



TIMES OF SUFFERING: NAOMI AND RUTH

WEEK 8
04.22.18

FOCUS VERSE

Ruth 4:14

And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel.

LESSON TEXT

Ruth 1:1–9, 14–17

1 Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Beth-lehem-judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.

2 And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Beth-lehem-judah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.

3 And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.

4 And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years.

5 And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.

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.

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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



FOCUS THOUGHT

Recovery from suffering is achieved through right choices.



CULTURE CONNECTION

A Great Misconception

One of the great misconceptions of Christian living is that the righteous are spared from suffering. Many people are like Job's comforters who assumed his suffering was caused by sin. The Bible has too many examples to show that assumption is false. For example, consider the disciples. Twice they suffered great fear as they were caught in fierce storms on the Sea of Galilee. During the first storm, Jesus was asleep in the boat. They awoke Him and He commanded the winds to cease. The disciples marveled and asked "What manner of man is this?"

During the second storm, the disciples feared for their lives but saw Jesus walking on the water. The disciples were on the sea simply

because Jesus had commanded them to go to the other side. He did not send them to the other side to destroy them but to teach them and give them new revelation of His might and power. Their suffering had a purpose.

Job never understood why he endured so much pain. God did not tell him. Warren Wiersbe said, "God does not have to explain His ways to us. It is enough for us to know that He cares and that He never make a mistake. We do not live by explanations; we live by promises." God used Job's suffering to shut the mouth of Satan.

Are you willing to trust God through your suffering? It will work for your good if you let it. (See Romans 8:28.)

OUTLINE

- I. THE DECISION TO RELOCATE
- II. THE DECISION TO RETURN HOME
- III. MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICES
 - A. Choosing What Is Right, Not What Is Easy
 - B. Resources for Recovery
 - C. Beyond Recovery

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We live in a hurting world. Suffering is all around us. Consider the following information.

Human trafficking, or "modern-day slavery," affects over twenty million people worldwide each year. Human trafficking victims are often forced, through sexual, physical, and/or psychological violence, to perform work under slavery-like conditions.

Domestic violence is pandemic. Men suffer nearly three million physical assaults in the USA annually. One in four women will experience domestic violence during her lifetime (safehorizon.org/page/domestic-violence-statistics-facts-52.html, accessed June 10, 2016).

Child abuse is rampant. On average, more than five children die each day as a

result of child abuse or neglect in the United States. Over 6.2 million incidents of child abuse and neglect are reported each year (joyfulheartfoundation.org/learn/child-abuse-and-neglect, accessed June 10, 2016).

Hunger stalks the world. Seven hundred ninety-five million undernourished people exist on planet Earth. According to the World Food Programme website, "one in nine people do not get enough food to be healthy and lead an active life. Hunger and malnutrition are in fact the number one risk to health worldwide—greater than AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined" (wfp.org/hunger, accessed June 10, 2016).

Spiritual hunger and pain is ignored by most people as the world becomes more secular. Instead of turning to Jesus Christ and experiencing the joy and peace He gives, people turn to drugs, illicit sex, and all forms of worldly pleasure to fulfill their cravings. But only Jesus can satisfy their souls.

Does the Bible have any solutions to the suffering in the world? What advice could we give to the hurting, the victimized, the unwanted, the ill, or the ones dying without Christ? Does the Bible offer any practical solutions?

Usually when suffering is discussed in a biblical setting, Job becomes the center of

attention. However, today let us consider two others who suffered: Naomi and Ruth. These two women did not have physical pain as that caused by Job's boils, but they experienced great loss that brought sorrow and suffering. Their plight was the result of decisions—some good and some bad. Taking license with the text and filling in some of the holes in the biblical narrative, their story went something like this.

I. THE DECISION TO RELOCATE

The land of Judah was suffering prolonged, severe famine. Elimelech's fields no longer produced grain. His cows had stopped giving milk. His sheep were starving because the pasture was parched and brittle. The creek that ran beside their humble home was dry. Elimelech saw the pain in Naomi's eyes and heard the hungry cries of his two young sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Bethlehem, the "house of bread," no longer provided for his family. Desperate to ease the suffering of his family, Elimelech sought a solution to their dilemma.

Pagan Moab had lush fields. It lay just beyond the southern section of the Jordan River and the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. The limestone hills that formed the plateau were generally steep but fertile. Grass covered the hills in the spring and the tableland produced abundant grain. Rainfall was fairly plentiful. Although the summers were hot, Moab was cooler than Judah to the west. During the Moabite winter and spring, snow often fell adding to the water supply.

Moab attracted Elimelech. It seemed logical to move there. Yes, it would mean leaving family and friends in Bethlehem-judah for a while. However, Moab was not that far. Once they got back on their feet, they would visit their aged parents and see friends again. By that time, blessings might be falling again and they would move back.

While it was true Moabites sacrificed their children to the god Chemosh, Elimelech and Naomi were strong in their worship of Jehovah. They had taught the Ten Commandments of Moses to Mahlon and Chilion. The boys were young but old enough to know "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one!" Elimelech was certain his sons would never bow to the heathen god.

The boys were excited when Elimelech broke the news of the move to them. Naomi questioned the wisdom of moving to a pagan land, but she knew better than to oppose her husband. Instead, she rallied the boys and called her neighbors to help her pack. Soon the cart was loaded, and they said tearful good-byes to family and friends.

Time passed. The strange customs of Moab became all too familiar to Elimelech and his family. Their new home was comfortable even though it was not overly spacious. Their neighbors were pleasant in spite of pressuring Elimelech to worship Chemosh instead of a god no one could see. The new fields produced healthy harvests although not as robust as Elimelech had hoped.

As the boys grew into hardy young men, Elimelech depended more and more on them to reap the grain. Naomi noticed that her husband was frequently short of breath and sometimes seemed pale. He assured her nothing was wrong. One day as Elimelech was harvesting grain, he became overcome by the sun. By the time Mahlon found him, he was dead.

As the firstborn son, Mahlon shouldered the responsibility of the family. He did not have his father's farming knowledge, so he turned to his neighbors for advice. As they worked together, he became more and more comfortable in their presence. The oldest neighbor had a young granddaughter who caught Mahlon's eye. Before the year was out, he asked for Ruth's hand in marriage. In due time, Chilion married Orpah.

The marriages brought heartache to Naomi. She wished her boys had married Israelite girls from Judah. She grieved when the women continued going to the heathen temple. She tried to teach them the ways of Jehovah, and she wondered if she was making any impact.

For ten years the hot sun beat down on the young men. They struggled to provide for their wives and mother. One day Chilion, who had never been as strong as his brother, suffered a heat stroke and died in the field. Mahlon then doubled his efforts to provide for his mother, wife, and sister-in-law. He apprenticed himself to a potter and longed to buy his own shop. Exhaustion was his constant companion. One evening after working all day in

the fields, he had a heart attack and died at his potter's wheel while working on a project for a customer.

Naomi was now bereft of her husband and her two sons. The responsibility she felt to care for her two daughters-in-law compounded her suffering.

The decision to move to Moab had seemed logical so many years ago. Life seemed easier for them at first. How she grieved for her husband! He was a good man. But she wished they had stayed in Judah and waited out the famine. Her boys continued to worship Jehovah, but she sensed an ambivalence after they married Moabite women. Now her sons were gone, and she was left with two daughters-in-law who were more pagan than worshipers of Jehovah.

Elimelech's decision resulted more in heartache than in joy. Unfortunately, this statement can be applied to many decisions Apostolics make in the twenty-first century. A job offer in a distant city may be attractive, but it is probably not a wise move if the city has no apostolic church.

A young man may be physically appealing, witty, charismatic, brilliant, and have a good job, but accepting his proposal is probably not wise if his consecration is less than his charm.

Such decisions have life-long consequences. It behooves us to choose wisely and to teach our children to choose wisely.

II. DECISION TO RETURN HOME

Naomi had moved to Moab as a young mother with two young boys and a faithful husband. Now she was a middle-aged widow with no one to support her and with no means of caring for herself and her daughters-in-law. She was destitute. The money from the sale of the fields was almost gone.

Desperate circumstances forced Naomi to make a decision. As she saw it, she had only two options: (1) She could remain in Moab and be at the mercy of people who had never really accepted her and who shunned the daughters-in-laws for marrying foreigners, or (2) she could return to Judah and trust Jehovah to provide a kinsman or loving neighbor who would look after her.

In writing to the church in Galatia, Paul stated, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for

whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Poor choices usually lead to pain and suffering. Recovery begins when we face the reality of life's situation and admit that our misdeeds led us to this point. Taking the blame for one's actions and repenting of one's poor decisions is the second step to recovery.

However, what if the situation we face is not of our own making? What if a spouse has found someone else and wants a divorce? What if we, or a loved one, are facing terminal disease? What if the stock market has crashed and the value of our investments has plunged? What if a son announces that she is now transgender? What if friends, like David's, have turned against us and seek our destruction? (See Psalm 41:9.)

Is there a solution to such dire situations? Is there an end to the emotional, physical, and financial suffering?

The third step on the road to recovery is trusting God and praising Him. Solomon said, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Claim the promise of Romans 8:28. The verse implicitly declares that God can use the most desperate situations for our good if we will allow Him by trusting Him. Joseph found this to be true, for he told his brothers, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20). If we believe that God can take our despair, agony, and frustration and use it for our good, then we will find strength to praise Him. When we praise Him, we release the power of Heaven to work on our behalf. (See Psalm 68:1-4.)

Naomi decided to return to Judah. She put her faith in Jehovah to provide for her. Even though her future was unknown, her choice to return to Bethlehem began her upward path to recovery.

III. MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICES

A. Choosing What Is Right, Not What Is Easy

Some suffering could be avoided if an individual always made the right choices, but choosing what is right is not always easy.

Right choices often involve personal sacrifice for others' benefit. Right choices bless and lift, inspire and direct, give hope and strength.

Naomi's choice to return to her homeland was costly for her. She would leave behind her home, the graves of her husband and two sons, and her two daughters-in-law. She did not expect Ruth or Orpah to go with her. They still had family members in Moab; they could return to their mothers' homes. They were still young enough to marry and have a family.

The thoughts of leaving Moab, her family, her gods, and the hope of finding a new husband were too much for Orpah to consider. She went back to her people. On the other hand, Ruth vowed to go wherever Naomi went, to dwell wherever she lived, to choose the Israelites as her own people, and conscientiously to reject the gods of Moab and worship Jehovah. Though what she was giving up may have pained her, because Ruth loved Naomi she knew she had made the right choice.

B. Resources for Recovery

Recovery is built on hope, righteousness, people, principles, hard decisions, and work. These are resources for renewal. Dependence on and attachment to other people are important to recovery. Naomi and Ruth worked together, each drawing from the other. Naomi was familiar with the customs of the land and had the wisdom of experience. Ruth was younger and had the strength to glean the fields to provide sustenance for them.

Naomi's arrival in Bethlehem was met with unexpected acceptance. Although the house Elimelech had built needed repair, neighbors rallied around. The men rebuilt the roof while the women cleaned. Soon her house was livable again. Surely God had gone before her to prepare the way. Naomi and Ruth lived close to relatives, kept the customs of the Law, and waited patiently for God's will to unfold. The bitterness that froze Naomi's soul in Moab melted away as she watched God work miracle after miracle for her and Ruth.

C. Beyond Recovery

The Law required that the poor be allowed to glean the grain that the reapers left in the fields. To help support her mother-in-law and herself, Ruth went to glean. Her choice of

fields was guided by God. She chose to work in the field belonging to a relative of Elimelech—Boaz, a wealthy landowner.

Boaz was smitten with Ruth and ordered his workers to leave extra grain in the field for her to glean. Boaz said to Ruth, "Hearest thou not, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens" (Ruth 2:8). He explained, "It hath fully been shewed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother in law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore. The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust" (Ruth 2:11–12).

When Ruth made it clear that she wanted Boaz's protection as a kinsman-redeemer (Ruth 3), he went before the city elders and conferred with the relative that was closer to Elimelech than he. That relative would not redeem Elimelech's fields and marry Ruth, because to do so would endanger his own inheritance. Following custom, he took off his shoe and gave it to Boaz, signaling he had given up his right as the kinsman-redeemer. Therefore, Boaz was at liberty to buy the fields of Elimelech and to take Ruth as his bride (Ruth 4).

Without a doubt, Ruth's choice of the place to glean was a key to her future happiness. Providentially, God had guided her. Boaz, a near kinsman, redeemed her. God supplied much more than Naomi or Ruth had ever dreamed of receiving. He turned their mourning into dancing.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The story of Naomi and Ruth occurred over three thousand years ago. What lessons can we learn from it?

We reap what we sow. An immutable fact of life is the law of sowing and reaping. In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul stated this law: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). We sow seed by the decisions we make. Wise decisions yield blessings. Bad decisions produce heartache, pain, and sorrow.

The world is filled with suffering. Famine often results because of drought, but sometimes poor farming practices lead to crop failure. Political differences lead to war and indiscriminate mass killings, but sometimes domestic strife leads to murder. Epidemics, such as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, spread wholesale death; but sometimes death is the result of a drug overdose or of someone firing a gun in a fit of anger. Some suffering is simply a part of the circle of life; other times the anguish and sorrow could have been avoided if other decisions had been made.

Because we reap what we sow, it is vitally important to walk in the Spirit and to follow the Lord's leading. We need to guard our thought lives, for thoughts become actions. Paul said, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Philippians 4:8).

Because we can plant good seeds, Peter advised: "Add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (II Peter 1:5-8).

While the law of sowing and reaping may sound threatening to some, it is a joyful promise that if we sow good seed, we will reap a harvest of manifold blessings.

God can turn our suffering into blessing. God can turn our mistakes into blessings. As mentioned earlier, Paul wrote in Romans 8:28 that all things can work for the good of those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose. Some people misquote this verse and state that all things are good. The Bible does not say that. A big difference exists between "all things are good" and "all things can work for a person's good." God is able to take the negative things in life—even our sinful mistakes—and turn them into something beneficial and edifying.

A wise woman has said that God never wastes experiences. Living with chronic pain for nearly forty years and being near death several times have made her compassionate and sympathetic to others suffering serious illness. Her familiarity with life's ups and downs as a wife, parent, missionary, and certified teacher has given her wisdom and understanding to help her neighbors and members of her church. Dealing with physical challenges has given her an inner strength and resolve that many say is miraculous. While many would say life has not been fair to her, and she has suffered much more than any person should have to suffer, she has allowed God to take the bad things in her life and to use them for her good and through her, to bless others.

Years ago, missionary Martha Dobyms told a story that has changed some people's perspective on life and suffering. As one individual remembers the story, a lady in Fiji had crossed the mountains to attend a service on the other side of this Pacific paradise. As she was worshiping, enjoying the presence of God, a policeman came to the church looking for her. He said, "Ma'am, I'm sorry, but I have bad news for you. Disaster has struck the other side of the island, and everything you own has been destroyed. Worse, your only daughter was killed, and your husband is in the hospital, not expected to live."

She looked as the policeman and quietly said, "That's a good idea."

Astounded, the policeman replied, "Ma'am, you do not understand! The freak storm has wiped out everything you own! Your husband is not expected to live and your daughter has already died!"

She looked at him again and, with tears flowing, repeated, "I heard you, sir. But that is a good idea."

She went on to say, "Sir, I have prayed for twenty long years for my husband to be saved and to serve the Lord. If losing everything I have, even the death of my precious daughter, is the way God has of bringing my husband to salvation, then it's a good idea."

As the years have passed, one minister and his wife who heard this story and who have had challenges to face have often looked at

situations and—sometimes through tears—said, “That’s a good idea, Lord.”

Don’t be hasty to judge the situation. It would be easy to judge Elimelech and criticize him for moving his family to Moab. Was he right? Should he have waited in Judah for a miracle? Right or wrong, Elimelech did what he thought was best for his family. Would he and his sons have survived had they stayed in Bethlehem? We do not know. We simply know what the Bible says: Elimelech moved his family to Moab to avoid the famine in Judah. He and his sons died in Moab, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law destitute.

We also know how the story ended: Naomi moved back to Bethlehem with Ruth. Ruth married Boaz, a wealthy near kinsman to Elimelech, and became the great grandmother of David. Did God orchestrate Elimelech’s move to Moab so Ruth would be an ancestor of Jesus Christ?

Two things in Scripture are perhaps puzzling to some. One is Judges 14:4: “But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines.” How could it be God’s will for Samson to marry a Philistine? The other is God’s telling Hosea to marry a harlot to

demonstrate the actions of the rebellious Israelites. In our minds, these two things do not harmonize with a holy, righteous God. Had we been asked, we probably would have advised Samson and Hosea to flee such sinful women. But God had plans only He could understand.

Often we find ourselves in uncomfortable situations and think we are out of the will of God. Sometimes these circumstances can be extremely frightening and painful. However, it could be possible that God is getting us into position for spiritual growth. Twice in obedience to the word of Jesus, the disciples found themselves on the Sea of Galilee in a fierce storm. Jesus used the storms to teach the Twelve about His deity.

For years farmers were taught that the milkweed plant was a weed that needed to be eliminated. Now St. Louis and other communities are planting milkweed to attract Monarch butterflies, whose population is declining. God knew all along the value of the plant.

And God knows the value of trials and troubles that He allows to come our way to refine us, to purify us, and to make us better equipped to serve Him and to reach our world. ■

REFLECTIONS

- Did Elimelech move his family to Moab in the will of God? Explain how you came to this conclusion.
- Is all suffering the result of sin or bad decisions? Upon what do you base this answer?
- What is the importance of Ruth being in the genealogy of Jesus?
- How is Boaz a type of Christ?
- How has suffering proven beneficial to you?
- Have you found yourself in difficult circumstances while obeying the will of God? If so, what was the outcome?