.” (20) The name ‘Naomi’ means ‘pleasant’. But she is not pleasant anymore. She is bitter now. The name Mara means’ bitter. This name reminds us of the place Marah, where the Israelites drank bitter water in the desert. (Ex 15:23) Naomi continued in verse 21. “***I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.***” Naomi said that her miserable life was not an accident or by chance, but a misfortune which came from God. It sounds like her complaining against God, but it shows her personal faith in God’s divine sovereignty over her life. She believed that all things came from God whether it was a blessing or suffering. Her faith reminds us of Job’s confession right after he had lost all things. Job was a great man. He had seven sons and three daughters. He was very wealthy. Above all he feared God. One day he lost all these things including his 10 children. Job 1:20-21 says that Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said, “*Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.*” In the middle of a great tragedy, Job accepted the sovereignty of God over his life. Job said that all things came from God and that God has right to take them away. Job lost everything, but didn’t lose God. As we know, Job kept his faith in God’s sovereignty over his life to the end despite his friends’ accusation. What happened next to Job? Who was the final winner? Later God restored all things for Job and blessed him more than before he had been tested.

Naomi also believed God’s sovereignty over her life. She believed that her misery came from the LORD, but she didn’t blame God. She admitted that her disobedience caused the tragedy. As she believed that her misfortune came from God, so she also believed that the restoration of her fortune will come from God. It is the LORD who took away and it is the LORD who will restore. Naomi’s personal faith in God’s sovereignty over her life amazes us. Some of us may be in the time of affliction and the time of misery. But we must believe that someday our misfortune will be gone and our fortune will be restored. It is the LORD who afflicts us and it is the LORD who will heal us. Hosea 6:1-2 says, “*Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us. He has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.*” In these words of Hosea, we find the good news of Jesus Christ. After two day’s suffering, on the third day he will restore us.

In the Garden of Eden men sinned against God and they lost paradise. This world was cursed because of our sins, and men had to pay the price with sickness and death. In this cursed world God promised to send the Savior from a descendant of a woman. (Ge 3:15) God punished the sinful men, still he covered their nakedness. Finally, God sent Jesus Christ to save us and restore his blessing upon the fallen men. In Jesus we have hope. In Jesus we have healing. In Jesus we have a restoration of our fortune. Therefore, there is no despair or failure in Jesus Christ because God always works for good for those who trust in him and love him. God wants us to believe his divine sovereignty over our lives in the time of misfortune and in the time of misery. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us. Amen!

Today Naomi and Ruth’s faith were praised. It was like two beautiful blossoming flowers in the desert of drought. Their faith shines brighter because their situation was terrible. The great thing was that they found a solution in their God, not in their human condition or idea. God blessed their faith, loyalty, and faithfulness. There is no failure or despair in those who trust in God. Amen!