

Orpah vs. Ruth



The book of Ruth begins by telling the tragic story of three women: Naomi, Ruth and Orpah. Naomi was married to Elimelech. They were Jews. Elimelech was of the tribe of Judah (1:1). Their two sons were also Jews, but evidently moved to Moab before marriage due to a famine in their homeland (1:2). Moab was not an area inhabited by Jews, but by people of foreign nations believing in foreign gods. It is there that the two sons of Naomi found their wives, Orpah and Ruth (1:4). In the first chapter, all three women find themselves in a similar situation—husbandless (1:3,5).

Naomi, unable to provide for herself, decides to return to her blood relatives in Bethlehem where her kin would provide for her (1:6-7). At this point, her daughters-in-law are faced with a life-changing decision. Shall they stay in Moab or go with Naomi as she returns to her homeland? Two decisions are made and they tell us about the varying character of Ruth and Orpah.

First, these two show us a difference in loves. In the New Testament, we see affectionate love described by the word PHILEO and sacrificial love described by the word AGAPE. AGAPE love is a stronger love than PHILEO. It is the type of love we are commanded to give to the Lord (Matthew 22:37) and the type of love God showed towards us in giving us His Son (John 3:16).

This type of love is seen in the Old Testament too. Orpah obviously has an affectionate love for her mother-in-law. She begins to follow her back to Judah (1:7). She weeps with her and kisses her (1:9). Yet, when encouraged to turn back to her homeland she leaves behind her aged mother-in-law (1:15). It was a love willing to weep, but not willing to change.

Ruth has a love that is willing to sacrifice. The text says she “clung to” Naomi (1:14). This is the same word used to describe marriage in Genesis 2:24. As Ruth 1:16-17 indicates Ruth was willing to follow Naomi to the grave if this was required. That is sacrificial love.

Second, we see a difference in beliefs. Orpah never truly left her native beliefs. As she turns away, Naomi comments that she is returning to “her people and to her gods” (1:15). On the other hand, Ruth has developed a love for the people of Israel and the true God of Israel. She says to her Jewish mother-in-law, “Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (1:16).

Even in Moab, word had spread about the miraculous giving of manna in the wilderness to God’s people (1:6). Could it be that Naomi also told her sons’ foreign wives about the plagues of Egypt, crossing of the Red Sea and other mighty works of God for the people of Israel? Such testimony was enough to convince Ruth that she should make her home with these people, but not Orpah.

Third, a contrast reveals a difference in comforts. Orpah goes back to the comforts of her homeland. For some, changing a life is too much to ask. Yet, Ruth is interested in doing the right thing. For her, this includes caring for her helpless mother-in-law and pursuing proper religion. It required change. She had to leave her homeland, old friends and her faulty, inherited religious practices. Yet, such sacrifices for the sake of truth can be an incredible balm to the conscience.

May we be more like Ruth—willing to sacrifice, learn and change—and may eternal comfort override earthly pleasures as we make our choices.

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