

Aug 16, 2020 | Mickey Klink

On the Way to Return

[This is an imperfect transcript from a pre-recorded sermon. Our volunteers work hard, but we appreciate your grace.]

[Ruth 1:6-18](#) *6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 10 And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, 13 would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her Gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." 18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.*

Sermon:

Good morning, Hope Church! I'm thankful to be with you, even if through technology. We're thankful for the resources and even for the staff standing behind the camera running the sound that helped facilitate this. We are in the beginning of the book of Ruth. We're working through, passage by passage, going through in an expository way, and it's rich. There's so many things to look at, and even in today's text, verses 6 through 18, there are so many different things we could talk about. I just highlighted a few of them to bring to us, a few things that God is trying to show us as his people, as the people of God. I want to remind you where we're at in the story of this family crisis. We talked about this last time - sometimes God talks about all of creation, the whole world, or even an entire nation. This particular Biblical book shows God's concern with all things and all people. This book focuses on one little family. Most of it has just been updating us, the first five verses or just the preface, the introduction, where we saw this family crisis, where this family walked away, left Israel, arguably they left their faith in God - they went somewhere else. Which, again, for an Israelite in the old covenant, would have never been the case. The sons married foreign wives and the crisis just collapsed even further. As the father, Elimelech, and both of his sons, died, and there is Naomi and her two daughters-in-law. How will God respond? How will the people respond? We continue in the text today in verses 6 through 18. Let me pray and then we'll look at the text together.

Father, thank you that we can - even if through this medium for those who are unable to gather with us on Sunday mornings - thank you that we can still discuss your Word, that we can still, even if just in our little family units or individually, worship you in song and in Word. Father, minister to us. I pray specifically for those who are now unable to come on Sunday morning, that you would encourage them through the message from your Word, to the singing that they do, maybe in a lone voice or just with their spouse or their children or grandchildren, Father, that you would minister to them in this process. Thank you that you are a God who has given us his Spirit, so that no matter where we are, you are present with us, Father. But we do pray, Father, I ask that you would bring us back together soon. That you would heal the sickness in this land and that you would encourage your children to gather together at the church, as they are able physically to do so. Father, be with us now, as we look again at the book of Ruth, and we pray this. In Jesus' name, amen.

The text has already been read for us. What I want to do is look at a couple themes that you'll see popping out, and the first is right away in verse six. The text says "Then she arose . . .". This is referring to Naomi, the wife who lost her husband and two sons. ". . . she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food." Notice how the text describes what she heard. That actually may not have been the actual wording she heard ; there were no quotations around those words, but the Bible describes what was happening. The Lord had visited his people and given them food. Meaning, it might have been the case that people simply said, "Oh, the people in Bethlehem, in your home country, the harvest has come back; they're able to eat now. The famine is over." All of that would have been true and an important and necessary description of events, but when God's Word describes what is really happening, when it talks about true agency, like who is the mover and the shaker of all things, it describes that the true provider was the Lord. The language says the Lord had visited his people. That's the Bible's way of talking about God's gracious presence, and it said specifically that he'd given them food. This little statement in verse 6 teaches us something important. We want to see how the Bible teaches us to listen well and to see the world and the true agency going on behind all things.

What it teaches us is this: it teaches us to see the good work of God in all of our circumstances. We can see how God works in all our circumstances. The same God that was sovereign and mysterious, that we talked about last week - there's a sovereignty, yet there's a mystery. We don't always know why, we don't always know when something will be resolved, or what ultimately caused it, or what his purposes are - but we trust him. and God's word teaches us to see the work of God in the circumstances around us. It wasn't fully true to say that the famine was over. It wasn't true enough just to say that there's food now to be found in Israel, or back in Bethlehem. The truest statement is that the Lord had visited his people and had given them food.

Last week we were challenged by Scripture to see the bigness of God. Here the text wants us to see that it was the Lord who brought the relief. That is, if last week we were reminded in the brokenness to trust his bigness, his mysterious sovereignty, here we're reminded to look for him, to wait upon him. The text states it strongly; the Bible is teaching us, it is shepherding us, it is discipling us, it is mentoring us to align our lives to the life and nature of God, to trust in him, to lean on him. Since God is sovereign, everything happens under his control and for his purposes.

Now we love those kind of statements, and they are Biblically true, but, man, in life are they hard! It is so hard to trust in God's sovereignty. It is so hard to rest in him when we are seeing what is missing or lacking, or we are suffering greatly, and I know firsthand that several of you in our own congregation have many struggles about which you are asking, "Lord, why are you seemingly silent? Why are you not responding? What about me?" Or maybe, as a parent or grandparent, your kids or your grandkids are struggling, and you're like, "Lord, where are you?" And even in those moments we have been discipled, we are being mentored, or shepherded by God's Word - to trust. And trust can even involve waiting, looking and hoping in the right things, in God himself.

A well-known verse, Romans 8:28, says this, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Notice how Romans 8:28 is saying, for those who have received the love of God, those that are in his love, he is working in all ways for their good, and that even is describing purpose - God has purpose behind the things that he does. Now you and I may want to say, "Wait, wait a second! I'm not seeing purpose in this crisis or this suffering or this loss or this pain," but remember what is equally true - the specific, purposeful care of God that is so real and Biblically expressed to us in a text like this, is also to be put in this context: God, in his Sovereignty, is also mysterious. He doesn't always explain. Sometimes it's not looking back at what we see, but something in the future, yet to be seen - how God is ministering to us, is guiding us, is working in us. That's why it's important that we respond rightly when things are difficult. Rather than domesticating God - making him helpless; or blaming him - accusing him of being evil; or demanding of him - so that he becomes our butler or a genie . . . we trust him. We seek him and we trust his purposes for us. That's why, even as we went through a previous series before the summer and right when this COVID was starting, we went through a series on lament. There might be times we just lament, like "Lord, we are hopeful grieving. We are broken. We are hurting. Help us to trust in you."

Again, without demanding to know the purposes and all the reasons, we align ourselves like a plumb line. We lean on, like a big father in whom a young child will sprawl across or lean against or literally be carried by, we entrust ourselves to a God who is both sovereign and mysterious, and we kneel before that throne on a daily basis. Sometimes, brothers and sisters, it might be good to hear, and the book of Hebrews speaks to this, sometimes God disciplines us so that we may seek him more. Sometimes he gives to us so that we can know he is the true provider. What was he doing with this family - Elimelech and Naomi, and the boys and their wives? How was he showing them what they really trusted in? How was he seeing how they would respond? And yet, even still, he is the one who, by this by the second part of chapter one, is feeding them, providing for them. These are important things to know. If we make ourselves the goal of life - and please hear this - this is so hard for us in our modern age. This is so hard for us in our broken inward bent of sin-self. If we make ourselves the goal of life, all discipline and suffering is bad. But if we make God's purposes the goal, then we trust God in the hard times, seeking to see how he is not just fixing our problems, like a butler, but actually fixing us, and those around us. What might God be doing during COVID? What might he be showing us about our hearts and the things in whom we trust? Is God breaking us of ourselves? How is he rebuking us in certain ways? Not just us, but an entire planet? How does God use that for his ultimate purposes? We trust him. We seek him.

Now, when we look at verses 7 through 14, the bulk of our text, we see this beautiful display of love between a mother-in-law and her daughters-in-law. It is absolutely beautiful. Seven says that she, again focusing the camera on Naomi, set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. Naomi stops, and the text was read for you already, she stops and she's encouraging her daughters-in-law to return. She knows this is not their homeland. In fact, she even knows this isn't even their God. Remember, we believe that this text is not just describing sociological factors, but actually faith responses. That Elimelech and Naomi, at least, certainly Elimelech, made decisions regarding his faith in God and in whom he would trust. That he abandoned the God of Israel and went and followed the gods of the Moabites. And Naomi knows full well that she needs to return. In fact, that word "returns" dominates chapter one. It's in verses 6, 7, 8, 10, 16 and 22 - most of them in our text. For this week, there's a major theme of "return" in the Bible.

"Return" is a theological key word that refers to returning to God - returning to the covenant of God, returning to his grace and his mercy. Naomi is responding to the judgment God had made on his people. She is responding to the mistake that she and her husband made, and she is returning to God. The story of this family teaches us that there is no safe place or provision outside of God, leaving God is never the answer. Brothers and sisters, this is so important for us to hear. Naomi would probably want to say that to us, if she could give her own testimony. (Wouldn't it be cool if the Biblical characters could give kind of an updated testimony for us? And in many ways these Biblical texts are just giving that.) There is no safe place other than God. Yet it is such our bent, in our broken, sinful world to trust in something other than God, and normally it's trusting our own judgment, our own circumstances, or some other king or provider. But there is no other place. There is no other one to whom we can turn.

Naomi's response is teaching us about repentance and returning to God. And Naomi's response teaches us the nature of true repentance - it is letting go, it's receiving the discipline from the Lord, and claiming nothing for herself. Jesus taught us this in Mark, chapter 10: Jesus is approached but by a rich man who is seeking to have religious teaching and instruction from Jesus, and Jesus says these words to him - go, sell everything you have, then come and follow me. It is tempting for us to want "God-plus" - like, yeah, we know God's a big deal. We know he's important. But we want "God-plus." We want God-*and this*, in this world. We want God-*and that*, in the world. Naomi's showing us that she had abandoned God, and she is willing to say, "I have nothing." She's saying this even to her daughters-in-laws: "I have nothing." This is a bold move, one that shows a deep and real trust in God. She is yielding, she is submitting to the grace of God - the one who had visited his people, and he'd given them food.

It's interesting when we think about verse six, that in many ways that language of God visiting his people and giving them food is the exact description we see in the New Testament of the personal work of Jesus Christ, who literally visited his people in the incarnation when God became man, taking on flesh. He literally visited us and he is the one that truly feeds us. In fact, in John chapter 6, which we went through a long time ago now it feels like, John 6 teaches that Jesus is our food. He is the one that we are to eat, he's speaking more, and past, something like the Lord's supper to this reality that our lives are sustained like oxygen or calories by Jesus. We live in Christ. "To live, is Christ," Paul says. Naomi is saying something to that effect and she's describing it even in her words (and if we had time we could look at all the nuances when she's explaining the cost of going back) -

“Listen, I've got no sons to give you. I'm taking you to a foreign land.” She's describing the cost of discipleship. She's showing that she's wanting them to know they will have to respond by grace. And what's fascinating, as we move to the last couple of verses, is to see the response.

Orpah responds and Ruth responds. Let's look at these last few verses, 15 to 18. Let's start in 14: “After Naomi said her words, then they lifted up their voices and they wept again and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.” Do you feel the passion in this moment? Do you see the love that is there? That kiss from Orpah is a goodbye kiss, but Ruth is not wanting to let go. Clearly verse 15 says that Orpah, after being told by her mother-in-law she is free to go, Orpah leaves, and Naomi says to her, “see, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people, to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law.” And look at the words of Ruth. But Ruth says to Naomi. “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you, for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. And may the Lord . . .” - and here this Moabite, this person who has never stepped foot into Israel, who has only known anything about the God of the Bible from this one family, this is what she says - “And may the Lord do so to me and more also, if anything but death parts me from you. And when Naomi saw that she, Ruth, was determined to go with her, she said no more.”

What a powerful moment those texts describe. It was decision time for Orpah and Ruth. Do they leave what they know? Do they leave what they know, and trust in the God of Israel? Please understand, in our modern, secular, world, religious belief is one facet of a complex, interwoven connection of life. And normally we're thinking of moving and transitioning based on economy, and jobs, and school districts, and family connections, and religion is rarely the primary component. You don't feel like when you're moving to another place that you're leaving your faith. In the ancient world, that's what this was. She was leaving. She was trusting in the God of Israel. She was trusting in what we now know, what the Old Testament was pointing to; she was trusting in Christ, and we're seeing how trusting in Christ means not trusting in anything else. Ruth chooses to say that she will follow God, and her language is the language of conversion.

What is recorded in verses 16 and 17 is one of the most radical and powerful conversions in the Bible, where Ruth chooses not just Naomi, her mother-in-law - she chooses God. Clearly, God had worked in her heart, likely using the faithful example of Naomi, and maybe even of the family, maybe even this weak, hesitant family, this kind of - whatever language we would use for somebody who had been part of the faith but has removed themselves or made it secondary in their life - that she'd gotten enough of a glimpse of God. Maybe just a little bit that she picked up from the Old Testament that was recorded, the stories of Moses and the people of Israel, she heard enough about this God that God began to work in her life. It's interesting, skipping ahead to what we see in chapter two, when Boaz, a character soon to be introduced, hears the gossip, the rumors, the conversations about Ruth - he hears about her deep faith that “She took refuge under the wings of the God of Israel.” That's what the people, when they're describing this young woman, they're describing somebody who took refuge in God. How'd you like that to be the gossip spoken about you? Ruth had turned from idols to trust in the living and true God - and she teaches us how, when we trust in Christ, we trust in nothing else. Ruth had nothing else. She had no husband. She knew that her mother-in-law could not provide. She knew there was great risk. Here was this immigrant going to a

foreign country, where she is not even allowed to worship in the temple! And yet she goes, with such bold language.

The last thing I want to point out to you - that last encounter helps us - look at the intimate family love. Look at the love between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law, the commitment to them. The language of Ruth is bold and strong. Your people shall be my people. Where you live, I will live. Where you die, I will die, and that is where I will be buried. May your God deal harshly with me if anything but death separates us. That kind of commitment between people - that's a God-driven, gospel symptom, when we are locking in with people and we are not letting go.

A gentleman was sitting in my kitchen not long ago when I came home, and he was talking to my wife, and he wanted to talk to the two of us about his grandson. This particular young man, this young boy, his grandson, had a mom who was absent and a dad who was completely uninvolved, and his grandma had recently passed away, and all that was left in this boy's life was this grandpa. We were talking with this grandpa, and trying to find ways to help and encourage him as he's caring for his grandson. The grandson had recently said to him, especially when grandma had passed away (knowing that the grandpa was actually not from this area, but somewhere else) the grandson had said, "Grandpa, are you going to leave too?" And with a tear in his eye this grandpa (as he was describing what he said, I could see the emotion on his face), he turned and he said to his grandson, "I will never leave you." He says, "and if I go anywhere young man, you are going with me." And the grandpa described how this young boy felt this relief, because his grandpa was all that he had. That is not easy - this family doesn't have it simple. There's lots of complex things around such a statement, but that is a commitment that should be driven by those who love and know God, and who love the people God has put in their lives.

Brothers and sisters, in this time of pandemic, in this time of massive amounts of anxiety and depression, with actual job loss and disruption of life in every facet and to every person and family, this text is encouraging you to trust in God - to make him the one in whom you put your trust, to trust in him even when it's difficult or or you're wondering what's going to happen, or how will this serious problem be resolved. Without minimizing any of those, this text is calling you to trust in that God.

And you know what else it is calling you to do? To be a person who then commits to and loves other people. There are so many ways we could apply that. A couple would be simply this: Husbands and wives - this text would remind you of that covenant commitment you have to one another and to take that seriously in this moment. To deal with those issues of brokenness and respond to it rightly. Moms and dads, grandparents, with your children and grandchildren, there might be some extra care and need in the midst of all that you're going through, that you might need to give to your kids. That you will lock on in the language that Ruth said to Naomi, that you will lock on in those relationships.

And I could even say, brothers and sisters in Christ, in the church with all the divisiveness, even me hearing comments of people who are unwilling to come and gather on Sunday morning because they disagree with particular things about masks - do not let those political convictions separate you from loving the people of God, and the people specifically who are your siblings! Would you stay away from your child or grandchild if they disagreed with you on masks? Would you not see them

because of that? Then why would you do this to your brothers and sisters in Christ , the ones to whom you have been aligned by the blood of Christ, in this kingdom of God's embassy brothers sisters?

I'm asking us to respond and to learn from the way that this book is already showing us to see the bigness of God, his sovereignty and mystery, and yet that minute care that we're waiting in and trusting in and the kind of care that isn't just looking into the clouds and trusting in God in the abstract, but expresses itself with a love and a faithfulness to his people, that is tangible and real. This book has a lot to teach us about our world and about our families and about relationships and about trusting in God, and I'm thankful that we get time to work through it.

Let's pray: Father, we thank you for the gospel of Jesus Christ . This beautiful truth that you created all things, you're redeeming all things. Father, work in us as this text showed even in Naomi's life. Break us of ourselves, rebuke us and adjust us. Father, help us to see our own brokenness. Father, help us to trust in you. Father, lead us to repentance. Help us to be teachable and humble. In a world where everyone has the answers, help us to be those who will listen, who will speak last. Father, help us in our relationships and our commitments, relationships with all of our people, those hurting around us - our brothers and sisters in Christ. Father, help us not to be divided about things when we're supposed to be unified. How many political things and differences were there between Ruth and Naomi? And yet two evangelical Christians cannot worship together because of different political opinions? Father, help us to be committed to one another as your children and as worshipers of you. Father, care for this church, minister to its people, I pray. And help us to be a light to those around us. In Jesus' name, amen.