

Lesson 1: Grief Upon Grief

Ruth 1:1-5

Prayer Requests:

Memory Verse: “For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning.”
Psalm 30:5

Text: “Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahon and Chilion – Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.”

Monday

Recently I heard the story of a woman who had been married for just over fifty years. Her husband passed away and after he died, she had the painful task of going through his clothing, categorizing them, and then putting them in bags and into boxes. She labeled the boxes “formal wear” (filled with suits and ties), “sportswear,” “shoes,” and still another, “casual.”

Each of the boxes became to her a monument of memory and each one reminded her of times they had spent together in different situations. For instance, as she looked at the box labeled “formal wear,” she thought about the suit that was inside, which he’d worn to their niece’s wedding, and she thought about the tuxedo that was in that box worn on a cruise that they’d taken on their 30th anniversary. As she looked at the “casual clothes” box, she was suddenly struck with vivid reminders of all those lazy Saturdays they had spent together at home just tooling about the house and the walks on the beach that they had taken. And when she looked at “shoes” she remembered the boat shoes they wore on their boat together. Then she saw where she had put his army boots, which he had kept for all those years. She remembered that he was wearing those very same boots the instant that their eyes first met. He had been on leave from the service and had gone to a dance. They’d seen each other across the floor and he had walked over and asked her to

dance. He had been wearing those very same boots that day.

She ended her story by saying this, “As I gathered his clothes and got them ready to give away, I found myself in the midst of perhaps the most difficult experience of my life.”

The book of Ruth is a book that begins on a note of tremendous sorrow and grief. And yet it is a book that contains a beautiful and wonderful story of love, perseverance and faith. This fact is important because this is how it is in the real world. We are constantly surrounded by sorrow, grief and difficulty, and I think this fact also gives us hope by reminding us of how so many stories begin in sorrow and yet end in joy, peace and a wonderful deep satisfaction in the Lord.

So let us begin this week by looking at the first five verses of Ruth chapter one and getting an introduction to the book of Ruth. As we do so we will be looking at the sorrow and grief of Naomi which serves as the backdrop to this book. The sorrows of her life are very similar to the sorrows that we all face in our own lives. We’ll see what this does to her and we will begin to see how God provides redemption for Naomi through a bitter providence.

What is the greatest sorrow you have ever had to endure? How did you cope with it?

Consider 2 Corinthians 1:3-4a, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation” In what ways does God comfort us in our trials? Have you ever experienced this?

How would you describe a faithful verses an unfaithful culture? What are the key differences?

Tuesday

As we begin looking at our text for this week, we see the first sorrow of Naomi. It is this:

1. Naomi endured the grief of an unfaithful culture (v. 1).

Verse one begins, “Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled ...” What were the days when the judges ruled like? This refers to a period of Israel’s history spanning approximately 350 years from the time of Joshua’s conquest, approximately 1398 B.C. to the time that Samuel established the monarchy approximately 1043 B.C.

Now, the days when the judges governed Israel were extremely difficult days in general. They were some of the most spiritually dark days in all the history of Israel. It was a time when the majority of people did not know God. It was a time of incredible compromise, moral corruption and confusion. We are told for example in Judges 2:11-13, “Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals; and they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.”

How did God respond to Israel’s unfaithfulness?

Baal was the rain and fertility god of the Canaanites and Ashtaroth was the female consort of Baal, the goddess of both sex and war – an interesting combination. The worship of these false gods included both ritualistic animal and human sacrifices, licentious dances, male and female prostitution and all manner of sexual perversion. You name it, it was a part of that pagan worship. And the children of Israel forsook the one true God for this kind of perversion. The time when the judges governed were spiritually dark days.

We are told in Judges 2:14 how God responded to this situation, “And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for calamity, as the Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed.”

So those were the prevailing social conditions in which the events of

Ruth unfold. The days when the judges governed Israel began with a generation of people who did not know God. As we are told in Judges 2:10, after the death of Joshua and the generation that conquered the land, “when all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel.” So in righteous discipline and anger God sold them into disaster after disaster. They would seemingly repent for a time and God would send a judge to deliver them. But soon afterward, they would go back to rebellion and paganism. It was a vicious downward spiral.

It was a period of frightful social chaos and pandemonium. One commentator says that “The book of Judges teems with violent invasions, apostate religion, unchecked lawlessness and tribal civil war.” And frankly, that’s putting it mildly. If you spend some time reading Judges, you will see that this commentator was certainly not guilty of hyperbole.

These are the days in which Naomi found herself. She was a believer in the one true God and was born, raised and lived in this time of darkness and spiritual chaos. We are not told, but perhaps many of Naomi’s friends were involved in this kind of false worship. Perhaps, there were even members of her own family caught up in these things. Whatever the specifics, Naomi had to endure the grief of an unfaithful and terribly dark culture, vexing her soul on a daily basis.

In what ways does our culture reflect the same kind of spiritual darkness that marked the days of the Judges? In what ways is it better? How is it worse?

How does a believer survive in a spiritually corrupt and dark culture?
What guidance does the Scripture give in this regard?

What impact does an unfaithful society have on a believer's spirit? Do you experience this? Why or why not?

Wednesday

In addition to the sorrow of living in an unfaithful culture, the text shows us this:

What physical hardships must people commonly endure in our own day and time?

2. Naomi endured the grief of physical hardship (v. 1).

Verse one as it continues, "... that there was a famine in the land." This is the grief of physical hardship: hunger.

Now we are not told the actual cause of this particular famine that drove Naomi and her family from the land of Israel for about ten years. Perhaps it was a long period of drought. Perhaps it was a famine caused by the invasions and depredations of that time. In Judges 6:1-6, for instance, we are told that God sold Israel into the hand of the Midianites for seven years. It says in verse 3, "So it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. Then they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both they and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it. So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites."

So much for the worship of the fertility god Baal. And what would the Israelites do during this annual disaster? They would hide in caves and dens and strongholds in the mountains while their land was ravished. For seven years this famine occurred, and it took seven years before the Israelites actually cried out to God, which gives us a telling glimpse at the hardness of their hearts and how far they really had drifted from God.

This is the only specific famine mentioned in Judges, though there were probably multiple ones, and perhaps this was the famine that Naomi's family fled from. Or, as I said, perhaps it was another famine that isn't specified elsewhere in Scripture. Regardless of the immediate cause we do know the ultimate cause of the hardship was God, Himself, because the nation forsook Him.

As an aside, it is interesting to me that some of the commentators I've read on these verses are fairly harsh on Elimilech for his decision to take his family out of the land to Moab. I found myself wondering, as I was doing this background reading, how many of these commentators had ever been faced with real hunger, or even worse the prospect of watching your family waste away and possibly die from starvation?

Even Abraham, the father of our faith, left the land of promise and sojourned in Egypt in an attempt to escape one of these ancient famines. So I don't want to be too harsh on Elimilech at this point, because I certainly don't even know what I would do in a similar circumstance. But this physical hardship does bring us to a third sorrow for Naomi revealed in the Scripture:

How do we wish we could make major life decisions, if we had the opportunity?

3. Naomi endured the grief of a desperate decision (vv. 1-2).

The text continues, "And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech [which means "My God is King"], the name of his wife was Naomi, [Pleasant], and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion – Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there."

To have to make a decision out of desperation is a special kind of trial and grief that many of us have had to endure. It rarely takes us where we would want to go. It is almost never our preference; and, such decisions are almost always heartbreaking, costing our families hardship and signaling the death of hopes and dreams that we have cherished.

Elimelech is faced with hunger and famine, and he must decide. The Hebrew text is fairly strong here in indicating that it was Elimelech who took the family to Moab and not a joint venture. Now we don't know if Naomi was consenting in this decision or not. We don't know the conversations that led up to it. Perhaps she was all for it. Perhaps she had even given him the idea. In which case, she would later live to be very sorry for her part in it.

Circumstances do not always allow these luxuries, however. What, then, are the difficulties that go along with desperate decisions?

Or perhaps, she didn't want to go. Maybe she looked at her husband and said, "Moab? Honey, I think that's a terrible idea. We don't speak their language. We don't know anyone there. They've always hated Jews as a general rule. Sure it's bad here, but at least we have family, friends and help and can get by somehow. Sure, you've got Baal worship here, but there they worship Chemosh. They don't honor God; they've been cursed by Him." Perhaps that was her opinion, and if so, she would later have cause for great bitterness. Either way, it had to be a painfully difficult and grieving decision for their family.

Why was going to Moab a desperate decision? Historically there had been enmity and strife between Israel and Moab. You will remember that after God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in which Abraham's nephew Lot and his family lived. The two daughters of Lot, thinking that there were no men for them to marry, suddenly poverty stricken and bereft of all prospects with the death of their fiances in the fiery judgment of God, and facing a potentially very difficult life in a patriarchal world, rather than turning to God for help, they decided to take matters in their own hands, make their father drunk and lie with him so they could hopefully have male children and preserve their lives and family line. Then in Genesis 19:36 we read, "Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father. The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day."

That's a bad beginning, but it gets even worse for Moab. In Numbers, Balak, the king of Moab, his elders and his people decide that they want to oppose, attack and kill the people of Israel during their wilderness wandering. He hires Balaam the prophet to curse Israel. This ticks God off a little bit, and we have those wonderful prophecies of the Messiah in Numbers 23 and 24, which God shoves into Balaam's unwilling mouth.

Failing in this effort Balaam gives Balak another strategy for victory. He sends women from Moab, sacred prostitutes, to entice and seduce the

Have you ever
endured the grief of a
desperate decision?
What happened?

people of Israel into false worship. Numbers 25 tells us the success of this venture, “Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.” All of this resulted in a terrible plague on Israel from God that was only ended through the zealotry of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron.

So Moab hated Israel without cause and God was not happy about it at all. In Deuteronomy 23, God curses Moab to the tenth generation. The enmity between the nations continued. In Judges 3 we are told that the Moabites captured, oppressed and enslaved the Israelites for eighteen years until God sent Ehud to free them, which was probably shortly before Elimelech’s time. Then in Judges 11, we are told that the hostility is so great that Moab would not even allow Israelites to pass through their territory, which was probably after Elimelech’s time.

So taking your family to Moab was a risky and desperate venture for Elimelech and Naomi, certainly not one entered into lightly or casually. This decision at least raises the question whether or not this man, whose name means “The Lord is my King”, whether he was really trusting in the Kingship of His God in making this decision, or whether he was tempted to take matters into his own hands? The inspired author of Scripture does not comment on that question here, however, or draw any firm implication, and neither does any other inspired author. So we must be careful not to go beyond God’s word and into our own ideas. But we can say that this was a grieving and desperate decision.

How should a believer respond scripturally to physical hardship?

Elimelech and Naomi's physical hardship led to a desperate decision. What should a believer do when faced with a desperate decision? Where should he or she go for advice and counsel?

Thursday

What happens to Naomi after her family arrives in Moab?

4. Naomi endured the grief of losing her husband (v. 3).

Verse three, "Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons."

Who can even adequately describe the pain and emotion of this event in Naomi's life? This land was supposed to be a refuge from starvation and death. It was supposed to be a way of escape from this calamity. And, it was supposed to be temporary. At the end of verse 2, we see, though, that they actually "remained" in Moab or you could translate it "lived there." It's not as if they were just popping in for a few days to buy provisions and take off again. And yet, it was supposed to be temporary, a place of sojourn, not the place where you bury your husband.

Moab was and is a mountainous region on the east side of the Dead Sea. It has a particularly fertile plateau that runs for about twenty five square miles and is several thousand feet up. This has been historically a little corner of abundance in an otherwise harsh area. But the security and protection that Elimelech had been seeking for his family in this place never really materialized.

The loss of Naomi's husband, however, was tempered somewhat by what we read next. Naomi still has two sons and they are to be married.

There is always joy in weddings, which must have been looked forward to with great anticipation by Naomi. There was certainly love between her and the girls and the weddings would do something to soothe her grief in a kind of bittersweet way. Many of us have been there, struggling with the absence of a loved one and a wishing that he or she could have been there to share in the joy of some special event. Naomi lived through all of those emotions.

And of course, with marriage comes the prospect of grandchildren. So she would have been able to stop in, pour the equivalent of coffee, and inquire in the discreet way that mother-in-laws do whether or not there was anything in the offing, and whether or not there might be the joy of little cries and tiny feet. This would have mitigated the grief of losing her husband somewhat.

Naomi, however, could not have imagined the intense tragedy that was about to unfold for her. Both of her daughters-in-law would prove to be barren for approximately a ten year period, a serious grief to all of them no doubt, but then added to this was a fifth sorrow:

5. Naomi endured the grief of losing her own children (vv. 4-5).

Verses 4 and five, “Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.”

Now, not only does Naomi have no grandchildren, none being born in a very long period, but she actually finds herself utterly bereft of her own children. What a sorrowful scene it is at the end of verse five: a lonely widow, living in a foreign country, in a time of terrible darkness, having lost her only children, and now struggling without the protection and provision of a husband or a son in a male dominated society. It is a hopeless, tragic, depressing and very painful situation for her.

The son’s names Mahlon and Chilion are not dissimilar from two other words, which actually mean “sickly” and “pining” or “frail.” We must assume that Elimelech and Naomi didn’t choose these names because of their similarity to these words. “Here’s our first boy, why don’t we call him sickly; and now that we’ve got a second one why don’t we call him frail.” But it just so happens that the very names they were given were close enough in sound to these Hebrew words, that they would make it possible for people to make this kind of connection. And there is every

indication, based on what we read here, that these names may have been ominously and unintentionally prophetic because of Mahlon and Chilion's premature deaths.

It's kind of like my name in a way. My mother certainly did not intend to name me after a breakfast cereal when she called me Christopher Paul Rice. And yet all of my life people have made this connection saying, "Chris P. Rice. Rice Chris P., etc." And now, even my three children are referred to at times as "Snap, Crackle and Pop." So I don't think Elimelech and Naomi intended this connection with their son's names, but that fact is that it has been made now for literally thousands of years.

We are not told how they died, but the text indicates that their deaths were in fairly close proximity to one another. "They dwelt there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died." One might imagine the horror of losing one child, but to lose two children in rapid succession ...

So this is where verse five leaves us and it is unfortunately not a tragic circumstance dissimilar to those in which many in this world find themselves even now. Sorrow upon sorrow, grief upon grief.

Have you ever endured the grief of losing a spouse or a child? How did this impact you or someone you know who has suffered in this way?

How should you as a friend and a believer respond to someone in Naomi's circumstance? What would God have you do?

Friday

Now, Beloved, if the story ended at verse five and we were left there, we would have to ask the questions, “Where is God in all of this sorrow?” and “What good can He possibly make out of all this?”

The rest of the book serves as God’s answer to these two questions; and, it is a beautiful and mighty answer indeed, one of great joy, love, grace upon grace, and redemption. This is why I’ve entitled our study “Redemption Through Bitter Providence” – not “From” but “Through”. But I want to close this week by simply listing for you the major theological themes that we will be dealing with as we work our way through this book. What is the book of Ruth really about? What is its message from God to us today? Let’s just mention these themes and then we will hit them more thoroughly as we go:

Major Theological Themes:

As you look through these themes, which one speaks to you most in your current circumstances? Why is that?

1. God provides a Kinsman-Redeemer, and thus redemption for the faithful through all the bitter providence of life in this world (4:1-12).
2. God is sovereign over all circumstances – bitter and sweet (1:6; 4:13) – and He is able to weave them together according to His purpose for His glory and our everlasting joy (4:18-20).
3. God’s redemptive plan extends beyond the Jews to men and women of all nations, those individuals who take refuge in Him (4:12).
4. God manifests for us the glory of true faith (1:16-17).
5. God vividly demonstrates for us the beauty of a virtuous woman (4:11-15; Prov. 31:10-31). It is no accident that Ruth was placed immediately after Proverbs in the original Hebrew Canon as it was handed down to us by the prophets.
6. God gives great reward and blessing to those who love and give of themselves in kindness toward others (2:8-23).
7. God is the God of the ordinary (1-4). By that I mean both ordinary people and ordinary circumstances. He is the God of the common. Even in the midst of the dark and dramatic eras of life, God still has his people, is still working out His purposes and is often choosing to do so in places that we would regard as very unlikely. And often, He is

choosing to do so in such a quiet fashion that those who believe that the dramatic and the loud events of life are the most significant are caused to wonder whether God is doing anything at all. But we will see that He is the God of the ordinary and is always at work bringing about the redemption of His beloved.

Hymn: Abide with Me

Abide with me! Fast falls the even-tide.
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide!
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me!

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day.
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away.
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me!

I need Thy presence every passing hour.
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Thro' clouds and sunshine, oh, abide with me!

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still if Thou abide with me!

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine thro' the gloom, and point me to the skies.
Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee!
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me! Amen.

Words 1847: Henry F. Lyte
Music 1861: William H. Monk