

## *Naomi and Ruth – An Extraordinary Bond Between In-Laws*

I have a question for all players of Trivial Pursuit. What did Mark Twain list as last of twenty-seven items to be rescued from a boarding house fire? If you say “a mother-in-law” you get a piece of pie! A more modern pundit defined “mixed emotions” as watching your mother-in-law drive over a cliff in your brand new BMW.

It seems that mothers-in-law have gotten a lot of bad press over the years and daughters-in-law haven't fared much better. That's part of what makes the Bible story of Naomi and Ruth so unusual and interesting. It's a story of friendship. It's a story of love. It's a story of relationship between in-laws. Ruth, by the way, is one of only two women after whom a book of the Bible is named and the name Ruth is the seventh most popular name given to female babies in all of the history of the United States.

Now, of course, I'm neither a mother-in-law nor a daughter-in-law, but I am touched and I am taught by the story of these two amazing women — the friendship they shared and the bond that was forged out of the worst of circumstances.

The story begins more than a thousand years before Jesus was born when a famine came to the town of Bethlehem and the nearby area. A man named Elimelech lived in Bethlehem with his wife Naomi and sons Mahlon

and Kilion. When they became absolutely desperate with hunger he decided that they would leave the community and move to the country of Moab. It was a difficult decision to make because the Moabites hated the Hebrews and the Hebrews hated the Moabites as well. It was an attitude not a great deal dissimilar to that between the modern day Israelis and Syrians. But when your wife and children are threatened with starvation, a man does what he ordinarily would not do. And so, Elimelech took his wife and sons to Moab.

For Naomi, I suspect, it was a hard transition. Whenever we are uprooted and relocated, there's always a trauma that goes with that. You lose your friends and all that is familiar. There is the long and difficult process of setting down roots in a new and unfamiliar place. For Naomi it was even more difficult because there was unemployment, poverty, a different culture and language. Moab was a particularly hostile place to them as Jews. No doubt there were days when life seemed about as bad as it could be.

Maybe you've had those times when you thought that things couldn't get worse, when you knew that the future could only be better because the problems were so terrible, only to have another problem come, a crushing blow that made the first problem seem insignificant in comparison. That's the way it was for Naomi because there, in the hostile land of Moab, Elimelech died. Naomi was not only in a strange and difficult place but she was there as a widow, as a single mom at a time and place in history that was especially cruel to women in such situations.

Naomi did the very best that she could and raised her two sons. She taught them and provided for them. I can only guess her emotions when each of her sons married Moabite women. It was a hard thing for a Jewish mother to have her sons marry outside the faith, but there were no Jewish women for them to marry. Mahlon married a woman named Ruth and Kilion married a woman named Orpah. Orpah, by the way, is the one after whom Oprah Winfrey is named. It

seems that her mother wanted to name her after Kilion's Moabite wife but the name was misspelled on the birth certificate as Oprah Winfrey instead of Orpah Winfrey.

Then, when Naomi thought she had it bad, life dealt her another crushing blow — both of her sons

died, leaving her with only two daughters-in-law. For Naomi it was such a harsh set of circumstances that she changed her name from Naomi, which means “my joy” in Hebrew, to Mara, which means “bitter.”

When the rains came and the famine was over she decided she would go back home to Bethlehem again. Her two daughters-in-law started walking down the road with her from Moab back to Israel. But Naomi stopped them, and you can sense her bitterness and her sarcasm. She said, “Do you think you are going to get new husbands from me? Even if I had a husband myself and became pregnant tonight and had two sons in nine months, are you going to wait for them to grow up so you can marry them? Why don't you just go home? Go back to your own mother's house. Go back to your Moabite gods. Just go back and leave me alone.”

Naomi kissed them goodbye. It was another misery, another loss. The pain of parting was all too familiar to Naomi. Orpah wept, kissed her goodbye

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and turned to go back home to her mother's house. But Ruth couldn't let go. Weeping, she clung to Naomi and pleaded with her saying, "Don't send me back. Let me go with you. Where you go, I'll go. Where you stay, I'll stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God."

Ruth's name means "friendship" and if ever there was a woman who needed a friend, it was Naomi. There on that day, on that road, a bitter old woman and a friendly young woman forged a friendship that would make history. Together, they went back to Bethlehem.

I'd like to guess at what Naomi had expected of that return, what she had told Ruth. Returning home after a long absence is seldom the way we expect it will be. For while we have been gone, we have changed and so have those we once knew. When they got into the village of Bethlehem, people who once knew her walked up to Naomi and said, "Can this be Naomi?" They remembered the women whose parents had named her "my joy." They were stunned by the way she looked and were shocked when she said, "Don't ever call me Naomi again. My name is Mara (bitter)."

Life for them back in Bethlehem was not easy. They were on the low end of the socio-economic spectrum. They had no money, no jobs, no men to take care of them in a culture where that was almost a necessity of survival. And so they had to go on welfare.

The welfare system in place in Israel in those days worked like this: When farmers harvested their fields, they were forbidden by law to make a complete harvest. They had to leave some of the stalks standing, and, if they spilled some grain, they were not to pick it up again, so that those who were poor could come along behind the harvesters and glean the fields clean. The poor were allowed to take what leftovers they could gather, and they would subsist on that.

That was the way Naomi and Ruth were to eat. Of the two widows, Ruth was younger and stronger, so she became the gleaner for the pair. She would go out in different fields each day and bring back what she could scavenge. They would eat some of it, and save some of it so that they could get through until the next harvest season.

One day she was gleaning wheat and barley in the field of a wealthy older man from Bethlehem named Boaz. When Boaz came to inspect the harvest, he noticed Ruth and turned to one of his employees and asked about her. When told who she was, he immediately recognized her name because she was quite famous in the village of Bethlehem. Everyone knew about her. And even though the general prejudice was to hate the Moabites, they respected her. They

were impressed with this young widow who loved her mother-in-law enough to leave her own land and family and religion to come home with Naomi to Bethlehem. They were impressed. And so was Boaz when he met her.

When Boaz started talking to Ruth he said, "You know, I have a lot of fields. Why don't you just do your gleaning here every day? Don't even go to anybody else's field, and I will instruct my employees to protect you and to provide for you because it's a dangerous thing for a woman to be alone at harvest time. These are difficult days in the land of Judah. I'll just see to it that you are cared for." Then he told some of his employees to leave some extra stalks standing. In fact, after they had gathered and bound the stalks together, they were to occasionally pull some out and leave them behind for her to gather. That day, when Ruth went back home to Naomi, her basket was full to the brim and overflowing. Naomi, who had had more than her share of difficulties, was delighted. When she saw all that Ruth had gathered she said, "May the Lord bless the man who gave so freely and abundantly."

As they talked about her day gleaning, Naomi asked whose field it was. Ruth said that it belonged to a man named Boaz. "Boaz!" Naomi said, "Why, he's a relative of my husband Elimelech," and with that, a mother-in-law's brain went into gear!

First, she had to take some time to explain the complicated Hebrew laws to her Moabite daughter-in-law. They are difficult for us to understand as well. Naomi explained that families are very important in Israel, and so the laws are set to continue and perpetuate the family and the clan and the tribe. For example, they have levirate marriage, "levir" being the Hebrew word for brother. According to this law, if a man dies with no children, it becomes the responsibility of his brother, cousin or other relative to marry that widow, and when they have a child, especially a son, that first born is legally counted and named as if he were the son of the man who died.

Then she said, "We have another law. It's called the Law of the Kinsman-Redeemer." This was a law where a relative would buy property left by the deceased or which was foreclosed on so that it would stay in the family or clan. The closest relative can buy or redeem the land.

"There's a relationship between these laws," Naomi explained. "For, you see, if the kinsman-redeemer buys the land and there's a widow who doesn't have a child, then, in the buying of the land, the kinsman-redeemer must also marry the widow." She had to also add a disclaimer that a lot of people didn't like these laws. There were people who wanted the land

but didn't want the wife. And most men didn't want their first son belonging to some dead relative. Besides, if there were no more sons born, it would jeopardize the man's own family property.

Now, all this being explained to Ruth, you probably have already guessed what Naomi had in mind here. She had it all figured out, all planned. Boaz was a relative. He could buy Elimelech's land and marry Ruth. Ruth would get a husband and Naomi would get a grandchild and they both would escape poverty. She just hadn't mentioned anything to Boaz! And you think to yourself that this woman sort of fits the stereotype of a mother-in-law – perhaps yours. You wonder why I am coming to her defense when she sounds manipulative and meddling. Well, let me explain why.

I find Naomi to be someone who genuinely loved Ruth, who really believed that what she was proposing was in Ruth's and everybody else's best interest. Also, there was a certain measure of self-sacrifice in what she was proposing, for if she could get Ruth married to Boaz, she would lose her dear daughter-in-law from her home.

Most mothers-in-law say they are doing things in every one's best interest, so you have to judge each case separately. But let me still come to Naomi's defense. For I would contend that what she suggested grew not out of being meddling nor manipulative, but out of the relationship that they had together. I also believe that the reason Ruth accepted Naomi's involvement is a combination of Ruth's graciousness and the extraordinary relationship these two women shared. Through the bond forged by widowhood, poverty, relocation and the sharing of difficult times together, they had built a relationship that allowed Naomi to do what she did.

In the first year that Charleen and I were married, we lived in an 8 by 46 foot mobile home. It was so cold in winter that our oil furnace would run twenty-four hours a day, but the pipes would still freeze. Whenever that happened, in order to go to the bathroom, we had to go a half-mile down the road to a gas station. We also had some times of unemployment and many days with very little money. Those days were hard in many ways, but wonderful as well. While we had very little, we had each other, and we grew closer than we might have in warmth and prosperity.

And so it was for Naomi and Ruth. Their hard times together had made their relationship all the stronger and it was out of that relationship that Naomi proposed her plan. But once again she had to do some

explaining to Ruth about their cultural customs. She told her that in their country the threshing floor was an extremely important place. It was carefully located and constructed on the side of a hill where the wind blows through in the afternoon. The gathered harvest is thrown up into the air as the wind blows and the chaff is blown away and then the grain falls to the smooth threshing floor. When the grain is all piled up, the men who have harvested it and the men who own it sleep there all night in order to protect it from thieves.

"So here is what I want you to do, Ruth. Tonight, now that the harvesting is done for the day, there will be a time of partying. After the partying is over, Boaz and his men will be sleeping on the threshing floor. I know that this might sound strange to you because you're from Moab, but after dark, when everybody's asleep, I want you to sneak in and find Boaz. While he is sleeping, gently lift his blanket and expose his feet. Then I want you lie down at his feet and wait for him to wake up."

Now would you trust your mother-in-law enough to do these things? Naomi went on to instruct Ruth, "When he wakes up you are to say, 'Will you cover me with the corner of your blanket?' Do you understand, Ruth?" Naomi went on to explain that in that

culture these actions communicated a proposal of marriage. Ruth would be symbolically saying, "I want to come under the cover and the protection of the blanket of your life." To do that

put her in an extremely vulnerable position. But she had come to trust Naomi's judgment and so she did exactly what she said.

When Boaz awakened and saw Ruth at his feet his answer to her request was "yes," knowing full well what all this meant. To protect Ruth's reputation, he quickly told all his employees to keep quiet about her being there. The next day he went to the town gate where all the business of the community was done and there, before the elders of the town, he announced that Naomi was offering Elimelech's property for sale. He knew that there was another relative closer than he was, but Boaz hoped he wouldn't want the land.

To the heart-sinking disappointment of Naomi and Ruth, the other relative said he would buy it. But Boaz kept his cool and said, "You understand, of course, that when you buy the land you also need to marry Mahlon's widow?" The other relative had a sudden change of mind and told Boaz to buy it himself — he wasn't ready to get married! Then the two men exchanged sandals which, in their culture, made it a done

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deal.

In great happiness, Boaz and Ruth were immediately married and the marriage was consummated. Ruth became pregnant, and God blessed their marriage with a son. When he was born they named him Obed which means “servant of the Lord,” and placed him on the lap of the woman he came to know as his grandmother, Naomi. The women of the village of Bethlehem often told Naomi that she was a blessed woman. Her daughter-in-law loved her and was worth more than seven sons and now had given her a son again!

It is the story of two women, the story of friends. It’s a story of love-in-laws, a true love story. But most of all, it’s a story of God. For woven through this entire tale are divine surprises.

To start off, remember that Ruth was a pagan; she lived in a place where they worshiped gods that were made with human hands. She knew nothing about Yahweh or scripture. Her only knowledge about the true God was from Naomi and her family. And yet she saw them at their worst. She saw Naomi going through death and disappointment, discouragement and depression. She saw her in poverty and in bitterness, but somehow God could be seen in Naomi’s life. And the God Ruth saw through Naomi’s miseries was sufficiently attractive for Ruth to give up everything to follow Him.

Our friends know us pretty well, don’t they? They see us with dirt on our faces and problems in our lives. They know when we’re hurting. Let us trust God to show through us to them, even in those tough times. It is one thing to have a God for the good times. That’s nice. But there is an almost irresistible attraction to a God who cannot be hidden by our miseries or extinguished by our pain.

There is a second divine surprise in this ancient love story. It’s the surprise that Ruth befriended a bitter relative, turning an ordinary relationship into a transforming friendship. There appeared to be little benefit to Ruth in leaving Moab. Humanly speaking the logical thing for her was to go back to her mother’s house, where she would be provided for. In all probability that was her best chance of remarriage. But she reached out to Naomi, a bitter woman. Ruth chose to love her when she wasn’t very lovable, to stick with her even when Naomi said, “Leave, go away.”

You know, love has tremendous power. Ruth’s love transformed Naomi. Maybe you have a friend, maybe a relative, someone who’s bitter. Maybe someone who’s told you to just go away. Can you think of someone to whom you can be a loving and transforming Ruth?

There is a third divine surprise in the story and

it’s the most surprising and the best of the three. It is the surprise that the short-term success was turned into long-term salvation. The story of Ruth more than a millennia before the birth of Christ, is a short story. It’s only four chapters long in the Bible. It’s true that it was a story of success — prosperity replaced poverty and good results gave the story a happy ending.

You remember that the child that was born was named Obed. Obed was Ruth’s baby but also Boaz’ baby and, in a sense, Mahlon’s baby and Elimelech’s baby and Naomi’s baby. But most of all, Obed was God’s baby. God had dreams for Obed that were far beyond anything that any of those of his generation ever imagined. You see, Obed grew to adulthood, married and fathered a son named Jesse.

Jesse was the grandson of Ruth, the great-grandson of Naomi. Jesse also grew to adulthood and fathered a whole string of sons, the youngest of whom he named David. David became the king, the founder of the Davidic dynasty, the man described in the Bible as after God’s own heart.

And then, for a thousand years to follow, sons and daughters were born until one day, in that same village of Bethlehem, under the light of a supernatural star, a baby was born named Jesus, a descendent of Ruth the Moabite. Ruth’s descendant was God in human flesh and he grew to adulthood not to father a son, but to die on a cross, to be buried and to rise again and thereby secure for us victory over sin and salvation to last for eternity.

And so the friendship of a Hebrew mother-in-law and a Moabite daughter-in-law produced Jesus who came to make it possible for you and me to be friends with God!

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