

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

PART II

Ruth 1:14-22

*BEING AT HOME SPIRITUALLY MEANS TO BE IN A PLACE
WHERE WE CAN RECEIVE GOD'S BLESSINGS*

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THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME (PART II) RUTH 1:14-22

Last week we saw that Naomi understood exactly what God was telling her. She realized that she could not be blessed by God as long as she was living in the fields of Moab . If she wanted to once again enjoy God's blessings, she would have to leave Moab and return to the Promised Land, Israel .

That is true for us as well. We will not be able to enjoy God's blessings if we try to find our happiness in the things of this world. We have all experienced instances in our lives when the bottom completely fell out. Those are the times in which God attempted to get us to move away from the world.

I can still see and hear Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* clicking her heels together, closing her eyes, and repeating the phrase, "There's no place like home. There's no place like home."

We have all heard the phrase; "Home is where the heart is." In a sense, that's what this

morning's text is all about. Home is a spiritual state. It is being at a place in our lives where we can experience God's blessing. For Naomi, it was going back to Israel . For us, it is leaving worldly thoughts and behaviors behind. It is putting ourselves in a position where God can bless us. Home indeed is where the heart is.

Maybe that's the problem for many of us. Being at home isn't always all it's cracked up to be. Let me give you an example. I was over my friend's house when his son came in and said, "Dad, I just got a part in the school play! I play a man who's been married for 30 years!"

My friend said, "Great job son! Keep up the good work! If you do well, next time you may get a speaking part!"

Maybe we don't always think of home as a place where we can be blessed, but in the Bible, going home is going back to a place where we can once again be blessed by God.

Let me emphasize this again. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **BEING AT HOME SPIRITUALLY MEANS TO BE IN A PLACE WHERE WE CAN RECEIVE GOD'S BLESSINGS.** In other words, just as Naomi must leave Moab and return to Israel to receive God's blessings, we must leave our worldly thoughts and behaviors behind and embrace God's ways in order to receive and enjoy God's blessings.

I. CLEAR THINKING FACES US TOWARDS HOME

In Order To Be In A Place To Receive God's Blessings, We Must Be Willing To Leave All Worldly Thinking Behind.

Last week we saw that even though Naomi received this epiphany, and even though we encountered three very noble women, we witnessed some muddled thinking. This week we will start off with some good solid thinking on the part of Ruth. Verses 14-

18 demonstrate that clear thinking faces us towards home. In other words **IN ORDER TO BE IN A PLACE TO RECEIVE GOD'S BLESSINGS, WE MUST BE WILLING TO LEAVE ALL WORLDLY THINKING BEHIND.** This seems to be the turning point in all of our lives. Are we willing to let go of all our worldly desires, thoughts, and behaviors?

A. REJECTING WORLDLY THINKING (14)

Verse 14 demonstrates that the first step in putting ourselves in a place where we can be blessed by God is rejecting all worldly thinking. I don't think I can emphasize this enough. Naomi thinks she is giving these girls a wonderful gift by sending them home to their Moabite family, friends, culture, and religion. Orpah and Ruth both wanted to go to Israel with Naomi. But here, on the second round of emotional reasoning, Naomi gets Orpah to go back to her Moabite roots. Is this really a gift? Naomi has just taken away any chance for Orpah to find the One True and Living God. She has sent her back to a culture that rejects Jehovah. She has sent her back into a place where she can never find God's blessings.

If we are Christians, we need to be careful that we are not giving people advice based on worldly ideas and worldly reasoning, and then attaching religious language to it. It doesn't matter if we are talking about drugs, alcohol, relationships, school, work, or whatever. If we are giving people advice that will carry them closer to worldly ideas, then we may as well be sending them back to Moab , just like Naomi sent Orpah.

Now the story starts to focus on its heroine, Ruth. Naomi talked Orpah out of her blessing, but Ruth refuses to be persuaded. We need to see how heroic this is. Going back to Moab is appealing. It is the easy way out. It probably agrees with the women's first instincts. Usually, we take the advice that appeal to our worldly desires. We really don't want to hear godly advice. I have found over the years that most people don't want to hear godly advice because it causes us to make decisions that go against our desires.

Let's take a lesson from Ruth. It says that Ruth "clung" to Naomi. Ruth senses that God's blessings are ahead of her, not behind her. Ruth rejects Naomi's worldly advice and seeks to embrace new life.

If we want to find God's blessing, we will not find it hanging on to worldly sentiment and ideas. We will not find God's blessings by hanging on to bad decisions and trying to make them work out. The first step is to reject worldly thinking.

B. GODLY THINKING (15-17)

Next, verses 15-17 show us how to embrace godly thinking. Again the language shows us how twisted we can become if we refuse to let go of worldly thinking. The word for *repentance* in Hebrew is *shub*. It means to turn around, to turn back. In other words, we are sinning when we are going in the wrong direction. Repentance is when we turn around and once again head towards God. Here Naomi continues to encourage Ruth to follow Orpah and "turn back" to life in Moab . Twice she uses the word "turn back." And just so there is no mistake in how devastating Naomi's advice is, look at what she encourages her to turn back to. She says, "Your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." What? Go back to godless people and worship idols that demand human sacrifice? Naomi thinks this is godly, noble advice?

Look at Ruth's great reply in verse 16. Again, let's watch the vocabulary. Ruth says, "Quit begging me to leave you or (here's that word for repent again) to turn back from you." Ruth refuses to repent and turn back to worldly thinking. She will not repent and go back to false gods, godless people, and a godless lifestyle.

In reality, Ruth is truly repenting by choosing to embrace Jehovah, His ways, in His land, with His people. I know you probably remember the phrase that God approached Abraham with when He commanded him to leave his native country and travel to the Promised Land to be blessed and to become the nation of God. God said to Abraham, "Get up and go." In Hebrew the phrase was *lek lekah!* Ruth uses these words. She says, "Where you go I will go." I think the author is comparing Ruth's faith and call to the Promised Land with Abraham's call. Abraham became the father of the Hebrew nation. Ruth becomes the mother of the Kingly line of David and ultimately Jesus the Messiah. Ruth is getting up and going to the Promised Land. God's Kingdom, not the world, is where God's blessings are to be found. She is adamant and knows exactly what she is saying.

Keep your eye on Naomi's bad advice in verse 15 and see how Ruth counters it in verse 16. In verse 15 Naomi encourages Ruth to go back with Orpah. Ruth responds in verse 16 by saying I'm going with you and living where you live. Naomi tells Ruth to

go back to her people. Ruth responds by saying your people will be my people. Naomi tells Ruth to go back to her gods. Ruth says your God will be my God.

And just to make sure there is no mistake, Ruth uses the Hebrew covenant name of God, Jehovah. She says, "May Jehovah deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." She has made a covenant with Naomi and God that said, "'til death do us part." Ruth doesn't understand all the ramifications of what she is saying, but she knows this is certainly not the easy way out. She is leaving everything she knows behind, her cultural way of looking at things, her religious way of looking at things, her worldly emotions, hopes and desires behind. She knows this may cost her, her life. But she has chosen not so much to follow Naomi, as she has chosen to follow God.

If we want to find God's blessings, not only do we have to give up our worldly thinking, we must embrace godly thinking. I know that many of us continue to miss God's blessings because we either continue to try and hold on to something worldly, or refuse to embrace God's desires for our lives, or both.

C. DETERMINATION (18)

Getting to a place where we can experience God's blessings is not easy. As verse 18 demonstrates, it takes a lot of determination. In verse 17 Ruth laid it out pretty clearly. She said, "I'm in this to the end. I'm committed to this plan to death. If I don't follow through, may the One True and Living God, Jehovah, curse me." Naomi got the picture. She realized that Ruth was determined (here's that word again) to go with her. Naomi quit begging her to go back to Moab .

Look, if we are half-hearted in trying to get out of the misery caused by bad decisions and sinful behavior, we will not make it. If we want to place ourselves in a place where God can bless us, we need be determined in leaving worldly thinking and behaving behind in order to embrace godly thinking and behaving. We must be committed to living life the way God designed it. We can click our heels all we want and say, "There's no place like home," all we want. But **IN ORDER TO BE IN A PLACE TO RECEIVE GOD'S BLESSINGS, WE MUST BE WILLING TO LEAVE ALL WORLDLY THINKING BEHIND.**

II. THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME?

God Often Uses Trouble In Our Lives To Get Us Back To A Place Where We Can Once Again Experience His Blessings.

Now the story shifts to scene two. We find the women arriving in Bethlehem . Only we are more than a little confused as to how they enter. We would expect Naomi to be excited but instead we can almost hear her say sarcastically, "There's no place like home?!" We must remember that **GOD OFTEN USES TROUBLE IN OUR LIVES TO GET US BACK TO A PLACE WHERE WE CAN ONCE AGAIN EXPERIENCE HIS BLESSINGS.**

In this next section, Bethlehem stands out and so do the names for God. *El Shaddai* is used first and last, and *Jehovah* is used twice in the middle. Remember, Bethlehem means the house of bread, *Jehovah* is the covenant Name for God, and *El Shaddai* has to do with God's protection and provision. Bethlehem is the place where God

chose to bless Naomi and Ruth by rescuing them from Moab , protecting them on their journey home, and providing for them in the city of bread.

A. THE TOWN'S REACTION (19)

We get the town's reaction in verse 19. I'm going to guess from the rest of the story that Naomi was well-liked and I think that old friends and relatives were glad to see her. But that's not what the focus of this verse is on. She left Bethlehem a wealthy, upper-class, aristocrat. But now she has returned in rags, broke, and traveling with a Moabite daughter-in-law. It would have been a disgrace had she been living in Bethlehem and her son married a Moabite woman. She returned to Bethlehem broken. The women exclaim, "Can this be Naomi?" We can hear both excitement to see her once again, but horror to see her in this condition.

Let's keep in mind that this is all part of God's plan. God may allow situations into our lives to break us and expose the lies of this world. Well meaning friends will want to solve our problems and make us feel better but in reality, by trying to help us, they may be working against God.

B. NAOMI'S REACTION (20)

Naomi's reaction in verse 20 is confusing. I say it's confusing because it's not what we expect. I'm sure we understand it, but it's not what we were expecting. In her epiphany, she realized that she had to get back to Bethlehem to once again experience God's blessings. I was expecting here to fall down at the "Welcome to Bethlehem " sign, kiss the ground and say, "There's no place like home. There's no place like home." Instead she appears to be hurt and angry. It's almost as if she starts to lash out on the very people who can help her get restored.

Listen, I understand this but it always confuses me. When we get involved in worldly behavior or sinful behavior that blows up in our face, or when bad things happen to us, we often reject godly counsel and lash out at those who tell us the truth. We often feel more comfortable with people who want to make us feel better in our misery.

Look what Naomi does. Keep in mind that Naomi means pleasant, beautiful, and graceful. She says, "Don't call me Beautiful, call me Bitter. I'm no longer beautiful, pleasant, and graceful. Now I'm bitter. That's what *Mara* means. I'm sure you also remember from our study through the book of Exodus that when the Israelites left the slavery of Egypt behind, crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, and watched the entire Egyptian army drown, they sang a great song of rejoicing. From there they traveled for three days. After only three days of freedom, they got a little thirsty when they came to a pond. The water was bitter and the people started to complain against Moses. That was the first in a series of the Hebrews grumbling against Moses and God, and constantly wanting to turn back to Egypt instead of looking forward to entering the Promised Land. That place was called Marah because the water was bitter. Just an aside, God had Moses throw a branch in the water, and the water became sweet and drinkable.

Naomi is bitter and now she, like the Hebrews, starts to blame God. She says, "Call me bitter because *El Shaddai* has made life very bitter." Excuse me Naomi, but was it God who told you to leave the Promised Land and go to Moab ? Was it God who told you to settle down and get comfortable in Moab ? Did God tell your sons to marry Moabite women?

Isn't that strange? When things blow up in our face, we always want to blame God for this somehow. Even atheists want to blame God when things go wrong. I think we need to really examine our lives carefully. Let's get rid of this western thinking about our rights and our freedoms. The facts are these. God is the king and ruler of the universe. We have no rights. He makes the rules. We are to obey them. They are not up for debate or discussion. When we choose to reject God's ways and when we choose to rebel against or ignore God, we will suffer the consequences.

When we are speeding in the car and the policeman stops us and gives us a ticket, it is not the policeman's fault, it is not the court's fault, it is not the speed limit sign's fault; it is our fault for speeding. But for some strange reason, when we sin or make stupid decisions, we want to blame God.

C. GOD'S ACTION (21)

In verse 19 we saw the town's reaction. In verse 20 we saw Naomi's reaction. Now we get a look into God's action in verse 21. Here is what I want us to keep in mind. Even though all of this is true, this disaster was brought on by Naomi and her husband Elimelech's poor decisions. Secondly, even though these are painful consequences, they are being used by God to get Naomi to a place where she can once again be blessed.

Let's start with the end of the verse 20. She says, "*Yahweh* has afflicted me; *El Shaddai* has brought misfortune upon me." Yes, that may be true enough but let's keep this in the context that this could have been avoided had she not disobeyed God and left in the first place. Her personal God, *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*, has allowed disaster in her life. The Almighty God, the One that is supposed to protect her and provide for her has left her to provide for herself. She has not done a very effective job.

When we insist on doing things our own way and when we follow our hearts the way the world suggests, God will allow us to go right ahead. But He will not protect us, provide for us, or help us. When everything blows up and continues to blow up, we too will feel as if God has brought all this on us and that He is against us. Naomi says, "Why call me beautiful, graceful, and blessed?"

We will also wonder why in all this suffering we should consider ourselves blessed. Here is the key. Look at the first phrase in verse 21, "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty." When Naomi left Bethlehem, she was wealthy; she enjoyed all the benefits of living at the top levels of society. She had it all; money, prestige, and power. When the God's judgment hit Israel, Naomi and Elimelech, with all their resources were able to avoid the consequences ... for a while. They were proud. They were full of themselves. They were intelligent and resourceful.

That's the set up for the great downward spiral. People feel they are clever enough to cheat, or manipulate the system. We work hard, save our money, and obtain a fair amount of power to control our own situations. We have safe sex to avoid unwanted pregnancies and diseases. And if we fail, there is always abortion. Then we enjoy ourselves and are somewhat successful at deceiving ourselves and others. We manage to avoid all the consequences we were told about. We become full of ourselves. The problem is that when we become full of ourselves, we cannot receive any of God's blessings. The only blessing we can receive from God is His discipline. When a wife gets up one day and says "I'm leaving," when a boss says "you're fired," when your doctor says "you have inoperable cancer," when your partner says "I have AIDS," or "I'm pregnant," God has a way of emptying us of our being full of ourselves.

How in the world can any of this be a blessing? If God never brought us to this emptiness, we may keep getting away with this behavior. We may continue to fool others and we may continue to fool ourselves. We would die apart from God. Pride and self-deception go hand in hand.

Naomi says this as if it is a bad thing when she whines, "The LORD has brought me back empty." That sounds harsh. She is correct. God brought her back with nothing. She lost her husband, she lost her sons, she lost her land, she lost her money and prestige, and she lost her dignity. From the top of the world, to the bottom of the heap, is a long way to fall. Her sin and her rebellion have found her out. She has been humbled. Not only has she been humbled, she has been humiliated. But you know, sometimes it takes us to be totally humiliated before we can be in a position to listen to God. There have been times where I have seen people hit the bottom. I thought "Now I'm sure they're ready to listen to God," only to watch them hit a new low and

bounce off a lower bottom.

Naomi had to hit rock bottom. God had to make sure she was totally wiped out and humiliated. I'm sure Naomi didn't think of this as a blessing and I'm sure when these things happen to us, we don't identify them as blessings, but in reality, that's exactly what they are. Until we realize that we are empty and until we realize that we are helpless without God, we cannot be in a place where we can be blessed by God. The Bible is very clear. God takes a stand against the proud but He gives grace to the humble. God takes down the proud but He lifts up the humble.

Naomi has no way of seeing this yet, but she is finally in a place where she can be blessed by God. She had the epiphany that Bethlehem was where God could bless her. She is now in Bethlehem, but she cannot see that she is home because the pain and humiliation are still too great. Nevertheless, she is home and this is a place where God can bless her.

I am wondering. How low do we have to fall before we give up doing things our way? Do we have to bounce off the bottom more than once before we get the message? I hope not, because **GOD OFTEN USES TROUBLE IN OUR LIVES TO GET US BACK TO A PLACE WHERE WE CAN ONCE AGAIN EXPERIENCE HIS BLESSINGS.**

III. HOME IS A PLACE TO FIND GOD'S BLESSING

Even Though The Place God Moves Us To Seem Painful, His Intent Is To Once Again Give Us Hope.

Verse 22 once again emphasizes that home is a place to find God's blessings. It often takes a painful commitment to leave the world behind in order to embrace God's way of life. It often takes some very painful situations to turn us back home. But as we go through the painful return, God wants us to do so with hope. **EVEN THOUGH THE PLACE GOD MOVES US TO SEEM PAINFUL, HIS INTENT IS TO ONCE AGAIN GIVE US HOPE.**

Naomi has returned home to Bethlehem . Like the Prodigal Son in Jesus' parable, Naomi has returned to the house of bread. Naomi has returned broken and humbled. Naomi is now home where God can finally start to bless her. You see, for Naomi and for us, home is not just a place, it is an attitude. When we are finally broken, humble, and repentant, we place ourselves in a place where God can feed us, heal us, and bless us.

A. RETURNED

Look at how verse 22 starts out, "So Naomi returned from Moab ." It's like the end of a long story and the start of a new chapter. So what is in our lives that we need to repent of and come home from? Maybe we need to come home from the country of addiction, from pornography, from infidelity, from immorality, from anger, from rebellion, or from pride. Wherever we find ourselves this morning, and whatever we are holding on to that is not from God, I pray this morning we can end this chapter in our lives by saying, "So I returned from the land of sin." Naomi left Moab and all the thoughts and behaviors of Moab behind. If we want to find God's blessings, we too must leave the world with all its thoughts and behaviors behind as well. We must repent and put ourselves in a position to be blessed.

B. ACCOMPANIED

Here is another sign of hope in this tragic story. Naomi did not return home alone. She was accompanied by Ruth. Note, at first this may not look like a blessing, because Ruth is a Moabitess. She is an outsider and comes from the country of one of Israel 's enemies. But nevertheless, Naomi has a friend. She is not alone. And further, Ruth is the one who really seems to sense God's will. She has done an honorable thing by staying with her destitute mother-in-law. If anyone is able to work or help this old woman survive, it will be Ruth. She is able bodied and she is loyal. And she seems to have acknowledged that she is committed to following the God of Israel. What an amazing companion she has. Ruth is really a gift from God.

I want to encourage all of us. Sometimes we miss the gifts God sends into our lives because they are telling us something that we don't want to hear. I have recently committed myself to not holding back with the truth. To be sure, I'll do my best to tell

the truth in love, but I will tell the truth. So if you really want some guidance from me, I will commit myself publicly before you today, to telling you the truth. However, if you want someone to just make you feel good and give you the answer that you want to hear, please don't ask me, because from now on I am committed to telling the truth. Ruth was a true friend to Naomi. She refused to play into her worldly thinking and behavior. We need to learn to tell and live the truth, even if it's not what others want to hear.

C. HOPE

I don't want you to miss this last phrase in verse 22 because it is a real sign of hope. It says, "... arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning." Listen how this should sound to us. Ruth and Naomi arrived in the city of the house of bread during the festival of weeks as the wheat was being harvested. Ruth and Naomi are in need of food. They are in a city named *The House of Bread* and the farmers are now harvesting barley that will be used to make bread. Besides, you remember the rules of harvest. The harvesters are to leave grain behind. They are to ensure that grain they drop remains behind and they are to leave some intentionally behind. This is so the poor, the orphans, the foreigners and the widows can harvest enough for them to eat. Ruth is young enough and strong enough to get food for Naomi and herself. This phrase is full of hope.

The Bible acknowledges that we all lose our way and end up in the world. But the Bible doesn't leave us to wander around. The Bible tells us to repent; to turn away from worldly thinking and worldly behavior. In the New Testament the word *confess* means to say the same thing as God. When we confess to God that we have sinned, the Bible says that He is faithful and just. God will forgive us of all our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Please don't let the painful events in life make us bitter. We will all face these events in life. Let God use them to move us home where we can enjoy His blessings. **EVEN THOUGH THE PLACE GOD MOVES US TO SEEM PAINFUL, HIS INTENT IS TO ONCE AGAIN GIVE US HOPE.** Our hope is not to be found in this world. Our hope is in God and His Kingdom through Jesus Christ our Lord. We need to constantly ask ourselves if we are at home in the world or at home with God.

BEING AT HOME SPIRITUALLY MEANS TO BE IN A PLACE WHERE WE CAN RECEIVE GOD'S BLESSINGS.

Finally Naomi is in a place where God can bless her. We need to have this attitude of always heading home to be with God. I think I do the best when I am heading home. When I am at home with God, I seem to take that for granted. When I am away from home, in the world, I am clearly out of touch with God. However, when I repent and set out on the journey home, I tend to be focused on God alone.

IV. EPILOGUE

Listen to what C. S. Lewis says about repentance,

"Repentance is not something God demands of you before He will take you back and which He could let you off if He chose; it is simply a description of what going back is like."

Many of us are stuck in worldly thought and behavior. And further, we have plenty of friends, Christian and non-Christian, who are right there giving us advice to remain there. I know it's hard, but I'm encouraging all of us to repent, turn around, give up worldly thought and behavior and embrace godly thought and behavior. God will be there to give us hope along the way. He will be there to welcome us home. And most of all, we will once again be in a place to receive God's blessings.