**Part 3: The Covenant**

**Ruth 1:15-22** [New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised](https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Anglicised-NRSVA-Bible/) **(NRSVA)**

15So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ 16But Ruth said,

‘Do not press me to leave you
    or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
    where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
    and your G-d my G-d.
17Where you die, I will die—
    there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
    and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!’

18When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

19So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’ 20She said to them,

‘Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara,

for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
21I went away full,
    but the Lord has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
    when the Lord has dealt harshly withme,
    and the Almightyhas brought calamity upon me?’

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

Let’s read again what Ruth said to Naomi in chapter 1:15-22. Her words are very familiar because they are often used in wedding ceremonies. The words are from the younger Ruth to the older Naomi, her mother-in-law. They have both lost their husbands. Naomi told Ruth and Orphah to return to their own country where they could find new husbands to care for them. Naomi gives an impassionate speech, telling them she cannot offer any future to them.

Orphah obeyed Naomi by returning to Moab, but Ruth clings to Naomi. Ruth sticks to Naomi – the word implies a permanent commitment. Naomi says she is empty and has no way of fulfilling Ruth’s needs. Ruth speaks of not coming to Naomi empty, but she never speaks of loyalty for her dead husband as a motive of staying with Naomi.

Indeed, she has great concern for Naomi’s well-being. Scholars say that the language Ruth uses is like that used for a treaty or a covenant. But some people do not really understand or get it. In order to make this commitment, we have to have dealt with our past and leave it behind. You could literally go back, or you could continue to go back in your head. But there is a future and before you can go into the future, you have to have some relief off your back.

When it comes to relationships, both women knew what it was to love and to have a loss. If you do not deal with your past, it will follow you. Your partner or friends will see how far you have come. Naomi was clear: If you go with me, you do not have a future. She was talking about her physical and economic capabilities. But when Ruth looked to Naomi, she was strongly bonded and saw the G-d of Israel through Naomi.

Most Jewish sources believe that Ruth’s made her vow because she recognized Naomi’s spiritual wisdom, and thus longed to follow her and learn from her. Even though Naomi is bitter, Ruth still sees a living G-d, even while they have no bread and they have come from riches in Moab to poverty in Bethlehem. Ruth saw the person of Naomi, and had that desire – she wanted to have that bond with Naomi and her G-d. Ruth’s poetic declaration stated her willingness to exchange her family, her gods, and land to be with Naomi.

Some sources suggest that the two daughters-in-law had earlier been converted when married to Naomi’s sons, but conversion in that time – and even now – may come in stages where one’s commitment deepens over time. It is not a single step. We see in the story of Ruth a path of deepening commitment between her and Naomi.

**Wherever you go, I will go:** The words indicate that Ruth expected their lives might be wandering about with an unstable lifestyle. Certainly, this differs from what most women in that time or now are looking for when they marry. She realizes their situation where no one was obligated to help them.

Her decision was stated as, ‘I will go,’ reminding us of Abraham who was told by G-d to leave his land. In ancient times such moves were very unusual; most people stayed in the land of their parents. But unlike Abraham, Ruth has no family, no wealth, nor was she promised progeny or greatness so she had nothing apparent to gain by her move.

She voluntarily becomes a stranger in an unknown land in order not to abandon Naomi, who had been a stranger in Ruth’s homeland – they switch positions, as it were.

We can imagine that Ruth and Naomi talked about their past lives together and the unknown future. Ruth saw the desire that Naomi had when they moved from Bethlehem to Moab. And now Ruth saw that Naomi was empty, feeling that she was nothing, and had nothing to offer.

Ruth was redefining herself in her desire to go back to the house of bread, even though she might not be accepted there. In essence, she says, OK, I follow you, even when you are an empty bag. Naomi believed she was nothing and felt that G-d saw her as nothing. But Ruth still said she wanted to follow Naomi. Can’t you imagine they had a lot of conversation where Naomi tried to talk Ruth out of coming? Ruth probably said, ‘Can you please shut up? I am going to follow you no matter what,’ so Naomi became silent when she saw the desire of Ruth.

**Wherever you lodge, I will lodge:** The Hebrew word for ‘lodge’ suggests again that they were on the move. But Ruth was a gentile, previously a lover of her idols, while Naomi loved her G-d. Jews were not supposed to overnight with gentiles, as it would be seen as a violation of purity laws.

Some Jewish sources such as the *Targum*, read this statement as a response to Naomi who would have said they were commanded never to stay the night with non-Jews. For those unfamiliar with the *Targum*, in the century before Jesus, the Jews’ common language changed from Hebrew to Aramaic, so when scripture was read in Hebrew, it had to be explained in their language that was in use at the time. It was a form of midrash, discussion and debate about the various levels of meaning or interpretation of the scripture, in a sense similar to our biblical commentaries of today. So, we can have insight into the thinking of the Jews at that time in how they interpreted scripture.

There is another level of meaning for ‘lodge,’ referring to a meeting of a man and woman alone with one another, in other words, an implication of physical intimacy. Ruth is saying she will follow Naomi blindly, trusting her. Every rock or whatever is in between will not stop me from following you, even though you are bitter. I see a strong relationship with G-d in you.

This is Ruth’s stage of spiritual development where she is more dependent on Naomi, because she is entering a strange land. So, it is in our spiritual walk, and at all stages of life, we all need someone who can hold up the mirror and help us stay centered when we enter the dark nights. And even those who have been in their faith for a long time will still have those periods of time where they do not understand what is going on in their lives. That is why they can teach us to learn to wait on the Lord when we are struggling in our faith.

**Your people shall be my people:**  Her commitment is a present commitment. In Jewish sources, the *Targum* suggests that Naomi probably reminded Ruth of the 613 commandments that Jews were required to keep, but she continued to insist, ‘I will be with you day and night, and your people will be my people.’

**Your G-d is my G-d:** Some sources say that at this point, Ruth’s commitment to Israel’s G-d was because it was Naomi’s G-d and not necessarily based on her own independent conviction. She was new as a follower of the Hebrew G-d. In their ancient culture, it would have been normal that if a person moved, they would take on worship of the gods in the new locale. But her next words were to make a vow in G-d’s name. The *Targum* indicates that Naomi would have explained that they were commanded not to worship other gods or idols, to which Ruth would have responded to her, “Your G-d is my G-d.” Unlike Orphah, who returned to her people and presumably their gods, Ruth chooses Naomi’s people and Naomi’s G-d.

**Where you die, I will die:** Remarkably, Ruth pledged that the Lord could do something to her “if anything but death parts me from you.” This of course is reminiscent of common marriage vows of ‘till death do us part.’ It is very surprising that a young woman made such a commitment to an older woman in a world where survival was tied to being with a man: One woman has chosen and committed herself to another.

And here, the word, ‘part,’ was also used by David in talking about Saul and Jonathan and their inseparable bond (I Samuel 1:23).

Some modern Jewish commentators have noted that the story continues to be a model for powerful love between two women where they were not motivated by economic advantage or status. Others see the book as reflecting a model of ethics in any close relationship.

And one Jewish writer whose meditations are profound explained that in Ruth, law and *hesed* come together. Remember that *hesed* is loving kindness, nurturing life, sustaining bonds with others, and fulfilling needs. The law focused on separation and exclusion from non-Israelites. Moabites could not join Israelite congregations. Ruth’s “stickiness” and clinging to Naomi challenged that law.

But at this time, laws of intermarriage and mixing with non-Jews were beginning to change. Ruth is an example of exchanging works of the law for works of *hesed*. This book teaches us, as it did the ancient Judeans, that we need to balance following the letter of the law, or pursuing our own personal goals vs. loyalty with others for whom we care.

There is a similar concept in the New Testament, where Jesus violates traditional norms such as working on the Sabbath in order to bring about a greater good, such as healing someone.

**Things to think about:**

1) Jesus called his disciples his friends. And he counted among his friends many who were of low status in their world. How did Jesus think about the law of exclusion in his time? Can you think of examples in which he overrode or ignored prohibitions or exclusions in relationships? If you come from a Jewish tradition, can you think about examples from the prophets, or perhaps those from modern times, who found ways to deal with exclusion? We think of all the holy men and women, Jewish and Christian, who rose up to fight the Nazis, who were the very definition of evil exclusivity.

2) In Naomi’s and Ruth’s era, there were detailed religious rules for how to behave, based on age, gender and marital status. In today’s world, the rules may also differ by nationality or culture. Are there differences in how you handle friends of the same gender different from the opposite gender? Does it depend on the place and situation you are in? Is it different at home or at work?

Have you had any experiences in other cultures or subcultures where the gender rules differed from those you grew up with? Are there different rules – spoken or unspoken – in your place of worship? If you are an older adult, how has your own religious culture changed across your lifetime? What rules have changed and which ones have remained the same?

3) What are your ideas of what a good friendship should be? What ethical rules guiding friendship are important to you? What have you learned from Ruth and Naomi?

4) In a committed intimate relationship, what are your ideas of ethical guidelines that should be observed? Regardless of whether a relationship is intimate or not, whether the same or opposite sex, what can we learn from Naomi and Ruth about forming a lasting relationship?

**Personal Notes:**

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