

Ruth | Tenderness in the Midst of Brutality

“The Return of Sorrow”

Ruth CH 1

12.1.19

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with 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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there.³ Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.⁴ They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years.⁵ Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food.⁷ So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.⁸ And 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 "May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each 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, but we will surely return with you to your people."¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?¹² "Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons,¹³ would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me."

¹⁴ And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ Then she said, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law."¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back 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 I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me."¹⁸ When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

¹⁹ So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city 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 out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

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

Last week, we concluded our long Fall Series on The Book of Judges with one of the darkest, most disturbing episodes in all the Bible and then a series of military actions that compounded and distributed the travesty to the whole society.

The time of the Judges is referenced in the opening lines of The Book of Ruth, which we hope to unpack as this year's Advent Series.

Today, I would like us to think about our lives at this point in human history, think about our place (SFL) and our nation and our world. I want us to think about ONE ASPECT (I think a very important and central one) one aspect of what we might call a Christian World-View. Everyone looks at the world and history and current events and at his/her own life through a lens...an interpretive grid... a way of understanding the Big Picture and how YOU fit into it.

And over these next four weeks, the plank of the Christian platform we hope to highlight IN The Book of Ruth is a theme that believers in Jesus Christ can and must incorporate into our view of all things great and small.

Most scholars believe the theme verse of the Book of Genesis is found its last chapter when Joseph tells his forgiven brothers, "What YOU meant for evil God meant for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (50.20)

Some scholars go so far to say that theme-verse of Genesis is ALSO the theme-verse of the entire Bible. It's a theme we might also call the "tender-shoot-out-of-parched-ground" theme (Isa 53.2). It's the repeated and joyful promise that even when the world, the situation, the state of nations, suffering, evil, the soil of our lives is barren, toxic and fruitless...just before it all goes to pieces, "Love Throws a Line" and beauty reasserts herself – God promises, Everything is Going to Be OK!"

Today, I simply want to introduce this book and introduce this CRUCIALLY important theme.

Judges ended with the refrain, "In those days, there WAS no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes." And, while I don't want to make too much of this, the writer doesn't use the most common Hebrew word for "everyone" but instead the word, "ish" – i.e. man (masculine).

And the Book of Judges describes and culminated in the fact that IT WAS A ROUGH period of history especially for women (from start to finish: sinking regard for women). The next book almost immediately introduces us to some women.

And we meet a man whose name is "God is King" (Elimelech) and the reader wonders if the Invisible Benevolent Hand might be doing something.

Elimelech takes his wife (Naomi) and leaves Bethlehem because there's "a famine in the land" as when Abraham and then the sons of Jacob went to Egypt... We have a sense that God is moving this family for some greater purpose (a new Exodus!).

They went East of the Jordan to Moab to look for food and stayed there. They had two sons and then Elimelech died and the sons were married to Moabite women and then the sons died and Mom, Naomi ("pleasant") is now in trouble because she has no man to protect her. Naomi is a microcosm of Israel – i.e. she has also partnered with the nations and they left her dry; she lost her sons and comes home empty and ashamed just the way that Samson lost his eyes to the nations and was mocked. When Israel resorts to the nations and their gods, she loses.

Naomi has heard that there's once again, bread in the House of Bread and she plans to return to Bethlehem. She has a tender relationship with her daughters-in-law (we're not used to tenderness at this time!) and being concerned for THEIR future prospects she bids them adieu. But in a tender, tearful scene, they protest.

But her logic prevails – "You will NOT find a man in Judah/Bethlehem and I'm too old to bear a son for you to marry." And they can't argue with that rationale so, again, tearful and tender the three widows weep together...it's touching (tender). Most of this chapter is the dialogue of the three widows.

Orpah succumbs (logical thing to do) but Ruth ("companion") clung to her ("and cling unto his wife" – same word). But the pleasant Naomi says, "Go with your sister-in-law – back to your people, back to your gods." (Maybe, it was a kind of test...a "count the cost" moment? Like when Jesus Christ provoked the Canaanite woman calling her "a dog" [Mat 15.22] to see if she had a come-back...and she DID) and NOW Ruth has a comeback of her own... some of the most lovely, healing, tender, intimate words (often used in wedding services) (16-17) "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back 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. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may YHWH do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me."

Somehow, Ruth, the companion, knew the Name of Israel's God... and actually invokes His name... and she vows to go to Israel where they take such good care of women and treat them with such dignity and respect... NOPE! Remember what we read last week? She was willing to endure hell for the sake of the mother-in-law she loved. WOW!

And when Naomi saw that level of determination (which I'm tempted to call... "faith") she gave in.

When they reached Bethlehem, it was like a High School reunion and all her former classmates ran out to see if pleasant Naomi was living up to her name... IS SHE STILL PLEASANT?!

She makes no pretense! “Don’t call me that! I am no longer Naomi, no longer pleasant! Give me a new name – the name of sorrow...of bitterness.”

And then, Job-like, she extends the idea that God is in control of everything...she extends it to its rational conclusion, “God controls everything and if I am bereft, grieving, widowed, broken – it’s because God has willed it... (QUOTE) FOR THE ALMIGHTY HAS DEALT VERY BITTERLY WITH ME...”

Do you have a problem with that? I mean DO you think Mara (née Naomi) do you think she has bad theology...that she’s blaming the wrong Person, that her troubles are her own doing and Elimelech’s?

“I went out full but YHWH has brought me back empty...YHWH has witnessed against me... and the Almighty has afflicted me...”

Do you have a problem with Mara/Naomi saying that God controls everything? And if she is now empty that HE EVEN CONTROLLED THAT?

I used to have a problem with that ... ascribing absolute control/sovereignty to “Shaddai” – I had a problem with the Almighty being ALL-mighty... but I don’t anymore.

I can truly say with Jonathan Edwards (mid-1700’s American philosopher/preacher, president of Princeton University) “The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God.” (Jonathan Edwards, Selections, 58–59)

I’ve come to see that THIS understanding is the least problematic because if God is NOT in control we have really, REALLY BIG problems philosophically AND PRACTICALLY.

I don’t really have problems with what Naomi said but I do have problems with what she didn’t say.

I don’t want to judge her and I don’t think I would do any better after losing a spouse and two children AND by the end of the book...what she left out HERE...she WILL see clearly and experientially... but what she misses here and what we GET TO SEE and what we must make central in our view of Venezuela and the Opioid-Crisis and your disease or your sister who is away from God or your child – I mean BIG mega issues and small personal/individual issues – what Naomi is not seeing here is that GOD BRINGS TENDER SHOOTS OUT OF PARCHED GROUND.

What we mean for evil – God is even in control of those things – and God will bring good out of those events/motives/actions.

She is not seeing, even now, that the tender shoot is already poking out of the scorched earth. She is NOT seeing that she has NOT come back empty but is accompanied by a companion, a daughter-in-law of whom we will learn by the end of the book (spoiler alert!) “your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons” (4.15). She has a narrative of decline! She has NOT factored-in the goodness and mercy of this Almighty God!

In the midst of pain and bereavement we have a hard time seeing it (that’s why we need each other) but the God who is in control of your pain IS ALSO THE ALMIGHTY GOD OF THE COVENANT (YHWH) who made a promise that can NEVER be revoked (based on His own existence! Genesis 15) that our scars and the scars of this whole world will be redeemed and become unimaginably beautiful – like that Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold (“kintsugi”).

And the reason we can be assured – really the ONLY reason we know it’s true is Jesus Christ – He is the Isaiah 53 reference; He IS the tender shoot come out of parched ground. He is the proof that out of the very worst things that ever happened on this Fallen Planet – the Fall itself...and even that moment when God Himself appeared in time and space, when in Jesus Christ, the Invisible Hand that governs all things... In Jesus Christ, the invisible became visible and those hands were pierced... the One who was full and IS FULLNESS HIMSELF became empty, naked and dead.

And out of that death... because of that death that God controlled and planned from all eternity (Acts 4.28) out of Jesus Christ’s emptiness, those who believe become full...those lost in the bitterness of guilt and the record of sin receive the sweetness of forgiveness, peace with God and adoption as sons.

This is the way I know that – somehow – some day beauty will come from ashes. Gentleness and healing will come from barrenness. Judges ends in hopelessness and then comes this Tender Shoot.

Often, when I look at the Big Picture (nations in corruption and untold suffering) and our national scene and the apparent lack of health in the American Church and then right down to my own life – my own “issues” and things very close to me and my family... I can feel a sense of hopelessness and, self-pity (such a dead-end) but looking at Jesus Christ, our True Companion, I believe... IT’S LIKE A BASS NOTE THAT YOU CAN’T HEAR BUT YOU FEEL IT IN YOUR BONES – Love throws a line, God and His mercy will triumph – everything is going to be ok.

The Narrative of Decline must give way to the Triumph and Tenderness of God’s Sovereign Grace.

“They came to Bethlehem and it was the beginning of the barley harvest.” Believe it.