

“Where You Go I Will Go,” Ruth 1:1-22 (August 21, 2016)

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

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.

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” ²⁰ She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

²² So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

PRAY

We are beginning a new series this Sunday on the book of Ruth, a little, four chapter book in the Old Testament about one of the most remarkable people, let alone women, who has ever lived – a woman named Ruth.

It is very popular in our country, and it has been for several years now, to identify yourself as “spiritual, not religious.” Everyone wants to be spiritual – it’s still not really cool to be an atheist. It’s not cool to be a Christian, either. But it’s cool to be spiritual. Spiritual is vague enough that you can sound really enlightened and in touch with world around you without having to actually commit to anything.

Do you know, though, what Ruth 1 teaches us? Boy, is it a timely passage, because Ruth 1 teaches us what it looks like to be spiritual in times of suffering and pain. After the events of this past week (and I’m not going to go into what they are; if you don’t know you can ask me after the service), a lot of us need to know what that means.

It’s easy for me to be spiritual on vacation. When we go to the beach in the summer, I can’t wait to get out of bed, grab my Bible, grab my prayer cards, get close to the water, and have my quiet time. If there were a gold medal for being spiritual on vacation, I’d win it.

But that’s not what we need today, is it? How can you be spiritual when it hurts?

There are three main characters in chapter one of Ruth, and each of them has something to teach us about faith. Three things I want to show you: first, faith in name only. Second, faith in suffering. Third, total faith in the one true God.

First, faith in name only. Let’s read verses 1-2: “In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.”

A little background: Ruth takes place “in the days when the judges ruled” in Israel. This was a notoriously chaotic time in redemptive history. No king was on the throne in Israel, often there was anarchy in the land, and Israel was wide open to raids from foreign powers. We read in Judges 6 that the Israelites had to abandon their homes and farms and hide in caves and rocks in the mountains from foreign invaders, and just leave all their property behind to be plundered by them. If they stayed in their homes, the men

would be slaughtered, the women would be raped, and the children would be carried off as slaves. The entire nation was from time to time turned into refugees.

But to make it all worse, the people of Israel, God's chosen people, set apart in the world to worship him only, lapsed into idolatry. They remained Israel – God's people – but they were Israel in name only. Their lips were close to God, but their hearts far from him.

And that almost certainly included Elimelech, husband of Naomi, father-in-law to Ruth. His name literally means "God is my king," but his actions do not reflect that. In verse one, we read there is a famine in the land, so Elimelech decides to pick up and move to Moab.

Now, that means nothing to us because we don't know our Old Testament, but in the context of the time Moab meant "bad news, bad news." Moab is almost never painted in a positive light in the Bible. Moab was a constant thorn in Israel's side and, from time to time, an oppressor. In Deuteronomy 23, we read that Moabites were not allowed to participate in the temple worship and that Israel was not to enter into a treaty of friendship with Moab. But Elimelech decided to move his family there anyway.

And if you're tempted to think, "That's not too bad – maybe that just proves Elimelech was a broad-minded man, and not some kind of bigot that looks down on people who are different from him ..." In the ancient world, to leave your country the way Elimelech did meant more than just traveling abroad. Elimelech, almost certainly, was making a conscious decision to leave behind his nation, his people, and, most importantly, his God. In the ancient world, every nation had its own god – to be a member of that nation meant you worshiped that God. Granted, Elimelech's reason for leaving Israel was the famine in the land. Times had gotten tough, suffering was present. But we're not told of any mass migration because of the famine; we're only told that Elimelech moved. So when Elimelech, "God is my king," left Bethlehem he was actually trading the God of Israel for the God of Moab; Chemosh. And there was one part of Chemosh worship that made it especially notorious in antiquity – Chemosh worship mandated child sacrifices in times of extreme need. When times were desperate, Chemosh demanded a baby so that he could know you were serious before he would intervene and help his people.

Elimelech's name was "God is my king," but Elimelech's faith was in name only. In trouble, Elimelech deserts God and runs to Chemosh, who takes pleasure in the burning of babies.

It is still very popular in our culture, in the American South, to call ourselves "Christian." To say we have faith. But that faith can so easily be in name only. We say we are Christians, we say we worship the God of the Bible, but then suffering comes, and like Elimelech we walk away from God.

So many Christian young women come to Ole Miss determined to date, if at all, only godly young men and to date only in a godly way. They come to Ole Miss determined to

guard their hearts. But then freshman year passes, and no boyfriend, no prospects. Sophomore year passes and still, no boyfriend, no prospects. Junior year – same thing. I'm not making light of that – that is a real form of suffering. There can be an almost unbearable pressure on girls and guys to pair off before college ends.

And so what happens? Their senior year they drop their standards. They start dating guys they shouldn't date; they compromise their principles. They become Elimelechs: Christians in name only. And it all too often leads to a lot of pain.

So many Christians say they are going to be generous with their money and do not want to be materialistic, because our God is a generous God and they want to be like him.

But then an economic downturn hits, and all of the sudden they don't feel like they can afford to give any money away to the poor or charitable causes. Or, more likely, because we live in Oxford, we see what nice things other people have, or our kids see things their friends' families have, and we feel pressure to go out and spend that money on ourselves. I want you to know: that is a form of suffering. I am not making light of that, any more than I was making light of wanting a boyfriend. Over and over again missionaries who come back from the mission field tell me they can't wait to get back overseas, because the pressures of materialism are almost overwhelming in the United States.

Yet, still, when we give in to that suffering, what really happened? We become Elimelechs: Christians in name only.

Instead of giving in when suffering comes, what should we do? Second, faith in suffering. And here we will look at the example of Naomi. Let's read verses 3-5: "But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband."

Elimelech dies, so Naomi is left a widow, but it's worse than that. She's not only a widow, she's a widow with no sons and she's in a foreign country. Everything in that culture hinged on having sons – only sons could own the property, only sons could carry on the family name. Without sons, Naomi is not only destitute – there's no way for her to make a living – but she considered herself accursed.

We think in our culture today having a family is a big deal, and of course it is. It is wonderful to be related by blood or marriage or adoption to people around you. But it pales in comparison to what family and kinship ties meant in antiquity. As much as we say we value family, we still in the United States think of ourselves as individuals first and family members second. We long for individual fulfillment above all else.

Naomi would have never understood that – there were no individuals 3000 years ago in Palestine. We literally cannot understand how important family was back then. It meant everything – they would have thought, "Who cares if something happens to you

individually? So long as the family is intact, everything will be fine. I can get sick and die – no big deal – because my family is there to carry on the name.” That’s how they viewed it.

But Naomi’s family is about to be wiped out, and so her world is ending. She’s thinking, “Who cares if I live, if I have no sons to carry on the family name?” That’s suffering. She’s hurting so bad she tells her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, not to come with her, for “the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” Ruth 1:13.

In fact, she considers herself accursed. ²⁰ She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi [which means “pleasant”]; call me Mara [which means “bitter”], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” Ruth 1:20-21.

That’s anguish. But what does Naomi do with her suffering? This is what is so important. *She does not walk away from the Lord like Elimelech.* Instead, she gathers her suffering up in her hands as it were and takes it right back to Him!

How? First of all, she gets out of Moab and returns to Bethlehem, to Israel, the land of God’s people. She’s literally trying to walk back to the Lord. But mostly, Naomi never references her suffering outside of the context of the Lord. Even in, especially in, suffering, the Lord is never out of her mind. He’s always present. She’s an emotional train wreck, but unlike Elimelech she never considers walking away from the Lord. Even though the Lord’s hand is heavy upon her, still she’s determined to take her pain to him.

We think having faith in times of suffering means keeping it all together and not falling apart. We live in a culture where we are expected to cover up. We are supposed to keep putting one foot in front of the other. We’re expected to put on a brave face, and we can’t get too weepy, and if we do feel bitter and angry about our suffering well we sure can’t talk about that. *Especially if we are considered religious people, because if we are religious people but we get too down then we’re being disrespectful of God, right?*

Well, that’s not the Bible’s view of how faith works in suffering. In the Bible, the name most synonymous with suffering is Job. He loses his children, he loses his money, he loses his health. And after all that happens, what does Job do? Does he put a smile on his face and say, “Yes, it’s been hard, but I’m claiming all the promises, and I’m counting my blessings. Tomorrow’s another day, and I’m just praising my Lord!”?

No. “After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. ² And Job said: ³ “Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man is conceived.’ ⁴ Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. ⁵ Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it.” Job 3:1-5.

My favorite example, though, is from 1 Samuel 1. Hannah is married to a good man named Elkanah but, like Naomi, she knows she is this close to dying without children, and therefore her family name is about to be extinguished – she has no hope. Worse, she doesn't really even have Elkanah. Instead, she shares him with another wife, her obnoxious rival Peninnah, who also happens to possess the most fertile womb in all of Israel. She keeps having children for Elkanah like a clock every two years and, all the while, mocks Hannah for not being able to have even one.

What does Hannah do? She goes to the tabernacle to pray, but not in normal, calm, “keeping it all together” kind of way. “She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly.” 1 Samuel 1:10. She's falling apart. In fact, she's in such a condition that Eli, the high priest who ministered at the tabernacle, thinks she's drunk.

Faith in suffering does not mean you keep it all together or pretend you have it all figured out. Nor does faith in suffering mean that you never get down, you never get depressed, you never weep, you never get angry, you never cry out. It doesn't even mean that you don't get bitter before the Lord – *Naomi got so bitter she changed her name to “Bitter”!*

Faith in suffering doesn't mean you have it all together, but it means that when you suffer you take it to the Lord! And there's no better place in the Bible for language to pray in times of suffering than the Psalms. Almost half of the 150 Psalms of the Bible are Psalms of lament – Psalms you pray and sing in your pain. The Psalms are where you go to get language to pray out your suffering to God. Psalm 10:1: “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” Isn't that how a lot of us have felt this week?

“Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you! Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress!” Psalm 102:1-2a.

In suffering, you must pray and ask God: why aren't you keeping your promises? You promised joy for your servants – why don't I have any? You promised goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life? Where are they? You promised you would never leave me nor forsake me? Where are you, Lord?

Psalm 119:82: “My eyes long for your promise; I ask, ‘When will you comfort me?’”

In order to be a person of faith in times of suffering, you do not have to pretend you have it all together (nor do you have to start crying because it's expected – one of the greatest things about true biblical faith is you don't have to fake anything – by God's grace, you can be exactly who you are!). You do not have to act like you're happy when you're not, you don't have to act calm when you're scared out of your mind. You can be honest about how angry, and frustrated, and hurt, and scared you are. Just be honest *with the Lord – take it to him in prayer, and beat and beat and beat and beat on the doors of heaven until you get the comfort that you seek.*

You know the parable of the unjust judge, right? “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: “In a certain town

there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men.³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴“For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men,⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’”⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says.⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?” Luke 18:1-7.

But how can we trust God to hear our prayers in suffering – especially since the suffering may last a long, long time? Months, years? In fact, the sad fact is that for many if not all of us, some of the things we suffer from we’ll carry around to one degree or another as long as we live. How can we trust him?

Third, total faith in the one true God. And here we come to the example of Ruth. Almost all the commentaries I read this past week say that Ruth is the greatest example of faith in all Scripture. Greater than any of the twelve disciples by far, greater than Moses, greater than Abraham. Why?

Because Ruth gave up whatever earthly chance she had at happiness in order to follow God. Look back at Ruth 1:11-13a: 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?”

Naomi was right – Ruth needed to go back. Only in Moab would she have any chance at the life Naomi missed. If Ruth, the Moabitess, came to Israel, who would marry her? She had no reason to suspect that any man would actually marry her, have legitimate children through her, and thereby make Ruth a part of his family.

But Ruth is determined to go – she will not be dissuaded. Ruth 1:16-17: 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.”

Why? It’s not that Naomi was an unbelievable mother-in-law. She may have been, but that still doesn’t explain what Ruth does. Ruth does something almost unprecedented in history. She leaves her land and her god, she forsakes her father and her mother, in a world where family is everything, to go to Israel. She’s one of the first individuals ever in the world. Naomi, you see in verse 18, can’t believe Ruth is doing this.

What happened? *Ruth had trusted in Israel's God.* She'd heard about him, almost certainly from Naomi, and Israel's God was so different, so wonderfully different, from Moab's god that she wanted to be one of his people.

What did Naomi tell Ruth about Israel's God to bring about this change? We don't know, but I like to think it was about Abraham and Isaac from Genesis 22. They would have been Naomi's ancestors, after all. You know that story – God tells Abraham to take Isaac to the top of Mount Moriah and offer Isaac as a sacrifice to him there. And because all people in the ancient world thought gods could require this, Abraham went. But just as Abraham is about to kill Isaac, God says, “Stop! Don't do this. Because you have not withheld anything from me, not even Isaac, I will make you into a great nation.”

Now, can't you just see? Ruth had grown up in an environment where babies were regularly killed to satisfy Chemosh. But then she hears from Naomi that Israel's God blesses just because you're willing to give him everything, not because you actually do. *Israel's God doesn't want your children; he wants your heart. **And he wants your heart because you have his heart.*** That's Deuteronomy 7:7-8a, which Naomi also would have known to tell Ruth: “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you...” And so Ruth hears all this and says, “That's a wonderful God. That God will love me. I don't care if it costs me every earthly chance at happiness – I want to know his love and mercy.” That's what total faith in the one true God looks like – *not necessarily giving everything over to him, but having a heart that wants nothing but him, because you know that his heart wants nothing but you, too.*

That knowledge converted Ruth, but we know something even better than Ruth knew. Moab's God was Chemosh, and he said to his people, “You are my people, and the only way you can be sure I will do for you is by giving my your children in sacrifice.”

But Israel's God is Yahweh, the Lord, and a thousand years after Ruth he said, “You are my people, and the way you can be sure I will bless you is that I gave you my Son as a sacrifice.” We know that God gave us Jesus. We know we have God's heart in a way Ruth could have only dreamed.

Do you want to be a Christian? Do you want to this God to be your God? All it takes is two things: first, it takes the humility to admit that you are part of the problem with the world. In other words, you are a sinner, you've hurt other people. And God is determined to punish all evil – he is a just God; he does not punish the innocent and he will not acquit the guilty.

Second, you must trust that rather than condemn you like you deserve, God sent his son Jesus into the world as the sacrifice for our sins. And we don't have to do anything to earn that sacrifice, and we can't do anything – it's a free grace offering that Jesus made for us. I hope some of you believe that this morning.

But if you do you have an incredible resource in times of suffering. Are you hurting? Are you crying out to God? Have you been crying out for months or even years and it seems like there's been no answer? I can't tell you why, but I can tell you this: Jesus knows what it's like to suffer – he is a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. He knows what it's like to suffer, and on the cross he suffered an agony than none of us can possibly imagine.

And so why we can't always know why we suffer, we can know that God is not indifferent to it – he cares. And he can sympathize, because unlike Chemosh *he doesn't force us to make the sacrifice – he made it himself.*

Friends, are you hurting today? Tell it to Jesus. Even if you haven't told him in a very long time. Even if you've never told him. Tell it to Jesus – “The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes. That soul though all hell would endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake.” Amen.