

This sermon was given during one of the Women's Ministries/Shepherdess meetings at the 2005 GC Session in St. Louis, Missouri. The sermon may have some portions specific to the sermon writer. If you use the sermon, edit the material to be sure it is understood that these are the sermon writer's personal experiences.

TRANSFORMED BY GRACE FOR DAILY LIVING

By Galina Steele

Theme: God's Transforming Power

Call to Worship: #701, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *Shout Joyfully to the Lord*

Opening Song: #12, Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee*

Closing Song: #311 , Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, *I Would Be Like Jesus*

Scripture: varied passages in the book of Ruth

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Transformed by Grace for Daily Living

By Galina Steele

A woman's daily living consists of many different responsibilities – housework, cooking, job responsibilities, children, husband, garden, ministry in the church and so on. Yes, there are also some opportunities: every day we can become somebody we were not yesterday. We can grow in every aspect, reach higher, do better, and accomplish more.

Daily living can also deal with the following questions: What is more difficult – daily routine or heroism in an extreme situation? Where is more love – in one act of love or in the devoted life of everyday living? And where can one take enough strength for daily living? Let us look at our life from the perspective of one book in the Bible.

Daily Living as our Pilgrimage back Home

There is one book in the Bible with a beautiful woman's name. It stands as a rose in a garden of biblical stories and books. This small book reveals the joys and sorrows of a woman's life, its sweetness and bitterness. It is about affection and relationships, domestic life, decisions and Providence.

Names

This book starts with the story of one Jewish family, the family of Elimelech. We know that in those times and in that culture, names were given with a purpose. Let us introduce the main heroes of this story.

Both the names of the husband and the wife had a strong connection to God. Elimelech means "God is King", Naomi – "God is sweet".

We can assume that their parents were godly people. And we can infer even more. It seems that Naomi's parents had a beautiful atmosphere in their home, sweet relationships. And when a girl was born they decided that her name should manifest that God is sweet as well as the life of those who believe in Him. Interestingly enough, this girl really did it; she spread the sweetness of His character in her life, despite the bitterness of her destiny.

There were two sons in this family. Although there are different opinions of the meaning, it is obvious that they are not of religious origin. Perhaps they were common in those times with no particular meaning as many names of our day. Or maybe they reflected the fragile nature of the boys.

Mahlon could originate from the meaning "tender in health", "sickliness", "tender in heart". Hileon – "consumption", "consume", "to complete". However, the names contained a prophetic picture of their life. They died in their young age, several years after their marriages.

Orpah could mean "neck" or "firmness".

Ruth – some possible variations: "a friend", "beauty", "rose".

Boaz – the root of the name was not found. Some suggest that it could have an idea of prosperousness.

Obed means "servant" or "to serve".

The book starts with the story of relocation. Elimelech's family – father, mother and two sons – moved from the city of Bethlehem, which means "House of bread", to the land of Moab to escape famine in Israel. Later in the story, the mother and a daughter-in-law will return back to the "House of bread". Our life is a pilgrimage back home. Our daily living is our daily traveling to or from our Bethlehem.

Stages

In our pilgrimage we pass through all stages of life – childhood, youth, and womanhood.

This story is about all of this. Here we meet three wives, three weddings, family happiness and family sorrow. We meet three widows, the birth of a beloved baby, and the happiness of parents and a grandmother. We witness moving, weddings, funerals, widowhood, courtship, engagement.

In this story, we see that our children can make their own decisions about whom to marry. However, the story reveals that girls from a distant land can be also virtuous, devoted, kind, and converted to the religion of their husbands. This story also reveals the terrible truth that we are mortal. Sooner or later death knocks at our door. Naomi lost her husband and both sons

Every woman's worst nightmare happened to her. Of the two genders, women are the weakest – she was a woman. Of women, the weakest is the widow – she became one. Of widows, the most miserable are the old, she was elderly. Of old widows, the poor are the least fortunate – she didn't have much. Of poor widows, those who have no children have no future – Naomi had none. Of childless widows, those who had children and lost them are the most miserable. It seemed like all possible sorrows climaxed in Naomi's life. It was a double desolation – a dead husband and two dead sons. And now we see three widows in one house, three widows on one road. Each of them had her own sorrow, her own memories and her own

burden and grief, her unspoken words to her husband and her hidden “Whys?” to the almighty God.

How would you react if you had to start from this very stage – widowhood? Is there any hope, any future? Is there much sense in everyday living? It is interesting to note that the head of the family was gone but his name was still with them as a promise: “God is King”. This name was a guarantee of a supply and protection. It was like an umbrella covering all three widows under a beautiful slogan. Let’s think about it. Without such a promise, any loss or grief would break us. But with this faith in God as a King of the whole universe and my own life we can keep moving. The only question is: In what direction?

Daily bread and daily pilgrimage

We saw Elimelech’s family moving in the beginning of the story and after a while there were three widows going slowly along the road. The beginning of the book reminds me of all of us. We all are in constant motion. Our pilgrimage starts from different places. Some are born in religious families and start from Bethlehem, although later they may wander to Moab in order to return again some day to Bethlehem. Others start their journey of life in the land of Moab with an empty or wrong picture of God. But by the mercy of the Lord, they discover truth and the right road along the way. However, both groups will discover that what matters most is their destination not where they started from. And both groups will discover that all their pilgrimage is to discover more about God, to understand Him more and to come into full light of His presence.

What is also interesting: our daily pilgrimage is about a constant search for bread. Bread for daily living. Looking for it we can be so busy that we forget the Bread Divine. Daily bread serves our body. Heavenly Bread can feed the soul. With the first, we will hunger again; with the second, we won’t.

Nevertheless, our daily routine is for our daily bread. And sometimes we can be so busy that we do not have a minute to stop and to think about, to meditate on or to eat the Bread Divine. I think that we can resemble busy bees. Do you know that to produce 100 grams of honey a honey bee has to visit about 1000 000 flowers. To produce one kilogram of honey that bee has to bring 120-150 thousand carriages of nectar. We are like honey bees with our many responsibilities in our daily living. We are driven by desire to find our daily bread.

Let us return to our story. Is it not striking that sometimes the city of God’s people with the beautiful name “House of bread” can be empty of bread? What was the reason? Maybe because the Bread Divine was forgotten? Sometimes we feel that our Bethlehem is empty and we turn to search in other places as happened with Elimelech’s family. The family set out for Moab. They went from the empty fields of Bethlehem to the full fields of Moab. However, later Naomi would say “I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty” (Ruth 1:21). Life brings contrasts. She left the city with a husband and two sons in the full blossom of her womanhood, but returned empty.

In our daily pilgrimage we all are driven by hunger. Hunger can lead us to foreign countries. Hunger can force us to leave the House of bread, and it leaves us hungry for more and better. This story shows us that we can be hungry for physical bread but at the same time “be full” because we have everything that creates home. We can come to the city in the time of harvest but “be empty” because our home is gone. Yes, we can fly from famine, but not from death. Change of circumstances is a common incident in human life.

Somebody said that one cannot build a house on a bridge. How true, although most of us are trying to do exactly this in our daily pilgrimage. We all, especially women, dream of having a nice house and a sweet home. And sometimes, only when it is swept away by the rolling waves, we realize that we have not yet completed our journey.

Why do we face so many troubles in our journey? Why we should deal with them in our everyday life? Maybe because, otherwise, we will settle on a bridge or in the land of Moab without completing our journey. Maybe this is why troubles sometimes come wave after wave. To remind us that every home is a tent life. We all are still on the bridge.

But what matters more in our journey? It is the people who create a family for us. With them we have the best that life can give. Because going together with them in our pilgrimage, we carry home with us. There is something worse than famine, worse than moving from a home, it is a loss of those who created home for us. And book of Ruth is not only about journey, it is about relationships.

We see three widows in their journey to the Promised Land. They were going to the city with foundation and walls where they could find rest. In times of trouble, we have to decide what direction we should turn. Maybe we have to turn to our God Who is our refuge.

Relationships

The book of Ruth is also about relationships. On this road of life we have people around us going together with us along the road. Some are going the same direction to Bethlehem, while others the opposite way – to the land of Moab, as it happened with Orpah.

Art of good relationships

The book of Ruth reveals that to establish and preserve good relationships is a true art. We can admire Naomi because it's doubly difficult to have good relationships with people outside your culture and your religion. Especially when you live together within one family. But these difficulties can be overcome by kindness and love. And Naomi did it. Her reward? The deep devotion of her daughters-in-law.

The Bible uses an interesting word to describe Ruth's attachment to Naomi – "Ruth clung to her" (1:14). This word "to cleave" is used in Gen. 2:24 to describe relationships in the marriage. It means to be glued as, for example, two sheets of paper can be glued into one. Ruth decided to share her lot with her desolate mother-in-law. We see absolute unselfishness. How did Naomi achieve this? Maybe because she was always ready to recognize their kindness, their good deeds, was quick to encourage them and praise them. She said: "May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me" (1:8).

Maybe because she was always giving them a freedom of choice. Ruth witnessed a full confession of love and devotedness. She decided to go to an unknown town by an unknown route to dwell in an unknown home and make it her own. From this example, we see that love and kindness are never in vain. It returns as it happened with Naomi.

In the book of Ruth we also see the unselfish character of Naomi. She wished her daughters-in-law well, she insisted that they leave her and return back to their parents. She thought more of them than of herself. She also treated Ruth as if she were her daughter. She created and thought through a good plan for her. Good relations are created by thoughtful love that is seeking the good for others.

Power of virtuous character

The book of Ruth draws the picture of two godly and virtuous women: Naomi and Ruth. Ruth was eloquent not only in words, but also in her deeds to her mother-in-law. She was careful, devoted. She saved for Naomi a piece of bread from her lunch. She cared. She was also a respectful good worker. Watch her on the field. "She came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been in the house for a little while," the servant told Boaz (2:6). Her piety and fidelity were recognized by others. "For all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence" (3:11). The price of a virtuous woman is above rubies. God also recognizes our piety and fidelity. It will be compensated even in this life. However, there are some rules to watch and protect our reputation.

In the book of Ruth we also see a picture of godly man. Note Boaz's salutation to the reapers "May the Lord be with you" and his blessings to Ruth "May the Lord reward your work and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge" (2:12). Benedictions in our life reflect piety and our relations with the Lord. Watch for religious people with pure character. A good husband is one who respects God and takes good care of his people. We also see mutual dependence on God both by the master and the workers, who replied "May the Lord bless you" (2:4). We see their good relations and mutual respect.

Mortality and value of a home

As we already mentioned, the book of Ruth teaches us to cherish people who are dear to us because all of us are mortal. This is a book of human mortality. We can build a nice house without people but we cannot create a nice home without them. Naomi described home with the word "rest". We can conclude that it is something wrong when our home is not a "rest" to its family members. Life without a home is unrest. We long to find a place where we can rest from our pilgrimage, happiness that can cover our sorrow, good companionship that will support us in our daily route. But let us remember that a person can find true rest only in God.

Picture of the Lord

The book of Ruth is also a book where God is pictured in a beautiful way. In our daily pilgrimage it matters a lot what kind of picture of our God we carry with us along the way. Our theology will shape our attitude to the people around us, to the circumstances, to our losses and gains. It reflects our inner struggles. It can make it even more intensive. It can also resolve it.

God as a King of all the earth and all the people

In the book of Ruth we meet God Who reigns over circumstances, Who is a King, Who is sweet, Who is powerful enough to lead us through difficulties, and provides for us a true home and happiness.

A woman like Naomi, whose picture of God Who is sweet, was able to spread a sweet aroma around her. In her sorrow, she remained sweet and tender to her daughters-in-law. The grief and sorrow did not make her harsh, rude and unpleasant. She remained sweet because her Lord was sweet even when she thinks He dealt bitterly with her. She could treat others with sweetness because she knew the sweetness of the Lord.

Naomi knew that her God had a big heart. Big enough to include Moabite people. That is why her heart was big enough to accept her heathen daughters-in-law and gave a room to

them in her heart. Her God was big enough to rule over all territories, He was a King over all the earth. That was why He could bless in the land of Moab, too, because He is merciful.

Ruth had never been to a synagogue or temple, but the character of God in the life of her mother-in-law was so attractive that she decided to belong to this Lord. In a foreign land, Naomi lived such a devoted life that Ruth could say: “Thy God will be mine God”. Ruth came and began to live according to the customs of Israel, she went gleaning, she accepted the law of a kinsman and God blessed her even more than she could dream. She became a part of the chain in the lineage of the Messiah. God is really a King of all earth and all people.

God Who provides

In the book of Ruth we also meet the God Who provides. He visits His people. He provides bread to them. He provides Ruth for Naomi. He provides a kinsman for Ruth. He provides rewards already on this earth to those who lives according to His principles. He provides conceptions, He gives children.

As an old widow, Naomi became a provided pilgrim. Sometimes we can feel as empty as Naomi. But God provides. And He is able to provide us with people who will become our home and rest. A young Ruth became a provided bride. She was rewarded by an honorable position and a happy life.

We can see that God’s provision comes when we have faith in Him as the Lord Who provides. There was a religious foundation in Naomi’s faith; there was a religious basis in Ruth’s trust and fidelity. She decided to follow Him and His instructions even when it seemed she was losing. True religious principles enable people to do the right thing. And they will bring a true reward. The burden of an ephah of barley was a burden of blessing. A kinsman became a redeemer for a widow’s bitter destiny. A touchy drama of home life became a wedding song of a sweet home with the cry of a newborn baby.

When we follow God’s way, we need to do our part with faith and when we have done our part then it is time for God to act. Then we can stand still and wait.

God as Emmanuel

In the book of Ruth we meet God Who is Emmanuel. We see God’s living presence with Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. We can see the lessons. God watches over our situations. His Providence is there even when the circumstances are against us, when there is no hope, no bright future. He will guide you and me to the right field. He will give mercy in the eyes of the right people. The right field for Ruth defined her marriage, her prosperity, her destiny. Sometimes our daily circumstances and everyday routine seem to us as simple chance, but through small details God performs Providence. In small unimportant things, our destiny awaits. That is why we should not regard anything as insignificant. Who is faithful in small deeds will be faithful in great also.

God Who is Emmanuel is willing to spread His wings over us and give us shelter and protection. However, His “wings” and blessings can come to us through other people and through us to others. Boaz talked to Ruth about God’s wings. But God chose him to become these very wings. Obed was a “servant” to whom? He was a servant to all but we can suggest that especially to his grandmother and of course to God. Through him, God provided His care for the old and faithful Naomi. Obed was covered in fourfold love of his grandma, mother, father and the Lord. But God wanted him to return this love to the people around him. He

looks for our love for Him in our love for others. Through us, He can become Emmanuel for those who need His love.

God Who leads us home

In the book of Ruth we meet God Who leads us back home. Maybe Naomi would have never returned to Bethlehem unless she had lost her husband and children. Even though Naomi became Mara (“bitter”), God made her through Mara Naomi again. Sometimes when we are challenged with difficulties and sorrows we resemble an ant that is crawling on a beautiful carpet with a beautiful design. There are different colors in that design but the ant cannot comprehend it. When it goes through a black line it thinks that all the carpet is black and only from above the whole colorful design is seen. God knows the design of your life. He creates it. And when we pass through black parts of our life let us not forget that this is just a part of a beautiful design that God has for our life. Through Mara, He is creating Naomies in us.

God wants us to have a happy end in His home which is full of bread. And even when we are passing through valleys of sorrow, let us not forget the true point of our destination. He longs to fulfill our hopes and give us a true rest in His beautiful home. The book of Ruth is about happy and sad circumstances in our life. Circumstances that force us to make decisions how to live our daily life, where to move, where to settle, where and whom to marry, where to spend our senior years. But above all circumstances that could seem ruling there is One almighty Ruler of our life – God Who reigns over all the earth, Who provides, Who is Emmanuel and Who is willing to lead us back to His home. He is above all circumstances; He is the Star of Bethlehem that leads us back to the “House of Bread” in spite of how far away we wander in our daily routine for daily bread.

Each of us has a Moab and a Bethlehem. Where are you now on your journey? What kind of picture of God do you have? Your picture of God is important because, at the end of our pilgrimage, this is the Star that twinkles above the beautiful Bethlehem of our motherland.

The book of Ruth closes with a lineage of David, with genealogy, in other words with a connection to Jesus. What kind of connection to Jesus do we have? What kind of relations? Let us remember that these relations will shape our influence. And the influence of a godly woman will live long. We can feel the influence of Ruth even today. Do you smell the beautiful aroma in the life of the Rose of Moab who became a Rose of Bible? Be such a rose in your land and among your people! Spread this aroma in your daily life, in your daily pilgrimage till we reach heavenly Bethlehem, full of Divine Bread.

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