

## **RUTH 1:6-18**

*(Reading: Philippians 1:12-26; Psalm 77)*

### **The Long Way Home!**

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

In 1997 there was a documentary produced about the formation of modern Israel.

Entitled, 'The Long Way Home' it went through the process leading up how that nation came about in 1948.

Naturally that involved going through much of the persecution of Jews through the ages and particularly the horrific holocaust perpetuated by Nazi Germany.

It brought out the long-seated desire within the Jewish race for a homeland of their own.

And what better place for that homeland than the promised land itself?

This meant they would truly be coming home.

Their traditional greeting to each other, 'Next year in Jerusalem' can be literally fulfilled!

The film shows the history behind this politically and philosophically.

It's this ideology behind setting up Israel that is usually known as Zionism.

Well, it is a long way home for Naomi in our text also.

And while it did not mean anything like the long period of history or the political machinations that needed to be done for Jews to return to the promised land today it yet has an essential ingredient which is missing from our day and age.

You see, Naomi returned to her home land out of faith.

Her journey back was a long way home.

And yet it was truly a believer coming home.

In the words of the first part to the sermon this afternoon, she is A  
**WOMAN LOOKING TO THE LORD GOD.**

I know there are many Christians who will disagree with me here.

They declare very loudly and boldly that modern Israel is the fulfilment of biblical prophecy.

And they even say that Jews don't have to convert to Christianity because they are God's special people.

But what we will see from the text this afternoon, congregation, is true faith being shown.

Here we will see that it's not about a bit of dirt somewhere in the Middle East that matters.

It's where your soul is before the Lord.

Thus it is no surprise that the covenant God figures prominently in this passage.

In verse 6 it is clear Naomi sees His hand at work with the breaking of the famine in Israel.

There it says that Yahweh had come to the aid of his people by providing food to them.

Do you remember what we heard about the importance of names in considering the verses 1 till 5?

In Scripture names tell us the type of character a person is.

And how much doesn't the LORD, Yahweh, declare to us that God is the personally involved god.

He is the One who meets His people in need.

He cares for His own especially when His own have got nothing to give Him.

He sends them a redeemer to set them free.

In the same instance she hears that the Lord has again done this, Naomi prepares to go home.

She has not forgotten this God.

In fact, right now all that history about how He had acted in the past would have come flooding back.

Dear believer, we must keep this in mind as we consider this woman who seems lost in her grief.

She yet continues looking to her LORD.

She recalls His goodness right throughout this deep sadness.

Their sojourn to Moab was only ever meant to very temporary and as soon as they could they would go back.

This was the spirit of the true Hebrew, unlike many Jews who stayed behind in Babylon when the exile there had come to an end.

They stayed behind because it was very good for them there – they were doing very well for themselves!

But those who sincerely believed are carried along by something quite different than what's in it for themselves.

They have God's Spirit within who brings them through all circumstances.

We see that spirit so often in the psalms.

Psalms 77 is but one example.

There in the midst of great distress the psalmist in verse 3 says, "I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused and my spirit grew faint."

And in verse 11, "I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago."

Friend, you need to do the same.

When it is all dark and dismal around about you keep looking to Him.

Because then it is He who will bring you through.

He **will** deliver you!

It's because of Who you are looking to through that desperate time that you keep living out your faith.

This is precisely what Naomi showed in the way she treated her two daughters-in-law.

While at first the verses 8 and 9 may seem negative towards them she has been thinking of what's best for them.

As Moabites they will fit quite readily back in amongst their own people.

By referring to their mother's homes it's not just that their parents are then still alive but that that is the place where we all find a place.

The social status for those women as widows was not a good one then.

They need special protection – and outside of their own natural families that wasn't normally possible.

While the Law urges the covenant people to look after them that often wasn't the case – and especially if they were foreigners!

You might know the expression, "He has a face only a mother could love."

Indeed, your mother will always love you.

She can truly comfort you when life really hurts.

Naomi wants these two young women to be under that loving care.

She wants them to have a place and, Lord willing, be able to start a new family by marrying a second time.

The way Naomi expresses this is in the form of a prayer.

This is what she is laying before God for them.

One commentator points out that prayer is the flipside to providence.

Prayer affirms that **we** believe God is working out all things for our good.

Prayer says that we have nothing in ourselves but can only look to His Fatherly care.

This is what Paul expresses when he says in Philippians 1 verse 19 that what's happened to him will turn out for his deliverance.

But what this prayer also declares is that we believe God hears and answers us.

By trusting in what God is working out for us we become more involved in His way of working it out.

Naomi prays that the Lord will show them the same kindness they have shown to their husbands and to her.

She prays that their love for her family will give them a new one of their own.

This word "kindness" in verse 8 is a special word.

This is a concept at the heart of God's covenant love for His people.

It combines the warmth of God's fellowship with the security of God's faithfulness.

We also call it *agape* love.

For this is a word which tells us about the self-giving love of God for His people, and the love He rejoices to receive in return.

And that's what Naomi shows them and us here.

In the words of the second aspect to our text, here we see A WOMAN WHO LOVES LIKE HE DOES.

The response of Orpah and Ruth is a natural one.

Especially considering the close relationship they have.

There is a strong personal love here.

Naomi kisses them and they weep aloud.

They want to come with her.

And yet they know the facts of their situation.

They have their family and friends here.

They would yearn to be wives and mothers, and that was possible here.

They don't know anyone over there, in Bethlehem, apart from Naomi.

Initially, though, both Orpah and Ruth refused to leave Naomi.

And thus it is that Naomi is quite frank with them.

There is a loving realism here.

She spells out the future in quite bleak terms.

And she is very pessimistic.

She paints it in the darkest possible hues.

For we know from later on in Ruth that there is another option.

But that option is not a given.

There is no guarantee in that direction.

The author of this book is concerned, however, with Naomi's hopeless position.

And she also wants to make it clear that there's no way they ought to share the blame.

Under the thinking of God's people then this was a curse on her.

As she says in verse 13, "the LORD's hand has gone against me!"

She had to bear it.

It is quite an impassioned speech to them.

In verse 12 she presents three cases, each one further reinforcing her desperate position.

The first is that she's too old to have another husband, the second that even if she were to marry that night and have sons they would have to wait until the sons were old enough to marry them, and the third that there's the likelihood they would have married someone else before then.

We might wonder why there's this talk of marrying their husband's younger brothers?

Couldn't they marry other men within the covenant community?

What Naomi is alluding to here, congregation, is the 'levirate' law.

This is the law found in the Law of Moses whereby a brother was obligated to marry his brother's widow.

This law incorporated in Deuteronomy 25, the verses 5 till 10, has nothing to do with the Hebrew word 'levi' but comes from the Latin 'levir' meaning 'brother-in-law'.

It ensured that the dead man's 'name' continued in Israel.

You might recall the time when the Sadducees challenged Jesus about this in Matthew 22.

They tried to trick Him by asking which brother a woman would be married to in heaven after she had had to marry each of seven brothers while on earth.

You see, the Sadducees did not believe in heaven and so they thought they could fool Jesus this way.

Which of course they couldn't, but it does give us an example of the 'levirate law' in Jewish history.

So there is a realism here.

Naomi is being honest about their prospects.

But there is also a relief here.

These two young women can go back to their Moabite families in peace.

Which one of them chooses to do.

Orpah kisses her mother-in-law goodbye.

There is the acknowledgement together that this is the Lord's way.

While there is weeping at what has happened and what is happening it's not going to distract them away from realising the Lord's goodness through it all.

Naomi's returning to Israel shows her faith in the Lord.

And her loving concern that her daughters-in-law stay behind proves it too.

This must have made quite an impact on Orpah and Ruth.

It was obviously why they wept together so loudly.

Everything in these verses tells us of a family strongly united together in faith.

But just think, fellow believer, what a challenge to that faith now?

Especially the challenge to Orpah and Ruth.

Because the obvious way out was to stay.

But would that consistently show what they had come to know about the LORD their God?

Is staying an option when the worship and service of God means going somewhere else?

Congregation, Naomi had passed through a number of the stages of grief.  
She had come to a point now where she was beginning to draw things together  
and build for the future.

And that had to be a future with the Lord.

But the Lord had someone else in mind to share that future with her.

In fact, the Lord was Himself working out His loving care for her.

And thus it is that we see, in the third place, THE WOMAN REFUSING  
TO LEAVE HER ALONE.

Verse 14 ends with Ruth showing quite a different response to Orpah.

There it says that Ruth “clung” to Naomi.

This word “clung” is another powerful word.

It harks back to Genesis 2:24 and the cleaving a man and a woman do together in  
marriage.

And it’s a word used of what God wants to see come from His people towards Him.

In Deuteronomy 10:20 Israel is exhorted, “Fear the LORD your God and serve  
him.

“**Hold fast to him** and take your oaths in his name.”

What a scene in verse 14!

Ruth the Moabitess, the former worshipper of Chemosh, is believing!

More than that, she is living out the true faith!

It’s all very well to say you’re a Christian but to go out and live it is something else!

And she does it!

In a situation when you wouldn’t blame her for going back to how she was  
she knows that’s not the way it can be.

Dear believer, do you know that too?

Have you turned your back on all that you used to be?

Are you setting your face to do the Lord’s will in your life – and only His  
will?

Now, Naomi tries to convince Ruth otherwise.

But don’t you think she knows this woman is one of hers?

Surely she has known for some time that Ruth is a genuine proselyte, a  
true believer!

And that’s what we hear in the verses 16 and 17.

What a strong statement of faith it is!

Words that have echoed down throughout church history ever since.

Right to death itself she will follow Naomi and God’s people.

She’ll be buried in a foreign land.

But, you know, it will be truly her land, the promised land!

Congregation, forget this being a superficial thing.

This is no mere willingness to be acquainted with Israel's God, as though it were some interesting custom.

Neither is this the best option amongst the religions of that time, as some present Christianity today.

You know how they say it.

It's as though Christians live better, and healthier, and happier!

They even say Christians have better sex!

Well, that misses the mark totally.

It's not about what we can enjoy here below but what God above has already done in His Son.

The Lord has so used the teaching and testimony of Naomi to bring Ruth to faith.

Even through the most difficult time anyone then could have in their life, Ruth sees God's hand at work.

His providence is shining through, even before we get to the definitely nicer parts of this book.

Congregation, the Lord often uses the hard times of His people to direct others to Himself.

Through pain and suffering those around us see something else in us.

For God's Spirit especially then is alive in us!

I mean, isn't this what we learn from the persecuted church?

Even though the Christians in the Muslim world are enduring more hardships than ever before look how many are coming to the faith in those places!

Islam certainly is not a faith for difficult times.

There's no assurance of faith or peace in your heart there.

And forget about any true love between their adherents here!

I heard that from a young man who went to the Atheist Conference held in Melbourne recently.

He was struck by the vindictive nature of those speaking and arguing against Christianity there.

And when he compared that to the loving nature of the Christians he knew and who continued to be warm friends, despite his views, he acknowledges there is something here.

This is what the apostle Paul spoke of in our reading from Philippians 1.

As he is shut in prison under Roman guard he yet writes to that congregation, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel."

“As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ (vv12-13).”

Dear friend, are you in chains for Christ?  
Is He using your suffering – even now - to further His glory?

Oh, so many Christians today don't want to hear of the downside.  
It always has to be upbeat and positive and self-affirming!  
But that's the last thing the gospel is!  
Because it's not about you or me!  
It's about He!

Naomi realises this in Ruth.  
Verse 18 says she that once she realised what is in Ruth's heart, she stopped urging her.

If this is Ruth's response when she's in the valley of the shadows then she will be the Lord's on the mountain tops as well!

Congregation, may our lives also show the same.  
When your life is down and out, human speaking, may you then be found looking up!

After all, this not about us – it's all about Him!

This may well be for you a long way home too.  
But it is definitely the only way home.  
As each one of us looks to the Lord in all things so we will more and more realise the same.

The Lord is good.  
Praise the Lord!  
Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Loving Heavenly Father, how much haven't we been reminded of who You are in these verses in Your Word?

Your sovereign providence is working out all things for the good of those who love You, whom You have called, even in their suffering.

In fact, how often isn't in the crucible of hardship that we really show who You are to us all the more?

Please help to live always looking to You.  
Don't let us be distracted by the sights and sounds of this world but stir us to keep looking to the next world.

May the Heavenly Promised Land be always in our hearts and on our minds.

For it could be next year – or even this day – that we enter into the Jerusalem that is above!

This we pray in the Name of Your dear Son, the ultimate Redeemer, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen.