

Text: Ruth 1

Title: Love is secured by commitment

Date: October 18, 2009

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

Yesterday, Michael Lorusso & Melissa Kary made vows to each other right here where I'm standing, vows that committed them to love each other for life! It was a beautiful moment. It was a moment that stands in very stark contrast to the world in which we live. Mike & Missy are doing something that many believe to be either impossible or highly unlikely – they are setting out to keep a promise to love for the rest of their lives!

We live in a society of shifting commitments:

- job changes are more frequent
  - o people don't have just one career – they will change jobs as many as 5 times in the course of their working life
- consumer loyalty – a better price and I'll change
- consumer goods are built for change,
  - o eg. Computers – every few months they come out with some “new thing”
  - o eg. Music: vinyl records to 8-track tapes to cassettes to CDs to DVDs to MP3s to ... who knows what's next!

**Relationships** are also subject to shifting commitments...

A young man walking into a photography studio with a framed picture of his girlfriend. He wanted the picture duplicated. This involved removing it from the frame. In doing this, the studio owner noticed the inscription on the back of the photo:

“My dearest Tom, I love you with all my heart. I love you more and more each day. I will love you forever and ever. I am yours for all eternity.” It was signed “Diane” and contained the P.S.: “If we ever break up, I want this picture back.”

In a newspaper comic one character said, “You know, it's odd – but now that I'm actually engaged I'm starting to feel nervous about getting married!”

The other character replied, “I know what you're thinking. It's only natural to be nervous. Marriage is a big commitment. Seven or eight years can be a long time!”

Sadly, those two humorous anecdotes tell us a lot about the contemporary understanding of commitment.

Change – shifting commitments. Many people in our world doubt the existence of a love that stays committed through all the changes and shifts we experience

in life. But there's a story in the Bible that gives me hope that Mike & Missy, in fact, that all of us who are seeking to keep our promises to love, will make it.

I want to read you a story from the Bible about a woman who came to question the permanence of love. Her name is Naomi and she experienced devastating change in her life. Many things that should have given stability and security failed her. Her life was hard and it took its toll on her ability to believe in love. But out of her story of shattered hope came a new, strong commitment to love.

**READ: Ruth chapter 1 [not on the PowerPoint]**

## **Naomi's belief in love was shattered...**

### **Naomi was hungry**

**“In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land...” (v.1)**

- drought and famine were regular occurrences in this land with marginal rainfall
  - o Ironic name: **“Bethlehem” = House of Bread**
- Without grain, what would Naomi make bread with?
- How would she feed her family?

### **She was a refugee:**

Elimelech and his wife Naomi migrate to nearby Moab where the rains were more regular.

- Many times the people of Palestine people had to migrate to find food:
  - Eg. Abraham – to Egypt
  - Eg. Jacob – to Egypt

**“went to sojourn in the country of Moab” (v.1)**

“sojourn” = gur (Heb)

- a term used with reference to people who were temporary residents
- after ten years of living there they were still “temporary”
- no kin in the area – their roots weren't there – they were always “from away”
- they never really belonged
- In a society where your extended family was your safety net, they had none!
  - o They lived on the kindness of their neighbours
  - o They had no rights in the community

And her security was chipped away bit by bit: until she had nothing left.

## She was a widow

**“But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.” (v.3)**

If being without family support was bad, being without the protection of a husband was worse.

- there was no social system to care for her
- there was no one to provide for her, except her two boys.

BUT it got worse yet!

## She was alone

**“They lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.” (v.4-5)**

The Hebrew of this passage is designed by the writer to have us see Naomi as a woman standing alone.

When Elimelech died, the writer tells us **“she was left with her two sons.” (v.3)**  
When her two sons died, the writer tells us **“she was left without her two sons and her husband.” (v.5)**

**“she was left ... she was left”**

We have terms for people who lose their spouses: widow, or widower. We have terms for people who lose their parents: orphans

But we don't have a term for parents who lose their children.

- Is it because we can't put a name to that depth of pain?
- It's not the way life is supposed to be! Children aren't supposed to die before their parents.

What joy she might have taken from her daughters in law is diminished by the lack of grandchildren.

- Mahlon & Kilion had probably only been married to Ruth & Orpah for a short time

Without children neither she nor Ruth & Orpah had much hope.

She pled with Ruth & Orpah to leave her and find happiness somewhere else. She said to Ruth & Orpah: “If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown?” (v.12-13) **You can hear the despair in her voice?**

I'm sure you could see it in her face:

When she eventually returns to their home town of Bethlehem after 10 years in Moab, the people aren't sure they recognize her

### **“Is this Naomi?” (v.19)**

There's a second irony in this chapter.

- **“Bethlehem”** means **“House of Bread”** but it has no bread for Naomi
- **“Naomi”** means **“pleasant”** but her life had been anything pleasant!

Not only does she feel alone humanly speaking, her husband and sons gone, but she feels spiritually alone as well.

### **She was spiritually empty:**

On her return, she laments:

**“I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.” (v.21)**

She really believed that God was out to get her. She was convinced that God was her enemy. She told the girls to leave her because...

**“the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.” (v.13)**

The expression she used was sometimes used to describe an army as it goes to face an enemy.

She told the people in Bethlehem ...

**“Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara [which means ‘bitter’], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” (v.20)**

- she uses a term for God that emphasizes his power
- **“SHADDAI”**
  - it speaks of God's power to accomplish whatever He wishes
  - it can't be resisted / God is all-powerful!
- she is helpless in the face of his power!

She doesn't feel any compassion or care from **“SHADDAI”**

She still believes in God – but not in His love for her.

- she will believe that God has love for others

Notice her prayer for Orpah & Ruth when she encourages them to leave her and go back to their Moabite homes...

**“May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.” (v.8)**

cf. **“kindly” = chesed**

- loving-kindness
- steadfast love
- loving faithfulness

NB. One of the most important terms in the OT to describe God’s relationship with His people.

Two sides of the term and both are necessary:

- 1) **Steadfast strength** – God’s ability to accomplish whatever He wished on behalf of His people and his faithfulness to keep His promises.
  - of this aspect of God she had no doubt – He was “SHADDAI”
- 2) **Love** – tenderness, kindness, care, mercy
  - This is what she doubted – at least as it related to her!

**What she needed was someone who could help her believe in God’s love again.**

**At least two important lessons for us in this story.**

**First...**

### **What bad things happen to us, it’s NOT because God doesn’t love us.**

- We can easily see tragic situations as God punishing us for something.
  - o Some sin we’ve already confessed & been forgiven for – God must be punishing us for it, anyways. NO!
  - o Some “hidden sin” He’s trying to expose:
    - Sometimes sin can be exposed during trials – BUT what if you can’t find anything wrong?

**Naomi shows us that bad things sometimes happen because we are broken people living in a broken world.**

- **Was leaving Bethlehem and going to Moab wrong?**
  - o Abraham, Jacob had all gone to find food when famine struck
  - o 2 Kings 8:1 -- Prophet Elisha tells a woman to leave Israel because a famine is coming – she goes to live for 7 years in Philistia.
- **Was allowing her sons to marrying Orpah & Ruth wrong?**

- God's Law forbade Jews from marrying the nations around them but the key issue was not race, but religion.

**“You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.” Deuteronomy 7:3-4**

Ruth & Orpah gave evidence that they worshipped the LORD:

- Naomi credited them with showing “chesed” (covenant love) to her and to their husbands. (v.8)
- When Ruth took an oath to stay with Naomi, she made it in the name of the LORD. (v.17)

It seems clear that Naomi had won Orpah & Ruth to the worship of the LORD.

- They loved her & refused to desert her!
  - Orpah only left when Naomi insisted
- her character & integrity shines through this story
- **Naomi was a woman of strong faith in God, but her life experience had been bitter!**

Cf. Douglas

- had trained for lucrative career in psychotherapy
- declined it to begin an urban ministry
- troubles began:
  - wife discovered a lump in her breast
    - two year later the cancer spread to her lungs
    - chemo left her weak – Douglas took over household chores
  - driving with wife & 12 yr old daughter they were hit by drunk driver
    - Douglas rec'd a massive head injury (wife & daughter suffered minor injuries)
      - Headaches, double vision – wandering eye – unable to read more than a page to two at a time
- When asked how he coped with his disappointment with God, he said, he didn't have any! How?
- “The reason is this. I learned, first through my wife's illness and then especially through the accident, **not to confuse God with life.** ... I feel upset about what happened to me as anyone could be. I feel free to curse the unfairness of life and vent all my grief and anger ... We tend to think, ‘Life should be fair because God is fair.’ But God is not life.” (Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, p. 183)

This is not the world He created it to be. This world, this life, is marred and stained by the brokenness of sin. **Don't confuse God with life!** That's the mistake Naomi made.

Secondly...

## **Even when things go wrong, God's love is absolutely committed to us.**

I said before, what Naomi needed was someone who could help her believe in God's love again. That's where Ruth comes in.

We make a basic mistake in Bible study if we see the example of people like Ruth as an invitation to praise them for their heroism.

The Bible is not the story of the heroic acts of  
     Abraham & Joseph,  
         Or Moses & David,  
             Or Ruth & Esther,  
                 Or Paul & Peter.

The Bible is the story of God, revealing Himself through the lives of people.  
 The focus is always on God.

The question is never, "How can be like Ruth or King David or Paul?" but rather, "What can they teach me about God?"

**What does Ruth teach us about God's love for Naomi?** And about His love for us?

### **God's love for us is secured by His commitment to us**

Ruth made a vow to Naomi...

**"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 ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." Ruth 1:16-17**

"Nothing will separate you from me," Ruth said, "NOT EVEN DEATH!! When I die, I'll even be buried with you!"

Ruth's words echo these declarations of commitment from God:

**"Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you."  
 Deuteronomy 31:6**

**"Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you." Joshua 1:5**

**“When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them.” Isaiah 41:17**

**“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Lamentations 3:22-23**

**“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Romans 8:28-29**

What Ruth does is to put into flesh the commitment of God toward Naomi. What Ruth shows us is that people who are rooted by faith in the committed love of God can be channels through which His love pours into the lives of people.

Ruth gives me confidence that Mike & Missy will keep the vows they made here yesterday because like Ruth, they are rooted in the steadfast, committed love of God!

There’s a third name in this story that’s worth noting.

“Bethlehem,” “the house of bread” – wasn’t!

“Naomi,” “the pleasant” – wasn’t!

“Ruth,” “the friend,” – WAS!!

It takes time for this reality to sink in to Naomi’s heart & mind – there was a lot of pain and confusion there.

- it isn’t until the next chapter that Naomi’s faith in the love of God is fully restored.
- But it was through the model of His love demonstrated in her friend and daughter in law, Ruth, that God was able to speak into Naomi’s heart.

On February 25, 1996, Dr. Haing Ngor, who survived the horrors of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and gave an Oscar winning performance in the movie, The Killing Fields, was murdered in Los Angeles.

At first there was speculation that he had been killed for political reasons connected with the film, but recently the truth came out. When Ngor escaped to Thailand and arrived in America, he had only one possession: a photograph of his precious wife who was killed while a captive. Ngor had the photo mounted in a gold locket and wore it faithfully about his neck.

When a street gang held him at gunpoint, Ngor gave them his \$9600 Rolex watch, but refused to surrender the gold locket.

“Ultimately,” the prosecuting attorney said, “this photo, which meant more to Dr. Ngor than life itself, is the reason why he died.”

Ngor chose death rather than to be separated from the picture of his beloved wife.

Jesus made the same choice for you and me:

- Rather than be separated from us because of our sin, Jesus chose to die for us so that we could be forgiven and live with him forever.

Jesus – the man who was called “a friend of sinners” (Luke 7:34) -- is a friend who demonstrates once and for all for us that God’s love for us is an absolute commitment!

**“Jesus, what a Friend for sinners,  
Jesus, lover of my soul,  
Friends may fail me, foes assail me.  
He, my Saviour, make me whole.”  
Hallelujah, what a Saviour,  
Hallelujah, what a Friend,  
Saving, helping, keeping, loving  
He is with me to the end.”**

**Invitation to Prayer Ministry:** Do you need a friend to pray with you, someone who will encourage you to believe in God’s love for you?

**Final Song:** #17 – Jesus, What a Friend for Sinners

**Benediction:**