

You Can't Run Away From Your Troubles

Portions adapted from "The Story Behind The Story," by John Hamby @ SermonCedntral.Com

The book of Ruth is a classic love story on multiple levels, but not a well known story. "When Benjamin Franklin was our ambassador to Europe, he would sometimes gather together a fashionable company, and telling them that he had come upon a most remarkable piece of Oriental literature, read to them the Book of Ruth. When he finished, all would express their great delight and ask him how he came upon such a gem of literature. Then he would tell them it was in the Bible." [Clarence Edward Macartney. "Great Women of the Bible." (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974) p. 10]

The book of Ruth is also a perfect Christmas story, filled with miraculous evidence of God's love for us hidden in the everyday events of our lives, but like many such Christmas stories it first starts out as a tragedy.

- A man and his very pregnant wife must travel four days back to their ancestral home just to be registered in the tax rolls of a ruthless king.
- A young clerk working for a miserly boss asks only for a half day off in order to enjoy a meager holiday meal with his wife and sickly child.

In like manner, the Book of Ruth opens with this sad description

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. There the man and two sons die leaving three desperate widows to fend for themselves. (Ruth 1:1-5)

Then when you learn the names of the characters in this tragic opening, you realize that this is in some sense a parable – a story meant to teach a lesson (while the persons are real, their names have been changed to emphasize the message).

We are first introduced to a man ironically named **Elimelech** which means "God is my King", since Elimelech apparently left God out of all his plans. Then, because of his faithless decision his wife **Naomi**, whose name meant "pleasant, would later change her name to **Mara**, meaning "bitter." His sons were ominously named **Mahlon** and **Chilion**, meaning "sickly" and "spent, which will prove prophetic later in the story." And the Moabite women whom the sons marry were named **Orpah**, possibly meaning "stubborn," and **Ruth**, which could mean either "friend" or "refreshment;" both of which proved to be true in Ruth.

Furthermore, this story is placed *in the day of the Judges*, when like this family leaving Bethlehem, Israel is also wandering far away from God. And that there was a famine in the land hints that the people were as spiritually starved as they were physically hungry.

As our story opens, a famine is gripping the Promised Land, a sure sign that the nation has again wandered away from its faith. But instead of repenting and trusting God to provide his daily bread, Elimelech moves his family from **Bethlehem** – which name literally means "The House of Bread" – to go looking for bread in the land of Moab, a nation who was the perpetual enemy of Israel.

During the time of the Exodus, Moab had twice attempted to defeat the people of Israel first by trying to curse them, then by using their daughters to lure the Israelite men into idol worship (Numbers 25). And for a period of 18 years during the early days of the Judges, Moab did succeed in enslaving Israel until they were liberated by Ehud, the left-handed Judge. For these reasons and more, the Israelites had been forbidden to marry or have any relationship with the Moabites (Deut. 7:1-11, 23:3-6). Yet that is the country where Elimelech decides to move his family.

While written over 3,000 years ago, Elimelech's faithless choice and the disasters which it brought down upon his family echo the problems in our American culture today.

There was a time when like Israel, our nation claimed to be founded on the bedrock of Biblical truth. We didn't have to argue over what constituted a marriage because the Bible declares that marriage is a union between a man and woman. We didn't have to argue over the ethics of abortion because the Bible teaches that life was sacred from the moment of conception. But when we no longer took our standards from the Bible, America began to change. Hence as in the time of the Judges, we now live in an age of moral relativity where it is left up to every individual to decide what is right or wrong for themselves; once again, "everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes."

Would Elimelech have made different choices if Israel was at a time of revival? Probably, it is easier to slip away from your faith during a time of national spiritual wandering. So, the onset of a famine, brought Elimelech to that choice which we all have to make at some point in our lives.

Do we stay here; stay the course, while praying, seeking God's direction and then trusting Him to provide for us? Or will we take matters into our own hands?

God had promised that there would always be plenty in the Land as long as Israel was obedient (Deut. 28:1-14). Now that there was a famine, this should have been a signal for Elimelech to repent and trust in God to provide; not to leave the land.

Abraham had earlier made the same faithless choice. Told by God to stay camped in the land of promise, during a time of famine Abraham instead moved his family down to Egypt and there got caught in several lies which literally got him kicked back to the Land where God had told him to stay.

Faced with a decision to have faith or leave, Elimelech decided to do the latter, leaving the Promised Land and going to another land where he hoped the suffering for his family would be less. His motives may have been legitimate; his intentions possibly sincere. But in spite of his good intentions he made a bad decision. The suffering he hoped to escape in Bethlehem his family still had to endure in Moab. And the death through starvation that he feared in Bethlehem, in some other form, not only took him but also his two sons.

Reading between the lines and wondering about Elimelech's choice, it seems that he may even have made the decision to move before his family had really been affected by the famine; were there other reasons behind his decision to leave the country? We get this suspicion from Naomi's declaration when she returns ten years later. She confesses to her former villagers, "I

went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty." (Ruth 1:21). Also making the decision to leave behind both a home and farmable land all the more suspect, we will soon learn that Elimelech had a close relative named Boaz, who not only stayed in Bethlehem but seemed to do quite well in spite of the famine (Ruth 2:1).

In a way Elimelech's move to Moab was equivalent to denying his faith God his King, because moving to Moab separated himself and his family from the all the things of God. They could not worship at the Tabernacle. They could not bring their offerings or keep the feasts. No Levites would be there to teach his sons God's laws. They were isolated from everything that God stood for. In the land of Moab, Elimelech also exposed his family to many evils they could have avoided had they stayed in Israel.

So in turning away from God and moving to Moab, Elimelech became an Old Testament illustration of a term that we no longer hear much in our day – he was a **backslidden believer**. Backsliding happens when a Christian stops advancing in their walk with God and instead starts sliding back into their old habits and behaviors.

Sadly Elimelech's backsliding led to his entire family backtracking. When Israel first entered the Promised Land, God parted the Jordan River for them to cross on dry ground, then He forcefully closed the flooded river behind them – giving Israel the clear signal that there was no going back. But to get to the land of Moab, Elimelech's family had to go back; back through the desolate Jericho pass, through the Judean wilderness near the Dead Sea, back across the Jordan River. This was a definitive departure from the Promised Land, a return towards the Wilderness from which God had earlier delivered Israel. These were clearly steps in the wrong direction.

Moab was located across the Jordan River, east of the Promised Land. The Moabites were descendants from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter (Gen. 19:30-38). They had attacked and opposed Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. They also worshiped a god whom they called Chemosh; worship of this idol was grotesque, at times even involving human sacrifices (2 Kings 3:26-27). This was a people opposed to God and all His ways; they were literally the dregs of ancient eastern society.

In Psalm 60:8, God calls, "*Moab, My wash basin*" (or foot pan)..." meaning that they were a despised people, comparable to a vessel used by slaves to wash the dirty feet of travelers. Even so, they were still a people who could be redeemed if they repented and turned back to the faith of Abraham, as we will soon see Ruth doing.

So far, this is a story of a person who willingly turns his back on the things of God and pays an awful price. If this portion of the story teaches us anything, it teaches us that **living in a backslidden condition carries with it devastating consequences, but repentance and restoration are always a possibility.**

From the opening verse, we learn that while Elimelech probably intended for their departure from Bethlehem to only be temporary, but then verse two informs us that having gone to the country of Moab "*they remained there.*" Days turned to weeks and weeks into months and before they knew what happened ten tragedy filled years had passed. There is an old saying

about sin; "***Sin will take you further than you wanted to go. It will keep you longer than you want to stay, and it will cost you more than you want to pay!***"

The sad story of their lives in Moab now continues: *Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons* (1:3). Next, the grown sons now try to establish themselves in this pagan land by taking wives from among the Moabites, which they should have known was strictly forbidden for any Israelite to do (Deut. 7:3-4). After which they live up to their names ("Sickly & Spent") by also dying, leaving Naomi alone in a strange land now with the responsibility of caring for the wives of her two sons.

To be a childless widow was one of the most vulnerable classes in the ancient world. There was no one to support them and they had to live on the generosity of strangers. In Israel, at least when the laws were being honored, there were rules for the care of widows, but Moab had no such custom; these three widows were left in a desperate situation.

Once returned back home, Naomi gives vent to her bitterness at both her life and the God she expected to protect her. "*Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty;...the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me'...*" The woman once named "Pleasant" is now so full of pain that she demands to be called "Bitter."

Turning from God always brings heartache and bitterness but no matter how far you roam, God always invites you to come home.

These next two verses can help us to leave this story for now with at least a glimmer of hope.

Then [Naomi] started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. (1:6-7)

Somehow Naomi heard that the Lord was again blessing Israel. In truth the LORD had never stopped loving Israel, even His discipline is a sign of His love. This news however, sparked a desire in her heart to return home. Like the prodigal son of Jesus' parable, Naomi realized that even the life of a servant back home would be better than any life she could expect here in a foreign land so far from God.

In returning home, Naomi will learn a great truth about the will and the work of God.

If you find yourself separated from God, if you have with good intentions but poor decisions, wandered far from God, it is always the will of God that you should return. And when you do so, again as in the story of The Prodigal Son, you will find the Father always ready and willing with open arms to receive the wanderer home (Lk. 15:20); which is the reception Naomi received once back in Bethlehem. The entire village welcomed her home and they were amazed at her transformation caused by all the tragedies that had befallen her in that other land. (1:19).

This is where our story should end for now, but there is one more portion which needs to be cleared up before we leave it until next week.

Naomi was going back home to where she should have been all along. But along the way, she realized that her Moabite daughters-in-law could expect no better treatment in Israel than she, an Israelite would have expected in the land of Moab. Orpah and Ruth both must have loved and felt some obligation to their widowed mother-in-law, because it took a great effort on her part to at least persuade Orpah to finally return to her own family, perhaps to marry again and live a happier life.

But Ruth could not be persuaded to leave. Her statement of loyalty to Naomi is often used in marriage vows, but was more appropriately a baptismal declaration. Even at great risk to her own life in this new land, Ruth made a vow as much to the God of Israel as it was to her mother-in-law.

*Ruth said, 'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people,
and your God my God. Where you die, I will die — there will I be buried. May the Lord
do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!'
When Naomi saw that [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.*
(Ruth 1:16-18)

So Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law fearfully return to Israel, two desperate widows looking for grace and mercy not only from God but from their neighbors back home. Of course that is exactly what they found. Ruth, the Moabite, would marry an honorable man giving her mother-in-law a safe home and a new grandson to cherish. Ruth's son **Obed** – whose name means "servant of God" – would grow up to become the grandfather of King David which ultimately placed Ruth's name in the lineage of Jesus. **Even when we do not see God at work His plan and His will is always moving forward!** But all of this is a story for another day.

Now let's turn to what lessons we can learn from this tragic first half of the story of Naomi and Ruth.

First we should learn that even when following God, his children may suffer. But God has also promised to eventually bring good out of whatever suffering they may have to endure (Romans 8:28).

There is also a lesson about choosing directions for our Life. Good intentions do not always produce good results. Any direction that takes you away from God is always the wrong direction.

And then there is this final lesson about knowing God's will. It's always God's will for us to come home and He is working to bring such to pass even when we do not realize it.

Let's pray about this, thanking God for His faithfulness even in our times of faithlessness.