

“Ruth: Lose Your Past”

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November 13, 2011

I do want to encourage you this morning to take your Bible, and if you are a first time guest or visitor, normally what I do is announce the text we're going to go to and you are opening it while I'm telling somewhat of an introductory story. But I want to share with you something that I think is very relevant to the message today: in twenty years of preaching and literally countless numbers of sermons, I have no idea how many times I've preached through the years, I am about to say something I have never said at the beginning of a sermon. Open your Bible to the Book of Ruth. It's in the Old Testament; Joshua, Judges, Ruth.

And the reason I want to confess that to you is this is a story that most of us may be familiar with. It's a story of Ruth and Boaz, who will become her husband in the end; it's the story of Ruth and Naomi who is her mother-in-law; it's the story of Ruth and Orpah, her sister-in-law, and the process of being in Moab and going into Israel and inheriting the land they never thought they would receive. And it's a story we allude to a lot, you cannot get away from the story of Ruth because when you open the book of Matthew chapter 1 in the genealogy of Jesus, there is Ruth. She plays such a prominent role in the Biblical story but there are only four small chapters about ten years of her life that we have in scripture.

When we address and reference Ruth, typically we use it as an illustrative point for another place in scripture, talking about how it's a story of redemption, a story of how someone on the edge of losing everything is swept up and redeemed. And it is a story of redemption. It is a story of romance between her and Boaz and it's a story of commitment between her and Naomi, her mother-in-law whom she refused to leave by the wayside. There are all kinds of avenues by which we could address the book and the character of Ruth, but I think what we need to recognize today is what Ruth did is something that every one of us needs to do. Yes, it's a story of “romance;”

yes, it's a story of reconciliation, yes, it's a story of all those things, but I think most importantly the story of Ruth is the story of deliverance. It's the story of being set free; it's the story of having the shackles of life taken off of us. And it's the story every one of us needs to heed this morning.

If you will turn in your Old Testament to the Book of Ruth, we're primarily going to be in chapters 1 and 4. And we're going to deal today with something every one of us can identify with: losing our past. Beginning in Ruth chapter 1, verse 1, "1Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehemjudah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. 2And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehemjudah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there. 3And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons. 4And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years. 5And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband. 6Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread."

Now this morning what I want to deal with are three simple concepts. I want to deal with what was the dilemma that Ruth was forced to deal with in her life, and there are multiple ones; what was the decision that she ultimately made in chapter 1, and what was the deliverance that she realized and received in chapter 4?

First I want to deal with the dilemma of the past. And the reason I use that word dilemma is this: our past truly is a dilemma. In fact, I heard a prominent Christian Biblical counselor tell me if you want to sum up the emotions of life, people are depressed because they can't get over their past and they're anxious because they're concerned about their future. And I know that is a very simple, broad stroke but I think you and I

would confess and admit that because of our past, because of decisions that should not have been made but were or things that should have been done but weren't, because of those dilemmas we get down in the dumps, we get depressed, we get frustrated, we get guilty and we get shamed.

Let me share with you that what we are about to see in the life of Ruth is there were four dilemmas in her life that she experienced. And I would say that rarely somebody could have all four of these at one time, but I promise you that you've dealt with or are dealing with at least one of these, and she shares with us in her life and how she followed the Lord in dealing with these, how to properly deal with our past.

The first dilemma that Ruth had to deal with is the dilemma of the "dirtiness of life," and I put that in quotations. You say where are you getting the dirtiness? If you will notice here in this passage it says that she lived in Moab. Here is the setting. You've got an individual, his wife and his two children who are in Israel and as happens many times in the Old Testament, we see that a famine in the land drives a person either in or out of a location because it's better to go there than to die. For example, Joseph's brothers, you remember the story that he was in Egypt because they had sold him into slavery. It was better to go into Egypt, a land of paganism, than to die by the wayside. So when famine occurs and you see somebody migrating, they're not migrating because they're moving up in the world. They're not migrating because it's a better location or they're just running. What they are doing is survival says better there than dead. Where did they go? Moab.

This is what I want you to grasp: when you look at the background of Ruth, she was a Moabite and that is the furthest thing from a compliment you could give anybody in the Old Testament. You ask what's wrong with a Moabite. Let me share with you the background of the Moabites.

Remember Abraham had a nephew by the name of Lot. Remember they had a bunch of stuff going on and they had too much and their servants were

fighting so they decided to part ways. And Lot had the “wisdom” to hang out in Sodom and Gomorrah. Remember that story in the Bible? Abraham goes with some angels to rescue him and his family. As Lot leaves Sodom and Gomorrah, he leaves with his wife and his two daughters. Does that sound familiar? Here we have a wife and two sons. Lot leaves Sodom and Gomorrah to head for the hills. Upon leaving, his wife decides she’s interested in what they left, she turns around and the Bible says she was made a pillar of salt. And in the Gospel of Luke, the only person that Jesus ever tells us to remember is to remember Lot’s wife. In other words, don’t do what she did. So Lot goes up into the mountains, and by the way, those of you who have very new ears be careful because this one gets sordid – in the middle of the night Lot’s daughters inebriate him, they get him drunk and have children with him: the Moabites. That’s how they started.

And you thought your family tree was bad! It gives us comfort, doesn’t it? You start looking at the past and finding out things and go, “Wow, I thought our crew was bad!” That’s the Moabites; that’s how they got started. This dirtiness of life and the reason that’s so important for us today is there are so many people who can’t get over the home they grew up in. They can’t get over the people they were around because of no fault of their own, it’s just that was the home they were born into or the people they were around. And oftentimes in the dirtiness of life, we struggle with where we came from or who we came from or the parts of where we’re from. And some people can never get over the dirtiness of their life.

And sometimes it was brought upon us but sometimes it was a decision that was made. It was a behavior that was done and it was so “bad” in our eyes that we can’t get over it. And the fact that we come from there or come from them or have that in our past, that dirtiness of life, we can’t go forward in life and we get hung up on it.

But Ruth was a Moabite. She had the dirtiest of dirt when it comes to life. But it wasn’t just her “dirty past” that was a dilemma in her life;

she also had to deal with this thing called death. You'll notice in verse 3, "And Elimelech, Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons." Verse 5, "And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them." In two verses three guys whom Ruth really needed in life died.

Now ladies, you may not realize the significance of this but let me share with you the sociological impact. If you go back to Biblical days, and do not get upset with me about this, but you as ladies had no right to property ownership and no right to a bank account. What you needed more than anything to survive was some male in your life, whether it be dad, husband or son to get you through life. She had none of the three. If you want the best picture of what this would have looked like, and guys please don't make fun of me and understand that what I'm about to share with you I did as a romantic gesture toward my wife and I was trying to be a better husband when she asked me to watch something. And once I watched it I said, "Wow, that really helps me with the Bible." Jane Austen. Guys, I'm sorry; I hate to admit it. *Pride and Prejudice*. The whole story is about a man who dies and leaves only daughters who have no right to the estate and no access to the money and how are they going to make it. Whether Jane Austen meant to or not, all she did was to take the story of Ruth and rewrote it for contemporary nineteenth century England.

But that is what's happening here. She experienced this death that brought such a destructive nature to her life. Literally, she was homeless, broke and had no future. Let me ask you what death have you experienced that you can't get over? I know a man whose dad died thirty years ago. Now I have not experienced that in my own life; I know it is a situation that one day I will have to deal with so I don't pretend to understand the emotions that are involved. But to this day, every time something bad happens in life or he makes a bad decision, he always refers back, "If only Daddy hadn't died." He can't get over it. And sometimes it's an individual who is no longer in our lives, sometimes it's a relationship that no longer exists or sometimes it's a dream that is gone, but sometimes there are things that die in our lives and we can't get over the fact that we're still alive. And we

can't go forward because "if only they were here," or "if only it existed." Not only was Ruth a Moabite, not only did she have a dirty past, but all around her was death and literally in her own personal life, destruction.

But there is another dilemma that I think may be more relevant to you. It's the reality or the dilemma of disappointment. Notice in verse 5 when it says that her husband died there is no mention of any children. Ten years she was married to this guy with the hopes and dreams and aspirations and nothing to show for it. I think one of the things I see in people time after time is that life never ends up being painted the way you thought it would look. Marriage isn't what you thought it would be. Children aren't what you thought they are. Working isn't what you thought it would be; this job isn't painted. Life is not like the fairytale. And what we do is tell fairytales to our children and say, "And they lived happily ever after." Who lives happily ever after? I want to meet them because I haven't met them yet. Disappointment happens in our lives.

Forgive me for sharing with you one of my favorite movies in life; it's called The Replacements. It's a story of a bunch of has-been football players that because of the spoiled football players going on strike, they get a chance to play again. Without boring you with all the details of the movie, as they begin to build this football team what they don't have is a quarterback. They go to find a quarterback and the head coach goes to a shipyard to find the quarterback that he knows can play. And what we find out in that story is that as a freshman at Ohio State, he got just beaten down in the Sugar Bowl that year. Disappointed that his career didn't work out the way he thought it would, disappointed he didn't play the way he thought he would, he never got over it. The story of that movie, The Replacements, isn't a story about has-been football players; it's the story about people who had gotten disappointed with life realizing that they need to get over the disappointments of life and they need to move on with the life that they have.

You talk about disappointment, not only is Ruth a Moabite, not only is her husband dead and her father-in-law dead, everything that she thought life

would bring her is nothing. It's not there. She is not suitable for anyone in marriage. And she doesn't even have a man to help. But just when you think it couldn't get any worse, along come your friends. Just when you think life couldn't be any worse, there is a woman by the name of Orpah. Orpah is her sister-in-law and as you go on in the Book of Ruth chapter 1, Naomi comes to these two ladies and says let me give you a choice: go back home and hopefully you'll find a husband, but don't come with me. And the story of Ruth is she decides to go with Naomi; the story of Orpah is she says I'm going back. And in verse 14 it says, "And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her."

Have you ever had the dilemma of desertion? Betrayal? Ever had anybody do you wrong? Has anybody ever made a decision, promised you one thing and they delivered nothing; said I'll always be there but then they leave? I'll stick by your side no matter what but then they turn and stab you in the back. We can relate to that, can't we? I can't tell you how many people can't get over the fact that somebody's done them wrong. Maybe it's a family member; maybe it's a friend; maybe it's a business partner.

But you talk about being done wrong – here she is about to go to a land she doesn't know with no husband, no man to help her, all of life is not what she expected it to be and the one person she thought she could count on says adios, see you later. That's a lot to get over; that's a sordid life; that's a dilemma. So the question that begs is this: what decision did Ruth make, what is it that she did that we need to do today to get over our past?

Look at verse 16. "And Ruth said, entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou go, I will go; and where thou lodge, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also if ought but death part thee and me." She is faced with a decision: either go back and sink in the mire and the mess of her past or go forward. I'm going to show you what she does. She literally turns her

back to the fact that she was a Moabite. She turns her back to the fact that her husband and father-in-law were dead. She turns her back to the fact that life wasn't what she thought it was going to be. She turns her back based on the fact that her best friend and sister-in-law left her. And she said I have no idea what the future holds, but it's got to be better than this.

Let me share with you before we get to chapter 4, if you are sinking in the mess of your past and you can't get it out of your mind and you can't get over it, listen: anything is better than what you're dealing with. Anything forward is better than the junk of your past. And I want to show you from chapter 4 the deliverance that Ruth experiences when she makes the decision to lose her past. She makes the decision to turn her back and go forward. There are four things that she is experiencing. And by the way, it just so happens, that these four things that she received in her present and her future, exactly match the things that she walked away from. Coincidence? I think not.

So what is the first thing that she experienced? Redemption. She experienced redemption for her dirtiness, one that would be discarded, one that was a Moabite, one that would be put by the wayside. We turn to chapter 4 and by the way we fast forward for the sake of time and Boaz has shown up. In chapters 2 and 3 Ruth has gone into the field and she has picked the gleanings of the field and Boaz, a wealthy landowner, a very well-known man, notices her and entreats her and the relationship forms. And in chapter 4, it is sealed and delivered, no pun intended.

In verse 4 this is Boaz speaking, "And I thought to advertise thee, saying, Buy it before the inhabitants, and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it: but if you will not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know: for there is none to redeem it beside thee: and I am after thee. And he said, I will redeem it." Boaz shows up and says this woman who is in distress, this woman who has experienced so much dirtiness in her life, if none of her family, if none of her friends, if nobody is interested in redeeming her, buying her back, restoring her then I will do it.

Do you know what happened in the picture we get here? It doesn't matter how dirty our past or how dirty our lives are the picture is that God wants to redeem us. He wants to take us out of that mess of life. He wants to pull us out of the gutter. Let me share with you what happened in Ruth's life. When she turned her back on her dirtiness, her face faced redemption. You cannot face redemption until you turn your back on the dirtiness of the sin and the junk of your life. And it's a perfect picture of what Jesus Christ does in our lives: He redeems us, He literally buys us. I Corinthians 6 says we are bought with a price.

Have you ever wondered why Boaz was so sympathetic? Have you ever wondered why was Boaz so interested in buying this woman, in redeeming her when nobody else would? Do you realize nobody wanted her? That's her baggage; that's her background - on an island, not even her sister-in-law and best friend, she's been left by the wayside. So why would Boaz see so much in her? Let me give you a little Biblical insight. Strictly speaking, Boaz's grandmother was Rahab, the harlot. It's amazing when we've experienced things in life how often we are interested in helping others. Do you know what he had experienced? Redemption. He hadn't been born yet, but if it had not been for the spies and Joshua taking his grandmother out of the tower, he would not have existed. He understood what it meant to be taken out of the dirtiness of life and be given a second chance. And Rahab, by the way, makes the genealogy of Jesus, too. Both Rahab and Ruth are there, and so is Bathsheba, just in case you're interested. It's amazing how God redeems the dirtiness of life.

But not only did she experience redemption, being actually purchased by this man though nobody else wanted her, she experienced something all of us desire and want: she experienced a resurrection. You know what a resurrection is: it's bringing something up from the dead. Remember her father-in-law was dead. Remember her husband was dead. Remember she had no child. I want to read this verse for you in chapter 4, verse 10. "Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife (that's the words of

Boaz), to raise up the name of the dead.” To raise up the name of the dead.

Now ladies, I don't want you to get upset with me again, but I've got to share something sociologically here that does relate to today. Please do not get upset with me, my wife knows I'm sharing this with you, my wife is aware of this and it is true: ladies, you don't have a name. We live in a patriarchal society, whether you want to admit it or not. Almost sixteen years ago, I married Traci Green. That was her maiden name; Green was her dad's name. And I know what some of you are thinking: “Well, our family is progressive. My mom didn't change names.” No, you just got your grand-dad's name. Think about it for a moment; I'm not joking.

When Ruth leaves Moab for Israel, she doesn't have a name. She's just Ruth the Moabite; no name of a father-in-law, no name of a husband, not even the name of a son. She's just Ruth the Moabite. But what does Boaz say? He restores; he says he's raised up a name. Do you know what happens when we experience death? God can resurrect; things which we thought would never exist again, things we thought would never occur.

I know a young lady back in my hometown who is significantly older than I am. At eighteen years of age in the middle of her senior year at high school, she ran away and married a guy. Two days later when they got back home both of their parents forced them to annul. She never married again. She couldn't get over it, couldn't realize the bad decisions she'd made and the shame and all of the things involved in that. And low and behold, at sixty years of age, a wealthy oil tycoon in the Dallas/Fort Worth area noticed her and said, “I'll give you a name,” a name of prominence, a name technically of wealth, and a name of non-shame. She thought it was dead, she thought there was no way that could be experienced in her life, and what happened? God restored, God brought back and raised that which she thought was dead.

And that's exactly what happened with Ruth. There is a redemption; there is a raising of the dead, and then there is a restoring of hope. What's the one

thing most of us can't get over? We can't get over the disappointments in life. I want you to go to chapter 4 beginning in verse 14 and I want you to see what the women say to Naomi, the mother-in-law, after all this has taken place. "And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, which has not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel. And he shall be unto thee a restorer of your life, and a nourisher of your old age: for thy daughter in law, which love thee, which is better to thee than seven sons." They literally say you realize this woman, Ruth, is better to you than seven sons, the Lord desires to restore your life, to give you hope about the disappointment that you can't get over. I want you to notice the last phrase of verse 15 that I did not read, "hath born him. And Naomi took the child." She had a child with Boaz. The disappointment in life, the fact that it did not work out the way she thought life would work out, when she turned her back on her past look what God did in her life. Not only was she redeemed from the junk, not only was the name resurrected, she was restored. That which she thought could never occur in her life was literally brought back.

But there's one last thing and probably the thing we know most about Ruth. It's the fact, not that she was redeemed, not that there was resurrection, not that she was restored in life, but in the last couple of verses we see that there was a replacement. The person who most likely was emotionally the most key in her life outside of Naomi, Orpah her sister-in-law betrayed her, right? And if there is one thing I have learned from people it is this: when they feel like they've been betrayed then they have trouble trusting anybody else. They keep people at arm's length because they say, "One time, shame on you; twice, shame on me." You've heard that phrase and you begin to think, "I'll never trust again. I'll never have a relationship like that again."

So the family that she had, a family that was literally adopted in the sense of her sister-in-law because it was by marriage, there is no mention of her parents, no mention of her siblings, that's not to say she didn't have any but it's just they are of such little significance in Moab that we have no record of who they are, so the only family she had betrays her. Yet, God goes beyond restoring.

God goes beyond redeeming. He actually replaces. I want you to notice what happens in verse 17. “And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi (he’s technically her grandchild); and they called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.” King David’s great-grandmother would have never been his great-grandmother if she hadn’t turned her back on her past and let the Lord take care of this.

It gets even better than that. “Now these are the generations,” and it goes on and on and it ends up in Matthew chapter 1 with a little baby boy being born over a thousand years later. He was not just a normal baby boy – He would come as our Redeemer. He would come to take the sin of our life and offer us salvation. He came as Redeemer; He came as our Resurrection. He said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” He said anybody who is in Me shall have the same life. He came as the One who was resurrected. He even came as the Restorer, that which we have broken, that relationship with God, He said I can restore your broken relationship with God. And He came to replace. He came to replace us because what He did according to 2 Corinthians 5 is He took our sin and He took our shame.

It’s a story of commitment. Ruth is the story of love, but it’s the story of deliverance and it all happened because at one point in Ruth’s life, with all of the junk and all the baggage she had, she turned her back and said I’m going forward. Let me ask you a question before our time of invitation. Are you willing to turn your back? You know you want to be rid of that junk. You know you want to quit thinking about it. You know you want to quit sinking in it. You know you want the depression to go. You’re sick of it, but do you know what the great news is? The Lord is sick of it, too. He has offered us the opportunity to be healed; He has offered us the opportunity for freedom. Let’s pray.