

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Women of Faith: Naomi and Ruth

Good morning and thank you for listening to *Truth for Today*. In this series of talks on "Women of Faith" in the Bible, we have so far considered Jochebed, the mother of Moses, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who had remarkable faith in God. Today we are considering two women, Naomi and Ruth, who also had great faith in difficult circumstances in their lives. Over the next few weeks we will talk about different women whose faith in God was used in help and blessing to others.

We see throughout the Bible that women are important to God and in particular they are vital within the family setting. My prayer this morning is that you will desire to more faithful to God and others, and be encouraged by the wonderful story of Naomi and Ruth.

The book of Ruth has four short chapters and is well worth reading over a few times to learn the story well. I will go through the story with you this morning as we do not have time to read the whole book. This lovely story is a picture of life in Israel at the time when the Lord raised up judges to rule; you can read more about this in the book of Judges. There was no king in Israel; and men did that which was right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6, 19:1 21:15).

God was displeased with the people who followed other gods and served them, which was against His covenant with them. In the Old Testament God used different ways to teach His people a lesson, to make them repent and return to Him. A famine was one of the trials God used; in the beginning of Ruth we read there was famine in the land.

Elimelech was from Bethlehem (Ruth 1:1-2) and he wanted to provide for his family during this famine. Elimelech decided the best way was to leave Israel and go to Moab to find food for his family. Was Elimelech right or wrong for doing this? Well, we can understand his good intentions in the circumstances that he felt a responsibility to provide for his family. But he was taking them to the land of Moab, the enemies of God's people. Did he not have enough faith that he could trust, and rely upon God to provide?

Elimelech obviously thought that he would be better taking direct action himself rather than waiting for God to help so he left to go to Moab with his wife Naomi and his two sons Mahlon and Chilion (Ruth 1:2). The family settled down in Moab and no doubt made friends there. But family life was shattered when, after a little while in Moab, Elimelech died suddenly (Ruth 1:3). Naomi was left with the sadness of losing her husband and the responsibility of looking after her two sons. During the ten years that they spent there the boys married wives, women of Moab; their names were Orpah and Ruth (Ruth 1:4). It was almost unbelievable but Mahlon and Chilion died as well (Ruth 1:5) and Naomi was then left with her daughters in law.

Poor Naomi! Put yourself in her position. It would not be out of place to think that all she had to go through was so unfair. I wonder if she considered why God had brought these terrible circumstances into her life. Was it to teach her to have faith in Him and in Him alone? Naomi and the girls were left with no one to provide for them. She must have felt a great sense of loss, as well as feeling helpless, struggling to provide materially for them.

Naomi heard that God had once more provided for her people in Israel giving them bread (Ruth 1:6). So she decided the best thing to do was to return to the land of Judah. This was a huge decision as there was no family there to care for them, so she was fully trusting in God.

Naomi and the girls packed up their belongings and they started on the return journey that she had made over ten years ago (Ruth 1:7). I am sure that during the journey they discussed all that they had gone through in the last few years. Naomi had been very faithful to God during the testing time in Moab. She must have talked many times to Orpah and Ruth of her God, the God of Israel, her people and her land. Both of the girls had listened and watched Naomi over the years because they had great respect for her. But Naomi was about to ask them to make a decision that would affect the rest of their lives. Naomi really appreciated the faithfulness and kindness shown to her by the girls.

In Ruth 1:8, we see Naomi stopping in her tracks as they journeyed to tell both the girls to return to their respective mother's houses. Naomi had confidence and faith that the LORD would look after them because of the way they had

treated her and the way they handled themselves during their time of sorrow. She bade them farewell and kissed them (Ruth 1:9). Orpah and Ruth both broke down in tears (Ruth 1:9). They both said that they would return with Naomi to her people. Naomi again tells them that there was no point going with her as she was too old to have a husband and have more sons. She went on to tell them that, if she were to have sons, would the girls wait until they were of age to take them as husbands. The girls wept again and Orpah kissed her mother in law (Ruth 1:14) and went the way Naomi instructed her to go, back to her people and to her gods. On the other hand, Ruth held on to her mother in law (Ruth 1:14), and again Naomi again tells Ruth to go back with Orpah (Ruth 1:15). But in Ruth 1:16 we see Ruth's faithfulness and commitment to Naomi, to Naomi's land, to Naomi's people and to Naomi's God.

Ruth even wanted to be buried where Naomi would be buried. Naomi saw that Ruth's mind would not be changed. She was very clear and single minded in that she wanted to return with Naomi. In one of the most moving passages of scripture, Ruth declares, in Ruth 1:16-17 "Intreat me not to leave thee, or 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. Where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me". So Naomi stopped trying to persuade her and they continued on together to Bethlehem.

Let us take a moment and consider why Naomi wanted Orpah and Ruth to go back to their families? Do you think Naomi was wrong to tell the girls to go back to their own families and lands? Naomi had been faithful in witnessing to them throughout the years in Moab, but she seemed more concerned about their practical needs rather than their spiritual. Once more I would like to point out there is a danger if we try and take steps ourselves to help our children that are not in line with God's mind and will. But there is an encouragement to mothers who through faithful teaching of the Bible can make a tremendous difference to their children by giving them sound counsel and direction.

With the right leading and guidance, they will be strong in their faith as Ruth was. But Naomi seemed to lack faith that God would provide for them in Israel. Once again, practically she was thinking that staying in Moab was the best option. But when you are turning away from God and His people, I believe it is never the best option. It will inevitably be a slippery slope away from God. Orpah and Ruth made their individual decisions. Orpah went back but, on the other hand, Ruth's faith is solid; no persuasion would halt her from her faith and commitment to go with Naomi, to serve Naomi's God and be with her people. It would not be easy as she would be a stranger in the land. We would do well to follow Ruth's example in our lives, to be faithful to others and to God no matter what difficulties come during our lives.

Naomi and Ruth continued on to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:18). I wonder what their thoughts were as they were entering Bethlehem? Naomi would be wondering if she would be recognised and remembered. What would people think about her? Would the people ignore them and cast them aside? Well the reaction in the city was quite interesting. The whole town came out and gathered round them with intrigue and suspicion; they asked, "Is this Naomi?" (Ruth 1:19). She was much older than when she had left all those years ago and maybe the years of trial had taken their toll on her.

Naomi said to them not to call her Naomi which means "pleasant", but to call her Mara which means "bitter" (Ruth 1:20). Naomi confessed to them that the Lord had dealt bitterly with her because, during the years in Moab, she had lost her husband and two sons and she had only Ruth, her daughter in law left. She recognised possibly that the family was wrong to go down to Moab in the first place. It is important for us to acknowledge and confess to God when we have done something wrong or have taken a wrong decision in our lives. God is ever faithful and He will restore to us the joy of fellowship with Himself.

In Ruth 2:1 we are introduced to a man called Boaz, a kinsman, which means he was a near relative of Elimelech, Naomi's husband. Culturally, the husband's family was to provide for the widows but there was no provision for any daughters in law. When the harvest was underway, it was generally accepted that women who had no one to take care of themselves went after the reapers and gleaned some of the barley to get food. It was an honourable way for families to survive. It must have been a painstaking job picking up little pieces of barley, enough to make bread.

Naomi sent Ruth out to glean (Ruth 2:2). Ruth did as she was asked and went to glean and God led her to a field owned by Boaz. Boaz was a wealthy man and had many fields in the area. Boaz had come to Bethlehem to check on how his harvest was as we see in Ruth 2:4.

Boaz was a godly man who treated his reapers well and so enjoyed their great respect. He said to them, "The Lord be with you" and they replied, "The Lord bless you" (Ruth 2:4). He seemed to be a man who was aware of people and interested in people. Boaz noticed that there was a new girl gleaning. He inquired and was told it was the Moabitish girl who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab, not a flattering introduction by any means! Earlier Ruth had pleaded with the reapers to allow her to glean (Ruth 2:7) and we see that they took note that Ruth was a hard worker. Boaz knew of Naomi's plight and he called Ruth aside and called her "daughter" (Ruth 2:8). He tells her to stay in his fields and to stay close to his maidens; he wanted to protect her from any harm (Ruth 2:8). He instructs his men to

treat her kindly (Ruth 2:9) and he tells Ruth that when she is thirsty just to go and drink from the water the men had drawn from the well (Ruth 2:9).

Ruth was overwhelmed by the kindness of Boaz; she falls on her face and asks why he was doing this when she was a foreigner? (Ruth 2:10) Boaz tells her that he was fully aware of the whole sad family story and everything that Ruth had done for her mother in law (Ruth 2:11). He also recognised that she had left the land of her birth and come amongst a people she did not know (Ruth 2:11).

Boaz was aware of Ruth's godly character. Boaz tells her that the Lord will reward her for her step of faith (Ruth 2:12). God is no man's debtor. In 1 Samuel 2:30, we read and are encouraged by the verse "for them that honour me I will honour". So like Boaz and the insight he had of Ruth, God sees everything we do, He knows our thoughts and our intents. Boaz goes even further and invites her to share the meal. Ruth eats until she is satisfied but once more we see her wonderful character, she keeps some food for Naomi (Ruth 2:14). How thoughtful!

Boaz went even further again asking the young men to allow her to glean among the sheaves and even drop handfuls of barley on the ground for Ruth to gather up (Ruth 2:15). Ruth laboured all day and then went back to Naomi to give her the food and all she had gleaned. Naomi questions Ruth, "Where have you gleaned today"? (Ruth 2:19) Ruth must have been bursting to tell her of Boaz, the man who was so kind to her and knew all about the family.

Naomi tells Ruth that Boaz was a near relative and he had the right to redeem them. Ruth tells Naomi that Boaz said that she had to stay close to the young men to glean (Ruth 2:21). But Naomi missed the point; she tries to protect her by telling her to stay by the maidens (Ruth 2:22). Ruth was obedient to Naomi but it took her much longer to gather the barley than if she was gathering up the handfuls left by the men (Ruth 2:23). There is a lesson for us here that we must be obedient to God's instructions, God's leading and His guiding or it may take us longer to enjoy the blessing He wants us to enjoy in abundance.

Naomi's faith is again seen as she sought for the best for her daughter in law. She gave her clear instructions to go down to the threshing floor where Boaz was and to lie at his feet when he was asleep (Ruth 3:1-4). In Ruth 3:6 we see that Ruth was totally obedient to her mother in law. Boaz had fallen asleep and when he woke he was startled to find a woman lying at his feet. He asked who she was? (Ruth 3:8) Ruth replied, "I am your maid servant Ruth; spread your wing of protection over me because you are a near relative (Ruth 3:9).

Ruth 3:10-11 give us the wonderful character of Ruth, and in fact everyone in the city knew that Ruth was a virtuous woman, a woman of strength, worth and bravery. What a testimony she had! What an example to us all! Boaz tells her that there is in fact a relative closer than he was and he would have to go and meet with him (Ruth 3:12). And if he was not prepared to be a kinsman redeemer for Ruth, Boaz would do it (Ruth 3:13). Then Boaz again showers Ruth with kindness by giving her more barley to take back to Naomi (Ruth 3:15). Once again when Ruth gets home, Naomi is eager to find out how she got on with Boaz. Naomi instructs Ruth to sit and wait to see what the outcome of the meeting would be (Ruth 3:18).

Boaz headed to the city gate to meet with ten of the elders and with the kinsman to discuss the matter (Ruth 4:1-12). Boaz offers to redeem the land which includes buying Ruth and marrying her if the other man would not. The other man was concerned that marrying a Moabitess would endanger his inheritance (Ruth 4:6). So he told Boaz to take his right of redemption (Ruth 4:8). The elders witnessed that this deed had taken place and that Boaz had bought everything that was Elimelech's and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's from the hand of Naomi, also Ruth whom he had bought to be his wife.

Boaz took Ruth to be his wife and they had a son (Ruth 4:13). The women of the town were glad for Naomi; they recognised what she had gone through. And they also saw the love Ruth had for Naomi. Naomi became his nurse and he was named Obed (Ruth 4:14-17). He was the father of Jesse, the father of David the ancestor of Jesus Christ (Ruth 4:17). This was God's testimony to faithfulness.

God is a very faithful God as we read in 1 Corinthians 1:9 and Lamentations 3:23. He always wants us to rely on Him, to lean on Him. We are His children and He loves us. He wants what's best for us. We would do well to trust Him entirely. We need to trust Him in every aspect of our lives, especially with our families. In the world today unfaithfulness is rife. This causes marriage breakdown. Husband's and wives be faithful to each other! Lead and direct your children on the right paths, and entirely trust in God to keep them! We also need to be faithful to others, especially since there is very little obedience and respect around today. As Christians, we have a great opportunity to shine as faithful witnesses to our God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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