
Futility - Of There and Again

Ruth 1¹

Pastor Russ Kennedy

“In the days when the judges ruled...” What a way to start the book. This short, sweet and simple story of loss and love is set in such collapse, chaos and catastrophe. It was a time of terrible trials, everyone doing what was right in their own eyes, the intervening of God’s judgment and the deliverance by men and women of God. This is the time of Abimelech’s murder of his brothers, the burning of thousands from Shechem in the tower, the driving of a tent peg through Sisera’s temple, nailing him to the tent floor, and Ehud’s ghastly killing of Eglan, the fat. It is the time of Samson and Gideon and Deborah. All this unfolds within generations of the mighty conquest of the land, the heroic leadership of Joshua and Caleb. As Moses predicted, the people soon became casual, carnal and corrupt in the very blessings that came from God and should have caused them to hold fast to God.

We do not know exactly when during the Judges this book unfolds. The author intends only for us to be able to set it generally during its historical time period. He is telling a story, but not a fictional one. This is not, “Once upon a time, many years ago in a far away place.” This is about these people (Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Chilion, Orpah and Ruth) who lived in this town (Bethlehem) when there was that famine and they went to Moab and lived for 10 years. It’s almost as though the author is careful that we know this is true.

This is also a very carefully crafted story. It is written in 4 episodes, roughly corresponding to the four chapter breaks. Its opening and closing scenes (Ch. 1 & 4 respectively) surround two inner units (Ch. 3-4). The outer are linear and tell us what unfolds. The two inner follow parallel structures and are the essence, but not the point of the story. The point of the story is at the very end. And like all good readers of good stories, we don’t go there till we get there and enjoy the surprise of arriving there. Can we be like little children who have heard a story a hundred times and yet still can jump at the scary parts and smile at the funny parts and cry at the sad parts and feel a sense of satisfied yearning at the ending parts. Then we say just like we used to when the story was done, “Mommy, read it again, pleeeasee...”

And as we shall see, beneath the simple story of loss and love, there are serious troubles and challenging problems and a hard to be imagined glory awaiting the appearing of the grace of God.

Now one word – we have been thinking much as we read and teach the Old Testament about a Christ-centered approach. Now, it may appear to some that I have left that and am just telling the story. Listen, we must come to Christ in the Old Testament when and where the Old Testament actually does. And so we will... and so we will.

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Departure

(v.1-5)

Episode one opens with the departure and all it involves.

¹ 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.

In its Cause

(v.1-2)

These brief words establish the initial problem. They tell us the people involved and their place. We are introduced to Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. So here is a somewhat ordinary Jewish family living in the town of Bethlehem during the time of the Judges.

But there arises a problem – a famine. From observing the cycles of decline, judgment, deliverance and blessing in the book Judges, we would conclude that this famine is part of the overall judgment of God on a nation that is in a period of sin. So the larger context of this story is that of God's chastening on disobedient Israel as a nation. Without telling us all the whys and wherefores of their decision, the author tells us that they decide to leave Bethlehem, in fact, to leave the land of Israel altogether.

The irony is not to be missed here: Bethlehem means, a *house of bread* and now it has become a *place of famine*. So they leave. And they go to Moab, which was on the east bank of the Dead Sea. Now this is no easy journey. Just a casual look at the map will tell you that they either had to go north or they had to go south *around* the Dead Sea to get the Moab. This was rough and dangerous territory. Why Moab? We are not told their own reasoning why, just that this is what they did.

In its Consequences

(v.3-5)

But now Naomi's husband dies. The interesting wording here – she is left with her two sons. This being left with and being left without is an important motif in this chapter. They are without food in Bethlehem. She is without her husband, then her two sons. It speaks powerfully of loss.

It seems that Elimelech's death gives urgency to the marriages of Mahlon and Chilion. There is great danger now that the family line will end and the family inheritance lost. So they marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. These Hebrew men marry the descendents of the incest between Lot and his older daughter after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Here is a real, eyebrow raising development and problem. Moses had commanded in Deuteronomy 23:3-6 the following:

“No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever, because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam; instead the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you. You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever.

So either we are 10 generations after Moses’ command or these two men have disobeyed God. To the Jewish ear this would sound like inter-racial marriage would have sounded 25 years ago. And 10 years later, both Mahlon and Chilion are dead. Naomi now has lost her husband, her sons and even in the narrative, her name. She is “the woman” bereft of husband and sons.

Here is the final and most pressing pain and problem of her life now – she will have no children or grandchildren. It is very difficult for us to grasp this. For us children and grandchildren are options. For them, children were a sign of blessing from God and were how the family heritage and land were passed on. Here is her final and most horrible loss.

Dedication

(v.6-18)

The commentators tend to focus on the differing responses by Orpah and Ruth. But this is not the author’s intent. The dialog here shows us the dedication of two women, Naomi and Ruth.

We are also introduced to the most prominent word in this episode, *return*. It is the same Hebrew word that is used to represent repentance. Here is the turning point in this episode as Naomi awakens to the place of her helplessness and hopelessness and turns her eyes towards home. While toiling in the fields of Moab, she hears that God has visited His people and has given them food (v.6).

In the Concern of Naomi

(v.6-14)

⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸ But 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 The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you 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, we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹ But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” ¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

What a picture this was – these three women, are out on the road headed for Judah. Naomi's daughters-in-law are on the way with her. As they are on the way, Naomi, in love and concern for them as well as out of the seeming futility of her own station in life, turns to them to send them home. She wants them to return.

Her blessing is full of the kindness and grace of a godly woman. She wants them to know the favor of God and to find rest in the home of a future husband from among their own people. She is not turning them away because she does not want to be responsible for them but in order that they might not feel responsible for her. She is releasing them from their obligation to care for her – to protect and provide for her as the widowed mother of their husbands.

What sweet sadness we find in their tearful love. They will not leave her. They will stay with her and go with her and watch over her. They will come with her away from their home to go with her to be with her people. And what tragic concern for them! Why should they stay with her? She is too old have another husband, much less more sons for them to marry. Besides, if so, would they be willing to wait?

In verse 13, Naomi expresses the anguish and bitterness of her soul. These beloved daughters-in-law have suffered because God has chastened her. The loss of their husbands has been at the disciplining hand of God on Naomi. It grieves her that she has been the cause of the sadness and sorrow of their situation.

So Orpah kisses her farewell and heads down the road towards her home. As Naomi observes, Orpah is not just returning home, but she is returning to her gods (v.15). There is more at stake here than just present security, but a personal salvation.

In the Commitment of Ruth

(v.15-18)

¹⁵ And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return 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 will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." ¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

Ah, but Ruth – Ruth clings to her. You can see it, can't you? What great love and sacrificial commitment is expressed in these actions and these words.

Here are the words of an endearing commitment to Naomi and an enduring covenant with God. She is not here merely attaching herself to Naomi, but she is swearing allegiance to Yahweh. I do not sense here that this is a new commitment, but rather one that has been settled deep in the soul of a Gentile woman now righteous before God. She has not accepted the God of Israel as a convenience of her marriage, who can not be offhandedly rejected with a return to her old gods. No, if the person she knows and loves is going to land and life and death where Yahweh dwells, then this is where she will go as well.

Yet, here is true love for God and love for neighbor. Ruth is about to leave all she knows, the familiar language and customs of her home and her people for the sake of God and

Naomi. Here is a great and grand return. Naomi sees the depth of devotion and determination and says no more.

So they journey from the hills of Moab around the Dead Sea on the road to Bethlehem.

Destitution

(v.19-22)

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town 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 away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"

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

What a sight this must have been. At least 10 long years have passed. When Naomi left, she left with husband strong and two strapping sons. She left with 3 stalwart men of Israel and returns with a Moabite daughter-in-law. She left a place of deprivation and now returns in state of destitution.

The simple sentence in verse 19, "The whole town was stirred because of them," sets the stage for the final part of this episode. The word spreads through the town, "Naomi has returned. Naomi has returned." Particularly among the women the word runs like a summons to gather in greeting.

In the Chastening by her Lord

(v.19-21)

Our author now brings to the front this play on Naomi's name. Certainly, a Hebrew would have known what her name meant. But the author says it like this. The women gather in greeting say, "Is this Pleasant?" No, this is not Pleasant who has come home, this is Bitter. She who went away Naomi, "pleasant", now returns home Mara, "bitter". She who went away full and has now returned home empty, empty of husband, empty of sons and arms empty of grandchildren. But is she really and truly empty? Is that the value she puts in the love and loyalty of Ruth? Or has Ruth become an embarrassment, the final evidence of her entanglement with Moab? (Webb, p.42)

She acknowledges God's hand in her life. Her loss is God's chastening. She has admitted that to Orpah and Ruth. Now she admits it to the women. Her loss and destitution, her empty arms are the hard providences of God. It is the Almighty God who has brought this calamity upon her. There is here a tacit confession that they should not have left Israel. Notice the wording, "I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty." They went away from God, His place and His people and now God brings her back, chastened and humbled.

And bitter. It is clear that she is struggling with the bitter providences of God. Here is her confession of her bitterness over her losses. Why should she continue to carry the name and thus the reputation of being "pleasant" when God has exposed her? Why should she be rejoiced over when God has testified against her?

There is no bitterness like that of knowing that your sinful choices have brought you the chastening hand of God. How many Christians have gone away full and returned empty? How many of you are struggling with bitterness – God has chastened you and has, through the public circumstances of your life, witnessed against you. What grieving and groaning and grinding in our souls when our present suffering and hardships are the bitter providences of God over the sinful choices in life.

The whole Bible is so clear in warning us about bitterness in the midst of the severity of God's Fatherly love. Nothing is so pointed and powerful than the words of Hebrews 12:3-9.

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. [ESV]

Beloved, know that the Fatherly love of God is always moving, even in the painful application of the rod, for our good. When we kiss the hand that smites us, that chastening work yields the fruit of righteousness, a harvest of holiness. Thus we can have peace in the midst of bitter providences of God.

But if we resist the grace of God and reject the help of the people of God, then we may end like Esau – full of bitterness and no place of repentance – no way to get back what we have lost.

In the Coming to her Home

(v.22)

So she arrives like this- destitute, broken and bitter. She who went away full has now come home empty. Naomi has come home Mara. Pleasant has returned bitter. And what has she come home with? Husband, sons and grandchildren? No, in a curious emphasis,

she returns home with a foreigner named Ruth. Not just any foreigner, but a Moabite at that.

But, she who left in a time of famine now comes home at the time of harvest. Who can tell what will come of people who come home just at harvest.

Reflect and Respond

This is a story about God.

This has been about the God who was not trusted during a time of hardship, during a famine. He whose promises and provision and power had brought them into this land and sustained them there.

This has been about the God who was not obeyed in the matter of marrying and giving in marriage. He whose holiness and righteousness demanded separation in marriage and union only with God's people.

This has been about the God in whom Gentiles may trust and commit their lives to loyal faithfulness, regardless of the cost. He whose grace casts wide and whose glory is most magnified when men and women from all over His world acknowledge Him as Lord and acclaim His worth.

This has been about the God whose Fatherly love chastens and disciplines, whose hand moves against and smites His people for their good. He whose love is not soft to allow sin or even distracting weights, but whose disciplines move to correct and train.

This has been about the God whose people should be called pleasant, but whose spirits are often bitter. He whose delight in His elect should call forth from them a solemn joy yet so often is met with deep resentment at the bitter providences.

This is about the God who brings home His wandering people just in time for harvest.

