

**Ruth 1:6-18**  
*The Road Less Traveled*

**Main idea:** There always seems to be a fork in the road. We always have a choice to make. Will we go our way, or God's way? In truth, there's only one way that leads to life. Jesus is the way.

How do you make a decision?

This is a true story I heard from Mark Clifton who serves on the North American Mission Board. I heard about a church who wanted to hire a pastor. The church had 10 people in it, and after years of searching for a pastor, they hadn't found one, or at least not one that would stay for very long, so they asked their director of missions to help them. So the director of missions met with the pastor search committee of 5 people (half the church) to help them look for a pastor. One of the first questions he asked them was if they wanted a full-time or bivocational pastor, and they said they didn't know yet. They hadn't yet made that decision.

The director of missions was a little confused, because that seemed like the kind of thing that they should have decided before they even started looking for a pastor. The pastor search committee explained that they hadn't decided yet because they had enough money saved up so they could afford a full-time pastor for 2 years, or a bivocational pastor for 4 years, but they said they had to wait for the finance committee to make that decision.

So the director of missions looked around at the 5 people on the pastor search committee, knowing that they were exactly half of the church, thought about it for a second, and asked, "So who's on the finance committee?" They all raised their hands. So he asked them, "Can we switch right now from being a pastor search committee meeting to being a finance committee meeting so that you can decide what kind of pastor you want?" They said, "no." He said, "why not?" They said, "Because according to our church's by-laws we need to give the church two weeks notice before the finance committee meets."

Now, that illustration might not mean much to many of you, but I share this story to point out that sometimes not making a decision is making a decision. And not making a decision can have some very long-lasting consequences, even sometimes eternal ones.

Ten years ago, you, this church, made the decision to hire a 28-year-old kid who preached weird and made a lot of mistakes to be your pastor. Ten years later, you have a 38-year-old kid who still preaches weird and still makes a lot of mistakes.

Maybe that was a hard decision to make 10 years ago. Maybe it wasn't. Either way, it had some long-lasting consequences, both for you and for me.

I could point out that some of you, over the last few weeks, have had to make choices that you knew would have long-lasting consequences. Maybe you can think of some major life event that has happened recently in your life that's forced you to have to evaluate your life. Because of circumstances outside of your control, you've had to think about your future, and determine the right course of action for you and your family. I could point that out.

But that wouldn't quite be true. The truth is, it's not just some of you, but all of you.<sup>1</sup> We all have these kinds of choices to make. And it's not just over the last few weeks, but even over the last few hours. Over the last few hours, you've had to decide whether you would go your way, or God's way.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the choices we have to make just don't seem to make any sense. Should I get up and worship with my church family, or stay home and relax on a Sunday morning? To most of the world, this seems like a no-brainer. But for those who believe, something compels us.

We saw last week that an Israelite woman named Naomi moved to Moab with her family during a famine, but ten years later, her husband and sons had died, and she felt like she had lost everything, even her own identity.

We often think of the book of Ruth as the love story of Ruth and Boaz, and that's certainly a good chunk of it. But the book of Ruth is a romance of many dimensions. It has several layers. As we'll see today, the book of Ruth also displays the love between a mother and her daughter-in-law, the love between a girl and her God, and also the love that God has for each one of us.

So let's begin reading in Ruth 1:6.

Then she [Naomi] arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. (Ruth 1:6)

Naomi had come to a crossroads. She had a decision to make. Before he died, her husband Elimelech had moved their family to Moab because he thought that it would be the best place that he could best provide for them during the famine. But now, she heard that there was food back in Israel. So would she stay, or go?

Now, that might seem like a no-brainer to us looking back, but think about it from Naomi's perspective. She had trusted God in the past to provide through her husband Elimelech, but now he was dead. But, fortunately, she still had her two sons, so she trusted God to provide through them, but then they died, too. So Naomi had a decision to make. Would she decide to trust God again by going back to her people, or would she remain in the land of Moab forever and turn her back on her God because she felt that her God had already turned His back on her?

I think some of you can relate to Naomi. Maybe you've felt let down by God in the past. Maybe you blame Him for how things have turned out. But I think the Scripture is teaching us this morning that maybe God allowed you to go through everything you went through so that at just the right time, you could see Him provide for you through His abundant grace.<sup>3</sup>

I don't know how many times I've read the book of Ruth, but when I read this verse a couple weeks ago, it was the first time I ever noticed that it said that it was the Lord who gave His people food. Of course, God probably did this through the service of people like you and me, by giving rain to farmers who could then grow an abundance of crops, who were then generous to meet the needs of others who lacked during the famine. But even if that's how it happened, Scripture is clear that their help ultimately came from God. So everything that we read in the book of Ruth only happened because God was faithful to take care of His people.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 16:9

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 14:12

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:31-32

So will you trust Him to take care of you?

Let's continue reading. Verse 7.

So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. (Ruth 1:7)

The New International Version says, "they set out on the road."

There's a poem by Robert Frost titled, "The Road Not Taken," and it goes like this:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Now, Robert Frost wrote as if both roads are equally good, which isn't true. The Bible is clear that there's only one way that leads to life.<sup>4</sup> But Robert Frost does get at least one thing right: the road we take today really does impact our future.

So what road are you on? Naomi had been living in the land of Moab due to a series of unfortunate events. She had been alienated from her people, the people of God. But rather than remaining where she was, she saw God's mercy and made the choice to return to God, taking the road back to the land of Judah.

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<sup>4</sup> John 6:68

I'm sure all of us can look back and remember times we know we took the wrong road. Maybe you got into a wrong relationship, or quit a job or took a job for the wrong reasons, or maybe you just neglected to take a road that you know you should have taken.

Often our unfortunate events are of no fault of our own, such as having a genetic disorder or growing up in an abusive home, but whatever the cause of the unfortunate event, we can be certain that when we seek God, He does hear us, and He can bring healing to our hurts.<sup>5</sup> He can bless the broken road. But in order for that to happen, God wants you to choose Him.

But you may have already picked up this, it really wasn't much of a choice for Naomi. It was the only road that would lead to life. She would have nothing in Moab, and yet God would provide for her in Judah. And yet, she still had to place her trust in God.

And the same is true for us. We sometimes convince ourselves that the land of Moab, where we alienate ourselves from God and His people, is just fine. But in truth, we're surrounded by famine, and we're starving.<sup>6</sup> And the only place where we can have true life is in God's presence.

Jesus said in John 6:35:

**"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." (John 6:35)**

What I'm saying is simply this: our sin leads to death, but God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, leads to life.

So Naomi decided to live. And yet, that's what makes this next passage of Scripture even more confusing. Verse 8.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. 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? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me." Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. (Ruth 1:8-14)

Now this is interesting. God was providing food for His people in Judah, and yet Naomi was encouraging her daughters-in-law to return to Moab. Why would they do that? Why would they even consider doing that? And why would Naomi encourage them to do that? There's all this talk about marriage, and husbands, and sons growing up, and certainly that's part of what's going on, but the real issue is simply this: which road would they take?

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 29:12-14

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:6

It's like Naomi was trying to give them an easy way out. Even though she knew that only the path back to Israel would lead to abundant life, she wanted to give her daughters-in-law the opportunity to make their own choice. They would need to decide for themselves to choose life.

And the same is true for everyone who grows up in the church as well. You can't make the choice for your kids.<sup>7</sup> Sure, there are things you can do that will help them make the right choice when it's up to them. Research shows that if you do certain things, like teaching them not just to attend church, but be involved in serving the church by modeling active service and commitment, they'll be much more likely to remain in the church when they're adults. But ultimately, it's still up to them whether they'll be faithful to God when their lives get busy and there are so many other things fighting for their time.

So youth, when you're able to get a car, and get a job, I encourage you to think not just about how you can enjoy your new freedoms, but how God would have you enjoy your new freedoms. Maybe you can use your car to pick up a friend for church. Maybe you can use your money from your allowance or your new job not just on all the things you think you want and need, but to help others also. I love seeing our youth grow and spread their wings. So use your new freedoms to glorify God.

But it's not just our kids who have to make these choices. It's all of us.

There always seems to be a fork in the road. We always have some choice to make. Will we go our way, or God's way? Our way has all kinds of things that we think we need. A certain kind of marriage, or a certain job, or a certain lifestyle. And when we pursue our way as the most important thing to us, our relationship with God will suffer. But when you follow God's path, all of these other things may suffer, but ultimately, God has even arranged that for your good.

So how insistent will you be to follow God? Sometimes I feel like I'm begging people to follow God. And I'm not sure it's right, because Naomi used a completely different tactic. Verse 15.

And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." (Ruth 1:15)

Did you catch that? It wasn't about marriage, or husbands, or sons growing up at all. It was about gods. What gods do you serve?

Verse 16.

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. (Ruth 1:16-18)

Ruth's devotion to Naomi has been used as an example of many things. It's the kind of devotion we ought to have toward our spouse and toward our church. And very plainly, it's the kind of steadfastness we ought to have in our faithfulness to God. But no matter how we understand our application of Ruth's speech, we

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<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah 31:29-30

shouldn't overlook how big of a declaration it was for Ruth herself, and yet it was the only declaration she would even consider.

She was giving up her roots. She was giving up her nation. She was giving up her people. In her mind, she was even giving up any hope of marriage. And yet, she was compelled. I think if we could ask her, Ruth would say that following Naomi, and more importantly, following God, was the only decision she could possibly make. She had tasted and seen that the Lord is good.<sup>8</sup>

So I'll ask the question I started with: how do you make a decision?

Well, according to the Bible, once you wrap your head around one big truth, all the hard decisions we face become that much easier. 2 Corinthians 5:14.

**For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. (2 Corinthians 5:14, NIV)**

If you rest in Jesus's love for you, demonstrated by His death and resurrection, then you're compelled to even give your life to Him. The English Standard Version seems to state it even more forcefully. It says:

**For the love of Christ controls us...(2 Corinthians 5:14, ESV)**

It's like when we receive Jesus, we give up control of our lives over to God. And yet, every day we live, there's still a fork in the road. We have a choice to make. Will we go our way, or God's way? In truth, there's only one way that leads to life. Jesus is the way.<sup>9</sup> And when you get a taste of that, and continually remind yourself of it, then you will begin to desire the road less traveled.

And here's the thing: God calls us to make a decision about Jesus.<sup>10</sup> A lot of people put that off, but as I said in the beginning, not making a decision is making a decision.

And yet, I don't think that in the end, it's really our decision that matters. It's God's decision that matters most. We love because He first loved us.<sup>11</sup>

As we saw, this whole thing is dependant on God, who visits His people and provides for them. Yes, God calls us to make a decision, but it's only because He's already decided to love us.

You see, I think Naomi's faith is credited to her as righteousness not because it was a perfect faith, but because she had a weak faith in a perfect savior.<sup>12</sup> I think at this point in the story, Naomi was absolutely exhausted and didn't know what to do. She decided to go back to her roots, to her people, and to her God, but it wasn't so much out of a love and trust for Him, but rather for a lack of love and trust in anything else. Next week, we're going to see that she even tells everyone in Israel not to call her Naomi, which means "pleasant," but Mara, which means "bitter." She was bitter toward her circumstances, toward herself, and I think even

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 34:10

<sup>9</sup> John 14:6

<sup>10</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 4:19

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 15:6, Mark 9:24

toward God because of the hardship He gave her in life. But she also knew of nothing else to do but to turn to God for help.<sup>13</sup> She was tired, worn, and broken.

Maybe that's where you are. Maybe you're here this morning simply because you don't know where else to go. Maybe you're so worn and broken, and you don't have a lot of trust in God's way, but you don't trust in the world's ways either because you have seen the world let you down. Maybe all you have the energy for is to stumble in the direction God is urging you, but your heart is weary and unsure.

If that's you, listen closely, you chose the right road here this morning. But don't start getting proud even about that little choice. Praise God for making the road.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13-14)

I think, ultimately, Jesus is the only one who can perfectly walk the hard path that God requires of us, and therefore, our only hope is to trust in Him. He's the perfect savior. He's the narrow gate. He's the road less traveled, who makes all the difference. He's the way, and the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him.<sup>14</sup>

So if you want real, abundant life, don't strive to go your own path. Only rest in Jesus, because He is the path.

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 11:28

<sup>14</sup> John 14:6