

## INTRODUCTION

When Benjamin Franklin was United States Ambassador to France, he occasionally attended the Infidels Club, a group that reviled the Bible and spent their time reading literary masterpieces. On one occasion, Franklin read the book of Ruth to the Infidels Club, but changed the names in it so it would not be recognized as a book of the Bible. When he finished, they were unanimous in their praise. They applauded and said it was one of the most beautiful stories they had ever heard. They demanded to know where he had found such a remarkable literary masterpiece. He smiled and told them that it was from the Bible, which they had scorned and claimed that it contained nothing of value.

The Old Testament is full of stories of Law and Order, Crime and Punishment. But I believe this little book of Ruth is the brightest spot in the 39 books of the Old Testament. It spotlights a powerful Hebrew concept captured by the word *he'sed*. It is translated "loving kindness," "grace," or "favor." God directs *he'sed* our way and then we direct it toward others.

We're going to be looking at the details of the story of Ruth, but I want you to have a grasp of the entire story, so listen again to my two-minute synopsis: The story of Ruth begins with a terrible famine. An Israelite family left Bethlehem and traveled to the pagan land of Moab in search of food. The mother's name was Naomi, and her husband's name was Elimelech. In time, their two sons married Moabite women. But life was bitter for Naomi. Her husband, and then her sons died. After three funerals, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. She urged the two younger widows to stay in Moab and find new husbands. Orpah stayed, but Ruth refused to leave Naomi and traveled with her back to Bethlehem.

They arrived with nothing and had to beg for food. Ruth went into the field of a farmer named Boaz to pick up leftover wheat from the harvest. Boaz was impressed with young Ruth and instructed his workers to leave plenty of wheat for her to gather each day.

To her delight, Naomi realized Boaz was a distant relative of her dead husband, which qualified him to be a Kinsman-Redeemer. If Ruth married Boaz, they could legally reclaim the land that formerly belonged to Naomi's husband.

So Naomi used her matchmaking skills. Following Naomi's advice, Ruth humbly asked Boaz to accept the role as her kinsman redeemer. In other words, Ruth basically asked him to marry her! And Boaz said, "You betcha!"

But there was a problem: Another man was a closer relative and he had the first right of refusal to the land. When Boaz explained the terms to him, he wanted the property. But when he heard a bride came with the deal, he quickly backed out! This opened the door for Boaz to marry Ruth and redeem the family's land and reputation.

First came love, then came marriage, then came Boaz with a baby carriage. God gave the couple a son named Obed, who turned out to be the grandfather of none other than King David himself! In fact, in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, Ruth is listed as one of the human ancestors of Jesus!

Ruth 1:7-21. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness (*he'sed*) to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.

Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!" At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

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 anything but death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 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." So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

The story of Ruth is so much more than just a romantic tale of love and marriage. It is a powerful parable of the Christian life. In this message, I want to look at four of the main characters in Ruth 1 and relate how each of them represents a different spiritual experience.

## **1. REGRET: ELIMELECH SHOWS US THAT A CHRISTIAN HAS LIMITED TIME TO RETURN TO GOD**

In the last message, we learned that Elimelech is a picture of a backslidden Christian. He left God's people, God's land, and God's promises to travel back to Moab. His life is a metaphor of a Christian who stops moving forward and starts sliding back into their old sins and habits.

A sad fact about Elimelech's departure from God's plan was that he carried his wife and two sons with him into Moab. He pulled them down with him. Husbands and fathers, this should be a somber warning that our disobedience to God always impacts our family members.

A father shared a testimony here a few years ago. He said when they moved to Tyler, they didn't join a church immediately. They had been active in a church in their previous city, but they didn't want to jump right back into church as soon as they moved. So they would visit around, and some Sundays they wouldn't even go at all. This father said he didn't know how bad it was until he realized his kids were no longer asking him, "Dad WHERE are we going to church today?" Instead they were asking, "Dad ARE we going to church today?" This man said when he realized this, he loaded up his family in the car and they came and joined Green Acres and have been active since that day. He said he realized how his lackadaisical spiritual attitude was affecting his family.

But the saddest thing about Elimelech's disobedience is that he DIED in Moab. He should have seen his mistake and loaded up his family and moved back to God's land and God's people. But he never did. He probably thought there was plenty of time, but then suddenly he was out of time. He must have died with an awful feeling of regret. How many times did he ask, "IF ONLY I had repented and taken my family back to Bethlehem!"

How about you? If you realize you've drifted from God, don't wait another day to repent. Today is the day you need to turn your back on your Moab and run back to God. The Bible says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." (Hebrews 4:7)

Did you hear about the staff meeting between the devil and his chief demons? They were discussing new ways to keep people from trusting Christ and ways to keep Christians in a miserable, backslidden condition. One demon said, "Let's tell them there's no God." The devil said, "That won't work. All they have to do is look around and see God's handiwork." Another demon said, "Let's tell them there's no hell." Satan said, "Nope. Everyone knows deep down that sin must be punished." They were quiet for a moment and finally a demon spoke up and said, "Let's tell them there's no hurry." Satan clapped his hands and smiled and said, "That's the plan we'll use!" Satan's favorite time is tomorrow, but God says to repent *today*. Elimelech intended on staying in Moab for a few days or weeks, but he kept procrastinating his return until he died there. Don't make the mistake of being a Christian who dies in a backslidden condition. You'll be ashamed when you stand before the Lord.

## **2. REJECTION: ORPAH SHOWS US THAT A PERSON CAN BE ON THEIR WAY TO GOD AND THEN TURN AWAY**

Before we talk about Orpah, have you been thinking that her name sounds a lot like a popular TV personality? You're right, because Orpah is actually Oprah Winfrey's real name. Here's the story in her own words: "I was born in rural Mississippi in 1954. I was born at home. There were not a lot of educated people around and my Aunt Ida chose my name from the Bible. So it went down as 'Orpah' on my birth certificate, but people didn't know how to pronounce it, so they put the 'P' before the 'R' in every place else other than the birth certificate. On the birth certificate it is Orpah, but then it got translated to Oprah, so here we are."

I hate to say it, but I fear Oprah Winfrey has turned away from God like her namesake! Orpah was already on the road with Naomi and Ruth, but she decided to go back to Moab. There is a cultural reason why Naomi asked the two widows three times to return home. In the Middle

Eastern culture then and now, it's impolite to accept an offer on the first request. For instance, if you were a stranger in someone's tent and they asked you if you wanted tea, you should reply, "No thank you." (Even if you wanted tea!) If they didn't offer again, you knew they really didn't want you there in the first place. But if they asked you a second time, you should repeat, "No thank you, don't go to that trouble." But when they make invitation number three, "Please, it's no trouble. Please have a cup of tea." Then you are free to say, "Yes, please I think I'll have some." That was the polite way to respond.

So when Naomi said, "Return home" the first two times, Orpah said, "Oh, no I could never do that to you." But when she made the third request, Orpah said, "Okay, so long—I'm outta here!" She turned her back on the road to Bethlehem and returned to the pagan culture and the false gods of her people.

Today, she represents a person who is on their way to becoming a Christian, but when they are faced with the decision they say, "No thanks. I'm going back to my old life." Orpah wasn't hard-hearted. She wept and hugged her neck. She kissed her, but she still turned away.

Through the years I've known people who have shed tears and they confused it with conversion. They shed a few tears and felt all warm and fuzzy in their heart, but they never followed through on their commitment to Christ. Tears aren't the same thing as trust. You can hear a gospel sermon and shed tears of remorse, but never truly repent and start following Jesus.

Orpah shows us that it's possible to come very close to trusting Christ, and then turn away. At the last supper Jesus indicated that all the disciples were "clean" (saved) except one, meaning Judas. Later that same night Judas kissed Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. That's amazing! Judas KISSED the very Door to Heaven and then turned away from salvation. He kissed the Son of God and then rejected Him.

One day a sharp, wealthy, young man approached Jesus and asked Him how he could obtain eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the commandments—and then Jesus quoted every commandment on the second tablet except "you shall not covet." The young man was close, very close, but he was unwilling to let go of his possessions. Jesus said, "Come, follow me." When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth." (Matthew 19:22) Like Orpah, he considered the cost, and wasn't willing to pay it.

Are you someone who is on the road to God? Don't turn back. Keep on seeking Him and He will find you. Are you someone who had some kind of emotional experience but there is no real evidence in your life that you are child of God? Orpah rejected the opportunity to know God and she turned and walked off the pages of history never to be heard from again.

### **3. REPENTANCE: RUTH SHOWS US THAT ANYONE CAN MAKE A TOTAL COMMITMENT TO GOD**

Ruth didn't turn away, even after three requests from Naomi. She was what you could call a Velcro friend. She clung to Naomi. Her beautiful speech is the most well known passage in this

book. It is often quoted at wedding ceremonies, but this is a daughter-in-law committing herself to her mother-in-law. It's a great pattern for us for what I call hard-core commitment.

Ruth committed herself on seven levels. She said, "I'll GO where you go; I'll LIVE where you live; I'll IDENTIFY myself with God's people; I will TRUST your God; I will DIE where you die; I'll be BURIED where you're buried; and this commitment is FOREVER, until I die. The apex of her commitment was choosing to trust the God of Israel, Jehovah. Repentance is turning from your sin and turning to God. That's what Ruth was doing.

Moabites worshipped a variety of deities, but their chief god was named Chemosh. He was a vengeful god and to appease him the Moabites would kill their newborn children and sacrifice them to him. Ruth was changing her address and changing her gods for the One true God. She was renouncing the gods who really weren't gods at all and embracing the One true living God.

I always shake my head whenever I read where another fluffy-headed theologian or a liberal politician says the God of the Bible is the same God of the Hindus or the Buddhists or the Muslims. I respectfully disagree. I have read the Koran and the God of the Bible is NOT the Allah of the Koran.

To accept that position would be like Naomi saying, "It's okay, Ruth, you can keep on believing in Chemosh. And when you have your first-born you can sacrifice him to Chemosh." No! There is only ONE God. Ruth might have already learned how to speak Hebrew from Naomi, but for the first time she could say and really mean it, "Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad!" She was saying, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One God."

And when she committed herself to God she was also committing herself to God's people. She was changing her allegiance from Moab to Israel. When you become a follower of Jesus Christ, you also must identify with God's people – and you find them in the church. I don't hold out much hope for some of these spiritual lone rangers who claim to love Jesus but don't want to be a part of the church. Churches aren't perfect, but they are the Bride of Christ, and on the Day of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb described in Revelation 19. That's when the Bride, the church, will be presented without fault or blemish. And if you don't want to be left at the altar all alone, I'd advise you to do what Ruth did and identify with God's people, the church.

Following Jesus requires a total commitment. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24) To take up your cross means to die; you die to your own plans and desires and you make a fresh commitment to follow the plans of Jesus.

Notice how much Ruth offered—and yet she asked for *nothing* in return. Commitment is not bargaining. It's okay to bargain when you're buying a Pollex Watch from a street vendor in New York City. But true commitment to God isn't a bargain to see how cheaply you can get off and still go to heaven! It's offering God everything and asks for nothing. But like Ruth, when we give Him our all, He gives us so much more in return.

The ancient Greek armies understood the meaning of total commitment. When the Grecian armies landed on their enemy's shore, the first command of the Grecian commander was, "Burn the boats." As the soldiers watched their only means of retreat burning, they knew they had to be victorious to survive. You might call that the "Grecian Formula for Victory." That's what Ruth did. She was burning her bridges and her boats to her past and looking for a new future.

It's like that chorus we used to sing that says: "I'm yours, Lord; Everything I've got; Everything I am; Everything I'm not; I'm yours, Lord; Try me now and see; See if I can be completely Yours." Can you say that you have that kind of hard-core commitment to Christ?

How differently Orpah and Ruth were in their decisions. You wonder how they could have lived together and made two totally different decisions that led to two different lives and two different destinies. But it shouldn't surprise us.

In the Colorado Rockies there is a mountain range called the Continental Divide. Two raindrops falling side-by-side can fall on one of those peaks. One drop goes eastward into the valleys and rivers that lead to the Gulf of Mexico and then the Atlantic Ocean. The other raindrop falls and goes west and ends up in the Pacific Ocean. So it is with people. Some accept Christ and others reject Him. Which are you?

#### **4. RETURN: NAOMI SHOWS US THAT A BACKSLIDDEN CHRISTIAN CAN RETURN TO GOD**

You could call Naomi the Prodigal Daughter of the Old Testament. There are some amazing similarities between her experience and the story Jesus told in Luke 15. Naomi said she left full and returned empty. As you recall, a rebellious son demanded his inheritance. He strutted away from his family with a pocketful of cash and spent it all on wild living. He left full, but he was soon empty, also. He was so broke that he had to take a job feeding hogs. There in the midst of the mud, manure, slime, and filth he came to his senses and started thinking about his father's house. He got up and started back toward his home. Naomi heard about the food in Bethlehem and she came to her senses and started back home as well.

The rebellious son rehearsed his speech. He was going to say, "Father, I've sin against God and against you and I'm no longer worthy to be your son. Just make me one of your servants." I'm sure he wondered if His father would be angry or not.

Remember, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is really more about the kind of God we serve than the kind of children we are. So, do you know what happened when the son returned? Did the father scold him and say, "I told you so." Did the father say, "Get out of here? You've made your bed with the pigs, now go back and live with them!" No, Jesus said that our Heavenly Father isn't like that. I love the way Jesus described how God the Father opens His arms to every child who has wandered away. Jesus said, "So he (the rebellious son) got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20)

Maybe you've wandered away from God like Naomi or the Prodigal son. Will you come to your senses? Wake up! Look at what you've lost. Look at the mess you're in. But you don't have to stay there.

## CONCLUSION

Who would you say is the main character in Ruth? There are a few A-List celebrities in Hollywood who require that their name be given top billing. They include stars like Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Sandra Bullock and Reese Witherspoon. On all the movie publicity and the credits at the end, they want their name listed first and in the largest font.

If the story of Ruth was turned into a movie, which character do you think should get top billing? We've met four of the main characters in this lesson, and we'll meet Boaz, the hero in the next message. Who should get top billing? Ruth? Naomi? Or Boaz? Who is the real star of the story? In my opinion, the main character in this story is God. He never speaks in this book, nor does a prophet speak in the name of the Lord; but God is mentioned over twenty times. He's in the background, but He's clearly in every scene, orchestrating circumstances to fulfill His purpose.

You can see this in the key verse of the story. When Boaz first met Ruth he said to her, "May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." (Ruth 2:12) This is such a powerful verse that I considered naming this Ruth series "Under the Wings of God."

Does God have wings? Of course not, but this is a picture of a mother hen who gathers her young chicks under her wings to protect them. Boaz recognized that Ruth wasn't looking to him for protection, she wasn't looking to Naomi for protection—she had made a hard-core commitment to follow the God of Israel until her dying day. She was resting under the wings of God.

One day Jesus stood overlooking Jerusalem and His heart was broken because the Jews wouldn't receive His offer of protection. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." (Matthew 23:37)

And this is the message of grace, *he'sed*, in both the Old and the New Testaments. God offers protection and refuge to anyone—Israelite, Moabite, Tylerite—who humbly seeks Him. Do you need refuge today? Are you in need of Someone to gather you under His wings and say, "It's going to be okay, trust Me? I will take care of you." Just like the Prodigal Son's dad, God's arms are open wide for you today.

There's an old song we used to often sing as an invitation song that says, "If you'll take one step toward the Savior, my friend; You'll find His arms open wide. Receive Him and all of your darkness will end; Within your heart He'll abide." You CAN return to God!

## OUTLINE

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"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." *Hebrews 4:7*

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes