

Yearning for Home

Ruth 1

At the end of their first date, a young man in a bygone era took his favorite girl home. He placed his hand on the wall behind her, leaning forward for that important first kiss.

“Are you crazy?” she said. “My parents will see us!”

“Come on, they’re sleeping!”

“No way. It’s too risky!”

“Please?”

“No, I just can’t.”

This went on for some time when suddenly, a light came on as the door opened. There stood the girl’s sister, pajama-clad, hair disheveled. Sleepily, she said, “Dad says to go ahead and kiss him. Or, I’ll kiss him. Or, Dad will come down and kiss him. Just tell him to take his hand off the intercom button.”

I don’t read much for entertainment. Most of my reading relates to preparing messages or expanding professional skills. But, this much I know; if I were to ever settle down and read just for the fun of being caught up in a narrative, romance would not be my literary genre of choice.

Of course, there is one love story that does pique my fascination. It is a brief little Bible story nestled in that chaotic time when judges led the people of God, before any king had been anointed. Ruth is not so much one love story as it is a chronicle of several love stories. An older widow loves her widowed daughters-in-law enough to free them from their obligations to look after her. One of these young women loves the older woman too much to leave her. A tender love blossoms between a man and a woman. But, Ruth is especially the story of a loving God Who provides for two of His servants, and in the process, for a nation that He has chosen to love.

The story begins with an Israelite family’s journey away from their homeland. A famine has driven them to live among a neighboring people. This was not intended as a long-term solution, but our lives many times have a way of not following the scripts we would write for them.

I. Naomi’s Homesickness Strikes with a Vengeance (1-5)

¹In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ²The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife’s name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³Now Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

A. The Depth of Sin behind this Story Is Debatable

Most commentators treat this family gently even though some ancient rabbis and certain modern preachers beat the tar out of Elimelech for taking his family to Moab rather than “waiting on God” for something to break. But, the storyteller doesn’t treat them harshly. He simply acknowledges that this was the age of “the judges,” regional leaders who dispensed justice as best they could. On occasion, a judge might be empowered by God to militarily unite and lead the various tribes in Israel against a foreign oppressor. Israel had no king responsible for binding the nation to covenant obedience and keeping the requirements of the Law before the eyes of his people. In fact, the final verse of the book of Judges describes the national state of affairs:

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. – Judges 21:25

The various judges that led Israel are seldom depicted as paragons of virtue. Many of them honored God only when they had little other choice. Typically, they did their own thing, and the people were pretty much on their own – honoring what they knew of the Law, but usually living according to their own wits. In view of the leadership void in Israel, I cannot harshly judge a man trying to feed his family. Besides, his intent was to “live for a while” in Moab, not to abandon Israel. Older versions use the word “sojourn” which means to live as an alien and not to become absorbed by the host culture. Besides, Naomi’s allegiance Israel’s God will become apparent.

It was not optimum that Elimelech’s sons married Moabite women, but that did not technically violate the Law. Moabites were not Canaanites. They occupied their own territory east of the Jordan. The Canaanite nations, which Israel was to drive out, vied for the land that God had promised to His people. To the degree they remained in the land, Canaanites corrupted Israel.

With multiple Bibles in our houses, stacks of uncracked giveaway Bibles in our upstairs library and convenience Bibles in our pews, it seems a tad pious to me for moderns to pick on Elimelech and his clan when they *might or might not* have been guilty of knowingly sinning. And, are those who judge them so meticulous about keeping God’s laws that they do understand? In any event, the Holy Spirit behind the ancient text does not brutalize this family. He depicts them as hapless, helpless and shepherdless; much like Jesus saw Israel when He came. I sin rebelliously at times, but I am also prone to simply wander into sin. It comforts me to see how Scripture depicts this family. Perhaps, He views us in similar circumstances with a similar degree of tenderness.

B. The Pathos at Hand in the Story Is beyond Debate

There was famine in Israel, which was not novel. Because of rampant covenant disobedience, God often sent plight upon Israel to drive His people to repentance. A famine might be limited to Israel because foreign invaders stripped the land bare. *Judges 6* tells of a seven-year oppression of Israel by the Midianites who were likened to swarms of locusts. When Israel cried out for relief, God called Gideon to rescue them. Perhaps, it was a time such as that which prompted Elimelech to take his family on the short journey to Moab, just across the Jordan River. Moab’s mountains are actually visible from the high points around Bethlehem, the family’s hometown, which means “house of bread.” Apparently, bread was not available in the “house of bread.”

The family moved to Moab where Elimelech died. The critics are sure this was God’s judgment. Whether they were there for ten years total or ten years after Mahlon and Kilion married is not clear. In any event, the sons died. The critics are sure this was God’s judgment too. In any event, all three widows, but especially Naomi, were in dire straits with no one to provide for them:

“... of women, old women are the most feeble; of old women, widows most woeful; of widows, those that are poor, their plight most pitiful; of poor widows, those who want children, their case most doeful; of widows that want children, those that once had them, and after lost them, their estate most desolate; of widows that have had children, those that are strangers in a foreign country, their condition most comfortless. Yet all these meet together in Naomi, as the centre of sorrow, to make the measure of her misery pressed down, shaken together, running over. I conclude, therefore – many men have had affliction – none like Job; many women have had tribulation – none like Naomi.” - Thomas Fuller as cited in *Pulpit Commentary*

It is no wonder that when Naomi, whose name means “pleasantness,” did finally return to Bethlehem, she told the women there, “Call me Mara” (verse 20) which means “bitterness.” Life seemed cruel, but like Job, she accepted this as the hand of God. Like Job, she never cursed the LORD in any of this. And, as with Job, God was doing a great work that Naomi could not comprehend. He was doing something wonderful for Naomi and for His covenant people. She would find her provision. In a few generations, God would raise up a great king, and eventually, a greater King.

II. Orpah’s Homecoming Smacks of Wisdom (6-14a)

A. Naomi Releases her Daughters-in-Law from All Obligations

Allow me to summarize this part of the text. The first good news Naomi had heard in years was that God was providing food for the folks back in Judah. No doubt, hard times had compelled the Israelites to once again cry out to the LORD, and, as He was always faithful to do, He granted them relief. When Orpah and Ruth had married Naomi’s sons, they had legally become her family. Their allegiances were to her household, and neither of these young ladies was inclined to question this. Both began the trek with Naomi back to Judah, a strange land to both women.

On the road, the needless peril that this imposed on her daughters-in-law dawned on Naomi. She could do nothing to provide for them. They would simply be three destitute gals in Bethlehem, so lovingly, she released them from their duty and sent them back to their “mother’s home” (verse 8). We learn later in the book that Ruth’s father was still living, so this probably refers to the women’s quarters in the father’s home. The idea is likely that she was sending them to a place of comfort where preparations for another marriage could take place. Naomi was freeing them to seize an opportunity for marriage, children, happiness and security, none of which she could offer. But, both women showed themselves loyal to her. Neither of them would leave her, at first.

Devotion is a fickle quality. Have you ever turned on your radio only to stumble across a conversation without really getting “the set-up”? I turned on my car radio one morning this week. It was tuned to a sports channel. The first thing I heard, with no context, was one host asking the other, “So, would you cut that dog open to get those Super Bowl tickets?” Apparently, or hypothetically, some dog somewhere had eaten someone’s Super Bowl tickets. The other host’s answer was not knee-jerk. He asked thoughtful questions like “How old is the dog?” and “Where are the seats?”

So, how deep did Ruth and Orpah’s devotion to Naomi run? The older woman got blunt with the two young women. Under Levitical law, they would each have to marry a brother of their dead husbands (or, at least, some close relative) in order to keep Mahlon’s and Kilion’s names alive in Israel. “I’m clean out of sons,” Naomi insisted, “I suppose I could find a husband as soon as I hit town and have children right away, but do you really want to help me raise them so that you can marry them? Go home! Start a new and happier next chapter to your lives.” It made perfect sense, and it is not at all surprising that one of the girls, Orpah, accepted Naomi’s offer.

¹⁴At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by ...

B. Naomi Is Easily Overlooked as a Woman of Virtue

The book bears Ruth’s name, She is the central character and heroine, and rightly so. Still, we should not move on without giving Naomi the kudos to which she is entitled. Naomi loved these girls. She appreciated their loyalty to her and to their marriages, but her bitter sorrow in life would only be compounded if that loyalty meant that Ruth and Orpah were doomed to face the life of distress she believed was inevitable. She released them because she loved them.

Naomi had a humble view of herself. She believed: “the LORD’s hand has gone out against me!” (verse 13), but this does not mean that the critics who severely judge her family are right. Insofar as the text reveals, Naomi does not identify her affliction as a divine punishment for some sin she can put a finger on. Neither does she accuse God of being cruel or unfair. She does not cease to call Him by His covenant Name, *YAHWEH*, rendered, “the LORD” in our text. Later, she will refer to Him as “the Almighty” (verse 20), implying His sovereign right to govern His creation, her life included, as He sees fit. Life has been bitter, but Naomi’s spirit has not become embittered.

Most tellingly, Naomi had a big view of *YAHWEH*. In verses 8–9, she blesses the girls, saying:

... May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. ⁹May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

The nations surrounding Israel worshipped their own deities. Moab worshipped Molech. These primitives believed that once a person left the jurisdiction of a god, he was beyond that god’s reach. Naomi knew this was not so with *YAHWEH*. He could show kindness to her daughters-in-law even if they remained in Moab. Naomi’s faith was not as informed as it might have been had a king who loved God’s Law reigned in Israel. She sent Orpah “back to her people and her gods” (verse 15). I would prefer that she railed against Molech as well as all such gods, since I know that they don’t exist. But, at least she knew that there is no God like *YAHWEH*, a God above all Gods, *Shaddai*, “the Almighty,” whose power cannot be restricted by national boundaries.

III. Ruth’s Homesteading Signifies Faith (14b–22)

A. Ruth Articulates an Incredible Oath verses 14b–18

... Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵“Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

¹⁶But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.” ¹⁸When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

We would be remiss were we to fail to acknowledge that people are drawn to or recoil from God because of the story told by the lives of His people. Could Ruth have been so powerfully drawn to *YAHWEH* apart from the love and kindness of Naomi? Perhaps, but one fact remains; devotion to God is often awakened in others by the devotion of those that belong to Him. I suspect that Naomi’s character was as much a factor in the coming of David, and, eventually, in the coming of Jesus, as the courageous faith of Ruth who stepped boldly into the unknown. What story about God does your life tell?

How bold was Ruth’s faith? It had an Abrahamic quality in that she had never set eyes on Bethlehem, but she had no doubts that this was the place she wanted to call home. To say, “Your people will be my people and your God my God” was simultaneously, a renunciation of her own people and gods. Naomi offered Ruth a safe alternative to a risky future, but Ruth pledged her allegiance to Naomi and to God. Then, she invoked the sacred name of *YAHWEH* as she swore an oath to never turn back. “May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.” There was no changing Ruth’s mind, so Naomi stopped trying.

B. Ruth Arrives Home verses 19-22

Upon the arrival of Ruth and Naomi, the women of Bethlehem exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" This might imply their delight to see an old friend, but it could also imply a sense of surprise at the toll the years had taken upon Naomi's physical appearance. "Call me Mara," she said as she acknowledged the hardships she had endured. "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty." Naomi had never been rich; a famine had driven her family to Moab. Still, when she left Bethlehem, she had a husband, sons and a hope for a bright future. God, apparently, had other plans for her, but she was too meek to imagine how wonderful they were.

Of course, now the story will shift to Ruth. Bethlehem was not the home she knew, but this was the home she had chosen, because she desired to abide with the people of God. The hand of God will become even more evident as the story unfolds. It was the time of the barley harvest, which meant that Ruth would have an honest means to provide for herself. There were no sons of Naomi to marry, but a kinsman will appear who could redeem her if he wished. And, he likes her. He admires her "spunk" for having left her home. Seeds of romance would blossom and flourish. But, just like a TV love story, that will have to suffice as just a peak at future episodes.

For now, what have we learned? Why is Ruth included among the works of sacred Scripture? Perhaps, it was to balance out the wretchedness associated with that era of the judges. In spite of rampant godlessness throughout Israel, a few people honored God as best they knew how. Perhaps, it was to provide some ancestral background for David, Israel's great king, who was also the great-grandson of two of the story's main characters. Perhaps, it was to show us that God can make a home among His people for anyone, no matter where they've been, especially, when they witness the uniqueness and the fruit of love in the lives of those who are devoted to Him. Perhaps, Ruth is intended to remind us that God's hand guides His people even in what seem to be life's darkest chapters. Ruth accomplishes all of these things, and I trust we will see more as well.

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