



Choosing Life in the Midst of Loss

Mother's Day

Mother's Day is a day to celebrate motherhood and appreciate and honor mothers and all of those women who are like mothers to us. I'm reminded of how Paul in one of his letters greeted a man named Rufus as well as "his mother and mine." In other words, Rufus' mother was like a mother to Paul and there are many woman who may not be biological mothers but who are like a mother to someone.

I've been a pastor long enough to also know that Mother's Day can be a painful day for many women. There are many reasons for that but the main reason is simply what I would call loss. There is the loss of not being able to have children. There is the loss of miscarriage or even of abortion. There is the loss of having a son or daughter die from an accident or disease. There is the loss of seeing your children grow up and leave the house. There is the loss of innocence as you watch a child grow up and make choices that are harmful and wrong. Over the years I've observed that motherhood is bittersweet; there are joys and sorrows. But I have also found that so many mothers display amazing tenacity and strength and faith in the midst of that.

Today I want us to look at an Old Testament story that takes place in Israel during the period of the Judges. This was a very dark time in Israel's history when "every man did what was right in his own eyes." The story of Ruth is a ray of light in a sea of darkness as it shows us two women of remarkable character. It starts out as one of them is plunged into a time of tragedy and loss.

I. God's people are not exempt from experiencing tragedy and loss.

Let's start by reading vv.1-5. **"Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. 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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband."**

The writer begins by describing the migration of "a certain man" from Bethlehem in Judah to Moab. His name isn't disclosed until v.2—Elimelech. He, along with his wife, Naomi, and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion are "Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah," which is a way of

saying that they were part of the royal family because every Jew knew that David would come from this same family. This would have been about a 40 mile trek to the area east of the Dead Sea. He moved his family there because of a famine in the land of Judah, which of course was an indication of God's judgment. Most of us have never experienced famine. Perhaps we've seen pictures of children in Africa with a desperate look in their eyes—thin arms, swollen bellies, gaunt faces. You can understand why Elimelech would move from the Promised Land to a strange place like Moab. But this was a faithless move on his part. Instead of trusting God to provide, he moved his family to a nation that historically had been at war with God's people. The Moabite race was the result of an incestuous union between two of Lot's children. The Moabite religion was diametrically opposed to the worship of the true God. The Moabites worshipped Chemosh, a false god who expected the Moabites to sacrifice their children as burnt offerings in his honor. This is what he was exposing his family to.

Perhaps that's why tragedy struck. First, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi a single mother in a foreign land. As a widow, she would have no way of providing for herself until her sons grew up and could take care of her. We don't know how much time passed, but eventually her two sons took Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah (not Oprah!) and they settled there for 10 years. But, as if one tragedy wasn't enough, Naomi's two sons died. I can't imagine the devastation of losing one child, much less two. There is a kind of pathos behind the words in v. 5, **"...and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband."** Besides the emotional toll this must have took, there was a practical side to this as well. Now Naomi was totally helpless. There was no Social Security system or life insurance to fall back on. You can't help but feel for Naomi. She's probably too old to marry. She doesn't even have grandchildren! She must have been overwhelmed by grief, loneliness, fear and an utter sense of hopelessness. What would she do? What was there to live for? It must have at least crossed her mind, why don't I just give up and die?

For some of us, it may be hard to identify with Naomi. We've had a few problems, but nothing as bad as this. Our life may have even gone relatively smooth up until now. For others, you know exactly what Naomi must have felt like. You've lost a child, parent, friend, brother or sister. You've been left all alone. It doesn't have to be a death. It can be something like divorce, or an illness, or even the loss of a job. We all have to deal with loss on some level. Everyone's turn comes sooner or later. God's people are not exempt. And sometimes it seems to all come at once,

as it did with Naomi. We get hit with one thing and just when we think we may survive something else hits us, and then something else on top of that. Wave upon wave threaten to undo us. But sometimes these losses have a way of bearing fruit.

On July 23, 1992, the local police chief in Beattyville, Kentucky, told Rosemary Smith and her husband, Luther, that two of their sons, Jeremiah (15) and Drew (18) were dead. The brothers were returning from a concert in Indianapolis when they crashed their vehicle. Darkness like nothing she had ever known settled over Rosemary. Yet, she found solace in her faith. While following the hearses to the burial site, she heard church bells toll 33 times. She said, "As I sat there and counted it hit me that when Jesus died he was 33, which was also the combined ages of my sons." Not long after her loss, Rosemary began a group called Fellow Travelers, a ministry to other grieving parents who have lost a child. Every day, Rosemary reads the newspaper and searches the Internet for child obituaries. She either calls the families or sends them special packets consisting of books on loss, a music CD, a three-ring notebook of inspirational messages, and more. She gets about 50 e-mails a day from people requesting one of her packets. She and her husband have paid for and sent more than 5,000 packets all over the world. She says, "I feel this is my mission on Earth. I now have a higher purpose than what I was doing, and the death of my sons took me there."

One writer says "the experience of loss itself doesn't need to be the defining moment of our lives. Instead, the defining moment can be our response to the loss. We don't have the freedom to choose the roles we must play in life, but we can choose how we're going to play the roles we've been given."

As we read the rest of chapter one, we can see that this was true for not just for Naomi but for Ruth and Orpah as well. Each of these women had important choices to make in the face of their loss. In their initial responses to their loss, they teach of the choices we must make to not just survive loss, but actually to grow through it.

II. There is a way to respond to tragedy and loss.

A. We can choose life: As a matter of fact, the first thing Naomi does is make a choice. Look at v.6. **"Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food."** Naomi decides to return home. The reason Naomi decides to return home is that **"she heard the Lord had visited his people in giving them food."** This isn't a story where we see God pulling off a lot of miracles. But here we see God's hand at work in providing food. He does that, you know. He's the One who provides food for us, whether it's after a famine or not. And Naomi hears about it. How she heard we don't know, but you get the feeling that maybe Naomi is turning a corner; maybe there are better things ahead.

The choice to return was an important one for Naomi. It reveals her courage; her stubborn will to live. It even shows her faith in God. Sometimes in the midst of loss

and grief and hopelessness the hardest thing to do is to do anything at all that might be a step in the direction of starting over; of receiving life and blessing again from God. Sometimes we're paralyzed by our need to hang on to the last remnants of the past. Sometimes in our depression we lack the energy and will to do anything at all. We want to just give up; to just keep counting our losses; to wallow in self-pity. I'm not saying at all we should run away from the pain. We'll see in a moment that Naomi took her pain with her. But she made a decision to live and receive from God. For you that might be a decision to see a Christian counselor or to just come to church or join a small group. It might be a decision to get out of bed. It might be a decision to buy yourself a new dress or go and look for a job. Whatever it is, God gives you the strength to make a choice in the direction of life.

B. We can choose to express loyal love: The second thing we can learn from these women has to do with their relationship with one another. There is something about shared suffering that knits people together and we see that here. Look at vv.7-14.

"So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And 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. May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.' Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, 'No, but we will surely return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.' And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her."

When Naomi heads off for Israel Ruth and Orpah leave with her. It was customary then to accompany a guest on the first part of their journey as a way to say goodbye—sort of like we might walk a person to their car after they visit with us. But after a while Naomi realizes these women aren't saying goodbye. Naomi wants them to stay in Moab because life would be better for them there. They could still find a husband. She says **"return to your mother's house"** because it there that a marriage was arranged. She has a genuine concern for them. That's why she prays for them: **"May the Lord deal kindly with you..."** That word "kindly" is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*, which refers to God's steadfast, loyal love for his people. That's what she wants them to experience as they go back and start over. When they refuse to go back home, Naomi heightens her argument. She says, **"Have I yet sons**

in my womb that they may be your husbands?" She's referring to what is known in the OT as the law of the leverite whereby a widow was to marry the brother of her deceased husband. Not only was this a way to provide for widows but it was a way to allow the name of the dead husband to continue. The son from that union would take the name of the deceased husband. Naomi says, "All my sons are dead and I'm too old to provide any more for you to marry under the law of the leverite. Even if I got married and conceived tonight (fat chance!) would you wait for him to grow up to marry him?" It's a rather cynical way of speaking, but she has an airtight argument.

Orpah buys it and goes back to Moab. She did what was expected. But Ruth wasn't buying it. Ruth did the unexpected. She "clung" to Naomi, like a two-year-old who doesn't want to leave her mother's arms. Here is a clue that there is something special about Ruth. Naomi even tries to exert a little peer pressure: "Look at Orpah. She went back. Go with her!" She even brings a spiritual element into this: "she's gone back to her people and her gods." But Ruth refuses to budge. **"Then she said, 'Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or turn back 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. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.' When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her"** (vv.15-18).

Ruth's expression of loyal love to Naomi are some of the most beautiful words in all the Bible. Often they're used as wedding vows, but you can see here they didn't start that way. They have to do with friendship between two women. Ruth's expressing her undying loyalty to her mother-in-law as a friend. She says she'll even be buried with her which was a huge deal in that culture. She could have just said I'll stick with you as long you're alive and then I'll return to Moab. But Ruth is making a permanent break with her past. Why? Ultimately this was an expression of loyalty to God. Notice she says, **"your God will be my God."** She had learned of this God from Naomi. After all that had happened to Naomi, she might have thought, "If that's how your God treats his friends, I think I'll pass." But she had come to believe in him and now her faith was expressed in leaving everything behind. Don't forget that Ruth had taken some shots, too. She'd lost a husband. She'd been childless throughout her marriage. But she too expresses unusual faith and loyalty.

If we're going to survive these times of loss, we have to learn this kind of deep loyalty to one another. We have to make a choice to look out for each other's interest and cling to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Our tendency might be to isolate ourselves, but we need to extend ourselves to each other. The church should be a place where we demonstrate that it's possible to have non-sexual relationships of great depth and commitment. We live in a rootless, mobile, transient society. Neighborhoods and workplaces are in constant flux. We rarely get to know our neighbors. Our workplaces are arenas of cutthroat

competition. There are few arenas for friendship to blossom. Sex offers a momentary sense of deep connection without the commitment, so people often exchange that for genuine relationships. But here in the book of Ruth is a non-sexual relationship of extraordinary commitment between two single women. There are people in our society who for one reason or another will never marry, but does that exclude them from experiencing loyal and intimate love? If you're single, I challenge you to forge these kinds of relationships. You may have felt like you've been scratched from the guest list when it comes to having deep and intimate friendship, but that's a lie. Look around you. Is there a Ruth to look out for? Is there a Naomi to cling to?

D. We can choose to lament our pain: So off they go. Ruth and Naomi make the treacherous journey across the mountains and into the town of Bethlehem. We read of their arrival in vv.19-21. **"So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?"**

We can imagine that news of Naomi's arrival passed from house to house and the whole town buzzed with excitement. The women of the town whisper to one another, **"Is this Naomi?"** They weren't mocking her. I'm sure they were glad to see her after 20 years. But we can hear the disbelief in their voices. We can only guess what story Naomi's face told. She'd left with a husband and two sons, but now she returns with no one but a Moabite woman. So Naomi responds with a bitter complaint. Naomi means "pleasant" while Mara means "bitter." She says Mara fits me so much better. And then she attributes all her suffering to the hand of God. She says **"the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me...I went out full but the Lord has brought me back empty."**

This is what you might call a complaint or a lament. We're not too comfortable with this. What would you say if someone in your small group piped up and said, "God has dealt bitterly with me." We might feel like Naomi was very unspiritual to talk this way. But this wasn't the first or last time one of God's people lodged a complaint. She is in good company here: Jeremiah, Job, Moses, David all expressed their complaints to God. I believe God appreciates the honesty. Often we think God is offended by our questions and complaints, but when you're intimate with someone and you've trusted someone, it's normal to express your most personal feelings. This only crosses over into sin when we become resentful of God or when we no longer trust him with our lives. In an almost paradoxical way, our choice to face and lament the pain as Naomi does here is necessary before we can really experience joy again. Don't deny the pain; bring it to God.

Part of the reason she complained to God was she had a strong belief that God was in charge of all of life. She says **"the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me...the Lord has brought me back empty."** What happened to her wasn't random. It felt random. It always feels random. Why me?

But, Naomi believed that God was in charge. What she had a hard time seeing, though, was that God was at work in ALL THINGS both for her good and his glory. The hand of the Lord wasn't against her; it seemed that way, but the fact is, he loved her, and he would use even this for her greater blessing. That's what Naomi had yet to learn. Notice she says, **"I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty."**

But look at v.22. **"So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest."** Had she really come back empty handed? No! She had come back with this stubbornly faithful friend, Ruth, the Moabitess, whose loyalty would prove to be a greater blessing than Naomi could ever imagine. Not only that, it was the beginning of the barley harvest. God was providing for his people. And this is just a little hint from the narrator of the story that better things are ahead for Naomi.

CONCLUSION

In the midst of our losses, it's an act of faith to believe that God is still at work and his ultimate aim is to bless us. All we can see is the loss; all we can feel is the pain; but if we open our eyes there may be a loyal friend like Ruth clinging to us, or even a barley harvest. Maybe the most important choice we can make is to choose life.