

August 11 Lesson 11 (NIV)

A MOTHER-DAUGHTER COVENANT

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ruth 4:13–17

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ruth 1:1–18

RUTH 1:6–11, 14–18

⁶When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

⁸Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

¹¹But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?”

¹⁴At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵“Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

¹⁶But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” ¹⁸When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

KEY VERSE

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.—Ruth 1:16

COVENANT IN GOD

Unit 3: Covenant: A Personal Perspective

LESSONS 10–13

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HOW TO SAY IT

Balaam*Bay*-lum.

Balak*Bay*-lack.

Canaan*Kay*-nun.

Elimelek*Ee-lim*-eh-leck.

Moabite*Mo*-ub-ite.

Mosaic*Mo-zay*-ik.

Naaman*Nay*-uh-mun.

Nehemiah*Nee*-huh-*my*-uh.

Orpah*Or*-pah.

Rahab*Ray*-hab.

Introduction

A. A Selfless Act

Cameron Lyle was a senior track star at the University of New Hampshire in spring 2013. Just days before he would compete for gold medals in the America East Conference championships, he learned that his bone marrow was an exact match for a 28-year-old leukemia patient who had been given six months to live. The transplant needed to occur right away, so Lyle faced a choice: sacrifice years of personal dreams and cut his athletic career short, or help save another man's life. Without hesitation, he chose to donate.

Such acts of selflessness are commended frequently in Scripture (for example, Philippians 2:4). The Bible contains many examples of loyalty and self-sacrifice. Joshua served as faithful aide to Moses for many years (Exodus 24:13; 33:11). Elisha refused to leave Elijah's side as his master's time on earth drew to a close (2 Kings 2:1–6). The women followed Jesus to his crucifixion and sought to take care of his body (Luke 23:27, 49; 24:1–11). Jesus himself said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). As we shall see, God uses selfless acts to help those in need.

B. Lesson Context: Period of the Judges

The story of Ruth takes place during the period of the judges (Ruth 1:1), which lasted from about 1370 to 1050 BC. This situates the story in a spiritually dark period of Israel's history. For one thing, divine inspiration through prophets was rare (1 Samuel 3:1). For another, Israel's population at that time routinely abandoned the teachings of the Mosaic covenant in favor of simply doing whatever they thought was right in the moment (Judges 2:10–19).

Israel had no king in those days (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). This statement is often taken as a positive appraisal of the forthcoming kingship in Israel; it suggests that kingly leadership would keep the nation on a better track spiritually (compare Psalm 72:1; Proverbs 16:12; Isaiah 9:7).

An alternate appraisal, however, is entirely negative: the nation's spiritual state was so poor that the people didn't even need a king to lead them down the wrong path (see 1 Kings 16:29–33; 2 Kings 15:27–28; etc.). In either case, the author's observations reflect poorly on the covenant people of God, who regularly snubbed their divine king.

Against this dark backdrop, the story of Ruth provides a ray of sunshine. Self-centeredness and idolatry were not universal. Some people still acknowledged God as they made their plans.

C. Lesson Context: Non-Israelites

The Old Testament preserves accounts of non-Israelites acknowledging Israel's God as being supreme. After hearing of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, Rahab acknowledged the Lord as God in Heaven and on earth (Joshua 2:8–11). Upon being cured of leprosy, Naaman the Syrian declared there to be no God anywhere in the world except Israel (2 Kings 5:15). In some instances, foreigners recognized the greatness of Israel's God better than the Israelites themselves did (contrast 1 Kings 16:29–34; 17:7–24; compare Luke 4:25–27).

The book of the Bible in today's study, Ruth, is named after a non-Israelite. Yet the story arguably centers more on the words, actions, and mental state of Naomi, who was Ruth's Israelite mother-in-law.

At the point where today's text picks up their story, the Israelite Naomi had been living in Moab for some 10 years. She, husband Elimelek, and their two sons had had to leave their hometown of Bethlehem due to famine (Ruth 1:1–5). The Bible records several famines that prompt people to leave the promised land of Canaan for greener pastures. Most notably, Jacob and his sons relied upon Egypt during seven years of famine and eventually migrated there with their families (Genesis 41–46; compare Genesis 12:10; 2 Kings 8:1, 2). We are not specifically told whether this famine arose from divine wrath, though Israel was warned of this possibility (Deuteronomy 11:13–17; Amos 4:9).

While in Moab, the two sons “married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth” (Ruth 1:4a). However, the passing of a decade finds the husbands of Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth deceased (1:4b, 5). Women without husbands or adult sons usually face desperate circumstances in ancient times. Such is the backdrop of the interaction of the three women—only one of which is an Israelite—in today's text.

I. First Plea (RUTH 1:6–10)

A. Return to Judah (vv. 6, 7)

6. When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

Israel has a troubled history with *Moab*, which occupies the territory immediately to the east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. The Moabites are descendants of Lot by his older daughter (Genesis 19:36, 37). They are banned from the assembly of the Lord because they did not come to Israel's aid during their wilderness wandering and because King Balak of Moab hired Balaam to curse the Israelites (Deuteronomy 23:3–6). During the early period of the judges, Eglon, the king of Moab, ruled over Israel for 18 years (Judges 3:14).

While the story's developments thus far have been grim, here we find the first sign of good news. After a decade of famine in Judah, the Lord has now provided *food* for his people once again (see Psalm 132:15; Matthew 6:11), and Naomi plans to *return home*.

7. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

With food now more plentiful back in *the land of Judah*, Naomi decides to return. She no doubt hopes to find support from her late husband's extended family, though her protracted absence may also leave her estranged from them. She cannot be certain what she will find upon her return (compare 2 Kings 8:1–6).

Naomi's *two daughters-in-law* have presumably been a part of her household for some years. Familial ties have solidified, and the common experience of loss and widowhood serves to bolster their bonds. The younger women thus initially agree to accompany their mother-in-law back to her homeland. The precise length of the journey is uncertain, since we do not know where Naomi lives in Moab. The journey represented a firm commitment, however, leaving Moab behind forever.

B. Return to Moab (vv. 8, 9)

8. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me.

We may imagine that as the women are about to leave Moab, *Naomi* has second thoughts about taking *her two daughters-in-law* with her. That Naomi bids them to return to their *mother’s home* (rather than father’s) may indicate that she feels guilty for asking them to abandon their own mothers in favor of her.

In addition, the mother’s house is often associated with marriage (compare Genesis 24:28; Song of Solomon 3:4; 8:2; contrast Genesis 38:11). This gives the younger women another hint about acquiring husbands.

The word *covenant* is not found in this book. But Naomi’s desire for *the Lord to show ... kindness to her daughters-in-law* includes a Hebrew term that is used frequently in Old Testament situations involving covenants or oaths. The term may signify willing devotion, kindness, and/or mercy that an advantaged party extends to someone disadvantaged. Jonathan showed such mercy to David, and took the same in pledge from him (1 Samuel 20:8–15).

The Lord showed such kindness to Israel in general (Deuteronomy 7:12). Naomi here attributes it to Ruth, and Boaz will do the same later (Ruth 3:10). For deeper study, see also Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Kings 8:23; Isaiah 54:10; 55:3; Psalms 25:10; 89:28; 106:45; Daniel 9:4; Nehemiah 1:5; 9:32; and 2 Chronicles 6:14.

9. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud

The Hebrew word translated *rest* sometimes describes a place or state of peace, security, and relief from anxiety (compare Deuteronomy 12:9; 1 Kings 8:56; Jeremiah 45:3). Naomi shares in the worries and travails that Orpah and Ruth are experiencing. For a widow to find a new *husband* is the best path toward economic security in this cultural context (see Ruth 3:1). Given the tenuous relations between Moab and Israel, the women’s chances of finding husbands among their own people would likely be greater than finding them in Judah.

C. Widows’ Resolution (v. 10)

10. and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

The younger women both at first express their desire to *go back with Naomi to her people*. Perhaps their statement here reflects genuine resolve. However, it may have been expected for the women initially to refuse to leave Naomi, regardless of their true wishes. After all, to turn and leave Naomi too readily would dishonor her. As a result, Naomi must now press her case even further in order to afford her daughters-in-law an honorable exit from the situation, if they were looking for one.

II. Second Plea

(RUTH 1:11, 14)

A. Widow’s Desperation (v. 11)

11. But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?”

Naomi has been away from her hometown for some 10 years by this time (see the Lesson Context). Naomi also cannot guarantee that she will be able to provide *husbands* for Orpah and Ruth from among her own kinsfolk. And Naomi certainly cannot provide future husbands of her own!

All this underlines the fact that finding new husbands is a top priority. But more than their own security is at stake here. Their first husbands died, leaving no male heirs. The law stipulates that if a man dies and leaves no sons, the man’s brother must marry the widow and produce a child in the deceased brother’s name (Deuteronomy 25:5, 6). This custom, known as “levirate marriage,” ensures the continuation of the dead brother’s family line. Moab likely has a similar law or custom.

Unfortunately, Naomi herself is also widowed. Whether or not she is past menopause is uncertain. But even if she is still of childbearing age, she would first have to find a husband before more sons could be forthcoming. Were she able to find a husband and conceive more sons, however, Orpah and Ruth would not want to wait all the years until they reached marriageable age (Ruth 1:13, not in today’s text; compare Genesis 38:11).

B. Daughter’s Departure (v. 14)

14. At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

Faced with an excruciating choice, *Orpah* finally yields to the strength of Naomi’s case, bids her in-law *goodbye*, and takes her leave. In her situation, this decision represents a wise earthly choice. She is setting herself up to find a new husband and the security that marriage provides.

Ruth, however, decides to stay with Naomi and sticks close to her. The word translated *clung* here is the same Hebrew root used in Proverbs 18:24 to describe the “friend who sticks closer than a brother.” The word also describes the commitment that a man has for his wife (Genesis 2:24) and the faithful adherence that God requires of Israel (Deuteronomy 10:20; Joshua 22:5).

III. Third Plea (RUTH 1:15–18)

A. Mother’s Counsel (v. 15)

15. “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

Naomi is still not entirely convinced that Ruth really wants to stay with her, so she must give her one last chance to turn back. She reminds Ruth once again that to go to Judah means leaving *her people* and everything she knows. She would also be leaving those who worship the *gods* of her native land (see Joshua 24:14).

It is clear that Naomi still adheres to worship of the God of Israel, and likely wants Ruth to do so as well. Even so, Naomi at least understands why Ruth may want to continue worshipping her Moabite gods. By outward appearances, they seem to have provided for their people better than Israel’s God has provided for them. An implicit challenge, therefore, is that of basing a decision merely on outward appearances. In that regard, Orpah’s decision is understandable. But *understandable* isn’t the same as properly *justifiable*. We live with such a tension yet today.

B. Daughter's Resolution (vv. 16–18)

16. But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”

As a Moabite, Ruth has no legal obligation to go with Naomi to Judah. Her offer here reflects only devotion and love for her mother-in-law. She goes beyond the call of duty and declares her intent to adopt Naomi’s home, *people*, and *God* as her own (see Psalm 45:10).

Sometimes God’s people need to be reminded that foreigners can compare with them favorably in mimicking the character of God. Ruth’s selfless pledge of allegiance to Naomi and her God stands in marked contrast to the depictions of rebellion and idolatry in the time of the judges (compare Joshua 24:15).

17. “Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

Ruth completes her pledge in the strongest of possible terms: at the risk of a divine curse, she declares that she will remain with Naomi until *death* (compare 1 Samuel 3:17; 20:13; 1 Kings 19:2; 20:10; etc.). So devoted is Ruth to her mother-in-law that she anticipates even joining her in the family tomb at death. In effect, she declares herself Naomi’s daughter and shows her determination to care for Naomi as her own mother.

Ruth is aware of at least some of the tenets found in the Mosaic law concerning proper treatment of the poor and widows (Exodus 22:22–24; Deuteronomy 10:17, 18; 24:17–22; Ruth 2:2). Naomi certainly knows the law (3:1, 2, 12, 13) and may have taught her daughter-in-law as her own child in the ways of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:1–9). Ruth’s actions here reflect the character of a God who cares for the weak and vulnerable and seeks to rescue them from life’s predicaments. God often accomplishes these goals through the actions of self-sacrificing people who put the needs of others ahead of their own as Ruth does.

18. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Naomi graciously and gratefully accepts Ruth’s kindness and the “covenant” relationship Ruth offers (see commentary on Ruth 1:8). Naomi may have had doubts initially about Ruth’s true wishes to stay or to go. But the strength of her declaration and the invoking of a divine curse put an end to any further discussion (compare Acts 21:13, 14).

Conclusion

A. A Selfless Life

An array of related terminology makes apparent that the expressions of loyalty between Naomi and Ruth reflect a covenantal bond (compare Ruth 1:16, 17 with 1 Kings 22:4; 2 Kings 3:7). The story shows the God of Israel as a God who cares for the disadvantaged, sometimes directly (compare Ruth 1:6; 4:13), but often through the actions of obedient people. Today’s account concerning actions of a Moabite woman may have confronted Israel in a way similar to Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, with its positive portrayal of a despised neighbor (Luke 10:25–37).

Even if we are not a “despised neighbor,” the example of Ruth should be a call to action. I know a widow who lives in service to others. She sponsors a scholarship fund for ministry students. She corresponds with missionaries and former students. Countless members of our congregation have been touched by the encouragement of her prayers, cards, visits, and character.

Not all selfless acts are as dramatic as Ruth’s returning with Naomi, nor need they be. The disadvantaged are all around us. They are those who battle with addiction, suffer with grief, struggle to make ends meet, are homeless, are despondent widows and widowers, etc.

Acts of kindness to such folks draw the pleasure of our heavenly Father (Matthew 5:3, 4). Though he involves himself even more directly when he chooses, God often chooses to employ his people as his hands and feet (Isaiah 6:8; etc.). As he uses Ruth’s covenant with Naomi, so are we his instruments. And he uses us best when we heed the words of James 1:27: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.”

B. Prayer

Father, open our eyes to the needs around us, and grant us a selfless heart to reach out and meet those needs. We pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God uses the faithful to help those in need.¹

¹ Cook, S., Boatman, C. R., Taylor, M. A., & Thatcher, T. (2018). [A Mother-Daughter Covenant](#). In R. L. Nickelson (Ed.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2018–2019* (Vol. 25, pp. 425–431). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.