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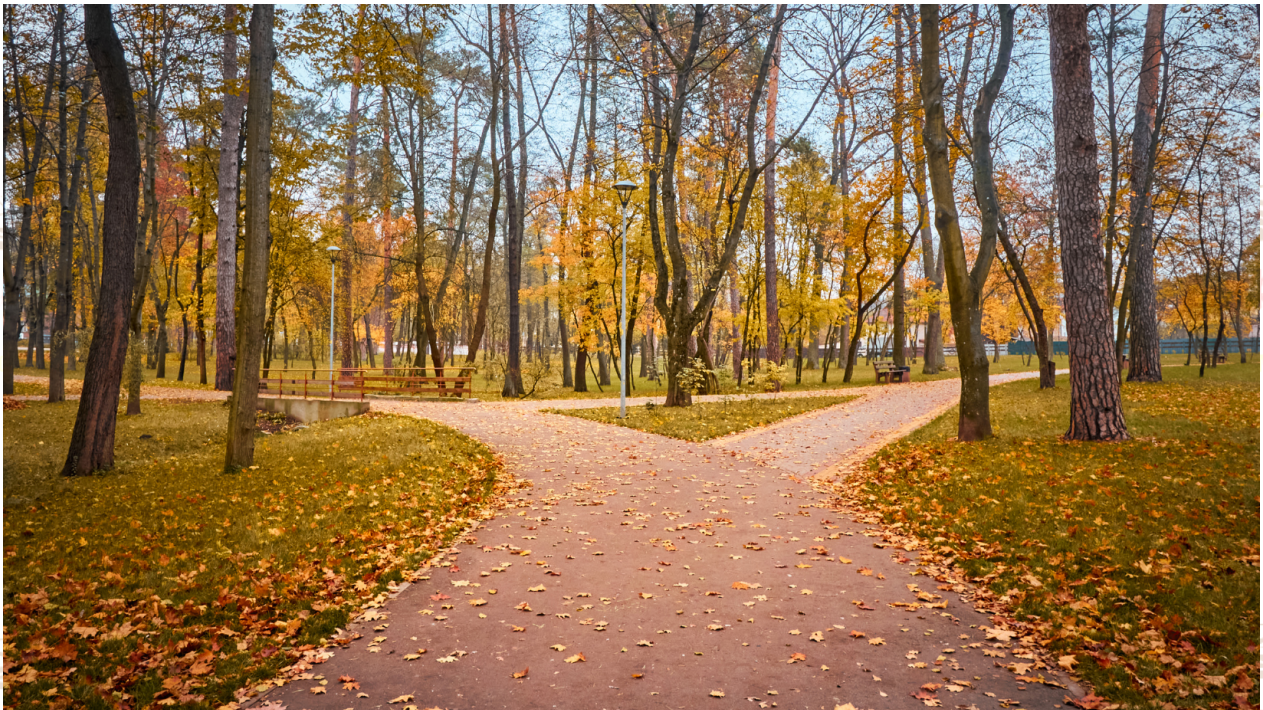


Orpah: The Forgotten One For a Reason

EXPLORING *by Stephanie Catmull*

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You may be at the same crossroads as Orpah, where you must choose what path to take.

Orpah...You don't recognize her name? There's probably a good reason for

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that, since she is only mentioned twice in the Bible, leaving her nameless legacy behind in the land of obscurity and forgotten lore. Orpah was the veritable seed that fell upon the stony places that Jesus had alluded to in his parable of the sower:

“where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away.” (Mt 13:3-7)

During the time of the Judges (around 1050 B.C.), Orpah lived in the country of Moab, a land that had been thriving whilst the city of Bethlehem in Judea was suffering great famine. Moab was a pagan country, a thorn in the side of Judea, that Israel was warned not to mix with for fear of adopting their idolatrous practices. However, a woman by the name of Naomi, along with her husband Elimilech and their two sons - Mahlon and Chilion, are greatly impoverished by the famine, and chose to travel to Moab in search of sustenance.

During their self-imposed exile, they cling to their Jewish roots, remaining faithful to their God despite co-existing among their pagan neighbors. In an unfortunate turn of events, Elimilech dies, leaving Naomi without a husband in a foreign land. Her two sons subsequently marry Moabite women – Ruth and Orpah, and together they live as a close-knit family in relative safety and comfort for a good ten years. These men gave their wives the opportunity of a lifetime: a chance at eternity.

What was their life like during this decade? The men shared their faith, their traditions, and their abounding love of God with their wives, planting the seeds of Judaism in both word and deed. They gently brought them into the fold of their religion and their God, remaining steadfast despite the idolatrous land they found themselves in. Their family was full of love for each other, and with an unfailing dedication and adoration to God.

Their only difficulty lay in the fact that neither daughter-in-law produces children, leaving Naomi without any grandchildren, especially grandsons, that would carry on their family name and provide for their future. And then the unthinkable happens: the two men die, leaving the women shattered and broken, poor, destitute, and most importantly - childless.

Culturally, women in the ancient Middle East were completely dependent on their male relatives for their livelihood; without them, they were relegated to the fringes of society. Ruth and Orpah *could* have married other sons in the family as customary in the Biblical tradition, however Naomi did not *have* any other sons. And the daughters couldn't exactly wait for Naomi to marry and have

more, since it was highly unlikely that she would even find another husband in Moab, let alone give birth to more sons (like they would have waited for the these sons to be of marrying age anyway!). Their situation, then, was dire and they all knew it.

They had to return to Naomi's homeland of Judea, a place where Ruth and Orpah had heard about in name only. There, Naomi could beg on her family's doorstep for merciful crumbs from their table. At the very least, she could depend on the Jewish tradition of gleaning, where she would be able to harvest the remains of a farmer's field and survive on the few pieces of grain she could pick for herself. In Moab, she didn't even have that.

Naomi knew, though, what it was like to move to a foreign land when circumstances demanded it; Ruth and Orpah, did not. Naomi knew the fear and uncertainty they would face, and this time she would have to do it without the strong arm of her husband to lean on. The tiny modicum of hope that she clung to was that her male relatives in Bethlehem would take pity on her, since the people in Moab would not.

The fateful decision, then, is made. Yet as they prepare to embark on their arduous journey to Judea, Naomi realizes what she is really asking her daughter-in-laws to do. She knows she is being selfish by asking them to trade their lives in Moab for something unpredictable, unknown, and quite possibly hostile in her own homeland. She insists they stay behind where they would be safe and secure, and where they could find other Moabite husbands to ensure their future.

And here is the moment of decision that would change their fate, their lives, and their legacy. One daughter-in-law would travel to Bethlehem with Naomi, and into the annals of history as she becomes the predecessor in the lineage of the great Davidic line and that of Jesus Christ himself. The other stays behind, and disappears - never to be heard from again. One would have an entire book of the Bible named after her; the other would merely be mentioned in two verses.

Why, at this venture, do Ruth and Orpah make different choices? Both had grown up in Moab, and turned from paganism to their husbands' faith. Both lived with an adoring mother-in-law. Both knew of the love of Yahweh, the one True God. Both enjoyed material wealth and prosperous marriages out of the abundance of God's blessings and love. Both had husbands who taught them well, and who showed them God's love in marriage. Both had husbands who stayed with them despite lack of children. Both were keenly aware of the power and authority of El Shaddai. God, however, has bestowed upon them, and us, free will. And this free will gives everyone the choice to receive God's gift of saving grace.

So whose roots ran deep, watered by the living God, and whose would fall on stony places? Whose seed would flourish under adversity, and whose would be scorched by the refining fire as told in Jesus' parable? Whose faithfulness to God would remain despite her risk of destitution, and whose faithfulness to God was dependent on her safe, predictable road of life? Whose steadfast life is a testament to God, and whose return to sinful paganism defined her soul-less legacy?

Who becomes the forgotten one?

You see, your faith in God cannot, should not, **MUST NOT** be dependent solely on the good circumstances of your life, for that faith is flimsy, unmerited and without root. Your cornerstone had better be based solely on Jesus, and not on the "things" God has given you. Are you going to love Him, remain true to Him, and stay by His side no matter what? Or you going to turn and flee back to your previous sin when times get tough? As even Job realized, anyone can love God when life is good. But what does that prove? It's when your life is not good that your faith is tested for what it's worth.

You may be at the same crossroads as Orpah, where you must choose what path to take. But understand that the wide road of sin is not safe, because it will continue to drag you under to a deep, bottomless pit. What good will "safe" do if it swallows you up whole, little by little, so that you become an empty shell with no chance of becoming one of God's chosen children? What good is the whole world if it costs you your soul?

Listen: women every day have to make these kinds of choices. You are not alone. Look at the addict who has completed a rehab... does she move on with her life to a better, brighter future? Or does she go back to the safe, comfortable old habits of her drug-addicted friends? Look at the woman who is beaten by her boyfriend. Does she leave him in search of a more stable relationship, or does she return to the cycle of abuse? Look at the woman who stays in a dead end job versus the woman who invests in an education and an unknown future. Are you remaining in your safe life, because you think it's easier to do that instead of taking a risk and venturing out towards a brighter future? Look look look.

The expression "better the devil you know than the devil you don't know" is popular for a reason, because fear and uncertainty sometimes paralyzes us. It keeps us molded to the seat cushion, and this is what happened to Orpah. You easily understand her too, because you are in the Moab of your life, standing at the crossroads. But hear her, and learn from her. Don't make the same mistake and choose the same hopeless, forgotten future.

Remember, God will not leave you when you choose to follow Him. His love is a strong tower, and when you run into it, you are safe. As a matter of fact, God not


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only stayed with Ruth, but because of her enduring love and faithfulness to Him, He chose her to become the ancestor of Jesus. That's right – she became one of THE most important women in Biblical history. Perhaps that's why Ruth never did have children with a Moabite, because her shining future as a Christian ancestress was still ahead of her. But first she had to choose the right, straight and narrow path towards God. Your shining future is ahead of you. Don't walk, run towards it, because you can be another Ruth in God's eyes and have eternity.

Orpah, though her choice was understandable, ultimately did not withstand the test of time. Did she mourn the loss and love of her mother-in-law? Most certainly she did. Did she beg, cry and weep at the thought of being separated from her? You bet she did. Was she invariably enticed, like you are right now, to stay where you are at because you would greatly miss what you would leave behind? Absolutely. But in the end, Orpah did not follow God's promise, and we never hear from her again.

My advice to you is to stand fast, stay strong, garner up your courage, and choose God not only in the good times, but in the bad times as well. Be the seed that falls on good ground and yields a crop, whether a hundredfold, or sixty, or thirty. Don't be the seed that, when scorched by the sun, withers away. Choose to be another Ruth, even if it means turning your back on your past. It's your future with God, and your eternal soul, that counts.

She who has ears to hear, let her hear.


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