

0336

The unpromising land

Ruth 1:1-5

Text

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.

Prayer

-New sermon series

-Rain

Introduction

Horatio Spafford was a wealthy lawyer and real estate investor in Chicago. Things were looking good.

Until they weren't.

His only son had died from scarlet fever.

Then in October of 1871, the infamous Great Chicago Fire struck the city. Hundreds died, and over 17,000 structures were destroyed. It was a crushing financial blow for the grieving Horatio.

More on him later.

Series Introduction

We're beginning a new series this morning through the Book of Ruth. It's one of the most beloved Books of the Old Testament. It is a masterful piece of narrative storytelling.

Introductory notes

Some of the main themes of Ruth include God's sovereign provision and his covenant loyalty to his people. We also see Ruth as an example of virtuous living.

Today, we're only looking at the first five verses. In this passage, we're introduced to a woman named Naomi and we see life deal her one devastating blow after another.

Bridge

Thesis

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The main idea of this passage is to walk with God in a world that walks away from him.

And we'll look at this passage in three scenes:
Leaving the Promised Land.
Two marriages.
And three widows.

First scene - Leaving the Promised Land

Verse 1:

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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.

This first verse introduces us to the timeframe for when these events happen. It tells us the situation, and it introduces us to four characters, although all of them are so far unnamed.

I'll start with the timeframe. The period of the judges places the events of this book after the death of Joshua but before the formation of the monarchy in 1 Samuel.

It was not a good time in Israel's history. They were in the Promised Land, but it was also a time of rampant sin.

In the Book of Judges, you see a succession of generally worsening leaders in Israel and the common refrain:

In those days, there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

And so, this is the same era where the events in Ruth are occurring.

What's more, we see that there was a famine.

Famine in the Old Testament is often associated with divine judgment. While we cannot know with certainty that this is the reason in the Book of Ruth, given the timing and situation, I think that makes sense here.

This is something we'll see elsewhere in this passage. These first few verses can, at first glance, appear to be very matter of fact, but I think there are actually some subtle clues that this family has been rebellious toward God.

Biblical theology

So in this first verse, you see a very difficult decision that the husband, later identified as Elimelech, makes.

The family is facing famine and drought and so they leave the promised land for Moab, a pagan land.

This first verse mentions them being from Bethlehem. Now as Christians, that town is most significant to us because that is the place where Jesus was born. It would also be the future hometown of King David.

But at this point in Israel's history, Bethlehem is a pretty insignificant place. Nothing major has happened there yet.

Also, in a twist of irony, the word Bethlehem in Hebrew means “house of bread.” Years earlier, the Israelites had entered the Promised Land as a land flowing with milk and honey.

But now in this famine, they leave the house of bread because the bread basket has gone empty. They leave the Promised Land.

I tried to think about this this week, and I even asked a friend who has a PhD in Old Testament and he couldn’t think of any other examples either.

But I believe that this opening sequence is the only place in the Old Testament where you have people willingly leaving the Promised Land to live somewhere else.

In those days, there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

I think Elimelech is guilty of that here as well.

Moving

In our day, people move.

Many young adults who have grown up here have moved to larger cities. In our day and age, sometimes people need to move for newer opportunities.

During the Dust Bowl, many people moved from places like Kansas and Oklahoma to other parts of the country in search of a better life.

The Pilgrims came to America for religious freedom.

Over the last 150 years, millions of people have come from all over the world to America in search of a better life.

There’s nothing wrong with moving.

But the situation with Elimelech and his family is unique. Because their move has them leaving the Promised Land.

And that is a problem.

Things were difficult where they were.

But they weren't going to be better outside the Promised Land. Things will never be better apart from God. And so leaving Israel was an act of distrust.

Meditation

For us, when we're going through a season of drought, when we're going through a dark night of the soul, the temptation can be to distance ourselves from God, to distrust God, to question God and his goodness and love.

For Elimelech and his family, they distanced themselves from the Land. We don't have a literal land to leave, but we can still turn away from God's blessings in pursuit of worldliness.

God invites us to know him, but when we're angry with God, there can be temptation to turn away from him.

God invites us to trust in him, but when things are difficult, the temptation can be to want to trust in ourselves.

God invites us to follow him, but when we're hurting, the temptation can be to want to follow the world. To follow the various idols and competing philosophies.

God invites us to live for him, but there can be a temptation to try to make our own way, do our own thing.

That's what we see from Elimelech when he leads his family out of the Promised Land in a difficult time.

Verse 2:

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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.

Verse 1 is really revolving around the circumstances. Now they finally give names to these characters.

The text says that they went to Moab and remained there.

That leads to various questions.

For how long? Was this meant to be temporary? Or was Moab going to be their long term home? The writer doesn't tell us all the details we want.

In verse 3, we see their whole world turned upside down.

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³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.

Once again, more questions than answers. How did he die? Why did he die?

Was it divine judgment for leaving the Promised Land? It seems plausible, but the text doesn't tell us.

All we know is the result. Elimelech is gone.

We come to our second scene.

Second scene - Two Marriages

Verse 3 quickly mentions the death of Elimelech.

Verse 4 quickly moves on.

Verse 4:

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⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years

When their father died, Naomi and her sons had decided not to return to Israel.

We don't know why.

But eventually, the two sons marry.

It's interesting in the verse: **These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth.**

We actually don't even know which son marries which woman.

It's interesting that the passage says that they "took" wives. And the word in Hebrew which is used is unusual here. It can literally mean to carry off someone. It has connotations of abduction or taking by force.

We see something similar in Judges 21:23. **the people of Benjamin did so and took their wives, according to their number, from the dancers whom they carried off.**

And so you have these two Israelite men marrying Moabites.

These marriages are also a gray area on theological grounds. In the Old Testament, Israelites were not explicitly forbidden from marrying Moabites, but it's still a people who are pagan.

So for Naomi, she lost a husband, gained two daughters-in-law. Ten years of marriage, you'd expect their to be a mention of kids.

But there's not.

And that's another theme that we'll see in the Book of Ruth. The theme of childlessness.

To this point in the story, we still don't really know how to judge what's going on. We've seen a lot of action in this family, without any indication for how we're to feel about it.

Verse 5, and our final scene.

Third scene - Three widows

Verse 5:

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and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

This verse is being looked at from Naomi's perspective.

She's lost everything.

More questions than answers. We don't know why they died. If they were being judged? Why didn't they have kids? Was it infertility or had they chosen not to? We don't know why they had never returned to the Promised Land.

Again, we ultimately just know the result.

At any point in history, it's hard to be a widow.

But it was especially hard in the ancient world. Women had few options. It's not like Naomi was going to go back to school and get her degree. It's not like she had lots of professional prospects. It's not like they had life insurance. Plus she was living in a land that was not her own with people who had no familial loyalty to her. She has no blood relatives in Moab. When Elimelech had died, she at least still had her sons, but now they too were gone.

Given that she already had grown sons, she was likely past child bearing age. In a culture like this one especially, that would have made the prospects for remarriage difficult, if not impossible.

That is quite the predicament.

Conclusion

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I had planned for the message to be a little bit shorter this week.

Because the only thing I really want to show in this passage is that these first five verses for Naomi, show an existence that's about as bad as Job.

Naomi had lost everything.

She is at as low a point as one can be.

And these first five verses leave us questioning what will happen next?

What will she do? How will she respond? Where is God in all of this?

What kind of future does she have? What kind of life can she have? How can she go on?

More questions than answers.

For some of us today, you might feel like you're in one of the darkest points of your life.

Sometimes we might feel like Naomi. Maybe not because our circumstances are exactly the same as her's, but because we're in a season where it seems like we have lost everything. Where it seems hopeless, but where some look to Christ and find hope. Where it seems like nothing but darkness, but where we can look to the light of Christ.

There's no shortage of difficulties we face.

Real difficulties, real struggles, real tragedies. There are incredibly difficult losses of loved ones. For some, you're struggling with that today.

There's pain and chronic illness.

I know that some of us have young people in our lives who are struggling, maybe with health issues, maybe with Spiritual issues.

I know that some of us carry huge amounts of shame for things that we've done. Huge amounts of regret.

The point in all of this is not to minimize pain.

But it's to walk through the pain with God.

Our world has distorted the gospel that if you believe in God, things should always go well for you if you behave yourself.

But that's not the Biblical view.

The Biblical view is that the world is fallen, suffering is inevitable. And we can go it on our own, we can go to Moab. Or we can go walk through it with a God who has promised not a life of ease, but a life with him.

We can come to the grace and mercy of a savior who knows about suffering, because he too has experienced it. He too has suffered in a fallen world.

If you're going through a difficult time right now, you have two options. You can go through it with God or you can go through it without God.

You should walk with God in a world that walks away from him.

God gives Spiritual blessings. He gives grace that is sufficient, he gives peace that surpasses understanding. Jesus gives himself. Do you believe that?

It's ok to grieve, to be in pain, to have sorrows. But we should walk through those times with God, not without him.

Bethlehem can seem like there's a drought but life is better there than in Moab.

The greatest promise the Bible makes is not that everything will be easy if you trust in God, it's that you get God.

Charge

When things are going good, are you developing a relationship with God that's strong enough to endure when things are going badly?

If you're in a good season right now, that's great. Be thankful for that. But suffering and trials are inevitabilities in life.

If you're not in a good season right now, know that we have a good shepherd who is there to lead. We have a savior who sticks closer than a brother. We have a Lord who promises to give us rest. Is Jesus the bedrock of your life? Is he your greatest joy? Is he your true hope?

For some of us, the answer might be no. But know that he is gracious and merciful. We have a savior who is great enough and big enough that we can walk with him through whatever struggles and trials we face.

Jesus invites us to come to him, to believe in him, to worship him, to walk with him, to trust in him, to live for him.

And so if today is a hard day, don't turn from Christ, but turn to him. And if today is a good day, don't walk by yourself, but walk with Christ.

He will never leave you. He will never forsake you.

Horatio Spafford

In the beginning of our time, I talked about the Chicago lawyer and real estate investor named Horatio who had lost a son to scarlet fever and lost a fortune to the Great Chicago fire of 1871.

Two years later, the family was set to sail to England. At the last minute, Horatio had to stay behind over some business issues and so his wife and four daughters set sail for Europe.

While at sea, the boat collided with another ship.

Horatio's wife survived the sinking but all four daughters were lost.

When he got the terrible news, he set sail for England and while he sailed, the grieving father wrote perhaps the most famous hymn ever written by an American.

Song lyrics

When peace like a river attendeth my way

When sorrows like sea billows roll

Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say

It is well, it is well with my soul

It is well (it is well)

With my soul