

SERIES: BOOK OF RUTH
“The Impact of a Discouraged Believer“
Ruth 1:6-15

I vividly remember the first [and many subsequent times] time I “left” home for college. My best friend pulled up in his ’57 Chevy. We loaded my major earthly possessions into the car next to his, turned, kissed and said the final good-byes to my folks, got into the car, and we left. Neither one of us spoke for 100 miles. It took that long to get the lumps out of our throats. The emotions about leaving home were incredibly strong. I have felt those same strong emotions as each of our kids left home.

I sense that same kind of emotion and more in our portion of the book of Ruth this morning. Turn with me to Ruth 1:6-15. The flow of the first part of the chapter in verses 1-2 *explain* a **famine** that drove the family from Israel, SE to Moab; verses 3-5 *expose* the **funerals** and marriages that happened in this family; and then verses 6-15 *express* the **farewells** experienced by this family. It is also in this farewell section that the author turns from narrative to dialogue, which really brings us into the pathos of these people. READ IT.

I will confess that I have struggled with finding the connection between this portion of the Word of God and our lives. I finally settled on two points of connection: 1) I see in this first chapter an illustration of how our God gets kicked out of our culture. Too many of us neglect, ignore, and devalue His involvement in our lives. 2) I see the impact of a discouraged believer. I want to be as charitable as possible to the three women in this segment of the Scripture, but I still want to discern the spiritual value for us as well. Discouraged believers do influence and impact those around them.

I laughed at the way Dr. J. Vernon McGee describes this text: *The parting of these three is a typically feminine scene, marked by much weeping. There was much waving of damp handkerchiefs; and passionate embraces [and more weeping] made the scene exceedingly touching....Naomi gave [her daughters-in-law] a sensible talk from the woman’s viewpoint..... This was good advice from an elder woman to younger women. She revealed to them how preposterous it would be for them to follow her, and at the same time, expect to have a home and children. This bit of advice for the young women occasioned more weeping, and the thought of parting forever produced a fresh flood of tears. This scene depicts the real affection of love that bound these three women together. It is noticeable and worthy of favorable comment.*¹

So we have three weeping women to watch this morning. If you listen, you can probably hear the sniffles, sobs, and shedding of tears emanating from the text. I’ll highlight some of the things they say in between the sobs and silences.

One author described the three with these ideas:	Another (me) with these ideas:
Naomi = was making up for past mistakes;	N = A discouraged believer
Orpha = was giving up on her relationships;	O = An almost believer
Ruth = was standing up for a new life of faith. ²	R = A staunch, new believer.

First, we hear from Naomi. I see five things about her.

¹ McGee, J. Vernon, *The Romance of Redemption*. Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Books, pp. 48-49.

² Wiersbe, Warren, *Be Committed*. Loc.sit. in the Logos Electronic version.

NAOMI

1. vs 6-7 Naomi is a departing traveler. These two verses are the action verses. Notice the verbs. All the main verbs are feminine singular: “she arose,” “she returned,” “she heard,” “she went out.”³

Dr. Samuel Ridout in his great book on Ruth draws an application from Naomi to us: A more hopeless condition than that of Naomi could scarce be imagined—bereft of husband and sons, in the land of a stranger and an enemy. And yet how true it is that the darkest hour is that which just precedes the dawn....In the coming day, it will be “in the cloudy and dark day” that the Lord’s wandering sheep will be sought out and gathered. In like manner, each soul is recovered by divine grace when all seems darkest, when the evil is brought out into the light.

Stay with v6 for a moment. It is a great thought generating verse. Notice, it speaks of:

A. **Relationships**, (daughters-in-law). There are at least two levels of relationship here. The **first** is **family**. This three-some is a model for mother/daughter-in-law relationships. There can be no bad mother-in-law/daughter-in-law jokes based on these relationships. I am also impressed that the two sisters-in-law got along so well. They were willing and able to have a nicely blended, bonded family. The **second** is **faiths**. Here was a family of different faiths. Naomi came from Israel with faith in Yahweh. Orpha and Ruth came from Moab where they had many gods, with the lead-god being Chemosh. This situation is glossed by our author, partly because it is not important to the theme, and yet it provides some tension to the story. But when we look at the people, they are models of a loving, caring, and kindly relationship between people of different faiths. Just because we believe differently doesn’t mean we have to hate each other. After all, we are all humans and share the same planet. These three loved each other.

B. **Return**. Ten times in this short book the word *return/ed* is used. The basic ideas of *return* is *to go back home; to get back to a former place; to restore to a previous state or condition*⁴ This is the theme of the book of Ruth. Naomi returns “home” after being gone many years; she returns from a place she was not supposed to be and from a people she was not supposed to be with; she returns to her former faith and closeness with her God. She has been gone a long time. It is time for her to return to her “roots”, physically, geographically, and spiritually. She has been living in Moab like an unbeliever too long. *How about you? Been away from a close relationship with the LORD too long? Is it time you return?*

Matthew Henry contributes this thought: *Though there be a reason for our being in bad places, yet, when the reason ceases, we must by no means continue in them. Forced absence from God’s ordinances, and forced presence with wicked people, are great afflictions; but when the force ceases, and such a situation is continued of choice, then it becomes a great sin*⁵

C. **Rekindled**. Naomi has a rekindled interest in the things of the Lord (had heard the LORD visited His people). It is too bad when we are only in the position of hearing about the

³Block, Daniel Isaac: *Judges, Ruth*. electronic ed. Nashville : Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1999 (Logos Library System; The New American Commentary 6)

⁴ Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th Ed.

⁵Henry, Matthew: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody : Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, S. Ru 1:6

blessing of the LORD, instead of being the recipients of the blessing. Being in the far country she heard that the empty house of bread and been replenished. Even eyes of little faith undoubtedly recognized in this gift of food the grace of God.⁶

Moab had now become a melancholy place to her. It had lost its luster. Her interests were shifting. Sometimes God removes our comforts and our security in this land of our sojourn, so that we will rely more on Him and keep in mind o-ur eternal destination. Earth is embittered to us, that heaven may be endeared.⁷ But the rekindling of faith makes at first but a feeble flame,... It is a selfish motive that induces her to return, much the same as that which stirred the prodigal to turn his face to the father's house: "She had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread,"⁸

We need to be reminded that there is trouble always for the prodigal son in the far country. It is in the far country that he receives his whipping and not when he returns in repentance and confession to his father's house. The hickory stick is applied in the far country; new shoes and a robe await his return home. He gets kicks in the far country; he is showered with kisses at home. Tears of sorrow are shed in Moab, but tears of joy fall at Bethlehem.⁹

Naomi's sorrow stirs her interest in her homeland. She becomes a departing traveler. Here is where I sense the emotion so strong about leaving "home" that no one talks for awhile. Finally they reach the border between the two countries. This is the point of decision. From here there is no going back to Moab. And finally, Naomi breaks the silence. She becomes....

2. vs 8-10, **A dissuading mother-in-law.** She does two things. She bids them farewell and then she blesses them.

A. She bids them to go back home. It is very unusual to talk about a **mother's house**. The usual and customary return of widows would be to the security of "the father's house".

The phrase *bê t , ēm* occurs elsewhere only three times. In Song 3:4; 8:2 it refers to the bedroom of a person's mother, where lovers might find privacy. In Gen 24:28 Rebekah is said to have run home to her mother's house to report her conversation with Abraham's servant, who was sent to find a wife for Isaac. In each instance the phrase "house of a mother" is found in a context involving love and marriage. Accordingly, by sending each of her daughters-in-law home to her "mother's house" Naomi is releasing them to remarry¹⁰

B. She blesses them. Notice she uses the name of her God to bless these two Moabite women. Though Naomi doesn't seem to be a practicing Jew, she still knows and calls on her God to bless others. Look at the blessing she gives them.

- **May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me.** She had experienced much love and care from these two young gals. She is asking her God to return that same kindness upon them throughout their lives. What one gives away will come back.

- **May the Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.** Rest here has two main meanings. One is a settled peace, quietness, pleasantness. The other emphasizes

⁶Block, Daniel Isaac: *Judges, Ruth*. electronic ed. Nashville : Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1999 (Logos Library System; The New American Commentary 6), S. 631

⁷Henry, Matthew: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody : Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, S. Ru 1:6

⁸Ridout, Samuel: *Gleanings from the Book of Ruth*. Pleasant Places Press, 2004; 2004, S. 16

⁹McGee, p. 39

¹⁰Block, Daniel Isaac: *Judges, Ruth*. electronic ed. Nashville : Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1999 (Logos Library System; The New American Commentary 6), S. 632

the security, provision, and protection that a good marriage supplies. She is asking that they will be blessed with a good marriage in the near future.

- **Then she kissed them.** This was the blessing of her love for them.

And, of course, they had a great cry. This was followed by strong objection, v. 10. It is as if they were so attached to her, that to go with her was equal to returning to a place they had never been. This trio had really bonded. After the objection, Naomi becomes....

3. **vs 11-13b, A disheartened widow.** Since her first instruction to them wasn't dissuading them, she turns to a series of questions to get them to see the folly of their decision to continue with her. She uses seven methods of inquest: [These are the kinds of approaches a parent uses with the kids.]

A. The direct approach: "Return home! Go back!" This is the kind of approach we use when we try to get the dog to quit following us and go back to the house. It rarely works. She tried this a total of three times. They weren't responding the way she thought they would.

B. The question approach: "Why should you go with me?" This is trying to get the girls to think of the best possible answer, and then discover it really isn't that good, change their minds, and go home.

C. The absurd approach: "Have I more sons in my womb for you?" Of course she was beyond the child-bearing age, and would not be having any more children. This situation wasn't even a remote possibility. This was an absurd proposition, but maybe it will get them to change their minds to my way of thinking.

D. The pity approach: "I'm too old. Even if there was hope [which there isn't] that I could be married tonight [not a chance] and get pregnant [impossible]"...Don't you see, there's no hope with me, I'm all done, you'd better go home." Eore, Eore, enough already!

E. The intention approach: "Would you *really* wait until they were grown?" This reveals doubt about the real, true intention of the person. The questioner has reservations that the person would really keep their word while waiting, especially over a long time.

F. The integrity approach: "Would you *really* stay unmarried all that time?" This expresses doubt about the integrity of the person. These last two questions are intended to create doubt in the mind of the other person that they could/would *really* live up to the expressed intentions. We all know the road to ruin is paved with good intentions. Naomi was trying to get them to realize they *really* couldn't keep their word.

G. The parental approach: "This is harder for me than for you." This implies the hurt or difficulty involved in the decision is harder on the older than the younger. Parents usually use this when it comes to spanking the kids ["this is going to hurt me more than it does you"]. What kid ever believes that? [I quit saying that after I swatted my leg once with the same force I swatted that little bottom.] Naomi is trying to make the gals think this parting was easier on them than on her. She has tried all the ways she can think of to convince them not to go with her. She must have still seen some resistance, because she moves to another level. She becomes

4. **v. 13c, 15b, A discouraged believer.** "the hand of the LORD is against me...go back to your gods". This happens way too often in christian's lives. When things get tough we think God is against us and we turn away from Him. When God is against us, there is a reason and a purpose for it. Tough times should bring us to brokenness before the LORD. Naomi was not broken, she was bitter. Instead of encouraging these two young ladies to see the true God's hand working in their lives, she is urging them to return home and to remain in idolatry. Dr. Ridout brings out a

good application: But Naomi was not yet restored in her own soul, and therefore could be no help to others. She urges them to return home, and expresses the hope that they may find rest in the house of a heathen husband! Her own resources having failed, she thinks God has also failed, and has nothing to put before these to encourage them to seek the Lord.

But such is unbelief, never more evil than in a saint. It can see no hope for others for it sees none for itself, and would even discourage those who would be seeking God. Let the wanderers among God's people beware. If out of communion themselves, they not only suffer individually, but are stumbling-blocks to any who might be seeking the Lord. Alas, how the cold, wretched spiritual state of God's people serves to repel rather than attract the seeking soul. If not in words, at least in demeanor and acts, the world is too often given to understand that there is nothing in the things of God to satisfy the cravings of the soul...Oh, brethren, let us not think that the world fails to understand all this; it says as plainly as Naomi's words, "God's hand is against me...Go return to your gods."

But what an awful responsibility is this. Our Lord has left us here as lights in the darkness to attract souls to Himself: what if we by our failure to "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things" are driving them away? There is but one remedy for this—to be in a state of active communion at all times; then we will attract others to Christ, our very lives will be a positive witness.¹¹

Here are four impacts of a discouraged believer:

A. Discouragement does not necessarily dim our desirability. The girls still liked Naomi even though she was a discouraged believer.

B. Discouragement does take others with it. When we are discouraged we can infect others with discouragement. They are affected by our discouragement.

C. Discouragement does teach others about our God. In reality, it teaches things about us. But somehow others draw conclusions about our God when we are discouraged. When we see God as against us, it does influence their perception of God.

D. Discouragement sees "events" as God's judgment, rather than just events. Naomi was a discouraged believer. But, there is one more thing about her. She next speaks as a..

5. v 15, **A dispirited woman**. I hear an empty, dispirited woman. She sees no future. She has no hope of a brighter tomorrow. She has given up. She has no interest, enthusiasm, or reason to go on. She has nothing in her future worth sharing with her daughters-in-law. All she knows for sure is that she isn't dead, but she doesn't know why she isn't.

v. 15 Her acknowledgment that Orpah has gone back to her gods does not suit an orthodox Yahwist perspective, but it makes perfect sense within the context of ancient Near Eastern perceptions of national identity. In the biblical world nations tended to be distinguishable on the bases of ethnicity (hence "her people"), territory (hence "land of Moab"), kingship (hence "Eglon king of Moab" in Judg 3:12–17), language (Moabite, Hebrew, etc.), and theology

... her comment is troubling. Her theological perceptions at this point seem no more orthodox than those of many characters in the Book of Judges. If she represents the highest level of faith in Israel, it is no wonder Yahweh had sent a famine on the land.¹²

Naomi is one discouraged believer!

¹¹Ridout, Samuel: *Gleanings from the Book of Ruth*. Pleasant Places Press, 2004; 2004, S. 16

¹²Block, Daniel Isaac: *Judges, Ruth*. electronic ed. Nashville : Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1999 (Logos Library System; The New American Commentary 6), S. 639

Now, just a glance at Orpha and Ruth.

ORPHA

I think of Orpha as an “almost believer”. She has lived with and been around nominal believers for a number of years. She has not objected to whatever this family did or said that exposed her to the God of the Scriptures. Yet, when brought to the point of decision about taking the next step in developing a relationship with this God, she apparently says “no thanks” and goes back to her old way of life. **Strong passions, without a settled judgment, commonly produce weak resolutions.**¹³ But it is interesting that the text neither criticizes or condemns her. She just left.

Matthew Henry comments: Orpah’s kiss showed she had an affection for Naomi and was loth to part from her; yet she did not love her well enough to leave her country for her sake. Thus many have a value and affection for Christ, and yet come short of salvation by him, because they cannot find in their hearts to forsake other things for him. They love him and yet leave him, because they do not love him enough, but love other things better. Thus the young man that went away from Christ went away sorrowful, Mt. 19:22.¹⁴

RUTH

Hearing Naomi’s command to return to Moab for the fourth time and watching her sister-in-law head down the road, Ruth stood between a rock and a hard place. Would she choose her own people the Moabites and their god Chemosh with whom she was no doubt familiar, or would she cast her lot with her mother-in-law and her alien kinsmen, and their God Yahweh, whom she knew only through the grid of Naomi’s imperfect faith?¹⁵

Remember this:

*One ship sails east
And another sails west,
By the selfsame winds that blow;
‘Tis the set of the sails,
And not the gales,
That tells them the way to go!*

*Like the winds of the sea
Are the waves of Time,
As we voyage along through life;
‘Tis the set of the soul
That determines the goal,
And not the calm or the strife!¹⁶*

These two gals, when exposed to the God of the Bible, through the imperfect faith of a discouraged believer had to make a choice about Him. You see, even a discouraged believer has an impact.

Amen.

¹³Henry, Matthew: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody : Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, S. Ru 1:6

¹⁴Henry, Matthew: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody : Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, S. Ru 1:6

¹⁵Block, Daniel Isaac: *Judges, Ruth*. electronic ed. Nashville : Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1999 (Logos Library System; The New American Commentary 6), S. 639

¹⁶Quoted in McGee, p. 52.