

Tragedy and Loyalty
Ruth: A Story of Redemption
Ruth 1
July 8, 2018

Welcome to worship. It's great to be together as a family.

There once was a man who took his wife and mother-in-law on a vacation to the Holy Land.

HOLY LAND PLUG

And while they were there, tragically, the mother-in-law died. The man went to the undertaker and asked how much it would cost to have her body shipped back to the States. "\$5,000," said the undertaker, "but we can provide a very nice burial here in the Holy Land for only \$150."

The man thought for a while and said, "No, I'll pay the \$5,000."

"Why?" asked the undertaker.

"Well," said the man, "2,000 years ago, a man died over here, and they buried him. Three days later He rose from the dead. I simply can't take that chance."

For the next four weeks, we are going to talk about a mother-in-law, her daughter-in-law, and the story of redemption in the Book of Ruth. We are going to work through these four chapters in four weeks. Now, someone from my Sunday School class will say it's impossible for me to teach about 4 chapters in 4 weeks. We're studying 1 Thessalonians right now; it's only 5 chapters, and we've been at it since the first week of December, so they are doubting we'll only take 4 weeks.

Well, let's see what we can do. Turn to page 4 in your bulletin as we begin this series.

Our story begins with hardship. Verse 1:

In the days when the judges ruled in Israel, a severe famine came upon the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah left his home and went to live in the country of Moab, taking his wife and two sons with him.¹

There was famine in Bethlehem. There is some irony here: Bethlehem means "house of bread," yet there was famine. That irony suggests a deeper irony, for you see, this was the period of the Judges in the nation of Israel, a time when the people had turned away from God. Two words define the situation in Israel in Judges: disobedience and chaos. The literal famine was merely symbolic of a spiritual famine in the nation.

Verse 2:

The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in the land of Judah. And when they reached Moab, they settled there.²

So it was during this famine that Elimelech takes his wife Naomi and their two sons down to a pagan, Gentile land called Moab.

Now, names meant a great deal in those days. Parents named their children in a faith statement or because of a characteristic.

Elimelech: God is my king.

Naomi: Pleasant.

¹ Ruth 1:1 (NLT2)

² Ruth 1:2 (NLT2)

Mahlon: Infirmity.

Chilion: Puny.

Why do I bring up the meaning of these names? Elimelech's name means, "God is my King." It was meant to be a statement of faith in a time of apostasy and when people clamored for a human king. Elimelech's name declares, "God is my King", yet he goes to pagan Moab during a famine. That is not the kind of faith that says, "God is my King." Going to Moab was a disobedient act. When Abraham went to Egypt during a famine and he tried to pawn Sarah off as his sister to protect himself³, that was not an act of obedience.

Folks, today's message is entitled, "Tragedy and Loyalty", and sometimes – not always – but sometimes, tragedies we experience are because we are not living with God as our king. We get ourselves in situations because of disobedience, and often, we cannot find our way out of tragedy until we return to obedience.

The hardship soon becomes tragedy. Verses 3-5:

Then Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons. The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth. But about ten years later, both Mahlon and Kilion died. This left Naomi alone, without her two sons or her husband.⁴

Elimelech dies in Moab, leaving Naomi and her two sons, whose names remember were sickly and puny. Naomi marries off her two sons to Moabite women, another act of disobedience. The Jews were not supposed to marry non-Jews, but Sickly and Puny do. But things go from bad to worse as both sons die 10 years after their father. To make matters worse, her sons had not given her any grandchildren. Naomi's circumstances are just about as bad as they can get for a woman in ancient near eastern cultures—a widow with no men to take care of her. Naomi's name means "pleasant," but she had to admit in verse 20 that her circumstances were "bitter". Life had given Naomi a bitter pill to swallow.

In the midst of all this loss, Naomi hears some news.

Then Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had blessed his people in Judah by giving them good crops again. So Naomi and her daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab to return to her homeland. With her two daughters-in-law she set out from the place where she had been living, and they took the road that would lead them back to Judah.⁵

The situation has improved back in Bethlehem, so she decides it's time to return home. Seriously, what other options does she have? Here's a lesson I draw from this situation; it's not the point of the message, but it's a good lesson. We may find ourselves in the midst of a spiritual famine, a time we've lost touch with God, even though we might be working hard in the Kingdom. In that famine, we look outside our homeland for provision. There is some enticing philosophy, or the latest guru offering a quick fix, or some cultural fad or trend that captures our attention, and we say, "Hey, maybe that's the answer to my circumstances." Rather than waiting the famine out, rather than trusting the Lord, we flee to another land, a land that promises answers to life's challenges. We flee, and we discover things only go from bad to worse, that where

³ See Genesis 12:10-20

⁴ Ruth 1:3-5 (NLT2)

⁵ Ruth 1:6-7 (NLT2)

we thought there was provision was only more problems. As Naomi shows us, when we're out of options, we can always go home.

Let's look what happens next in verses 8-14:

But on the way, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back to your mothers' homes. And may the LORD reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. May the LORD bless you with the security of another marriage." Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept. "No," they said. "We want to go with you to your people." But Naomi replied, "Why should you go on with me? Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands? No, my daughters, return to your parents' homes, for I am too old to marry again. And even if it were possible, and I were to get married tonight and bear sons, then what? Would you wait for them to grow up and refuse to marry someone else? No, of course not, my daughters! Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD himself has raised his fist against me." And again they wept together, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye.⁶

Let's stop there.

Naomi's daughters-in-law are Orpah and Ruth. Apparently, they had failed to bear either son or a child (I mean, their husbands were sickly and puny). Still, they continued to live in the Naomi's household.

Naomi's comment here about future sons to marry refers to levirate marriage, the obligation of a dead man's brother to care for the widow.⁷ This law kept the widow from poverty and provided a way for the family name of the dead husband to continue. Naomi, however, had no other sons for Ruth or Orpah to marry, so she encouraged them to remain in their homeland and remarry.

So as Naomi prepared to return to Bethlehem, she turned to Orpah and Ruth and said, "Y'all go back to your father's homes. I'm too old to have more sons for you to marry. You don't need to go with me. Go home and get on with your life. I release you from any obligation to me." After a little coaxing, Orpah left, which was her right, but Ruth persisted, and that's where we hear the famous words in verse 15-17:

"Look," Naomi said to her, "your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You should do the same." But Ruth replied, "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!"⁸

Maybe you've heard those words quoted during a wedding ceremony, and they seem most appropriate because they speak of the depth of commitment a husband and wife are supposed to embody. But, here spoken by a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law, they seem out of place.

The Hebrew word for leave in verse 16 is similar to the word from the vow of marriage in Genesis 2:24:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united [or cling] to his wife, and they will become one flesh.⁹

⁶ Ruth 1:8-14a (NLT2)

⁷ See Deuteronomy 25:5-10

⁸ Ruth 1:15-17 (NLT2)

⁹ Genesis 2:24 (NIV)

The Genesis commandment was for sons to leave parents, not for daughters-in-law to cling to their parents-in-law; but Ruth made clinging to Naomi her choice, her business, and her destiny. Now that her husband was dead, and that her brother's brother was dead, her obligations to Naomi were ended, but Ruth applied the vow to herself, volunteered her commitment, and bound herself to Naomi, and in so doing, Ruth demonstrated covenant love, and that's the same kind of love God has for his people, and it is the same love we see lived out ultimately in the life of Jesus.

Imagine, God chose a pagan woman to demonstrate His covenant love to a disobedient and chaotic people. God never ceases to amaze us!

Arthur Golden wrote, "Adversity is like a strong wind. It tears away from us all but the things that cannot be torn, so that we see ourselves as we really are."

Naomi left Israel married and pleasant; she returned widowed and bitter.

But, I want to leave you with this. What remained for Naomi was the loyalty of a daughter-in-law and a testimony. Yes, a testimony, because what Ruth saw in Naomi, despite her bitterness, was a faith testimony that compelled Ruth to leave the emptiness and fruitlessness of her pagan land for the faith and promise of the Lord that would be found Bethlehem. Bethlehem, the place God came to us in Jesus Christ and kept His covenant, and showed us truly what sacrificial love looked like. The challenge for the church today is to love like Ruth...no, to love like Jesus.