

Study in Ruth 2

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Preacher: Rev R.G.Mackay

[0 : 00] And I think we should find her to be a very helpful guide at the beginning of a new year. Because what Naomi really does in this passage is she gives some pieces of advice.

She gives three pieces of advice in the passage. And if we have time, I want us to look at all three pieces of advice that Naomi gives.

First of all, there is Naomi's advice to herself. And we have this in verses 6 and 7.

Where Naomi makes the decision, having heard about better times for the land of Israel that she had left with her family some years ago.

Certainly over ten years ago, we don't know exactly how long before. They left because of famine and we discussed the reasons for that earlier.

[1 : 05] And now she has heard that better times have come and in her sadness, she is going to return. And what I want us to see is that before that final decision was taken to return, Naomi must have reasoned with herself.

She must have weighed up the evidence. She must have done some thinking and decision making. And that's what I'm thinking about when we find, at least underneath these two verses, Naomi's advice to herself.

It seems to me that at this stage, Naomi is really very like another character we have in the Bible. A character that you may know much better.

That we have in the New Testament in the parable of the prodigal son. And at this stage, there are definitely similarities between Naomi and the prodigal son.

At that point where we read that the prodigal son came to himself. And at that point when we read that the prodigal son said, I will arise and go to my father.

[2 : 16] I will arise and go back to where I came from, a better country than I am now in. And that's exactly the advice that Naomi must have given to herself so that she decides to return.

Why is that sort of thing recorded for us in the Old Testament as well as in the New? What is the insistent message that God would have every age and all people learn from that sort of consideration that Naomi had and that Naomi gave?

Well, I think there are at least two things that we need to learn from Naomi's advice to herself. First of all, it's obvious that she stopped to think and to consider.

There was that time of reflection. There was that time of weighing up the signs of the times. And how they affected herself.

And what she ought to do about them. Now I want us to remember what we learnt in our first study from this book, a fortnight or three weeks ago.

[3 : 49] The reason that we're studying this book at this time is that it is so much to say to us about the way that God is planning and working out his purposes.

Even in times when the whole world seems to be in a mess. And God has his purposes and he wants us to remember that and he wants us to respond to that.

And I think this stage in Naomi's life is telling us that we cannot respond aright without stopping in the busyness of our lives and considering and thinking and meditating.

And asking, how does this all affect me? What ought I to be doing? What ought I to be doing? What ought I to be doing? What ought I to be doing? What ought I to be doing? What ought I to be doing? What ought I to be doing? And it hasn't happened. And the ways of the evil of this world are still abroad and are still so effective.

[5 : 27] Things are difficult. And just because of perhaps broken expectation in recent months and years, which perhaps all of us have. We are perhaps the more inclined at least to talk about these things.

And yet, are these signs of the times really affecting our lives deep down? How are we responding to them?

What are we doing about the things that are happening abroad? And I don't just mean in other countries. I mean abroad, across the face of the world.

And I think the Bible would encourage us to believe that nothing will happen to us. And it will make no difference for good to us unless we stop and consider and think.

And especially, nothing for good will happen to us unless we begin to take God's word more seriously.

[6 : 40] And unless we turn there insistently and expectantly for answers.

This book, the Bible, is God's central means of revealing his purposes in this world.

God has so made us that we have minds with which to think. That's why we find it such a terrible disaster.

When we see dear folks in this world whose minds become disordered. Our difficulty in such circumstances is because deep down we know what a central blessing it is.

That God, when he made us like himself, gave us minds with which to think. With which to reason.

With which to hear his voice. With which to come to an understanding of who he is.

[7 : 49] What he is like. Why he has made us. What he is able to do with us and for us in this world.

And the greatest work of the evil one is to close our minds.

And when the most terrible things may be happening abroad in the world. The devil has that way with us. And we have that sin that responds to the methods of the devil.

And we will become used to almost anything in this world. And we will brush it off. And we will carry on regardless. Sin is so deep seated with all of us.

And Naomi who made mistakes in the past. The direction of her life was changed. And it began inside in her mind.

And when she used what she had heard. And when she summed it up. And when she thought about it. And we have to ask ourselves.

[9 : 02] If we are willing anew in these days. If we are willing be for the first time. Or if we are willing again.

To bring our minds. To bring our reasons. To God. And to his word. Are we willing to begin to search these scriptures of his.

To open them and to read them. And to ask God to give us understanding. To open them not just now and again. But to open them every day.

And to open them day after day after day. Are we willing if we are finding the reading of scripture difficult. To find Bible reading notes.

You can go to any of the Christian bookshops. In Inverness here. You can go to the Church of Scotland bookshop next door. You can go to the Christian bookshop beside the Baptist church on Castle Street.

[10 : 12] Or up to the bookshop that is opposite the Crown Church. And in all of these Christian bookshops you will find daily reading notes. That can help you to understand God's word.

Surely this is one new year resolution we need to make. But of course as we know from past resolutions. We will never be able to keep it without prayerfully asking God for his help.

It's a day for understanding before it's too late. What is God doing in this world? And how is my life fitting into it?

That was Naomi's advice to herself. But there's another thing we need to learn from Naomi's advice to herself. She stopped to think and to consider.

And we're also given some light on what were the main factors that came into her thinking. And what Naomi thought about the terms in which she thought were the terms of two kingdoms.

[11 : 26] With which she could identify. She could identify with the kingdom of Moab. In which she was living at that time.

Or she could go back. And identify more completely and more thoroughly. With the kingdom of Israel. Well not yet a kingdom but you know what I mean.

She could identify with the people of God. Or she could identify with those who were not the people of God. And that of course is a recurring theme.

Throughout the whole of the Bible. Here we have it near the beginning of the Bible. And here is Naomi. If you like the biblical terminology.

She's in the valley of decision. And that's what this world is about. This world ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin.

[12 : 34] And we have followed them into that sin and wrongdoing. This world and all that it means has become a valley of decision. It's become a place where there are two kingdoms at war.

The kingdom of our God and of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the kingdom of the evil one. The kingdom of Satan. The kingdom that will be eventually banished.

To hell and to a lost eternity at the end. And that of course is the message I say that is throughout the scriptures. And it's the message that the scripture highlights.

Most wonderfully. Most awfully. Right at the end of the Bible. In the great book of Revelation. Where we have. And it's therefore the encouragement of God's people.

Where we have throughout that book. A picture of the way that the world will be. Right up until Jesus comes the second time in judgment. And it will be warfare.

[13 : 38] And it will be tension. Such as the tensions of our day. And it will be one kingdom against another. It will be Christ's kingdom.

The kingdom of righteousness. The kingdom of grace. The kingdom of eternal blessing. The kingdom where people can know God and walk with God.

And the kingdom of the devil. The kingdom of the devil. The kingdom that is basically against God. The kingdom of falsehood.

The kingdom of ambiguity. The kingdom of bearing one's head in the sand. And saying it will be all right in the end.

The kingdom of saying peace, peace. When there is no peace. The kingdom of selfishness. The kingdom of self-centeredness. The kingdom of living for this world.

[14 : 34] Rather than the world that is to come. And that's God's basic. Oh he has so much more to tell us.

But these are the basic lines of his revelation to us. Of the way that this world works and interacts. And of course the revelation is given.

And the coming of Jesus Christ is explained. So that we can learn the way to be in Christ's kingdom. And to be delivered. From the kingdom of the evil one.

Now the question for us at this stage is. Are we thinking as Naomi was thinking? Are we willing to see God's revelation in these stark terms?

Of the two kingdoms running along together in this world. Intermingling, meeting at so many points. Points of tension. Points of temptation.

[15 : 36] Points of testing. But eventually on the great day of judgment. Separating. Forever.

And for eternity. You see Naomi's thinking. Led her to decision.

That's always the way that God's grace works. When we turn to the Bible. He brings us along this valley of decision.

In some of our reformed circles. The word decision has become a dirty word. And it's a great pity. Whether it is or not that there are wrong sorts of evangelism. That calls for decisions. That may be spurious decisions. Let us be clear about the fact that God in his word is always calling us to decisions.

[16 : 45] All that we may think about the truth. All that we may think about the truth. And about what's happening in this world. And what God is doing in this world. Will be of no final use to us if it doesn't bring us to decisions about our own lives.

And thanks be to God that as he works out his plan. He brings his people to decision. As he brought Naomi that day.

She thought. She pondered what's happening in this world. She thought about the ways of God. She thought about the difference between the people of God. And those who are not the people of God.

And on the basis of all that God was teaching her. She made a decision concerning her own life.

And she identified herself with the people of God.

How is it with you as you begin this new year? Naomi's advice to herself.

[17 : 52] But then there's Naomi's advice to her daughters-in-law. This we find in a longer passage from verse 8.

Right down to verse 18. And I think you know the record of the story. And it was basically advice to both Ruth and Orpah.

Her two widowed daughters-in-law. To stay in Moab. And you can also read there. The basis on which she gave that advice.

As we read it. It seems a little bit strange to our ears. And we've got to work out how it fits in. To the laws and the customs. That were so familiar to Naomi.

That she had grown up with. The laws that had been laid down for God's people. In the wilderness. And at Mount Sinai. And there were certain marriage laws.

[18 : 50] And the responsibilities of family. To see that the women folks. And even those who were widowed. Were protected. And were cared for. And that they indeed were married off.

Because this was the way of God's will. To see that everyone. Had proper protection and care. And of course these laws are going to play a big part. And the rest of the story of Ruth.

And so it was on the basis of God's laws. Best Naomi could interpret. That she makes her decisions. And that she gives the advice. How could they possibly be cared for.

In a marriage way. Back in Israel she thought. They must stay for their own good. In Moab. And there there would be someone of their own family line.

Who would care for them. Well of course we are now blessed with the help of hindsight. And we ask the question. Was Naomi's advice correct advice?

[19 : 55] In the light of God's purposes and plans. In the light of what eventually happened to Ruth on the one hand. And to Orpah on the other hand. Did Naomi give correct advice?

Well I think we would have to say that she didn't. But from the advice sincerely given. Although wrongly given. Again there are a number of lessons. That we ought to learn.

I think the first thing that we need to see is that. Naomi. In giving the advice she gave to her daughters-in-law. Was genuinely concerned. For her daughters-in-law.

She says there as she speaks to them. That the terrible way that her God. Naomi's God has dealt with her. And she has seen.

We saw that already. That the troubles that have come to her in these recent years. She sees God's hand in it. But her particular distress she says.

[21 : 00] Is that these daughters-in-law. Perhaps she thinks of them. Because they were Moabites. Not really knowing any better. That they have been so bitterly affected also. By what she may be seeing as her wrongdoing.

And that of her late husband Elkanah. And so it is with real and genuine concern. For the best. For these daughters-in-law. That she gives the advice.

That she gives. It doesn't seem to be that it's out of selfishness. That Naomi gives her advice.

It is out of genuine kindness. And a real desire. For the good of others. She will go back alone. If they will only be provided for here in Moab.

Now I think that most of us will probably agree. That so much of the trouble. And the difficulties of our day.

[22 : 05] Find their root and their source. In rampant selfishness. And greed. The troubles of Bosnia.

The ravishing of Somalia. It's all to do with folks. Who must have it their way.

Because they have their interests. At heart. And we are all so good at seeing that difficulty.

In others. But not in ourselves. Christ's antidote.

For the troubles that the kingdom of the evil one bring to this world. Are to be found. In the sermon.

In the sermon on the mind. A sermon that's full of unselfishness.

[23 : 09] A sermon about putting the good of others first. The first. First. First. First. First. First. First. First. First.

And making it one of the principles that directs the way that we live. If someone asks for our coat. We give them our cloak as well.

Someone asks a favour of us. We go out of our way to say yes I'll do what I can. And I'll do even more. To the sermon about going the second mile.

It's a life that we cannot live. Without the power of the risen Jesus Christ. At work within us. But it is the life that is the only antidote.

For the misery of this world. And it must begin with me. It must begin with you.

[24 : 17] As it began with Naomi. Then. The second thing about this advice of Naomi to her daughters-in-law.

The second lesson is this. That here is Naomi. Naomi and she had identified with Israel. She had just taken the decision to go back.

She had identified with the people of God. We have every reason to believe that whatever mistake she had made in the past. She was one of God's people. But she still could be wrong.

She still could be wrong. You see Naomi had still to learn. About the deeper purposes of God's law. She could only see them at this stage. At least the law about marriage. She could only see it about the provision for God's own people. The people of Israel. She had still to learn.

[25 : 22] That the law was pointing forward to the need of a saviour. A saviour who would have a place in his kingdom. For Moabites. As well as Israelites. For people of Invernais.

As well as people of Jerusalem. For people with no church background. As well as people with church background.

And Naomi had to learn that. And so the advice that she gives. Even at this critical and blessed stage in her life.

Still as imperfections. Still as things that are wrong. And don't we so often get frustrated with our politicians.

With all the circumlocutions that they will use. In order that they never come out. Categorically and publicly.

[26 : 23] And say. I was wrong. It was a wrong decision. And the Bible is teaching us.

That that's one of the central characteristics. Of the people of God. That's one of the central characteristics.

Of the kingdom of Christ. That is different from the kingdom of the evil one. The people of that kingdom. Are a people. Who are willing. To face up to the fact.

That they are wrong. And that they will be wrong. Time and time again. And that's the very reason. That they need Christ.

The other side of that coin is. That the church must always have room. For those who are wrong. And for those who confess that they are wrong.

[27 : 26] No matter how wrong they have been. The church is a place for discipline. The church is a place sometimes for public and open discipline.

But that discipline is always for enabling people to confess that they are wrong. And for receiving them again.

And staying with them. Until the wrong is put right. And then the third thing.

And Naomi's advice to her daughters-in-law. She was genuinely concerned for them. Although identifying with Israel. She was wrong. And what Naomi particularly had to do.

And her advice bears this out. Naomi had to sort out the seen. The seen. And the unseen. She had to see that both.

[28 : 29] Move on together in this world. She had to see the seen circumstances. All often difficult circumstances. In the light of the unseen realities.

Of almighty God in heaven. In control. Of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Using all the circumstances of this world. For the good of his people.

And for the building up of his church. She needed I think Naomi. To hear Paul's words. Coming to her with power. Over the years. Our light of fiction.

Which is but for a moment. Worketh for us a far more exceeding. And eternal weight of glory. So we look not at the things which are seen. But the things which are not seen.

For the things which are seen are temporal. But the things which are not seen. Are eternal. How are these words appropriate to Naomi. Well you see.

[29 : 22] She was thinking. If she took her daughters-in-law back to Israel. With her. They might have to live in poverty. There might be no husbands for them. And oh the affliction that there would be.

Back in Israel. Better in Moab. Where they had much more prospect. Much better marriage prospects. In terms of the seen.

It was better in Moab. But in terms of the unseen. In terms of the almighty God to be worshipped. And all the provision that he could make in time. And in the life to come. The reckoning was different. And we've got to be careful.

And we've got to ask God. As we weigh up the signs of the times. And as we try to react to them properly. We've got to ask for an eye. For eternity. Oh it's so easy.

[30 : 32] When troubled times come in our world. To return to church perhaps. To use it as an insurance policy.

We're worried about the troubles of this world. And our thinking you see. Doesn't lift us higher. And if we can just feel a little bit better.

Here and now. And if we can use religion. And use the church for that purpose. Then that will be okay. If we can just escape the trouble.

Or the feelings of unease that we have. Sometimes we need the trouble. Sometimes we need the difficulty. To remind us.

That trouble and sin go together. To remind us that we can only finally face trouble. Escape trouble. If we escape from sin.

[31 : 35] And we can only escape from sin. Through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Through following him in the paths of obedience.

Through learning his motives for this world. By which he said. Don't lay up treasures in this world. But lay up treasure in heaven.

Because where your treasure is. There your heart will be also. Where's your treasure this morning? As you see the signs of the times. What are you living for? Are you living first and foremost for what you can get out of this world?

Or are you living first and foremost? For the next world? For the next world. For the next world. For the next world.

[32 : 38] Because Jesus promised. Because Jesus promised that if we are living for the next world. Then all other things. Then all other things. Will be added to us as well.

There was Naomi. There was Naomi's advice to herself. There was Naomi's advice to her daughters-in-law.

And then once she returned to Bethlehem. There was Naomi's advice to the people of Bethlehem. That begins at verse 19.

And she said to them at verse 20. Call me not Naomi. Call me Mara. Which means bitterness. For the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.

I went out full. And the Lord hath brought me home again. Empty. What was Naomi doing then?

[33 : 34] Well you see. She was witnessing. She was witnessing. Even although she was so weak as a Christian at this stage.

Even although she felt so battered. And so bruised by the Lord's dealings with her. She had learned some things. She had stopped. She had considered. She had identified herself with the people of God.

Or she was still making mistakes. She still needed more instruction from God. But what she knew. She was putting into practice. And she was witnessing to it. And she was telling others about it. And she was telling you see. About God's control. Over the affairs of this world. She was using a very common point of contact. To pass on the truth of God to others.

People talk about the affairs of this world. People talk about what they see on their television screens. At news time. People talk about the awful things they read in the newspaper.

[34 : 38] People talk about deaths. Or some wrongdoing that happens in our street or in our neighbourhood. And these can often be opportunities.

For us to witness to the fact. That we know the God. Who is in control of all these things.

And he is the only God. And we need to know him. And we can do so humbly. Not lording it over others.

Not saying oh I know more than you know about what's happening in this world. No. No we can witness humbly as Naomi did. What Naomi was saying is the Lord is dealing in bitterness with me. And the reason is that I went wrong. And I had lessons to learn. And I have to hang my head down low in your presence as I witness to you.

[35 : 45] There's no good in me. But it's the Lord who has brought me back to you. She says.

What she's saying is. No matter how far away I went. The Lord's grace. Is sufficient for me.

And if the Lord's grace. Is sufficient for me. The Lord's power to change me.

The Lord's power to lead me on. And teach me where I'm going wrong. If the Lord's grace is sufficient for me. It's sufficient for you.

That's what the world needs to hear. In these days. There is a righteous God who is controlling all these things.

[36 : 48] He can show us where we are going wrong. And his grace can change us. His grace is changing me.

His grace can change you also. Amen.