



One Page Sermon

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Kindness Matters: The story of Ruth and Naomi—and Orpah

Kindness matters. With those two words I can sum up the Book of Ruth. A beautiful short story about friendship, courage, and faithfulness, Ruth gives us insight into how the everyday ordinary moments of life can lead us to a deeper understanding of God's steadfast love.

The first part of the story focuses on three women: Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah. Naomi is a woman from Bethlehem, who moves with her husband and two sons to Moab when there is famine in their homeland of Judah. In what is modern-day Jordan, Moab is on the other side of the Jordan River and Dead Sea from Bethlehem. It is not only a foreign nation, but historic enemy of Judah.

While in Moab, Naomi's husband dies. Her two sons each marry Moabite women, but shortly thereafter, they die too. The three women are now widows, but Naomi is also an older widow in an enemy land. Realizing how vulnerable she is, she decides to go back home and hope that she can find safety in the home of her kin.

When they begin to go with her on her journey home, she tells her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth to go back to their families. She knows that they are young enough to still find husbands, and will be better protected there than if they accompany her to Judah. At first both insist on staying with Naomi, but Orpah relents and goes back to her family. They weep and kiss, and Orpah goes home.

I think there is an important lesson here that often gets overlooked. Orpah and Naomi parted ways, and there is no rebuke. There is no narration that claims that Orpah was unfaithful. There is no ridicule of her for leaving Naomi. Instead, it seems as if there was an emotional farewell, and then a healthy ending to their relationship.

This break is an important thing to remember. There are times when relationships must end. Orpah did nothing wrong. Naomi did nothing wrong. Their relationship had simply come to an end, and to cling to it was not the right thing for them in that moment. Sometimes relationships need to end. Sometimes people need to go their separate ways, bid each other farewell, and know that is the best for both individuals.

Ruth however decides to stay, and shares the poignant promise:

"Do not press me to leave you.

Where you go, I will go;

Where you lodge, I will lodge;

Your people shall be my people,

and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried." (Ruth 1:16, NRSV)



Ruth decides to stay with Naomi. In this moment, she gives up her future for the sake of her love of Naomi. In the ancient world, this pair of widows would be extremely vulnerable. That Ruth decided to walk with Naomi instead of going back to the safety of her own family reveals how deep their connection was. Time and again Ruth is referred to in Scripture as "Ruth the Moabite." The narrator wants to make sure you remember just who Ruth is.

In the second half of the story Ruth will become a foreign woman with no ties of kinship to anyone but her mother-in-law. This incredible act of kindness and courage reveals to us the kind of love God offers.

It has been oft-noted that God is not involved in this story. Yes, the characters speak of God and speak of their desire to follow God, but never does God take an initiative. Yet God's *hessed*—the Hebrew word for steadfast love or loving kindness—is on display throughout.

Kindness matters. It can change lives. It can save people from despair. It can form community and bonds that endure. The kindness and love that is shared between Ruth and Naomi is an inspiration to us all who form a community of faith. Our bond is not kin. Our bond is not obligation. Our bond is *hessed*, a steadfast love from which we may all draw strength. May our love of kindness bind us all.