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Ruth 1:6-22

Second Message

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RETURNING HOME

SERIES: FROM EMPTINESS TO FULLNESS

I have always enjoyed participating in the Mexicali Outreach, but toward the end of the week away I get really homesick. I get desperate for the love of family and friends and the comfort and security of my own home. Home is the place I can truly be at rest. Don't we all desperately long for a place to call home? I believe it is an essential element of the human condition. I think it mirrors for us in many ways our longing for our eternal home and rest with our Heavenly Father. This morning we will reflect on the journey home of three women in difficult circumstances and consider their example of returning home.

Last week we were introduced to the family of Elimelek, in Judah. Instead of clinging to the Lord during a time of famine, he left the land of promise and sought refuge in the pagan nation of Moab. Seeking security and comfort outside God's provision, the family experienced only death. Naomi suffers great tragedy as her husband and two sons die.

Naomi is alone except for her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, neither of whom had children. Their tragedy was not only familial but also financial. They could no longer depend upon their men to provide for them. These three surviving widows are left in desperate need. In the midst of this great tragedy we see a glimmer of hope for Naomi. We hear that the Lord had "come to the aid of his people."

Leaving Moab

When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. 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. (Ruth 1:6-7 TNIV)

The Lord has not abandoned or forgotten Naomi and the Israelites. In his grace and compassion he reverses the famine to provide food for his people. So Naomi chose to return home.

The central movement of the passage we will look at revolves around the word "return," also translated "go back." It is used 12 times in the last 17 verses of chapter 1. This repetition underscores the main question of the text: Where will they turn to find provision, protection, and rest? How will God get those whom he loves home to a place of rest after they have sought security some place else?

Naomi has decided to return to Judah. But as we will soon see, she appeals to her daughters-in-law three times to go back

to Moab. Will Orpah and Ruth return to their home in Moab, or will they stay with Naomi and turn toward Israel and the Lord?

Appeal #1: Go back...your family is in Moab

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them good-bye and they wept aloud but they said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." (1:8-10)

All three women began the trip to Judah together. But after they had traveled a bit, Naomi urges Orpah and Ruth to return home and bids them farewell. Naomi pronounces a blessing upon them and praises them for their kindness. The word translated "kindness" is the Hebrew word *hesed*. This is a word filled with so much meaning that no one English word can even begin to convey it accurately. It is most often translated as lovingkindness or loyal-love. It speaks not of an emotional attachment but loyalty to a relational commitment that results in concrete action. *Hesed* is an act of extraordinary mercy or generosity from a person of strength to a person in desperate need.

Orpah and Ruth demonstrated this kind of loyal-love to their deceased husbands and to Naomi by staying with her and joining her on her journey back to Bethlehem. Out of compassion for them, Naomi releases them from their commitment to her and tells them that as young widows they should return to their mother and not stay with their mother-in-law. Naomi loves them and prays that the Lord will repay their kindness with kindness of his own by granting them rest in the home of a new husband in Moab.

This "rest" that Naomi refers to is an interesting concept. Rest is what the people of God longed for and what the Lord promised Israel if they remained loyal to him. After wandering for years in the wilderness, a resting place was God's gift to them in bringing them into the Promised Land. The people of God could experience "rest" even under threatening circumstances, because they had the unshakable assurance that God was present with them.

But it seems Naomi believed this kind of rest could be found in the home of a husband rather than in the presence of the Lord. Her prayer that the Lord would grant them rest with pagan husbands in Moab demonstrates a lack of under-

standing of the true source of blessing. She is asking the Lord to grant them exactly what she and Elimelek never found in Moab—rest outside of covenant fidelity to the Lord.

After this farewell blessing, Orpah and Ruth weep at Naomi's kiss goodbye, but insist that they will return with her to her people. Naomi's first try at getting her daughters-in-law to return to Moab was based on the positive picture she paints of the potential for a good and happy life in Moab. This positive approach did not convince them to return, so Naomi resorts to Plan B.

Appeal #2: Go back...life with me is a dead-end

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? 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—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 turned against me!" At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her. (1:11-14)

Naomi tells Orpah and Ruth to return home to Moab because she is a "dead-end." There is no hope of rest or security if they remain with her. Naomi gives them two reasons why.

First, she is too old to remarry and have sons who could become their husbands. Naomi is referring to the Israelite law of Levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-9). According to this law, others sons or close male relatives of Naomi's should marry the childless widows to protect the family. The first-born son of that union would be raised to carry on the name and inheritance of the relative who died (Deut. 25:5-9). Naomi asserts that this would never work even if she got married that day and had sons right away.

The second reason why Naomi considers herself a dead-end is because she believes the Lord is responsible for making her life bitter. While they were young enough to begin again with new families, she was not. She feels the hand of the Lord had turned against her, so that anyone connected with her can expect the same. To stick with her is to put themselves in the line of fire and doom themselves to her fate.

Naomi was telling Ruth and Orpah, "I appreciate your concern and kindness, but for your own good you'd better leave me. You have a much better chance at happiness and rest in Moab than with me in Bethlehem. You don't have any future with me, because I don't have a future. I don't have any sons for you, and God is against me. I'm just a dead-end."

Naomi has built an airtight case for why Orpah and Ruth are much better off returning home to Moab and getting as far away from her as they can. Naomi's arguments were enough to convince Orpah. She recognizes that if she stays with Naomi she will be turning her back on her family, her community,

and any hope for a family of her own one day. The cost is too high. With tears and a tender kiss, she lets go of Naomi and returns to her home in Moab.

While Orpah does the expected, Ruth's response is extraordinary. Ruth sees her relationship with Naomi and her God not as a burden but a blessing. She doesn't leave Naomi; she cleaves to her. This verb is used in Genesis 2 to describe how a man is to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. What a gesture of love and loyalty!

Naomi is stunned. She was not expecting this. So she tries a third and final appeal to convince Ruth to return to Moab.

Appeal #3: Go back...your people and gods are in Moab

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." (1:15)

Naomi urges Ruth to follow Orpah's example and return with her to their Moabite people and their pagan gods. This brings a swift and passionate response from Ruth. The narrator underscores her passion in that this is the first and only time in this whole book where Ruth speaks more than just a few words.

Ruth demonstrates loyal-love

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. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. (1:16-18)

No matter how hard Naomi might plead with her, Ruth rejects Naomi's suggestion that Ruth seek life in her old community or with the gods of Moab. Ruth no longer has any attachment to them, so she refuses to go back. With eyes wide open she takes a step of faith and commits herself with a binding oath, not just to Naomi but also to her people and her God.

Notice the progression that her commitment to Naomi takes. First, in terms of geography. Like Abraham, she promises to leave her home and all that is familiar, to travel where Naomi travels, and then to temporarily lodge where she lodges. In terms of relationships she is willing to embrace Naomi's people and her new family once they cross the border of Israel. Most important of all, she will forsake all other gods to embrace Naomi's God. And Ruth emphatically states that this is not a temporary commitment to appease her mother-in-law. Even after Naomi dies, this new commitment will be the driving force of her life until she dies.

Ruth further binds herself to this commitment by making an oath. She invokes the Lord to strike her dead if she fails to keep her promise. This is an unprecedented act of loyalty to Naomi. Ruth is laying down her life to love and serve Naomi. And now, using God's personal covenant name, LORD, in her

oath she is affirming that she had made a personal and permanent allegiance to the God of Israel.

Against the backdrop of the terrible times of Judges we may have wondered how does God change a nation when his people are addicted to idolatry. The answer from this book is that he begins his work of redemption with a gentile woman who maintains faithfulness to the one she loves, even at great cost to herself. A relationship with the Lord and his people is more important to her than her homeland, her family, her comfort, her security, and her happiness.

In response to this extraordinary loyalty and sincere profession of faith from her daughter-in-law, Naomi says—nothing. Lost in her grief and bitterness, she offers only a hard silence until they reach Bethlehem.

Arriving in Bethlehem

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?” “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 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.” (1:19-21)

Naomi and Ruth create quite a stir when they reach Bethlehem. A lot has changed for Naomi since she left—her appearance, her countenance, her family, and her financial situation. When she walks through the city gate she is hardly recognizable to the townspeople.

“Can this really be Naomi?” Naomi overhears their question about her identity and immediately declares that she is not the same person they knew over ten years ago. Her life has undergone a tremendous reversal. Her life has changed, and so should her name. They should no longer call her Naomi, which means pleasant, but Mara, which means bitter.

Her life is bitter because she went away full but the Lord has brought her back empty. Her emptiness, affliction, and misfortune are the result of the Almighty’s hand against her. Naomi’s comments are more than mere complaints. She is actually putting God on trial and making public accusations against him. She is claiming that instead of blessing her as he should he has brought disaster upon her. He has taken away her husband and sons, and has stopped showing his loving-kindness to her.

Absorbed in her own world of pain, Naomi fails to publicly acknowledge Ruth’s presence or loyalty to her. Consumed by her grief, Naomi can only see what is missing. Have you ever felt that way? Is your self-understanding framed by what you have lost?

Even though she defames God’s character, he graciously continues to grant compassion to her.

The Lord already at work

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. (1:22)

Ruth stands as an outright contradiction to Naomi’s bitter words. God has not brought Naomi back empty. At her side she has Ruth, her loving and faithful daughter-in-law, who has demonstrated the highest degree of loving-kindness. Ruth is a living witness and unmistakable presence of God’s love and grace to her. Chapter 1 of Ruth opens with a famine in the land, and now it closes just as the harvest is beginning. As the final verse of the chapter makes clear, God has been faithful to her all along and has already been laying the groundwork to restore her from emptiness to fullness.

As I reflect on this passage I am struck by the different ways each of these three women turned toward home pursuing rest.

Naomi returned home to Bethlehem because she is responding to her need—the Lord’s provision of food. She returned home but she was not at rest. She has not found comfort and security in the presence of God. She is back in the land, but with no sense of the grace of God.

I wonder how many of us are like Naomi. Do we see the blessing the Lord has put right in front of us, or has the pain of loss blinded us to his sovereign work in the midst of our trials? Like Naomi, many of us are children of God yet we consider him cold and punitive. The circumstances of life have gone badly for us, and we blame God. Our trust in the Lord is weakening because we assume that our difficulties are evidence that he is displeased with us and he is drawing away from us.

If that is true of you, I’d like to encourage you with the assurance of the Biblical poet of Lamentations: “The LORD’s lovingkindness indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning” (3:22-23). Do you believe that? Can you grab hold of that truth and cling to the Lord in your time of trouble? His compassion and concrete actions of loyal-love never end. He is faithful and generous to us every day.

Larry Crabb puts it this way:

There’s never a moment in all our lives, from the day we trusted Christ till the day we see Him, when God is not longing to bless us. At every moment, in every circumstance, God is doing good. He never stops. It gives him too much pleasure. God is not waiting to bless us after our troubles end. He is blessing us right now, in and through those troubles. He’s determined to give us an encounter with Himself. It’s the greatest blessing He can think of.¹

This is not to say that we can’t cry or complain to the Lord when life is hard. There are a lot of tears in this passage. Often we are afraid of tears. Yet we can appreciate that Naomi does not seek to deaden or avoid her pain. She faces her life head-on. She offers no pretense, nothing phony, no pious platitudes.

She does not hide her true feelings about her circumstances or about God.

Naomi's honesty is impressive. Most of us are more inclined to only admit a past heartache that has been quieted by God's peace. Too often in Christian circles today to admit that we are currently bitter or depressed about our life discredits us as a trusting man or woman of God. That is so wrong.

Complaining may seem ungodly to some of us. But as the words of Jonah, Jeremiah, and Job make clear, not only is complaint tolerated by God, it can be the proper stance of a person who takes God and his providence seriously. Without honesty our bitterness festers and grows. As we admit our brokenness to ourselves, to one another and to God, he is able to transform our despair into hope.

Again, Larry Crabb hits the nail on the head: "Church is too often a place of pretense and therefore a place without hope. When brokenness is disdained, where the real story is never told, the power of God is not felt. Where brokenness is invited and received with grace, the gospel comes alive."²

May God use our vulnerability with each other to bring healing and restoration to our lives.

Orpah loved Naomi. She wept over her, but she didn't love her enough to forsake all that was familiar to be with her. Orpah is a mirror of those who make relational and spiritual commitments based merely on emotions or obligation. The heart is stirred and motivated at the beginning, but it can't sustain those warm feelings in the midst of difficulty or pain.

I wonder how many of us are struggling with Orpah's dilemma? Are we willing to forsake everything to pursue the Lord and his kingdom? The tragedy is that by choosing what is known and familiar, Orpah misses out on an unseen future of tremendous blessing from the Lord, the one true God.

In contrast, Ruth turns toward a new home and embraces a new life as a full member of God's people. She returns with Naomi because of her loyal-love. She forsakes her old way of life and clings to the Lord and his people. In an act of commitment and faith she throws herself onto the mercy and favor of the Lord. In her *hesed*, Ruth models for us the character of God.

It is out of God's *hesed* love that he made a promise to Israel that they would be his people and that he would be their God through thick and thin. The Lord's *hesed* is a kindness we can count on; it is care when we need it most; it is a loyalty and devotion that cannot be shaken; it is mercy shown to us when we don't deserve it.

Because we are shown this kind of love and filled with this kind of love we are able to show it to one another: "He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord re-

quire of you, But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

Reading the January issue of Time magazine I came across an article from Nancy Gibbs that reflected on the crisis of our economy and how it is changing how we think, how we live, and how we see one another. Will these hard times bring us together or pull us apart? Will they make us better or bitter? She writes:

Mass moral breakdown seems a tidy, symmetrical response to a crisis driven by greedheads and gamblers who blew the bubble that carried us away and politicians who stood by and watched it burst. So now we stand in the rubble, surrounded by sharp questions. How sturdy are we, how suspicious, how brave, how bitter? What is it going to do to us, individually and collectively, when dread takes up residence next door, or right upstairs in the empty rooms we prowl around when we can't sleep because our debts and doubts are making too much noise?

Maybe as times get worse, we get better. Our pain makes us feel other people's too; our fear lets us practice valor; we are tense, and tender as well. And among the things we can no longer afford are things we never really wanted anyway, like the solitude of snobbery, and the luxury of denial...To suffer alone is a tragedy; to struggle together is an opportunity, when we find out what we really care about.³

Where is home for you? Where are you seeking rest? Are you feeling homesick when it comes to finding comfort and security in the Lord? Not long after our very dear friend Anne Harrison died, Yvonne Hyatt said something to my wife Amy and I that has stuck with us ever since. She said, "It's not until you've felt deep loss that you realize that this earth is not your real home." That is so true. Our true home and rest are found as we cling to the Lord and respond to Jesus' invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Loving Lord, we thank you for your love for us. We freely admit our bitterness as well as our gladness. We are tempted toward despair when we see our life not as we hoped it would be. By faith we confess that no matter how it may seem, you are drawing us to yourself and molding us into the image of your Son. Please give us eyes of faith to see beyond the circumstances of our life and cling to you as our refuge and strength. May we turn toward our home in you that at all times we might find in you our true rest. Amen.

¹ Larry Crabb, *Shattered Dreams* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 1.

² Crabb, *Shattered Dreams*, 66.

³ Nancy Gibbs, *TIME* magazine, January 19, 2009, 64.