

Ruth 1:1-22 - The Prodigal Widow

At the funeral, last weekend, of my dear friend and mentor, I told his nephew I was sorry for his loss. And he said, "And yours." Suddenly I was weeping. I didn't know where it came from. The tears we weep reveal our pain, don't they? And the tears, in a way, let it out so others can see and come alongside and comfort.

Tears, idle tears I know not what they mean,

Tears from the depth of some divine despair

Rise in the heart and gather in the eyes

In looking on the happy autumn fields,

And thinking of the days that are no more. (Tennyson)

One of the most heartbreaking prophecies in the Bible came true the night when King Herod sent his soldiers to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem, trying to destroy Jesus before he could threaten Herod's kingdom. The Gospel of Matthew says, "Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.'" (Mat 2:17-18) Some weeping cannot be comforted. It would be a mistake to conclude that God does not care about our deepest sorrows. On that night when weeping rose up from Bethlehem, God was near, wasn't He? Sometimes our sorrows are the painful results of our own actions; sometimes the actions of others are to blame. Much of our human sorrow goes back to the sin and death Adam unleashed in this world. But could God be nearer than we realize, as when Bethlehem wept?

Coming to the book of Ruth, we need to ask, "what does this teach us about God?" And the answers I found to that question surprised me because of how relevant they are today, more than 3000 years after these events took place. The events narrated in this book took place during the same time as the book of Judges; when there was no central government in Israel yet; when the people were forgetting all about God, how He rescued them from Egypt; about the Law God gave to Moses; about God's covenant; when people did whatever they thought was right, when again and again Israel turned away from God, but again and again, God brought them back to Himself. Even when, again and again, people turned away, forgot God, and failed to see that He is near. But we need to let the writer tell this story, and it begins with a man from Bethlehem of Judah who leaves home and God behind.

SCENE 1: What makes us leave? [read vv1-5]

You can tell a lot about a man by his actions. And from his actions, you can tell learn a lot about what a man thinks of God. Now, the name of the town of Bethlehem means, "house of bread." And This story begins with Elimelech leaving Bethlehem because there was no bread. Don't

miss what that says about this man's low confidence in God. God had brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, probably about 200 years earlier; every day for 40 years, God had fed Israel with manna from heaven; He had brought them to the Promised Land; He had shown them their boundaries, and their territories, where to settle. So that many of the Ephrathites of Judah settled in the town of Bethlehem. Looking back to verse 1, this was the time of the Judges. And the book of Judges doesn't pull any punches. Things were not good in Israel. And four times in the book, when bad things are about to happen, the writer says, "In those days there was no king in Israel..." So it's surprising that this man, Elimelech, whose name means "God is my king," went to Moab looking for food. And stayed there. See that in verse 2? Until we read the last verse of the book of Judges: [read Jud 21:25]. Elimelech did what seemed good in his own eyes. It seems his family stopped worshipping Yahweh. His sons took Moabite wives, which probably also means they converted to the Moabite religion, to worship Chemosh. In that ancient world, most believed that the local god was connected to the land. So to live in Moab usually meant worshipping with the Moabites; bowing down to Chemosh.

So much for Mr. "God-is-my-king." Notice all the attention the writer gives to people's names: his wife is named, "Naomi;" his sons are named, "Mahlon and Chilion"--verse 2 repeats the word, "name" three times: the name of the man, the name of his wife, the names of his sons. Then verse 2 reminds readers where they are from, again, just in case you forgot what you read in verse 1, but adds "they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah," the family name, or the name of their clan: it's a prominent family backward in history, and forward. Backward in time since the people of Bethlehem were descendants of Caleb, a hero of the book of Joshua; and forward, as an Ephrathite from Bethlehem is how King David is introduced in 1 Sam 17:12. Verse 1 describes those days like they were ancient history when this writer wrote Ruth, when Bethlehem was much more famous for who was later born there than when these events took place during the days of the Judges. And as we know, even later, Bethlehem became much more famous not only in Israel, but in the whole world for who was born there. Around 500 years after Elimelech and his family left Bethlehem for Moab, the prophet Micah prophesied that Israel's great hope, the Messiah, would be born in Bethlehem one day (Micah 5:2). Backward and forward in time, Ephrathites from Bethlehem were noteworthy. But unlike the heroes in his family, Elimelech is no hero. He stays in Moab; he remains there. And in verse 3, the spotlight passes suddenly to his wife, and Elimelech dies.

Naomi is now centre stage. In verse 4, two more names are added: the names of the wives her sons marry. And the word "name" is used twice so that you don't forget to pay attention to the importance of names here: "the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other, Ruth." Then in verse 5, her sons are named again--Mahlon and Chilion--and we are told that they died. After all this focus on people's names, it comes as a shock in verse 5 when we read, "the woman was left without her two sons and her husband." She lost her husband, then her sons, and, with their deaths, she lost her name. She's just "the woman." In this ancient near east culture, her ruin could hardly be more complete: she went from being married to a man from a

prestigious family, a somebody, to becoming "the woman," a nobody, with nothing. The next verse introduces another name that, perhaps, Naomi had not heard in a long time.

SCENE 2: What brings us back? [read vv6-14]

You can tell a lot about a woman from her actions. Naomi's story started out with a journey-- leaving home in search of food; moving from Bethlehem to Moab; leaving the house of Bread behind and making a home in a foreign land; and staying there for 10 years. She is in exile. So it's no accident that the writer carefully records what Naomi one day heard about Yahweh. It is strangers working in the fields of Moab whom she overhears talking about Yahweh, the people of Moab knew Yahweh was Israel's God, and in spite of their bad theology, they had heard Yahweh was back: He had returned to His people, to Naomi's people, and brought food. We have no way of knowing what went through Naomi's head. I'm sure she wondered about the wisdom of ever leaving Bethlehem. I do wonder if she connected the dots that maybe the famine had happened in the first place because the people of Israel had turned their backs on God? Because Naomi's words in verse 13 suggest she believes Yahweh was responsible for the deaths of her husband and sons.

The second scene in Ruth 1 is a moving scene about moving. There are lots of tears and weeping; there is lots of coming and going. And again certain words are repeated to make the point. In verse 6, "she arose... To return"; Yahweh "visited"; in verse 7, "she set out from the place," "they went on the way," "to return to the land of Judah;" verse 8, Naomi said, "Go, return...;" and in verse 9, "may you find rest in the house of your husband" (but first they would have to find new husbands). Naomi wishes her daughters-in-law would abandon her to her tragic journey and begin a new quest of their own. The 3 speeches in this paragraph all happen on a journey. Journey stories make us feel unsettled, unsure—they make us ask questions: "What will they find?" "When will they get there?" "Will they make it?" "Will life be better for them where they are going?" Naomi and her daughters-in-law had set out on their journey to Bethlehem. Maybe this is the point in the journey where they would begin to make their way down into the Jordan Valley before crossing the river and turning south toward Bethlehem. At any rate, the conversation they have is a turning point that changes their destiny and the destiny of the nation of Israel, and of many, many more.

Not only that, but where in the first scene, verses 1-5, there was a lot of time that passed, here in these verses, the longest scene takes the shortest time. The first scene covered more than ten years; the second scene takes place in what seems like days, but most of it happens in just minutes. Time almost stands still at the middle of Ruth chapter 1. There is very little time here but there is a lot of talking. And weeping.

First we have Naomi's first speech and Orpah and Ruth's response: [read Vv8-10a]. Naomi commanded her daughters-in-law, "Go back." (v8a) Sending them back to their mothers' homes is an argument that that is where they belong. "What am I to you? You should be with your mothers not with a mother-in-law! One commentary says, "...a widow should return to her

mother and not stay with her mother-in-law."ⁱ Then there is Naomi's prayer: (v8b-9a) "May the Lord deal kindly..." *hesed*. I'll come back to that in a moment. But I wonder if Naomi really believed you could find more of God's kindness by running away from him than toward Him? See? She still wants them to go back to Moab (v8). That's worth thinking about. The prophet Jonah wrote that those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their steadfast love.

The kind of kindness Naomi saw behind the behaviour of her daughters-in-law is the kindness she prays God will give them. The reason they didn't leave Naomi was evidently because they loved her dead sons. The word for "kindly" is a noun here, so it's like "May Yahweh do kindness." But that word is the Hebrew word *hesed* which was already a very important word in the Bible before the days when Ruth's story takes place. This is the word used often for the "steadfast love" of God: it means something like lasting loyalty, faithfulness, goodness, gracious love. This word is used of God's love 3 times in Deuteronomy 5:10; 7:9; and 7:12 [read]. You see, Naomi is praying, "May Yahweh's *hesed* for you be like yours for your dead husbands."ⁱⁱⁱ

Then Orpah and Ruth respond and they say, "no." [read v10b] Naomi won't take no for an answer. This is her second speech: [read vv11-13] Why didn't Naomi pray that God would give them *hesed* in Bethlehem? Why did she assume God might bless them if they abandoned her, but that if they went with her there was no hope? Why did Naomi focus only on what she had lost? Her empty womb (v11); her empty bed (v12); she has no hope. She has nothing to give them, no way to help them. Why? (v13b) Because God has taken everything away. In effect, Naomi says she *would* show them blessing and kindness if she could. She is willing to be gracious but lacks the power, whereas God has the power but lacks the willingness. She seems to be saying that (v8) she wishes God was as loving and loyal as Orpah and Ruth are.

Then we need to let the force of her words hit us. If each part of her second speech is read like a rhetorical question with an implied answer that is really a reason to go home and not follow her, then this is what her argument sounds like: "You are wrong to follow me. You should not follow me. There is no point in following me."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Naomi is full of grief, anger, and bitterness. But she is persuasive. Both women should leave and go home to their land, their people, their god. That's what they should do, but one of them doesn't do what she should. Look at the pattern before and after Naomi's second speech:

1. Naomi kissed her two daughters in law goodbye (v9b)
2. They lifted up their voices and wept (v9c)
3. They lifted up their voices and wept (v14a)
4. Orpah kissed her mother in law goodbye (v14b)

What about Ruth?

Ruth breaks the pattern, Ruth doesn't fit, Ruth is unusual, Ruth does the unexpected. Why?

SCENE 3: What makes us stay? [read vv15-18]

You can tell a lot about a woman by her actions. Naomi challenged and argued for her daughters-in-law to go home. But Ruth won't let go. Now she tries to convince Ruth to follow

Orpah's example. Remember though that in verse 8, Naomi mentioned the way Ruth had been loyal to stay with her because of Ruth's love for Mahlon [c.f. 4:10]. So now, in verse 15, Naomi is really telling Ruth she has loved Mahlon enough already--she is taking loyalty too far--she is taking love too seriously. And how does Ruth answer? With a wedding vow.

First, in verse 16 Ruth uses very strong language--a command: don't tell me to leave you or go away! See what Ruth is saying? "Staying" was not about where you live but about loyal love. She was not leaving Moab, she was staying with Naomi. Why? Because I will go wherever you go; I will stay wherever you stay; Your people, my people; your God, my God; **until death do us part**, and even then I will be buried with you.

Ruth's understanding of the duty of true love, of *hesed* meant that to abandon Naomi was unthinkable. It was not how she had loved Mahlon; it was not how she had loved his mother ever since his death--this was the loyal love Naomi had seen, that she mentioned in verse 8. And now Ruth has chosen to love Yahweh like that. When Naomi sees, in verse 19, that Ruth wasn't going to leave, couldn't be budged, wouldn't quit, she simply stopped talking. It was probably a very quiet walk the rest of the way to Bethlehem.

But the words the writer used for Ruth's "determination" in verse 18 say a lot more than that Ruth was stubborn. They give the sense that Ruth was continuing to do what she had been doing.^{iv} I think just as Naomi had said in verse 8 about Ruth's *hesed* for her dead husband, Mahlon, she now saw that Ruth's *hesed* was like God's *hesed*. *That maybe God's steadfast love was more faithful even than Ruth's*. In fact, I wonder if that was what Naomi stewed on all the way to Bethlehem: God's steadfast love and her own fickle, unreliable, unsteady, unfaithfulness to God. Because as soon as they arrive and the women of their little town see her and exclaim, "Is that you, Naomi?" she explodes.

SCENE 4: Who brings us home? [read vv19-22]

These verses are very theological suddenly: Naomi refers directly to God 4 times in two verses: The Almighty has dealt bitterly with me (v20); Yahweh brought me back empty (21); Yahweh testified against me (21); The Almighty brought calamity upon me (21). You can learn a lot about God from His actions.

Naomi's complaint about God in verse 21 was that when she had left Bethlehem she was full, and God brought her back empty. But the writer shows you and me that this is not true. Verse 22 is a bookend to verse 1. In verse 1, a man and his wife and their sons leave Bethlehem and go to Moab looking for food. In verse 22, Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem from Moab and arrive in time for harvest. Remember how much she had lost?--Her husband and both her sons, and even her name (verse 5?). But if you have read Judges, you know how God cares for women who have no sons. If you've read Deuteronomy, you know how God cares for widows (God calls for the protection and care of widows 10 times in Deut!). Naomi is home, and she is not empty or abandoned any longer. God's *hesed* is meant to lead us to turn back to Him again.

Naomi was confused about God, but she wasn't completely wrong: God had brought her back (that's what she says in verse 21--"Yahweh brought me back..."). Naomi can't yet see that in Ruth's love, there is a glimpse of what the love of God is like. And she can't yet see that God's *hesed* has not abandoned her, has not left her, has not forsaken her. Naomi can't yet see what the readers can see: It is God's steadfast love and grace that brought her back to Bethlehem. The reader will also be wondering, "Since God is nearer than we realize what is He about to do for Ruth and Naomi?"

ⁱ Bush, Dr. Frederic W.. Ruth-Esther, Volume 9 (Word Biblical Commentary) (p. 75). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ "She obviously refers to the faithfulness of Ruth and Orpah both to her and to these dear departed during the ten years (v 4) of their married life together." [Bush, Dr. Frederic W.. Ruth-Esther, Volume 9 (Word Biblical Commentary) (p. 76). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.]

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.