

## **Ruth 1:1-19a** (especially 8-11a,14-18)

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*Ruth 1:8 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. <sup>9</sup> May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”*

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

*<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? ...*

*<sup>14</sup> At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.*

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

*<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.” <sup>18</sup> When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.*

Dears Fellow Believers and Friends in Jesus,

“Turning Things Around” is a series of four sermons. Last week we looked at a man named Saul who persecuted Jesus’ followers. But God reached into his life and turned him around from eternal death to salvation. (Remember the children’s message with that car going the wrong direction?). God, in his undeserved love, took Saul and made him his greatest messenger.

Today we look at turning something else around. Not unbelievers whom God can turn into believers, but people in times of earthly difficulty. How can they get their lives turned around?

### **I. Naomi, an Example of Selfless Giving**

When you have nothing left to offer, it affects you. Have you ever seen a young boy unwilling to wear the second-hand coat? He wears his old ratty worn one, shivering just a little rather putting on than that nice, warm, new one. He says he doesn’t like it. But actually he is afraid his classmates will see it and know it isn’t his, and that he is just wearing the cast-offs of the better-offs. It is hard, sometimes, to take the charity of others.

In a way, that was Naomi. Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, had left Israel during a time of famine. He took his wife and two sons to nearby Moab for about ten years. They were refugees. During that time the man of the house died and his sons reached marriageable age. They married local women from the Moabite tribe—not Israelite women. I am sure that was a cause of concern for Naomi. But that question was short-lived, because even before any grandchildren arrived, both of her boys died.

One more thing you must understand is what marriage meant in that time and place. As in most of human history, marriage had as much to do with the families as it did with individuals. When Naomi’s sons married Ruth and Orpah, these women became part of their husbands’ family.

So here you have Naomi. Sons and husband dead—in a foreign land—uncertain of what waited for her in her native land. What a mess! At least she had her two daughters-in-law. By marriage, they were obligated to her.

Well, you remember that boy and the jacket? Like I said, that is Naomi. She had before her two young women who had hoisted their flags on the sinking ship of Naomi's life, and Naomi had nothing to offer them. They were willing to go with Naomi, but Ruth and Orpah would be foreigners in Israel with little chance of a marriage. Naomi would watch these young flowers of women, of so generous, age and fade and wither. She would be their ruin. How can you accept a gift like that? You can't. Naomi couldn't wear that jacket. ***“Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest”*** (8-9). In faith, she takes the last good thing in her life and she sets them free.

It is frightening for me even to suggest that from the pulpit—to suggest that in our time of need we need to keep on giving. And yet... What God has called us to do is to live beyond ourselves, beyond the circumstances that define our life. When a mass murderer mercilessly gunned down several people at a church Bible study, what testimony did the survivors give? They forgave. They prayed for his soul's well-being, even when the natural human reaction is in the other direction. Only God can do that. And when the protesters showed up with their bullhorns to incite hatred, those Christians sang them away. Do you notice that difference between that and all the other similar public spats of the last year? Not a spirit of revenge, but a spirit of giving.

The Christian can act that way for we know that, *“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”* (Romans 8:32). You see, love is a reflex. A loving word gives birth to love in the hearer's heart. Respect given, causes respect to be returned. The problem is that you need someone to start the cycle out. Here the Christian has an advantage. We don't have to wait for someone to show us love, because we experience God's love every day. He did not spare his own Son, but willingly gave him up as a sacrifice for our sins. When we see how God gave to us, we continually feel challenged to, in some way, show a similar love. God's love in Jesus makes us want to love, to make Naomi-like sacrifices.

One way of turning things around when bad things happen to us, is simply to take our eyes off ourselves. Remembering all God has done for us, we look at others and we ask how we can minister to, and help them.

## **II. Ruth, an Example of Selfless Giving**

Naomi was nothing like the stereotypical mother-in-law. Think of Disney movies like Snow White, Cinderella, Rapunzel. Fairytales would disappear if it weren't for wicked mothers-in-law. (In case some of you are wondering, I have a wonderful mother-in-law!) But the wicked mother-in-law idea has always been around. Almost two thousand years ago there was a Greek writer (Plutarch) who wrote about mothers-in-law. He reported a custom of a certain tribe around the Mediterranean Sea: It was their custom for the bride, on the day after the wedding, to send to the bridegroom's mother to ask for a pot, which the mother would refuse to send—even if she had a houseful of cooking pots—saying that she had no pots. In this way the young woman would know what to expect out of a mother-in-law and not get upset when they didn't see eye to eye.<sup>1</sup>

Naomi broke the cultural mold, and Ruth knew it. So when Naomi released her daughters-in-law from all responsibility to her and tried to shoo Ruth away, “Go, go, go home!” still ***“Ruth clung to her”*** (14). She physically restrained Naomi. “No, you're not going without me!” See that reflex thing there?

This made no sense. Every reasonable argument was for Ruth to stay in her homeland. If Ruth returned to her family, she could probably salvage a new life, a new family. But if Ruth went with Naomi, she would be saying good-bye to everything, forever. There would be no Facebook to see pictures of her nephews and nieces, no phone calls that would tell her when he parents were sick and on death's doorstep. No highways and cars or planes to make the quick trip home for the final visit.

But when Naomi told her to be a sensible girl and go home and enjoy what remained of life, 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. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it every so severely, if anything but death separates you and me”*** (16-17). If Naomi should live out her life in the deepest poverty, friendless and without family, Ruth would be there; that would be Ruth’s lot too. She swore before God. Has anyone ever said anything like that to you?

This commitment of Ruth obviously has nothing to do with marriage. Except that this unconditional life-long commitment to Naomi is the same thing God’s commands in every marriage vow. Marriage is not a trial. It is a promise. And not unlike Ruth’s promise to Naomi, it is a promise to journey down a road for which you do not have a GPS or even a paper map. But just as Ruth was pledging herself unconditionally, so marriage is an unconditional promise to be the life-long companion of another. And since this sermon is about something else, I cannot spend too long on this point, but it is worth remembering that the only marriage which is pleasing in God’s eyes is a marriage which has a Ruth-like commitment. ***“May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”***

One might argue that Ruth even went beyond that commitment! Her last words were, ***“Where you die... there I will be buried.”*** Ruth granted that death could separate them. But her devotion was so great that even when Naomi had died, Ruth pledged to one day be laid to rest next to her. Ruth would be her lone companion even in death, until the time when our God would call them forth together.

Naomi may have looked at Ruth’s offer like the second-hand jacket, something beautiful but too costly. Naomi could look at Ruth and fear for her future, but Ruth was too strong for her mother-in-law, and so the two women walked down the dusty road back to Israel together.

Who can possibly be equal to that? Can you do that? It’s good to listen to appeals for help in distant lands and to give. But it is also easy. Taking care of troubles at a distance is easy because the commitment is clear and limited. But when we help people close to us, things get messy. We get committed to people who need more help than we can provide, and then what do we do? We ourselves age and find helping more difficult. And what if there is a falling out between us? What about my own needs?

Listen, don’t worry about the what-ifs. God’s call is for us to help here and now. When problems arise, he will give us the wisdom to deal with those problems in the future.

We as Christians and as a congregation need to look for ways that we can not only worship our God, but also seek ways for each of us to look out beyond ourselves. Then we become God’s tools to turn around lives when the bad things of life happen to others.

While some possess this to greater degrees than others – and thank God for those of you who have that natural ability to truly give of yourself, and make our world a better place – while some have a greater gift for giving of themselves, all of us can cultivate this gift. Turning to God in prayer not only for your own blessings, but that you may be a blessing. Ask God to make you someone who looks for ways to turn other people’s lives around.

How can I possibly do this? Someone once said it this way. “I speak because I believe; I love, because many sins are forgiven me.”<sup>iii</sup> Yes, it is that easy. Love shown to us will be reflected from us. Thank you Jesus for making it so easy!

How can things get turned around in the middle of tough times? For ourselves, we must continually remember all that our God does for us. Then we begin to feel his love, even when it is not obvious. Then we take our eyes off ourselves. And when we take our eyes off our own problems, we become God’s instruments to turn around the lives of others in need. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lange, J. P., Schaff, P., Cassel, P., & Steenstra, P. H. (2008). *A commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Ruth* (p. 18). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

<sup>iii</sup> Zinzendorf as quoted in Lange, J. P., Schaff, P., Cassel, P., & Steenstra, P. H. (2008). *A commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Ruth* (p.

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22). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.