

“Heroes of the Faith: Ruth – ‘A Noble Choice’”

By Dr. Mark Smith

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Ruth 1:1-18, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Ru 1:1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

Ru 1:2 The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife’s name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Ru 1:3 Now Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.

Ru 1:4 They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years,

Ru 1:5 both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Ru 1:6 When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

Ru 1:7 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.

Ru 1:8 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me.

Ru 1:9 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

Ru 1:10 and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

Ru 1:11 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?

Ru 1:12 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—

Ru 1:13 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!”

Ru 1:14 At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.

Ru 1:15 “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

Ru 1:16 But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Ru 1:17 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.”

Ru 1:18 When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. [NIV]

It’s a beautiful story, and I encourage you to finish reading it at your leisure. (It will take you about 15 minutes.) It’s a love story, really, on several levels. As we have just read, it begins with Ruth making this noble choice to stay with her mother-in-law no matter what.

To appreciate this choice of hers, it helps to understand the dire predicament in which the women of this family found themselves, for Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law were widowed. In that day, society was completely dominated by men. A woman was always considered to be the property or the responsibility of some man, which meant that any woman who did not have a father or a husband or a brother or a son to care for her was in desperate straits. There were really only two alternatives open to such a woman: she could sell herself into slavery or resort to prostitution.

It so happened that word reached Naomi that the famine back in Bethlehem had come to an end, and so she resolved to go back there, thinking that she might find some kinsmen to take her in. At this point, she urged her two daughters-in-law to go back to their homes in Moab, and seek the same kind of protection. Orpah chooses to do just that.

But contrary to all expectation, Ruth chooses to remain with Naomi in words that have become famous to this day:

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.

These words pledging love and devotion and loyalty are often read in wedding ceremonies, fittingly enough. But this is a love, mind you, not between two lovers, but the love of a daughter-in-law for a mother-in-law. Of all things! In our day mothers-in-law are often the brunt of jokes and perhaps are more to be avoided than loved – or so is the stereotype, unfair as it is.

Ruth's choice to follow Naomi, as noble as it was, was quite surprising when you think about it, for it would come at great self-sacrifice: She was willing to give up her family and her own land. It meant, as far as she knew, a life of widowhood and childlessness, because Naomi had no man to give. It meant going to an unknown land with a new people and new customs and a new language. It meant leaving her gods and her religious heritage behind – and following her mother-in-law into a future that seemed bleak. Such was her love for Naomi that she was willing to forsake all this. Now that's love!

Her choice to remain with Naomi reflects the highest kind of love, the kind celebrated by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:

Love is patient, love is kind . . . It is not self-seeking . . . It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres . . . Love never fails.

And Ruth was able to love her mother-in-law, even when Naomi herself was quite unlovable. Naomi was bitter, inconsolable, and felt quite abandoned by her God. Still, Ruth pledged her loyalty and her commitment to Naomi, refusing to leave her side.

We are so in need of this quality of love in our relationships – our friendships, our marriages... We need that kind of outgoing, self-giving kind of love, that keeps us concerned and working for the good of the other person, even when it is difficult to do so, even when they don't give us any love in return.

So often, people will enter into relationships with one primary consideration, *"What's in it for me? What is the other person going to do for me?" If I remain in this relationship, what will I get out of it?"* But real love is not self-centered and self-seeking, it is self-giving - after the

example of Christ himself, who loves us not because we are especially loveable, but simply because he values us.

This quality of love simply reflects true concern and care for another – it puts the other person first. And it stays on the job. Love never fails; it never ends. It is loyal.

Lewis Smedes, who was a well-known professor at Fuller Seminary, and popular author, wrote a book entitled Caring & Commitment. I like what he says about caring for others:

Care is love's investment in another person's needs.

Care is love's permission for the other to walk to the beat of a different drummer.

Care is love's gratitude for the other's unexpected gifts.

Care is love's flexibility to go where another needs to go.

Care is love's firmness to stay close by when the other cannot move.

Care is love's generosity to give when the other speaks of needs.

Care is love's presence when being there matters most.

Care is love's power to survive the death of desire.

Ruth exercised this quality of care and commitment towards Naomi – a noble choice indeed. She didn't have to go with Naomi. She could have thought of herself first and turned back. That was the safe thing to do. But such was her love and her sense of loyalty and devotion. It was a beautiful thing.

But perhaps there is another reason besides love and care for her mother-in-law that led to Ruth's decision to go with her to a strange land. I believe she made a noble choice to make Naomi's God her own – that is if we can judge that to be the meaning of her words: *"Your God will be my God."*

Through Naomi and her Israelite family, Ruth, a Moabitess, came to know Yahweh – the God of Israel. As she heard about this God – as stories were told around the campfire - she began to realize the huge difference between the gods of her pagan heritage and the God revealed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

For the Moabites and for other pagan peoples at the time, the gods were above all to be feared. The gods were either indifferent to humanity or were hostile and needed to be placated.

The ancient myth of Prometheus gives us a glimpse into the pagan mindset. Do you know that story? Prometheus was one of the lesser gods in the Greek pantheon. He is said to have looked down from Mt. Olympus with compassion upon humanity. He saw that human beings were cold and confused in their darkness, so Prometheus took fire from the altar of heaven and gave it as a gift to warm and illumine humankind. When Zeus, the king of the gods, discovered what

Prometheus had done, he was enraged; to show compassion for human beings was a crime against divinity! So Prometheus was punished by being sent into exile on an island in the middle of a river and poor Prometheus was tortured there eternally.

The gods were not supposed to be nice to humanity; they were to be feared. So it came as quite a shock to Ruth to learn that there was a God – one God only – whose desire was to bless humanity – not to curse. Here was a God full of compassion and mercy. Drawn to follow this God, Ruth made Naomi's God her own. This noble decision on Ruth's part to forsake pagan gods for the God of Israel corresponds beautifully with the promise made to Abraham that eventually all the families of the human race would be able to bless themselves because of him. Ruth the Moabite – a non-Jew - became part of God's family. The God of Israel did not want to be merely a tribal god, but the God of all the earth and of every nation.

Ruth's love for Naomi, and her love for Naomi's God led to her decision to stand by Naomi and go with her into a strange land. And God honored her noble decision, for a whole new future opened up for Ruth and for Naomi and all the family.

The story goes on . . . Ruth met Naomi's kinsman, Boaz, while gleaning in his field. And Ruth and Boaz eventually married and produced seven sons, one of whom was Obed, the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David. That puts Ruth, a foreigner – a Moabite – squarely in Jesus' family tree. Ruth's noble choice was honored by God, and was used by God to bring about his good purposes – for Ruth and Naomi – and for us as well, for the Messiah came through her family line!

Life is full of choices. When we choose what is good and life-giving, we are blessed. When we choose to give ourselves away in love to others, when we exercise care and concern for the people in our lives and stand by our promises and commitments, and when we choose to put our trust in God and follow him in love, God honors that and rewards us by making us useful for his purposes, and by giving us a future and a hope.

Life really comes down to two choices. We can either live for self, and pursue our own aims and goals; or we can live for God and for others and pursue a life of love, only to get our own self back again, with a greater sense of joy and fulfillment.

Ruth reminds us of the nobler choice.