

“The Dead-End Road”
Ruth 1:1-5
September 7, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

We’re going to be focusing this fall on the Old Testament story of Ruth, a story that is set in a dark time in the history of Israel. The opening verse sets the story during the time when Israel was ruled by the judges, just after Joshua and until the time the monarchy began with King Saul. It was roughly around 1350-1100 B.C. There is a repeated cycle in the book of Judges. It starts with the people forgetting God and sinning against him. Then God sends judgment, usually in the form of Israel’s enemies being given power over Israel, a power they used to make Israel miserable. Then Israel would call out to the Lord, and he would raise up a judge, which was their name for their rulers at that time, and the judge would deliver Israel from their enemies. After a time of returning peace and prosperity, they would sin again and the cycle would start all over. But it was a downward spiral. With each cycle of sin, judgment and restoration, Israel would show less desire to repent, so that by the end of the book there is no record of any repentance.

The general decline of spiritual health during the period of the judges is further seen in the worsening of the judges themselves. The first one, Othniel, had an unblemished record. The last one, and the most well-known of all the judges to modern readers, was the worst. Samson was a Nazirite who broke every vow made for him, the most famous of which was the cutting of his hair. He wasn’t supposed to come into contact with anything dead. But when he saw the beehive in the carcass of the dead lion, he couldn’t resist taking the honey for himself. He was supposed to abstain from all alcohol, but he hosts a feast in preparation for his marriage. And when it came to choosing a wife for himself, his heart was drawn to Philistine women, marriages God had forbidden to Israelites. His deliverance of Israel seemed to be motivated more by personal vengeance than love for his people and his God. Then the book of Judges ends with a tale of unspeakable evil and the outbreak of a brief civil war.

The story of Ruth is set at the end of this period of the rule of the judges. It was a dark time. The book of Judges repeatedly summarizes the evil of this time by saying, **“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”** (17:6; 21:25). Whenever people do what’s right in their own eyes instead of obeying our Lord and King, trouble follows. That’s what happens in this opening section of the story. Elimelech did what was right in his own eyes and fled the famine in his hometown of Bethlehem, and his move proved to be a dead end. This opening passage of the book is a passage describing incredible suffering. The dead end wasn’t caused by the

suffering in their lives, but rather their response to that suffering. He responds to the suffering of the famine with an unbelieving and evil heart. Let's look at the suffering that unfolds in these first five verses, and consider the proper response to this suffering.

I. Experiencing Suffering

The very first verse of the book describes a type of suffering with which very few of us are acquainted. **“There was a famine in the land.”** Though starvation is still a major problem in the world, we are less prone to famine in our modern economies because of the relative low cost of transporting food over long distances. If there is a drought or blight in one region, we simply import food from another region. It may cost a little more, but we won't have to watch our children cry out for food and be unable to help them. But in Israel at this time, if it didn't rain for two or three growing seasons, they would simply run out of food and be unable to acquire any more. Death by starvation is agonizingly slow. Elimelech undoubtedly would have been more familiar with such things than I. Naturally, he wanted to protect his family from this suffering. Given the names of his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, which mean “weak” and “frail,” it is possible that his sons were less able to withstand a famine than normal. So he decides to immigrate to Moab, where he had heard there was food.

In our time and place, there would be nothing wrong with making the decision Elimelech made. Most of our ancestors at one time or another made the same decision in immigrating to America from some European nation. But in his time and place, it was an evil and unbelieving decision. The reason for that is because of the special place the land had for Israel. We call it the Holy Land because it was the place during that period of time where God decided to make his own home and live with his people. God had told them about famines in the land back in Deuteronomy 28:22-24. Drought and famine was to be interpreted as a curse for their disobedience to God. The answer for such disobedience was not to flee the land, but to repent. But there was very little repentance going on in Israel, because there was very little spiritual life.

Elimelech moved outside the land to Moab. Moab was the nation descending from the incestuous relationship between Lot, Abraham's nephew, and one of his daughters. Their name was a slur on their origin. *Mo* is Hebrew for “who” and *Ab* for “father.” We would say, “Who's your daddy?” Moab was the nation that hired Balaam to curse Israel on their way to the Promised Land after their exodus from Egypt. When that backfired, they sent their young women into the Israelite camp. When the Jewish men began taking them as their wives, the Moabite women invited them to worship Baal. And like Samson giving in to Delilah, they agreed and began worshipping false gods. The first

part of that happens again with Elimelech's sons. They take two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, to be their wives.

But before these marriages took place, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a widow. As hard as that would have been for Naomi, it was nothing in comparison to what was about to happen to her. In time, both her sons died, and they did so without having any children. Some cultural explanation is needed if we are to appreciate what a blow this would have been to her. In many traditional cultures such as this one, a woman would leave her family of origin when she got married and join the family of her husband. A son was permanently part of his family of origin. So if a husband and father died, it would become the duty of the son to care for his mother until her death. This obligation would also pass to any grandsons the matriarch would have through her sons.

In his book, *A Loving Life*, Paul Miller reports on a Harvard Business Review article in which a management consultant posed this hypothetical situation to American men. "Your mother, your wife, and your daughter are all in a sinking boat and you can rescue only one of them. Who do you rescue?" Sixty percent would rescue their daughter and 40 percent their wife. Not a single American man chose his mother. The consultant then posed the same question to Saudi men, and every one of them said they would rescue their mother. The Saudi culture is much closer to the biblical culture than ours, and that illustrates this strong bond between a mother and son.

Naomi's situation is the epitome of suffering. She is all alone in a country not her own. She is without economic resources and, seemingly, without any hope for the future, due to the death of her two sons before they could have any children. Her situation would be like one of us waking up in some large African ghetto with no money and no ability to contact anyone we know. As we see later in the chapter, all she can do is weep. She has lost her past and her future, and her present is a type of living death.

II. Responding to Suffering

While there is some suffering we bring on ourselves from bad decisions we make, the majority of it is outside our control. Naomi didn't bring the famine on herself. In the patriarchal culture in which she lived, it was probably not her decision to move to Moab. The loss of her husband and sons was certainly not the result of bad decisions she had made. We cannot control the majority of suffering in our lives. What we can control is our response to suffering. As in all areas of life, we are called to trust God when we are called to undergo a season of suffering. What does such trust look like? I notice three features of it in this passage.

Trusting God in the midst of suffering looks like repentance. That is the theme of this chapter. The Hebrew word for “turn” appears repeatedly in this passage. Instead of responding to the famine by fleeing to Moab, Elimelech should have repented. I don’t mean to suggest by this that human suffering is always caused by our own sin. Jesus suffered greatly, though he never committed any sin. What I do want to suggest is that all suffering is God’s call to us to turn from trusting ourselves to trusting him.

What do you do when you come to a dead end? I remember one time when Wendy and I were traveling in Florence, Italy. I was driving a rental car, relying heavily on our GPS to help me navigate. As we were leaving Florence late one afternoon, I forgot to change the GPS from pedestrian mode to car mode, and it directed us down a small lane. We thought it odd that there were pedestrians standing in the middle of the street, until we came to the bottom of the lane and saw a series of barriers erected to prevent cars like ours from traveling on this road. It was a dead end because it was a sidewalk. When you come to a dead end, you turn around and go the opposite direction. That’s repentance. Suffering is God’s call to us to draw near to him and trust him instead of trusting any number of strategies we can develop on our own.

That brings us to a second feature of trusting God in the midst of suffering. We are to stay in the suffering for as long as God has us there, rather than attempt to deliver ourselves by taking some step motivated solely by self-protection. I’m not saying that it is wrong to employ normal and acceptable steps to relieve suffering. If you suffer from hunger, eat some food. If you get sick, go to the doctor. If your job doesn’t pay enough, look for a higher-paying job. There is no unbelief in taking such steps. What I’m talking about is the kind of suffering in which you take such normal steps, but the suffering is not relieved. The famine encountered by Elimelech is an example of that. He sought to deliver himself from that suffering with a step God had forbidden—moving to Moab—when he should have stayed in the suffering. It seems from the text that Elimelech only intended this to be a brief sojourn in Moab. Notice the verbs used for his stay in that land. In verse 1, he went for a *sojourn* in Moab, a verb that would be used for a temporary trip. Then in verse 2 we read that he *remained* in Moab. Finally, verse 4 says they *lived* there for ten years. When we turn our backs on the Lord and his commands, we usually only intend it as a temporary measure. But it quickly becomes a lifestyle instead. How many times have people said to themselves, “We just need to take a break from church for a season, and then we’ll go back.”

Two of the most common ways we wrongly try to remove ourselves from suffering is by attempting to fix people or by emotionally withdrawing ourselves from them. For example, parents have a wayward teenager who brings great pain into their lives. They may attempt to assert control over their teenager by

some parental power play. I'm not talking about normal disciplinary measures such as enforcing some sensible household rules. I'm talking about an attempt to force change in some manipulative way such as some overly harsh discipline. When that backfires, the tendency can go the other direction in the form of parents writing off their child emotionally. The way of trusting God is to stay in the pain rather than seeking such self-protective measures, even if your heart gets broken every day.

How can you stay in that kind of pain? You can only do so by having a heart full of hope in God. That brings us to the third way we are called to trust God in the midst of suffering. We are to cultivate a heart of faith that believes that the good hand of God is at work in everything. It would be easy for Naomi to see God as the problem, not the solution to her problems. Commentators have pointed out that Ruth is one of those unusual stories with no villains. Naomi could have seen God as her chief enemy. He could have prevented the famine that prompted their emigration from Bethlehem in the first place. He certainly could have saved at least one son from dying. But if we broaden our perspective a little and see a bigger picture than this woman at the moment of losing everything, we begin to see the faint outline of God's grace. We see, for example, in the very next verse **"that the Lord had visited his people and given them food"** (1:6).

In the bigger story of the Old Testament, we see that God reverses all the ironies of our text. These ironies are seen in the differences between the names given and the events occurring with those names. Bethlehem means "house of bread," but there is a famine there. Elimelech means "God is king," and he dies. Naomi means "pleasant," though her life is anything but that. But the God who raises the dead eventually reverses these things. Bethlehem becomes again the house of bread when a young son of Jesse is born there. Ruth's grandson, David, was from Bethlehem, and he becomes the king of Israel who will bring great prosperity to the whole nation. Further, another king will be born in Bethlehem, the great descendent of David, our Lord Jesus. In him, God will be King. And Naomi's life will become pleasant once more, which we will see in future weeks as the story unfolds itself.

CONCLUSION:

Are you at a place where you are feeling your life at something of a dead-end? There is always hope, and it is found through repentance and trust in God. Let your suffering lead you to repentance of all self-trust and look to the God who raises the dead.