

Ruth 1

God's Work: No Little People, No Little Places

Ryan Perz – December 8, 2019

Our lives are a mixture of choices that we make, and things that are chosen for us. For example, none of us chooses where we are born, or our first or last name. But as we mature, we usually can choose to relocate and name our pets or children, or even change our name. And then there is the topic of death. We don't get to choose how long we live, or when a spouse or child may die.

The reality of life is that some things we choose, other things are chosen for us.

Over all these choices, is a hidden hand of God at work. This is a summary of Ruth 1.

- Ruth is strategically placed in our English Bibles between Judges and 1 Sam for chronology and theological purposes.
- The Hebrew Bible places Ruth after Prov 31—Ruth embodies the description of the woman of noble character.

But if you are reading through the OT—in between the stories of Gideon, Samson, and King David defeating Goliath—you get two overlooked widows, and an obscure man with an interesting name, Boaz.

It's like one of those novels about small town, ordinary people; no kings or capital cities—though it does end with Royalty.

The story of Ruth reminds me of the title of a Francis Schaffer sermon I cherish, *No Little People, No Little Places*—if there is a “tone-setting” statement of Ruth, that is it.

In God's big redemptive story of Christ, there are no little people and no little places.

Context: A season of crisis (1-5)

- The story opens with immediate sadness.
- When deep sadness hits, we often ask, “Where is God in all of this?”

- The story of Ruth happens during the times of the Judges. The conclusion from Judges (Judg. 21:25) is that in the absence of a king, everyone does what is right in their own eyes.
- Famine hits the land and this family in Bethlehem.
- It's ironic because the name "Bethlehem" means "house of bread."
- According to the covenant, curses laid out in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28, famine served as an act of God's judgment. People are responsible and accountable for sinful choices.
- The famine forces Naomi and her husband Elimelek to make a choice, and they sojourn in the land of Moab.
- Now they are *outside of the promised land*. Anytime God's people are away from his place, it's sad.
- In Moab, Naomi's sons pick up Moabite wives, which would not be a badge of honor.
- Finally, Death. Within a 10-year time frame, all the men die. This is one of those "things chosen for us", categories we would have rather avoided.

I wonder how Elimelek (name means "God is King") actually made his choices. Did he follow the culture of "doing right in his own eyes", or did he seek the Lord's hand of guidance and provision? The text is silent.

It presses us to ask, "how are we going to make decisions?"

Do we follow the culture and "do the right in our own eyes" or seek God, seek his direction, provision, blessing?

I'm not convinced that Moab was God's best, especially considering the outcome. It's the last chapter in Elimelek's life. But even with poor choices, God's sovereign hand is at work.

No Little People (8-21)

- Beginning in vs 8 the focus narrows on the main characters, Ruth and Naomi.
- As Naomi departs out of Moab, she tells her two daughters-in-law to go back.
- After a brief back and forth (e.g. think two generous people arguing over who pays the lunch bill)—finally Orpah (name means "obstinate") concedes, but *Ruth clings* (v14).

1. Ruth the outcast

- Ruth stands out as loyal, but her family background is a bit checkered.
- Gen 19:37 gives the backstory of the Moabites. It's downright disgraceful. Lot's daughter got him drunk so he would impregnate her.
- Now for the average Jew reading this story, they would immediately see a Moabite as an outcast.
- Moabites worshiped a different god, Chemosh (2 Kings 23:13); Numbers 25 mentions how the Moabite women enticed Israel men to idol worship.
- A Moabite was not just an outcast, but actually a natural born enemy of God.

(Num 24:17)

a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;
it shall crush the forehead of Moab

“She would have been as welcome in Bethlehem as a ham sandwich at a bar-mitzvah.” (Ian Dugiud)

At the heart of God's work, is his work of drawing outcasts and enemies.

(Eph 2:11-13, 19)

“¹¹Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹²remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,”

1. Ruth is a picture of *conversion*

As an outsider, she was not seeking God, but sovereign grace sought her.

Her words are at the structural center of this chapter. In Hebrew writing that carries a lot of emphasis.

- The other emphasis is placed in the word “turn”—it occurs a total of 12 times in vs. 6-22.

Sinclair Ferguson draws the conclusion that the reason is because the emphasis is on Ruth’s conversion. The Hebrew word for “turn” or “return” is the most often used word for repenting.

In other words, the beauty of this story begins is to see Ruth, the outsider and enemy, drawn by the sovereign grace of God!

It gives gospel hope to all outsiders and enemies.

2. Ruth is also a picture of *covenant loyalty*.

The language she uses, “till death part us”, is highly charged covenantal terms.

- Ruth pledges to be a constant presence near to Naomi.
- She has a love that will not let go of commitment. The language she uses (v14) echos the loyalty in a marriage covenant.

Ruth shows us covenant loyalty that is fully found in Christ. Jesus commits to us with a “love that will not let go” commitment. He makes good on never leaving or forsaking. He is Immanuel, God with us.

2. Naomi in bitterness

- So far, we’ve seen a positive side of Naomi. She is a thoughtful woman. She has a high view of God’s sovereignty.
- Yet by her own admission, she is bitter (v20).
- Naomi’s name means “pleasant” —but she feels the opposite.
- She has a very high view of God at work—God’s sovereignty. She is orthodox in that.

**It’s interesting that here Naomi does not use the covenant name for God (Yahweh), but Almighty. It’s less personal, lacks covenant loyalty.

It's as if she sees God as "sovereign, yet without grace, powerful but with no compassion, a judge who shows no mercy." (Block)

It's as if she forgot how the Lord wants us to know Him.

(Ex 34:6) "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness".

- She also sees God as one *who works mainly to empty her life* (v21).

She doesn't ask the question: "*What if God empties my hand...only to fill it with something better?*"

I've personally seen friends very emptied, yet only to be filled by God's gracious hand. We have good friends who served for 5 years as missionaries in China. During their last year, the younger brother of the wife died suddenly. He was a very young man in his early 20's. She was empty and broken. But as the months passed, her testimony is that she was so much closer to God than she would have been with her brother alive.

Or one of my mentors, who is a pastor and has served his church faithfully for two decades. His oldest son served in some heavy combat stations in Iraq and when he came home, died of a drug overdose. I walked with him through several years of grief. During that season, I heard members of his church say how his preaching and ministry had a new dynamic. There was a closeness to God, an intimacy, and a powerful supply.

The Lord had emptied these friends...but was very faithful in filling them also.

Now, if you could travel back in time, what would you tell Naomi if you were her biblical counselor? At minimum she needs to know the Lord cares. He's not just out to crush her. He's faithful. He's interested.

- It would be most helpful to remind her of the story in Exodus where she drew her name from.
- (Exodus 15:23-25) The Lord can make the bitter, sweet again.

There are some here today that can really identify with Naomi's bitter soul.

Your story echoes v21. The Lord cares. He's not out to crush you; He is interested in your life; He is faithful. He can turn the bitter, sweet. If he empties, he is very capable of filling you with something infinitely better: himself.

Or, in the words of Rom 8:28: “²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

No little place: Bethlehem (6-7; 22)

- We did not skip over vs 6; it’s key to seeing the drama unfold.
- V6 marks the return to Bethlehem.
- The famine was finally lifted. In the era of the judges it had to be conditioned on the people’s repentance.
- Why does Naomi consider a return to Bethlehem an option? *Because God is working.*

—Yet the place, Bethlehem, connects us to the larger story in scripture.

What God does in Bethlehem and a birth of a son will change the course of history and eternity for millions.

(Mt 2:3-6)

“⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he (Herod) inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel’.”

(Jn 7:42) “⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?”

Conclusion:

As we reflect on this story, the story of us in our fallen humanity, mirrors what we’ve seen in Ruth.

We begin our story (birth) in exile, a lawless land, and really just waiting for our death. Crisis of judgment, exile, and death marks the beginning of our story. Even if we have our fridges full, spiritually we are in starvation mode in a land of famine. We will die in a foreign land.

But God's unseen hand is at work in the lives of some, calling them to return—the outcast, the bitter, the sinner.

And the place we begin to anchor our hope is the small town of Bethlehem. It's in that place the Lord provides. It's no small irony that the house of bread, Bethlehem, is where the Lord Jesus would be born.

The Lord has visited his people by giving them bread

Jn 6:33

“³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. ³⁴ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

³⁵ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’”