

A Mother-Daughter Covenant

Bible Background • Ruth 1:1–18

Printed Text • Ruth 1:6–11, 14–18 | Devotional Reading • Ruth 4:13–17

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: IDENTIFY the relationship between Ruth and Naomi; EMPATHIZE with those in vulnerable situations; and COMMIT to demonstrating godly loyalty to our family members.

In Focus

Shortly after graduating from Hampton University, Jessica got a job in Indianapolis. She was really excited but adjusting was challenging, and the office culture was not inclusive. She felt isolated and alone, like she was living in a foreign world.

Jessica was in the cafeteria when she noticed an older woman sitting in the corner, reading a newspaper.

She approached the table. “Hi ... do you mind if I sit here?” The woman barely looked up from the newspaper, but Jessica sat anyway. “Hello, my name is Eileen Moxie,” the woman said. “I’ve seen you around. How have the first few weeks been?” Over the next few months the two became friends. Jessica valued Eileen as a friend and maternal figure.

One day, Jessica sat down to talk to Eileen, who looked distant. “They’ve let me go,” Eileen said. “One more year to retire with benefits, and they’ve let me go. I’m widowed and never had kids. This job was everything I had,” Eileen said softly. Jessica felt so heavy. The first few months had been so difficult for Jessica, but Eileen had been there to guide her through the process.

Jessica stared at Eileen a long time, not knowing exactly what to say. After a few moments, she reached out and grabbed Eileen’s hand. She knew that it was her time to listen.

How can we show care to those who have shown care for us?

Keep in Mind

“But Ruth replied, “Don’t ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God” (Ruth 1:16, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. House bayit (Heb.) — In this lesson it means household or family.

B. Deal ‘asah (Heb.) — To put in order, to attend to.

Say It Correctly

Orpah. OR-pah.

Moab. MOE-ab.

KJV

Ruth 1:6 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.

7 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.

8 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.

9 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.

10 And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people.

11 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? 14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her.

15 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.

16 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:

17 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.

18 When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

NIV

Ruth 1:6 Then Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had blessed his people in Judah by giving them good crops again. So Naomi and her daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab to return to her homeland.

7 With her two daughters-in-law she set out from the place where she had been living, and they took the road that would lead them back to Judah.

8 But on the way, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back to your mothers' homes. And may the Lord reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me.

9 May the Lord bless you with the security of another marriage." Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept.

10 "No," they said. "We want to go with you to your people."

11 But Naomi replied, "Why should you go on with me? Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands?"

14 And again they wept together, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Ruth clung tightly to Naomi.

15 "Look," Naomi said to her, "your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You should do the same."

16 But Ruth replied, "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.

17 Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!"

18 When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said nothing more.

The People, Places, and Times

Bethlehem-Judah. This city is five miles south of Jerusalem. Its hyphenated name is to distinguish it from the town of the same first name in the area of Zebulun. Bethlehem translates to "house of bread." It was previously known as Bethlehem-Ephrathah. Therefore the people were called Ephrathites. This is the city Ruth and Naomi

traveled toward when they left Moab. Ruth would eventually become the great-grandmother of King David. David and his ancestors lived in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:1–5), so it is also known as the city of David. This is the lineage into which Jesus was born.

How have you seen God provide in the midst of loss or hardship?

Background

We are introduced to a family set in the time when judges presided and governed over the children of Israel in the early days of the nation. Elimelech, the patriarch, was from Bethlehem, a province of Judah. Elimelech left his homeland with his wife Naomi and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to escape famine in the land. The family settled in the country of Moab. The people of Moab were descendants from the incestuous relationship between Abraham’s nephew Lot and his oldest daughter (Genesis 19:37); therefore, Moabites were distant relatives of the Jewish people. As the Children of Israel made their journey to the Promised Land, the Moabites sent Baalam to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22). From this and other contentious interactions, the Law of Moses prohibited Moabites from the Lord’s assembly, the worshiping community made up of men, for ten generations if not forever (Deuteronomy 23:3–6). Moab was also an idolatrous nation; one of their gods, Chemosh, was worshiped with child sacrifices.

In Ruth 1:3–5, Elimelech dies while living in Moab and his sons Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Ten years after their unions to these women both sons died childless. We are not told the circumstances surrounding the death of these men, but the three women are now widows. Naomi suffers the greatest having lost her husband and two sons. In this culture women without men were at the mercy of extended family and community to care for them.

How could Naomi and her daughters-in-law go on after enduring such losses?

At-A-Glance

1. A Mother’s Farewell (Ruth 1:6–11)
2. A Daughter’s Response (vv. 14–18)

In Depth

1. A Mother’s Farewell (Ruth 1:6–11)

After the death of her sons, Naomi, an older woman, was left with no one to care for her. The text does not give the span of time between the passing of her sons and the decision to move forward. Traditionally, a Jewish burial takes place within twenty-four hours of death because the Torah says, “His body shall not remain all night ... but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day” (Deuteronomy 21:23). Further, ancient Jewish culture dictates that after the death of a husband the sons were to care for their mother. A widow was considered blessed to have sons because they inherited the father’s possessions and his tie to land. To have lost her husband and ten years later to have no sons was a mark of shame, and it weighed heavily on Naomi. She had no choice but to go back to Judah to reconnect with extended family members and her community. The people would know her story upon return. As the three women made their way toward Judah broken and in mourning, Naomi stopped during their trek and implored her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth to return to their own mothers to start over. Her daughters-in-law would also need to be cared for in this culture. Naomi encouraged them to go back to the security of their own people. However, she also spoke the blessing of the Lord over her daughters-in-law. She prayed that the Lord would deal kindly with them as a reward for their love for her sons as well as the kindness extended to her. After the death of their husbands, Orpah and Ruth could have immediately

returned to their families and left Naomi to grieve alone. However, they showed great honor for their husbands' memory and their mother-in-law by caring for her and refusing to leave her side.

Naomi made the case to the two women that no hope existed for them if they remained with her (vv. 12–13). Naomi would be unable to have more sons for them to marry but if they returned home, they could possibly find husbands and marry again because they were young. Naomi was reeling in the bitterness of her losses and felt forsaken by God, but tried to offer hope for a future for her daughters-in-law.

Have you tried to offer hope to others while in a dark place?

2. A Daughter's Response (vv. 14–18)

Orpah reluctantly listened to her mother-in-law's logic and with a gut-wrenching cry said goodbye, but tearful Ruth decided to stay with or "cling to" her mother-in-law. Naomi again pleaded with Ruth to return to her family and her gods like Orpah, but Ruth refused. In this moment Ruth became more than a daughter by marriage but a daughter birthed in the spirit as she literally comes into a covenant relationship. Ruth responded emphatically that she did not want to leave Naomi's side and that she wanted to continue the journey. Ruth honors her husband's memory in declaring to remain with her mother-in-law, not wanting to dishonor her by leaving her to travel alone. Ruth becomes one with Naomi by proclaiming that where she lives, she will live. She would become one with her people and worship her God. Where Naomi is buried, she would also be buried; she accepts that if she does not keep her word and stay by her side, she would leave it to God to judge her. To seal the deal Ruth vows that nothing but death will separate her from her mother-in-law. When Naomi saw how resolute Ruth was about moving forward with her, she said nothing more. When love in action is that strong and committed, it requires no further argument and nothing more is to be done but to receive it. Ruth, a Moabite woman, displays such great love and honor for a woman she highly esteems, leaving all that is familiar to start a new life.

Can you see the picture of God's love for His people and His church to not allow anything or anyone to separate them from His love? How do we respond to such a love?

How can we respond to Jesus' teachings about divorce with such high divorce rates in our society?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why was it important for Naomi to leave Moab, a place of such pain, and return to Judah to be among her people?
2. Compare and contrast Orpah's and Ruth's responses to Naomi's plea for them to return home. Why was Ruth so determined to stay with Naomi?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Have you ever been in an unfamiliar situation? Who did you turn to for guidance?
2. What are times when you feel God has tested your strength? How did you react?

Liberating Lesson

We are called to show one another deep love and commitment to God and His people. When one of us hurts, we all hurt. Nothing hurts more than the death of a loved one. Many churches make a resolution to care for members when they suffer such loss. With churches all around, communities across the country have been touched by gun violence that has ripped the hearts of mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, extended family, and friends. How can our churches be first responders to provide hope and healing? How can we stay in touch in the days and weeks to come?

Application for Activation

As you receive news through your medium of choice, pray for families who are experiencing the pain of loss.

Pray for peace in our communities. And if your community or a surrounding community hosts a prayer vigil, join in or convene one. Volunteer your time and seek to partner with other institutions to end violence in our communities. Be a beacon of hope and a reflection of God’s love by asking the Holy Spirit to present you (or your small group/congregation) with opportunities to provide comfort to those who grieve.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Ruth 1:6–11, 14–18

Various writers and scholars have described the story contained in the book of Ruth in many different ways. Some writers describe its theme as “from emptiness to fullness,” “from poverty to riches,” or “from tragedy to triumph.” All these describe the plight of the chief characters of the story, especially Naomi and Ruth. It is a story that begins with having nothing and ends with abundance; it goes from poverty to prosperity, and from tragedy of death to triumph of life. Indeed, the best way to view the story of Ruth is to see it through the lens of God’s providential intervention in the affairs of His people, those who would choose Him as their God. The story illustrates the act of God in rewarding the faithfulness of those who put their trust in Him. No matter how one looks at this story, one thing is certain: God has made His plan of salvation available to all of His creation from the beginning of time, whether Jews or Gentiles.

Due to famine and the death of their husbands, the world of Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth collapsed around them. Still, they displayed strength of character that is worth emulating. They showed love, faithfulness, selflessness, and concern for each other that should be named among all believers. Instead of a negative mother-in-law report about Naomi, the text portrays her as a godly woman, who in spite of her own suffering and loss is concerned about the well-being of her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Life had dealt Naomi a devastating hand: Not only had her husband Elimelech died, but ten years later, her two sons—Mahlon and Chilion—passed away as well (Ruth 1:1–5). Yet, Naomi was not so caught up in her own grief that she could not see the needs of her two daughters-in-law.

6 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. 7 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.

Verse 6 serves as a transition; it concludes the introductory part and sets the stage for what follows. The author seems to give a glimmer of hope amidst the rather grim and tragic circumstances that have so far dominated the first part of the story. He does this by relating the news that “the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread,” which prompted Naomi to decide to return to Bethlehem, her homeland. However, as we shall see,

Naomi does not see any bright future beyond her present bitter situation (vv. 19–22). In any case, she decides to return home.

“Then she arose” (Heb. kum, KOOM) means “to stand up” or “to arise.” It carries the idea that Naomi had made up her mind to venture home. This construction is similar to the construction found in Christ’s New Testament parable of the prodigal son arising and returning home. The purpose of Naomi rising is that she might return from Moab. Note the use of the preposition “for” (Heb. kiy, KEE). The reason for Naomi’s decision to return to Bethlehem is that she had heard the Lord had given them bread. How did she hear this news? The narrator does not tell us, although the most likely theory is that she heard the news through rumor. Jacob heard there was food in Egypt and sent his sons to buy some, without saying how he heard (Genesis 42:1). The writers in both instances do not deem it necessary to reveal how Jacob or Naomi got the news. Yet with her situation in a foreign land, Naomi was all ears to hear news about her home country. The news is “that the Lord had visited his people” by giving them bread. The verb “visited” (Heb. paqad, paw-KOD) is used in a number of ways in the Old Testament and can mean to attend to, muster, reckon, punish, care for, or commit for care. Here, as in many other instances the visitation produces a beneficial result: the return of “bread” (Heb. lechem, LE-khem), which also refers to food in general.

So Naomi, along with her two daughters-in-law, set out from Moab where she had been living. The second clause, “they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah,” implies that they went toward Judah. Her daughters-in-law, ignorant of where she is going, accompany her. As they turn onto the road that leads to Judah, Naomi turns to them and asks them to go back to Moab, their country of origin.

8 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. 9 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.

It is interesting that Naomi tells them to go back to their “mother’s house,” rather than the expected advice to return to their father’s house. This could be because of a family system where their mothers were one of many wives, or their mothers were single, divorced, or widowed as well. We can definitely see this through a womanist perspective recognizing the importance of relationships between women as the focus of the book of Ruth. Naomi, however, might also have used “mother’s house” in a generic or general sense to mean their homeland of Moab, especially considering her later statement to Ruth: “Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people...” (v. 15).

In verses 8–9, the word “house” in Hebrew (bayit, BAH-yeet) means “household” or “family.” In the ancient world, there was almost nothing worse than being a widow, living without blood-related family to provide or take care of you. This was the lot of Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. Their husbands were all dead. Who would care for these women in their dire situation? They could be taken advantage of, ignored altogether, or swallowed up in poverty. Therefore, Naomi tells them to return to their birth families so they would have someone to look after them.

Because Orpah and Ruth had dealt kindly with her, Naomi also blessed them. She said, “The LORD deal kindly with you” (v. 8). The word “deal” in Hebrew is ‘asah (aw-SAW) and means to attend to, or to put in order, and “kindly” is checed (Heb. KHEH-sed) meaning loving-kindness, goodness, favor, and mercy. In other words, because Orpah and Ruth had shown goodness, favor, and mercy toward Naomi and her dead sons, she asked that God show them the same as they returned to their people. In addition, she wanted the Lord to bless them with “rest” (Heb. manokhah, maw-NOisakh), meaning quietness, a resting place, or comfort. The phrase “may find” in Hebrew is matsa’ (maw-TSAW), meaning attain, or encounter. Naomi knew that with the loss both she and her daughters-in-law had experienced, all three of them needed a place where they could rest, regroup from their sorrows, and receive nurturing and care. She was confident that the three of them could find this when they returned home to their own people.

After blessing them, the three women “wept” (Heb. *bakah*, baw-KAW), which means they cried loudly and shed tears. Since they had already experienced great loss and now they could be separated from each other for the rest of their lives, they had much to cry about. The sadness of their predicament overwhelmed them.

10 And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people. 11 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?

Naomi had the mindset for them to return to their own people; however, Orpah and Ruth had the mindset to go with Naomi to Judah—to return with Naomi to Naomi’s people. They were at an impasse. Since Naomi had acted so selflessly toward them, Ruth and Orpah returned the kindness by acting selflessly toward her—they followed Naomi’s example. Naomi sowed the seeds of love and kindness and reaped love and kindness in return. Since her daughters-in-law would not relinquish their desire to go with her, Naomi reminded them of her own sad situation. She feared that she would not be able to provide or find provision for them. She was past the normal age to bear children they could marry as husbands, and if she was able to find refuge among her own people there was no certainty that her foreign daughters-in-law would be welcomed or able to remarry.

14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her. 15 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. 16 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: 17 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. 18 When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

After listening to a long, persuasive plea and a convincing argument by Naomi for her daughters-in-law to return to their people, Orpah goes back, “but Ruth clave unto her.” Then Naomi goes through another passionate plea for Ruth to return with her sister-in-law (v. 15), but Ruth determinedly commits herself to go with Naomi back to Judah. She does this through one of the most beautiful and poignant statements of human loyalty and commitment in all of Scripture.

The English translation of the phrase “and Ruth said” does not seem to bring out the force and emotion of the statement that follows. “Said” (Heb. *‘amar*, A-mar) is used more than 5,000 times in the Old Testament with a variety of meanings, including “promise, command, pledge, or vow” as well as simply “stated.” In light of the mundane nature of the dialogue it makes Ruth’s insistence more unexpected and that much more powerful.

In her reply, Ruth asks Naomi: “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee,” which in simple English means, “do not ask me or urge me to leave you.” The word translated as “intreat” is the Hebrew word *paga’* (paw-GAH), often meaning “to meet, encounter, or strike.” In this case, it means “to encounter with a request.” It seems to be a gentle but determined objection to Naomi’s effort to dissuade Ruth from following her to Judah. This objection translates into an absolute committed loyalty, which Ruth expresses in a beautiful poetic form. Ruth’s commitment and allegiance to Naomi extends beyond a commitment to one individual; it transcends the boundaries of nationality and ethnic religion. Her resolve to follow Naomi to the end is expressed as a matter of both life and death.

In many cultures, especially in Africa and the Jewish culture, people may decide to live among another tribe or people, but at death they always want to be buried in their homeland, among their people. But Ruth implicitly declares her allegiance to the Jewish community, culture, and religion. She invokes God’s covenant name and seals this declaration with an oath. In it, she pronounces a curse on herself if she fails to keep this promise or fails to do what she has pledged. In its Hebrew context it means something like, “May the Lord deal with me ever so severely.” Ruth says that not even death would be able to separate her from Naomi. She says that the

only thing that could keep her from fulfilling her vow to Naomi was if she died first. A covenant oath of this nature in Hebrew is taken very seriously and is binding, especially when the name Yahweh is invoked.

Naomi understands the degree of Ruth's commitment and determination to go with her, and she entreats her no longer (v. 18). When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her to return to Moab. The rest of the chapter summarizes their return to Bethlehem and the reception Naomi received from the women there (vv. 19–22).

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Protecting Widows
(Deuteronomy 24:17–22)

TUESDAY

Continuing the Family Line
(Deuteronomy 25:5–10)

WEDNESDAY

Ruth, Mother of David and Jesus
(Matthew 1:2–6, 16)

THURSDAY

Naomi Loses Her Husband and Sons
(Ruth 1:1–5)

FRIDAY

Ruth and Naomi Return to Bethlehem
(Ruth 1:19–22)

SATURDAY

Boaz Welcomes Ruth to His Fields
(Ruth 2:5–13)

SUNDAY

Intimate Family Ties
(Ruth 1:6–11, 14–18)