

Ruth: A Frowning Providence

Ruth 1:1-5

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

This morning we begin a series on a book that the German poet, Goethe, called “the most beautiful short story.” Namely, the lovely, and rightly beloved, Book of Ruth. And what is not to love. Ruth is short. You can – and I urge you to – you can read it in about 20 minutes. It is a dramatic and beautifully crafted love story. It’s understated and simple and elegant. It is told by a narrator who doesn’t waste words – or inject himself into the story, or pass judgment about what’s going on. Nearly every word matters, as the narrator subtly hints and evokes while skillfully weaving the story together. It’s an earthy, concrete, story -accessible & straightforward- about ordinary people in their ordinary, practical lives. In short, its far away from the literary world Book of Revelation. And that’s by design. Man does not live by apocalyptic literature alone!

So today we will look at just the opening five verses of Ruth chapter 1. I will make three points: The Famine, The Family’s Flight, and The Frowning Providence.

I. The Famine

First, then, the famine. The historical situation was, as v.1 says: “in the days when the judges ruled.” So, after the time of Joshua and before Samuel. Somewhere between 1300 and 1000 BC give or take a little. Which is why the book of Ruth is between Judges and Samuel in your Old Testament.

Now the time of the judges was a time of chaos and, largely, rebellion in Israel. There were cycles: the people would sin, they would be subjected to judgment, they would cry out to God, and he would send a judge/deliver to save them. But there is a deterioration over time and the latter part of Judges, chapters 17-21 are full of faithlessness, shocking debauchery, and civil war. The book ends with its famous signature line: In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. This was an era of lawlessness, and the not so subtle suggestion is that a king is needed to bring salvation to the people of God.

And Ruth, it turns out, is an episode – a kind of cameo through the lens of one family – an episode in the bringing forth of King David, and ultimately his greater heir, King Jesus. In this situation, the text continues, there was a famine in the

land. The Land is Canaan. The promised land, the land of milk and honey. The only land where God dwelt in the midst of his people. The land where the covenant promises were in force. And the heart of those covenant promises was this: blessings for obedience, and curses for disobedience. In THIS land, there was a famine.

Thus, with great economy, the narrator wants us to see that this famine is a judgment. It's not just a random weather fluctuation. Famine was one of the threatened curses of the covenant if Israel (once in the land) was, as it was the case in the time of the Judges, disobedient.

Now famines, of course, are times of great fear, great hardship. They create terrible strain on ordinary families. In this time Israelites face a choice: do we see the famine as a judgment, repent and turn back to God, and wait for his provision, his face to shine upon us again, or, do we perhaps take another course of action.

II. The Family's Flight

That brings us to our second point: The Family's flight. Verse 1 continues: So a man, or a certain man. Notice this: this is a story, not about kings or powerful or great people. It's about ordinary people in Israel in a bleak time. It's about people like us dealing with the hard and bitter circumstances of life.

So a man from Bethlehem in Judah. Bethlehem peaks the attentive readers interest. We've been told there was no king in Israel at this time, but the story starts from Bethlehem, the birthplace of David. And there is an irony here. Bethlehem means house of bread. It was a fertile grain area in Israel. Thus, the breadbasket, Bethlehem, is empty. The famine, the absence of bread where naturally there should be bread, all this prefigures the barrenness, the empty wombs, which figure so largely in the rest of the story.

So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife (one wonders if she was consulted) and two sons, went to live for a while, or, went to sojourn, in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi (which means pleasant), and the two sons were named Mahlon and Kilion – and those appear to be Canaanite names, interestingly. Mahlon and Kilion are not Hebrew names. They were, the family that is, Ephrathites (Clan) from Bethlehem, Judah. They were from the clan, the city, and the tribe of the family of David. And they went to Moab and lived there the end of v.2 says. Now, this can seem like a reasonable move – even a noble thing. There is a famine, and Elimelek (Naomi?) have to provide for, and protect, their family.

Who cannot sympathize with the situation Elimelek is in? It seems like a relative no-brainer. After all Abraham sojourned in Egypt during an earlier famine. But we

should note a few things here: Abraham did not move at God's command. He got to Egypt and engaged in deception about Sarah, and was rebuked by a pagan king. It's far from clear that he did the right thing. And, later, when Isaac is about to leave the promised land during a famine, God commands him to stay. Even later, Jacob, having sent his sons to Egypt during a famine, is himself hesitant to go. God confirms to him in a dream that he is to go, and that the Lord will provide for and restore the family to the promised land. The general principle – even for the patriarch – seems to be this: the default place, the place of provision, is Canaan, unless God specifically directs one to leave.

But we can say more: the patriarchs were in the land by promise, they did not possess it. They were sojourners in a land that was destined to be theirs, but was not yet the consecrated, holy land. Elimelek, on the other hand, lives after the conquest of Joshua. Now, Yahweh's presence, and his covenantal promises of blessing and curse are, in fact, tied to the land. So, Elimelek's flight here, with his family, is sinful, it is an act of faithlessness, even apostasy. One does not just decide to leave THIS land, just because economic conditions have changed.

When you have a famine in the land in the days of the judges, after the conquest, the remedy is repentance, not flight. For God sends famine to awaken and restore his people, and he can be trusted to provide for his righteous ones even in the midst of famine.

Now, did Elimelek know all this? Well, he should have. It's just basic stuff every adult Israelite in the land, in covenant with Yahweh, whose read (or heard read) Lev. 26 and Dt. 28 should know. We have no indication that Elimelek tried to think through his situation in faithfulness to the Word of God. We're just told – he left.

There's a lesson here. We often make life decisions – sometimes big ones – without any reference to the covenant, to the church, or to the kingdom of God. The assumption seems to be: we can serve God anywhere, so let's go where it's best for our family, or for our economic future. All else being equal, this may be fine. But I've seen families get into serious spiritual danger, because they made a move without ever asking about a faithful church in their new hometown, to tend and nourish their souls. At best it was an afterthought. And a few years down the line they end up drifting grievously from the faith.

We know that the faithful in Israel STAYED in the land, and that the Lord indeed kept them alive, and provided for them from later in chapter 1 of our story. When Naomi (to jump ahead here) finally does return to Bethlehem some ten years later (verse 19), the women of the town recognize her and say: "Can this be Naomi?" They stayed and survived, she and her family fled.

Notice a few other things our narrator expects us to pick up here – and they also all confirm our reading of the family's flight. The first is an irony. Elimelek's name

means “my God is King.” And yet this was in the time of the judges, when there was no king, when everyone did what was right in his own eyes. So it’s ironic, because Elimelek is doing what is right in his own eyes. Also, notice, Elimelek didn’t simply flee. He went to Moab, a pagan nation some 50 miles SE of Bethlehem. Moab is a people descended from Lot’s incest with his daughter in Gen. 19.

And here’s another irony: they refused to offer Israel bread and provisions as they came out of Egypt and sought entry into Canaan. Instead the Moabite King, Bleak, hired Balaam, to curse Israel (Num. 22-24). The Moabite women seduced the Israelites into sexual immorality and idolatry at Baal-Beer (Num. 25). And more recently, in the days of the judges, a Moabite King, Elgin, had oppressed Israel for 18 years. The Moabites worshipped the god Chemosh who among other things required child sacrifice. And, finally, the Moabites – because of their treatment of Israel – were not allowed to enter the sanctuary of the Lord for ten generations (Dt. 23) – which may in fact be a way of saying – forever.

And so Elimelek thinks it’s a good idea to bring his two marriage age sons, and his wife to THIS land. It looks like it was maybe supposed to be temporary, a short-term remedy. How often it is that what we think is a short-term, expedient thing to do ends up with long-term ramifications we could have never foreseen. Especially when we wander from the covenant. Small compromises turn into big, longstanding ones. Eventually, we hardly notice.

The text says in v.1 that they went to SOJOURN in Moab. Just a short temporary stay. By the end of v.2 it says they lived there – they settled in. And of course we learn in v.4 that the remnant of the family remains for 10 years. Elimelek was in an awful situation. Awful situations pressure us to compromise, to cut corners. We ought not to be self-righteous. For I doubt many/any of us have faced the terror of a famine. But Scripture is clear. For Israel in the land, the famine is a judgment and a test. And in this awful, harsh situation, Elimelek made an awful decision. That’s the family’s flight.

III. The Frowning Providence

Our last point is the frowning providence. In v.3, Naomi’s husband, Elimelek dies. She is now a widow in a strange land. In a culture where women were vulnerable economically and socially. And since his sons are not yet married, and people married quite young – Elimelek has died as a young man in the prime of life.

Naomi is painted throughout the book with a vivid realism. She has her virtues, but she is not without her faults – as I said these are real people of clay like us – and for Naomi, life has already dealt her a series of brutal blows. The text says: and she was left with her two sons. What should she do? She should take her two sons and return to Israel, trusting the Lord to provide. At least there her sons

could marry in the covenant. But she doesn't do this. Now she stays. Whether she had a say in the family's flight or not, now staying is her choice. Maybe she was too numb. Too tired. Too shattered to even think about attempting a move back into the teeth of a famine.

Whatever the reason, she stays. And the two sons the text says: "they married Moabite women." Strictly speaking this is not forbidden. Israel was forbidden from marrying Canaanite women – women from the nations in the land. The Moabites were just outside the land. But this is unwise. In fact, it's profoundly foolish given all that I said about Moab above. As Moabites, neither these women, nor any offspring, would likely ever be allowed to enter the Lord's sanctuary back in the land. But if you go to Moab with two sons, and if after your husband dies, you stay in Moab, you get Moabite daughter in laws. One named Orpah and the other named Ruth (it's part of the power and legacy of this story that Ruth is now essentially a Jewish and Christian name). And they lived there about ten years.

Both Mahlon (Ruth's husband, 4:10) and Kilion also died. How is this even possible? They could barely be thirty. And Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. Three devastating losses in ten years. The sons die childless, leaving Naomi without heirs (a chief social good in this society). The family is as barren as the famine making Israel. Now Naomi, an alien, has no protection, no provision, no heirs, no inheritance, and no explanations.

Let me close with a few words about providence. First, it is not possible to read this body count as anything but a judgment, in light of all we said earlier about the flight to Moab. And to her credit, Naomi will see all this as the hand of the Lord. She does not attribute it to fate or to chance. It is exceedingly bitter, she will say – no whitewashing of the agony, no pious platitudes for her - but it is embraced in the providence of Israel's God. She may not connect all the dots we've connected, but she knows who is the Lord and sovereign over life and death.

Second, then, some of God's providences -as we have here – are brutal. They are dark and grim. And in the midst of them we have no idea what is happening, or how any good could possibly come of them. Often, they seem positively harmful, as if God is against us. And they don't come with labels interpreting them, or disclosing their purposes. Naomi has no idea why this is happening apparently, and she surely has no idea how things will end up.

Third, this is part of why the story is so dear and practical to God's people. We suffer blows, cruel and inexplicable. We are ordinary people – like this family - and we know what it's like to feel like life is unraveling. To feel like maybe the hand of the Lord has gone out against us. We know that life can get bitter and dark. We can't make any sense of it at times. But this story is about to turn – yes, today's text is bleak, but things get better (can only go up). And when they turn, we will see that God is at work for extraordinary good among ordinary sinful

people. Even amidst even his own chastisements of his people for their sins – he is at work for everlasting good.

Can you believe that about your own life? That God is at work – especially among the wreckage? Behind the scenes, silently, slowly, but surely knitting us – and our little lives - into his cosmic purposes? Naomi, contrary to appearances, is left (left) with an embarrassment of riches, for she has Israel’s God, and she has the magnificent Ruth. And what God will do through her grief will renew, not only her life, but through Israel and the monarchy, the offspring of Ruth will renew the world.

Fourth and finally, though providences can be bitter and harsh in this world, God is not. He is a tender and good Father who has permanently turned his face toward us in Jesus Christ. This is crucial to get. Providence is difficult (often impossible) to read. And providence, while it does tells us something about God, is NOT the full unveiling of God and his heart that we get in the gospel. Jesus Christ is how the Father shows himself to us. He bears our sinful fleeing, our exiles from his presence, through his exile from his Father’s face on the cross.

Naomi does not “figure out” God’s providence. She returns to the land, and thus to the presence and worship of Israel’s God. And we too, in the midst of our confusions, convulsions and losses, are to return to Christ the Lord, reading God’s heart in the gospel of his Son, trusting that, as our closing hymn says: Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face. Amen.

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