

Three Widows . . . Three Ways

When Fairytales Come True – Part III

Ruth 1:6-22

Introduction

I have an aversion to doctors, dentists, and needles. Do you have the same testimony?

When you sit in the dentist chair, the assistant comes in with a needle and says, “Now, this won’t hurt . . .” – she is lying. They are all a pack of liars!

I remember going in for some x-rays for which I had to drink something so the technicians could track it on a machine. The doctor said to me, “Here, drink this, it tastes like a milkshake.” It tasted like sludge – whatever that tastes like.

I am convinced that you cannot get a medical degree without being able to lie with a straight face.

“This will only take a moment . . .”

“This will pinch for just a second . . .”

Yeah, right.

Several years ago, pain from a chipped tooth finally drove me to make an appointment with a dentist. I had been taking pain relievers for months and finally knew I had to do something about it, so I went to the dentist. After taking x-rays of all my teeth, he informed me that I had not one, but three broken teeth and I needed three crowns. I think a crown is an appropriate name, because only kings and queens can afford them. Amen?

Nearly two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to a friend in which he stated, “The art of life is the avoiding of pain,” which proves he never went to the dentist either.

The art of life is avoiding pain . . .ⁱ

I would have to disagree. The art of life is not avoiding pain – the art of life is accepting and responding to pain.

Pain manufactures maturity.

Crises condition character.

Difficulty develops depth.

The truth is that difficulty, pain, suffering, and sorrow create crossroads, and the path we choose to take will make the difference in whether we grow and sweeten or stagnate and weaken in our faith.

If you have ever wondered where a crossroads experience is described in scripture; where there are decisions to be made that will determine the destiny of a person’s life, Ruth chapter 1 is such a place. It is a crisis at the crossroad of life for three women – and what a crisis it is.

When we last left this family in Ruth chapter 1, they had become familiar sights at the local funeral home. They all knew Naomi by name.

First, Naomi’s husband had died. Then, one of her sons died. And then, soon after, her only other child – another grown son – passed away.

There are no details and no descriptions – just three widows – Naomi and her two daughters-in-law – grieving their incredible loss.

In this world, at this time, in this culture – this was beyond grief. It not only threatened the future happiness of these women on Earth, but their very ability to survive.

Naomi and her husband and two sons had left Bethlehem, believing they were leaving trouble behind. There was nothing but green pastures ahead.

Now, however, ten years later, there is nothing in Moab for Naomi except three graves, great sorrow, and unbelievable grief.ⁱⁱ

Naomi can stay in Moab and mourn and starve to death, or she can leave. Besides, word has reached her that Bethlehem has food again; Bethlehem, the House of Bread, has bread once again for all who live there.

So, without any apparent hesitation, verse 7 of chapter 1 informs us that Naomi,

. . . 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.

It was a typical oriental custom for hosts to accompany their departing guests some distance down the road and then, bid them farewell – which seems to be the picture here.ⁱⁱⁱ

Three widows eventually end up at either the border or perhaps the edge of the Jordan River just above the Dead Sea – we are not told.

Bethlehem was a three-day journey from Moab and Naomi would not have wanted her daughters-in-law to walk very far before she said farewell – which is exactly what she had in mind to do. Notice verse 8.

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.”

You might think it strange for Naomi to encourage these women to return, not to their father’s house, but to their mother’s house.

This does not mean that Orpah and Ruth have deceased fathers. This expression is actually referring to the mother’s place – it was the mother’s chamber where marriages were planned and often arranged.^{iv}

In other words, “Girls, listen, you’re young; you have your life in front of you – go back to your mothers and make plans for another wedding.”

Naomi continues with her blessing in verse 9.

“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.

Out in the open – literally without hope, security, and, in their minds, a future – these women weep.

Three widows – their lives turned upside down by unfulfilled expectations and unexpected sorrow. I do

not think I have ever met a family with three widows, related to one another by marriage, where none of them have surviving children or grandchildren.

There are few more tender and heartbreaking scenes in the Bible than this one. This is not one damsel in distress, but three.

These women are at a crossroads, literally and figuratively. And in the midst of their pain, we happen to be given a textbook lesson on three classic responses to pain, disillusionment, and sorrow.

Perhaps you will identify with one of these widows, and maybe you will identify with all three.

A Crossroads for the Widow Naomi

Let us take a closer look at Naomi. You may remember that her name means “gracious one,” which could be rendered “pleasant” or even “sweet”.

The trouble is that she has become embittered over these ten long years. The lines in Naomi’s face tell the story of three graves and great loss. So she concludes that she is best left alone.

Let me make some observations from Naomi’s own words.

1. First, Naomi considers herself unworthy of love.

Four times Naomi will tell her daughters-in-law to leave her alone and go back home.

Notice the first reason Naomi expects these young women to leave her in verses 10-11.

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?”

In other words, “Since my sons are now gone, there is no longer the bonds of marriage; there is nothing in myself that is worthy of you following me or caring about me. I’m just an old woman now; surely you won’t bother with me.”

Peel back the layers of self-pity to see that Naomi has convinced herself that God no longer loves her and neither should Orpah or Ruth.

Notice the words Naomi then says in verses 12-13.

“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.”

“God is against me and He doesn’t love me either.”

If you ever reach the point at which you are convinced that God does not love you anymore, you are going to find it impossible to be loved by anyone else. Loving God and believing God loves you is actually the foundation for receiving love from others and giving love back to them.

True, self-sacrificing, genuine love is impossible apart from the love of Christ.

David wrote,

Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it . . . (Psalm 127:1a)

True love is always a three party transaction.

In fact, the commitment that Ruth will show Naomi will be possible only because Ruth has become committed to Naomi’s true and living God.

The next observation is much more serious.

2. Secondly, Naomi considers God unworthy of worship.

Look at verses 14-15.

And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

In other words, “Go back to your gods – they’ll probably be no worse to you than mine was.”

- In verse 13, Naomi says that God’s hand has been against her;
- In verse 20, she says that God has dealt bitterly with her;
- In verse 21, she says that God is against her and has afflicted her.

In other words, “My God has really dropped the ball. Why don’t you go back to your gods, perhaps they’ll treat you better.”

What in the world is Naomi doing demanding that her two daughters-in-law go back to their gods?

Their chief god was Chemosh, and the worship was child sacrifice.

Why would a Jewish woman, a daughter of Abraham, encourage two pagan women to worship false gods?

Warren Wiersbe asked this question and suggested a reason in his commentary. He said that Naomi wanted to go back to Bethlehem and she really did not want anyone to know that she and her husband had permitted their two sons to marry pagan Gentiles.^v

In other words, “I’ll cover up our unfaithfulness to God.”

However, two wrongs do not make it right! Naomi is only adding to her guilt.

Perhaps, at least in my opinion, she is not covering up unfaithfulness, but is counseling these two women based on unbelief. Perhaps Naomi is saying, “God isn’t really worth following. I’ve been to the graveyard three times now, and it’s obvious that God doesn’t care.”

Let us fast forward to the moment Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem. Notice verse 19.

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?”

In other words, all Naomi’s former friends and acquaintances come up to her and say, “Naomi, is that you?”

Notice her answer in verse 20.

She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara . . .”

When this name is translated, Naomi is saying, “Don’t call me pleasant or sweet anymore; call me bitter . . .”

“ . . . for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.”

In other words, “He made me this way. It’s all His fault.”

We do not read anywhere of repentance for having abandoned God’s covenant people and God’s covenant land. At this point Naomi is more interested in food than fellowship with God. She was returning to walk in her land, but she was not returning to walk with her Lord.

Notice Naomi’s words in verse 21a.

“I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. . . .”

Naomi is right, in a way. God has brought her back. She just does not realize at the moment that God has not deserted her, even though she is basically deserting Him.

She has no idea that God is at work in her life now more than ever. She has no idea that God has plans for a new son-in-law and a grandson named Obed, who will be the great-grandfather of King David.

We act in the same way. When in pain, we tend to magnify what we do not have and minimize what we do have.

However, there is a ray of hope and insight buried in her words. She says, in verse 21, “We went out full and came back empty.”

Now wait a second! Naomi and her family left in the middle of a famine – they had little to eat; they saw the loss of their property value; enemy Midianites were just around the corner. This was the reason they headed for the green and fertile fields of Moab.

However, notice that Naomi says to these women, “We were in reality, full.”

In other words, “We had everything that really mattered in Bethlehem.”

A Crossroads for the Widow Orpah

Now, let us go back and take a quick look at Orpah, the second widow in this setting of pain and suffering.

When Naomi first demanded that her daughters-in-law return to their mothers, notice in verse 10 that both Ruth and Orpah refused to go. They both said in unison,

“. . . we will surely return with you to your people.”

However, Naomi then lays out the reality of what they will lose if they do return with her – and that changed everything!

Orpah gets the message:

- her life will be difficult as a widow from Moab;
- her prospects of a husband will be less than nothing;
- she will be unwanted by the Jewish community – Moabites and Jews did not get along, in fact they hated one another;

- she will leave her nation with all its comfortable customs and conditions for a different nation;
- she will be forfeiting her rights as a citizen;
- she is given no prospects and no promises.

So Orpah lifted her voice and wept, and then kissed her mother-in-law and said goodbye.

J. Vernon McGee wrote that Ruth and Orpah demonstrate the two kinds of members in the church – the professors and the possessors. Orpah made a profession of faith, but Ruth possessed genuine faith.^{vi}

So at this crossroad of life, a decision is made by Orpah that will determine her eternal destiny.

This is like many I have witnessed who believe Christ will interrupt their lives more than they want; who believe God will mess up their social connections and their reputation; who believe they just might have to give up an idol or two; that following Christ just might mean a cross to bear.

Orpah calculates the cost and decides to go back to darkness. She was sad about it and she shed tears that were real, but at this crossroad of life, she chooses to go back to paganism; back to Moab; back to her gods, and this time, perhaps, back to a good man of Moabite stock.

Orpah disappears back over the horizon and the Bible never mentions her again.

Naomi then says, in verse 15, “Well, Ruth, what are you waiting for? Look . . .”

. . . “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

“Go on . . . get.”

What happens next is nothing less than one of the greatest confessions of faith we will find anywhere in scripture.

A Crossroads for the Widow Ruth

Notice verses 16-18.

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 [Naomi] saw that [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

To sum this up, Ruth is saying to Naomi, “No matter what the future holds and no matter where the future takes us, I will stay by your side.”

This is not a blind decision. Ruth knows that Naomi has nothing to offer her except poverty and hardship.

She has absolutely nothing to gain by going with Naomi and everything to lose.^{vii}

Naomi tried to tell Ruth, “Go back to your mother.”

Ruth’s mother, a Moabitess, is evidently alive. I can just imagine the conversation. “Ruth, are you out of your mind?! I knew there would be trouble when you married that Israelite. Stay in Moab; stick to your family; worship our gods; marry a nice Moabite man.”

We have read this story so often that we have forgotten what Ruth is giving up. After losing her husband, she is turning her back on her citizenship, her family, her country, her religion, and her security. She is literally giving away her future.

One author put it this way: “Ruth possesses nothing. No deity has promised her blessing; no human being has come to her aid. She lives and chooses without a support system and she knows that the fruit of her decision may well be the emptiness of rejections and perhaps even death. She has committed herself to the life of an older widow rather

than the search for a new husband. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel.”^{viii}

Twice in this well-rehearsed speech, Ruth refers to God in personal terminology. The God of Israel is the One whom she is now believing in and trusting in for her future.

While in Toulon, France a number of years ago, my wife, Marsha, and I stayed with a French pastor – John-Pierre and his wife, Jocelyn. John-Pierre could not speak English well and Jocelyn often translated for him as we talked. One evening, John-Pierre told us about a young lady who had recently received Christ. She faced a great deal of persecution due to her decision. She lost her friends and was nearly disowned by her family. Then John-Pierre said something that Jocelyn was having a hard time translating into English. She finally said, “My husband is saying that in spite of everything, this young lady gripped God.”

She gripped, by faith, her living Lord.

Conclusion

These are three widows, with three different ways of handling the pain of life that they just could not avoid.

- Orpah departs – her shallow faith was based on circumstances.
- Naomi returns – her weak faith was biased by circumstances.
- Ruth arrives – her new-found faith went beyond circumstances – it was independent of circumstances entirely.

In this strange new land, Ruth has a tight grip on her new-found, true and living God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/23/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Maria Cosway, dated October 12, 1786, <http://www.enotes.com>.

ⁱⁱ Stanley Collins, Courage and Submission: A Study of Ruth & Esther (G/L Regal Books, 1975), p. 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert L. Hubbard, New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Ruth (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 102.

^{iv} Frederic W. Bush, Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 9, Ruth (Word Books, 1996), p. 75.

^v Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Committed (Victor Books, 1993), p. 19.

^{vi} J. Vernon McGee, The Romance of Redemption (Thomas Nelson, 1943), p. 61.

^{vii} Collins, p. 11.

^{viii} Bush, p. 87.