

Loyalty In The Wreckage

Introduction

- If you have your Bibles...
- This morning we start out in the book of Ruth. It is an amazing story of Loss and Love and Legacy, but it seeks to answer the question, what happens when, from our perspective, God doesn't come through. When God doesn't heal your son. When you do feel hopeless. When the doctor's report is terminal, when you didn't get the job. When your children walk away from the faith.
 - Is God still sovereign? Is God still good? Well then how do you explain this mess?
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Ruth 1

1 In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, 5 and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 10 And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, 13 would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

15 And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." 18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

20 She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Context

- This story comes immediately after the chaotic time of the Judges, and if you were to turn your back one page you would read the exact context that the book of Ruth takes place in.
 - Judges 21:25 - In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
 - This was a 400-year cycle of national disobedience, judgment, and temporary deliverance, there was constant cycle of sin, oppression, moral decay, famine, violent invasions, apostate religion, unchecked lawlessness, and tribal civil war
 - There was a famine in the land.
 - This is likely divine judgment
 - Remember that it was not too long ago that Joshua had brought them into this “PROMISED LAND” described as overflowing with milk and honey. Abundantly fruitful land. But not anymore. Because of the Israelites rampant sin, God emptied out all the Sams clubs and Walmarts of the land.
 - Deuteronomy 28:15-18 - But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. 16 Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. 17 Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 18 Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock.
 - Now we have to understand that when bad things happen, it is not necessarily that God is punishing you. But it is always good to ask the question, “Is this a consequence of Sin in my life? In this case, it was a consequence of sin in the lives of the Israelites.”
 - God was withholding His blessing from the land, and the people were suffering from the consequences of their own sin.
- And it is into this context that we begin the book of Ruth.

Bad Choices Have Consequences

- We are introduced to an ordinary family.
 - Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons. They are in Bethlehem, starving, and they have a decision to make.
 - Bethlehem literally means "house of bread"

- To have a famine in such a place was a bit ironic. You know something has gone terribly wrong when you are in the place where all the food is supposed to be and there is no food there.
- Can you imagine how difficult it would be to not be able to find food?
 - “Well, I wonder if any of the stores will be open today. I wonder if we’ll manage to get any wheat today. I wonder if the bread supply will be down as it was yesterday. Mom, I’m hungry. Dad, I haven’t eaten anything in three days. Isn’t there somewhere that we can go and get food?”
- Thank God for the Grocery Store
 - It is a beautiful thing to stop in at the store and be able to buy literally all we need. Magnificent how somehow they know exactly how many pickles have been purchased, how many loaves of bread are needed to restock. They know how many times you bought envelopes, and thus a message was sent out somewhere, then sent again somewhere else, and the trucks were dispatched, and the doors were opened, and that means the bread should somehow be back on the shelf. What a wonderful thing.
 - But it does cause us to miss the provision of God in all of it. Let us not forget that ultimately, it is God who stocks the shelves.
 - So next time you are in the store, thank God for His provision. “Thank you for another box of Cheerios, Thank you for milk, thank you, father for eggs. Without you, there would be no eggs.”
 - Thank you for the blessing of food, and thank you for the ability to purchase our food. It should not be taken for granted as it far too often is!
- The decision that Elimelech needed to make was whether to stay in the promised land with God’s people, or move his family to a foreign nation that did not worship God, but seemed to have food for his family.
 - Now is it a sin to move your family? No. But is it a sin to move your family to a place, when God tells you not to move to that place? Yes. God commanded the Israelites in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy not to live in Moab, not to marry moabite women, and not to give your daughters in marriage to moabite men.
 - This was absolutely sinful. You see, Elimelech decided that food was more important than everything else. For this man, physical needs trumped spiritual needs, cultural needs, communal needs.
 - Elimelech put food on the table, but his entire family was destroyed by his disobedience to God.
- Moab, east of the Dead Sea, was a fertile plateau but also Israel's foe. They descended from Lot (Gen. 19:37) and worshiped Chemosh
 - Chemosh was a deity who granted protection but required human sacrifice to do so. The Israelites referred to him as “the abomination of Moab”.
 - You could imagine why God would pronounce judgement on such a practice. You could imagine why God wouldn't want His people to live there.

- Elimelech decides to go to Moab, he brings with him his wife, and his two sons.
 - The text uses the word “Sojourn” which means it is a temporary stay.
 - he didn’t intend to go there for the rest of his life—although, as it turned out, it was. He took his family to a place with no temple, no worship, no godly fellowship, no sacrifice, no people of God.
 - The truth is, it is really really hard to leave God’s people, and still experience the blessing of God.
 - the security and the protection that Elimelech had been seeking for his family never materialized. In fact, he dies, leaving his wife a widow. She fortunately has two sons. But unfortunately, she’s about to lose them also.
- Weddings are always joyful.
 - the loss of her husband would have been mitigated in some sense by the prospect of her boys being betrothed. The weddings of her sons would do something to soothe her grief.
 - Many of us have been there. In the absence of a loved one, there are bittersweet days. Bitter because of the wish that they could have been present and yet at the same time the great joy and the unfolding of the marriage. Naomi would have lived through all those emotions. And, of course, with marriage comes the prospect of grandchildren.
 - But tragedy strikes again, and not only does she get grandchildren, none are born to these couples in ten years, but she then also finds herself without her own children as well. Mahlon and Kilion also died.
- Grief upon Grief
 - So here Naomi is, Husband dead, Children dead, foreign country, no protection, no provision, male dominated society. It is a completely hopeless setup.
 - She must have been thinking, “I don’t know what I’m going to do now. I really don’t know what the future holds...” She faces her declining years with no children to care for her and no grandchildren to cheer her up.
 - And the worst part of all of it is that her family name totters on the brink of extinction. If there was one thing that was a shame in the nation of Israel, it was that your family line would come to an end. And that is exactly what she faces. Her husband’s gone. Her boys are dead. She has no one to carry on her lineage.
 - Naomi, Orpha and Ruth, 3 widows unrelated by blood, are all that remain.
 - Naomi says, “well I am going home, but you should return to your families, because I have nothing to offer you. There is no redemption here, no sons in my womb, no future left. Only more darkness and bitterness will come if you follow me.”

Unshakable Faith

- Vs 13 - No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.”

- In verse 20, when she gets back into the village, she says, “Don’t call me Naomi call me Mara, because God has made my life very bitter.”
 - God has providentially been overruling all these things in Naomi’s life—The Famine, the loss of her home, the loss of her husband, the loss of her boys, the loss of her legacy and future. And who knows what else might be in store!
 - What is Naomi doing? She is tearing apart the only thing she has left. These women love each other. They have gone shopping together, spent years together, wept at the loss of their husbands together. They are very close. But now Naomi is telling them to leave. To go back to their old lives, their old families and their old gods.
 - Once again, these women had a decision to make. One that would define the rest of their lives. Whatever decision they make would have ripple effects that would last years, decades..., and if you know the end of the story, for Ruth, her ripples would spread through all eternity.
- Vs 15 - And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”
 - Naomi is a believer telling her daughters to join another religion! That's not really good evangelism. That's like anti-evangelism.
 - Sometimes when we are hurting, the way we speak to unbelievers doesn't help them want to meet our God.
 - She convinced Orpha, but Ruth stayed.
 - Ruth chooses to abandon the known, the familiar, for the unknown. In every realistic sense, on the basis of her mother-in-law’s word to her, she gives up the prospect of marriage to cling to an aged, hopeless mother-in-law.
 - Why would she do this?
- if ever there was a reason, it must have been something spiritual not physical. The physical offering before Ruth made no sense. But spiritually it made perfect sense. I believe that she understood exactly that this was not about geography, that this was not ultimately about emotion. That this was ultimately about her life and her destiny and her faith and her belief and her trust and her heaven and her hell.
 - She realized that to go back up that road into the Moabite community, would be turning her back on all that her husband, and her father in law and mother in law had taught her, all that she knew to be true. She would be rejecting the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob. She knew she was never going to go back to her people and her gods.
 - And so she says, Vs 16-17
 - “I’m with you, Naomi, all the way through time, and I will sleep with you in the grave, and I will rise with you in eternity.”
- Prove

- Isaiah 56:6-7 - And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
- Apply
 - Never going back - We have a decision this morning. Just like Ruth knew that the path to life was found in the God of Israel. We too know, deep down, that the path to life is found in the God of Israel. We are foreigners, gentiles like Ruth. Yet Christ did not exclude us from his redemption. He has brought us into the family. We have been grafted onto the tree of life.
 - Knowing all that you know, will you return to your old ways? Your old lives? Your old idols? Or will you follow the way of truth?
 - Remember that old hymn? "I have decided to follow Jesus. Though none go with me, I still will follow, No turning Back, No Turning Back."

Is God Bitter or Sweet?

- The author of Ruth is very, very interested in the names, for each of these names has significance. Elimelech actually means "the Lord is my King." The sons' names, Kilion and Mahlon, mean "sickly" and "pining."
 - Naomi Means Sweetness, Mara means Bitter
 - God has dealt bitterly with Me. Naomi questioned God's goodness, fairness, and love.
 - Naomi's theology said, God is all powerful but he is not loving. He is like a sadistic kid with a magnifying glass, burning ants on the sidewalk.
 - It is a profound and unsettling truth that the path toward bitterness can be shockingly easy to walk. It is so easy to grow bitter. A wound that wasn't healed, an injustice that wasn't righted, a disappointment that felt too heavy. Any of these can take root in the soul and begin to send up the poisonous shoots of resentment.
 - Bitterness is extra difficult because we feel like it is a justified response to being wrong. But when we grow bitter, it blocks us from joy, and it ends up defiling us
 - Hebrews 12:15 - See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled
- Apply
 - Bitterness against God arises when we feel a loss of control and question the narrative of our lives. Running to mercy requires an act of the will to trust that God is the divine Author, and that His plan is infinitely better than the one we would have written for ourselves.
 - Joseph: He was betrayed, sold into slavery, and imprisoned

- all injustices that could breed bitterness toward God. Yet, at the end of his trial, he was able to say to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good"
 - He saw his suffering, through the lens of faith, as a vessel for God's larger, redemptive purpose.
- The journey out of bitterness against God requires us to exchange our demand for immediate understanding with a quiet trust in His long-term, perfect work. It means clinging to the fact that He works all things together for good for those who love Him, even when the "all things" feels deeply painful

Conclusion

- The beginning of the story starts rough, but the end of this story is bright. By the end of our story, we will see God's providence at work. Naomi will have her hope restored, her future secured, and her legacy reinstated. God will have turned famine into feast, death into legacy, and outsiders into heirs. Despite her bitter attitude, God is about to do the impossible. And it is all because Ruth decided to be faithful to God.
 - No matter how bad it looks, Good is coming. God is not done with you yet. Your God is able to make you new, whole, and joyful again. Do not lose hope. God is in the business of turning the darkest beginning, into the most wonderful ending.
- Ruth's faithfulness leads to Boaz, to David, and ultimately to Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem. From the bitterness of Naomi, we have a direct line to Jesus, who drank the bitter cup of wrath on the cross so we could taste eternal sweetness. When God seems farthest or harshest, He's laying the foundation for your greatest joy, and He is weaving your pain into His redemptive plan.
 - Today, if you're in the wreckage of your life, hear this: Your story isn't over. God invites you to Ruth's choice: forsake your old gods and cling to Him. Decide today to follow Jesus, no turning back. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead, will raise you from your ruins.