

Explore the Bible: Faith Through Trials

February 1, 2017

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Feb. 19 focuses on Ruth 1:6-18.*

As a chaplain, one of the most helpful and hopeful Scripture passages I read to hospice patients is Revelation 21:1-4, which includes these words: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

Some years ago, a pastor collapsed in his study at church. EMTs were summoned, and he was rushed to the hospital. At first, the pastor thought he was suffering a heart attack. As it turned out, he had collapsed due to extreme exhaustion.

Reporting on the incident later, he told his congregation he wasn't afraid of dying as he lay on the gurney. He was afraid of not being here.

In so doing, he identified one of the single most terrifying thoughts we encounter as we face our own mortality—fear of the separation it brings from those we love. There is no greater fear than the fear of abandonment.

Naomi's fear for Ruth

It's not uncommon at all for the surviving spouse temporarily to feel anger toward a deceased partner for leaving him or her here alone. It is against that fear that this story of Ruth and Naomi is cast.

Naomi's and Ruth's losses simply are indescribable. As is commonly known, in their day and time, a woman who was widowed not only suffered the

attendant grief, but also could also find herself in serious trouble very quickly. Often, women had to turn to prostitution to survive.

Although the Scripture doesn't say as much, it's hard not to believe that this may have been one of Naomi's greatest fears for Ruth. She all-but begged Ruth to return to her country and her people. Perhaps there she could remarry or at least have family support and avoid living out her days being sexually brutalized.

Ruth's commitment to Naomi

Even so, Ruth knew going back home meant causing Naomi the utter desperation of isolation. Naomi had lost her entire family, including her husband and her two sons. To Ruth, abandoning Naomi was simply not an option. Whatever she was going to do, Ruth was not going to allow Naomi to face her future alone.

In the process of counseling people in marital crisis, it's common to discover two people didn't realize that, when they married each other, they also were "marrying" each other's families. Many marriages don't survive that blending.

It's apparent, however, Naomi had not only married her husband, but also her husband's family. Over the years, Naomi had become as much a part of her family as any who were back home in Judah. In Ruth's mind, to leave Naomi was to abandon family, and that simply was not an option. Naomi obviously had been a wonderful mother-in-law. Now it was Ruth's turn to return the blessing.

We have recorded the remarkably beautiful words of Ruth in response to Naomi's pleading in verses 16-17. Even today, millennia later, many couples have that passage read at their weddings as an expression of their love for and commitment to each other.

Never abandoned

As a chaplain, when I am present at a person's death, those who have large family also present always find a way through the dark tears. My heart breaks for those who face a loved one's death alone.

Although grief can be hard and deep and long, people surrounded by family and friends find immeasurable comfort in their company and the courage to go on in life. Even though death has separated them temporarily from their loved one, they know they have not been abandoned.

Upon the death of a loved one, as tragic as it can be, what helps all of us go on is when others gather around and promise never to leave us alone. When conducting a funeral, I always thank those who've taken time to attend. I affirm they are and will be the hands, arms and shoulders of Christ to those who, at that moment, have been swallowed whole in grief.

One day, I asked a young father, a deeply devoted man of faith, who had lost his infant son some years before, how he was able to survive the loss. I fully expected him to say "Scripture" or "faith" or "prayer." His answer surprised me. He said one word in response to my query—"friends." Ruth's response to Naomi, even in her own grief, is clear evidence that, in times of grief, friends and family are as much the gift of God as prayer or Scripture.

With every death and separation this side of heaven, those of us left here for a while longer are given Ruth's privilege—the opportunity to be the fulfillment of God's promise never to abandon the grieving.

The same God who has promised a future in which death will be no more makes himself present through our flesh, reminding the grieving that the eternity in which there will be no more crying or pain or death or abandonment already has begun.

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