

Gleaning God's Provision...Spiritual Friendship
Ruth 1:1-22
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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.* 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.*

The story begins with the announcement that *there was a famine in the land*. Bethlehem, its name literally meaning “the House of Bread,” was normally a fertile region for growing grain. But *there was a famine in the land*. Inasmuch as God's people on the Space Coast are enduring the worst recession in decades, this ancient story has an extra element of relevance!

Elimelech and Naomi did then what families still have to do today when there's insufficient provision—they move to greener pastures. So they and their sons went to Moab and lived there. Moab is now the nation of Jordan. For devout Jews this meant leaving their homeland; it meant running the risk of being compromised by the pagan culture. This has always been a dilemma for God's people—you want to stay where things are secure and simple, but the circumstances of life cause you to leave and become an alien in another land. However, Naomi thought at least everyday life would be better in Moab. But that was not the case, things got worse.

³ *Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.* ⁴ *They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years,* ⁵ *both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.*

Wow, all three Jewish men died in Moab, Mahlon and Kilion before they could father children! What a sad and desperate situation! Three widows—Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth—having to face the cruelty of the ancient world without the protection and provision provided by a husband...remember, no life insurance, no Social Security, no survivors' pension. All they had was each other; along with their faith in a God who lets bad things happen to vulnerable people. But then the text reminds us that this God can be trusted to provide:

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.* 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.*

So the economy was now better in Naomi's homeland, so the three of them set out west for the land of Judah. Now remember that the two daughters-in-law would be aliens among the Jews; they were Moabite women. When they married Naomi's sons, they promised to become Jewish and turn away from idols. But Naomi wondered whether they really wanted to remain Jewish and leave their own people, so she stopped them along the way:

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.* 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 ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

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? 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- 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!"

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

¹⁵ "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

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. 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." ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Who could blame Orpah? She wanted to be loyal to Naomi but it made sense to live with her family in Moab and hope that a local man claimed her.

Ruth's choice was the surprise. Not only was she loyal to Naomi, she was loyal to Naomi's god. Despite the suffering, she had become a believer in Yahweh, this invisible God who sustained people through life's hardships, liberating them in the process. She spoke words that are repeated thousands of years later; words that are sung, words that are often claimed at weddings: *Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.*

This ancient story resonates with relevance! First, **God's people need spiritual friendships**. When times are tough, when you are dealing with loss or lack of provision, you need people to listen to you and pray for you and watch out for you. But because we live in an individualistic culture, we tend to isolate ourselves, denying ourselves the God-given provision that will help us to overcome.

I will also add that God's people need spiritual provision when times are good. When our material needs are met we're tempted to stop praying. We think of ourselves as self-sufficient. Seems like its too much trouble for our life group to meet, we're all just too busy. That's when we're most at risk of making bad choices, our blessings becoming curses because we don't depend on God in abundance. Spiritual friendships can provide the ballast you need so that you don't flip in the storms of temptation.

Sometimes spiritual friendships happen through family, as in Ruth's case. Sometimes they seem to be random, though nothing is ever random. Most often they happen when you see a God-given opportunity and you act on it. A benefit of life groups or ministry teams is that sometimes we connect with someone, over breakfast, lunch, or coffee, so we can encourage each other to be our best.

The story also reminds us that there are times that **God's people must choose their god**. Now in my notes I've used a small "g;" people who've been part of the covenant family often choose to worship idols. Orpah chose the Moab gods; nowadays, many people who were baptized into the church eventually chose to make gods out of their own fulfillment, achievements, or material

possessions. The young people we have here today who have professed their faith in Christ through Confirmation have said that they are choosing to honor the one true God, the invisible Creator who sent His Son Jesus to make us His sons and daughters. We're thrilled that the church's children are becoming young adults before our eyes. We're hopeful that when they leave us they will choose the Lord Jesus Christ; even when they've messed up that they will still choose to receive His grace and His guidance.

As we wrap up today's study, we see a wonderful benefit of having spiritual friendships with God's people. Even when you're feeling angry with God or distant from God; even when you're struggling with doubts, you can **be real with God's people**:

¹⁹ 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?"

²⁰ "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. ²¹ 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."

Naomi didn't hesitate to share her anger. The strange thing is that when spiritual friendships allow you to be honest about your feelings, you start to heal and feel closer God. And as we'll see next week, when you draw close to Him, you can hear and see how He provides for your needs. God will give you opportunities to glean. As verse 22 says,

²² So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

The barley harvest was beginning; as we shall see next week, Ruth will go out into the fields to gather what God had provided.

And for those of you enduring the worst recession in decades, for those of you facing uncertain health, for those of you wondering whether you will ever get married, have children, or have a sense of peace and purpose, don't give up...invest in spiritual friendships, commit to the one true God, and be real with God's people. As we shall see, God will prepare you for the harvest that is coming, a harvest of provision, a harvest of relationships, until that Day when the Lord's has His harvest, and gives eternal honor to those who chose to honor Him.