

Act 1: The Road To Bethlehem

Ruth 1: 1-22

The book of Ruth resembles a play, divided into acts and scenes, each centred around an individual character. After an opening prologue we have Act 1, consisting of two scenes, with Naomi at the centre of the action. Each following chapter, or act, has its central character as first Ruth, then Naomi again, then Boaz, step forward.

The first five verses sets the scene for the whole play; its place in history ('in the days when the Judges ruled'), in geography (in Bethlehem, Judah and Moab, and on the road between), in society (Elimelech and his family) and in economics (during a famine). All this comes thick and fast, with hardly time to take it in before moving on to the main problem of the book – Naomi's emptiness.

It is easy to think, particularly given the title of this book, that Ruth is the central character of this story, but it is Naomi who, in fact, is at the heart of this tale. The opening prologue sets out her background.

We do not know what she felt about leaving her home to go with her husband and family into a foreign land. She may well have not been consulted and had no choice, but it seems clear from these opening verses that the choices made were poor ones. God had given the land to his people. He had promised to provide for them, yet Elimelech, with or without Naomi's support, had turned away from God's revealed word and will. The story does not state that Naomi's destitution was a punishment from God, but it does see it as a consequence. Naomi certainly sees it as a direct act of God (1:20ff).

Eventually, Naomi hears that things have changed back home (1:6) and in scene 1 sets out for Judah, taking her two daughters-in-law with her. Very quickly she decides that the two young women would be better off going back to their own families. Orpah is persuaded but Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi, and so they return to Bethlehem together. In scene 2 Naomi arrives home in Bethlehem and tells of the bitterness in her heart at the way she feels God has treated her.

How are we to read Ruth today, with its hints at divine judgment and strange customs? At the centre of this story is Naomi's emptiness. Naomi is alone in the world without hope or a future. She has lost husband and sons and feels the weight of God's disapproval on her life. Naomi is overwhelmed and blames God. She has no hope. She has no choices. There is no 'Plan B' to fall back on. Such feelings of powerlessness are extremely debilitating. She feels she has no alternative but to go home. Naomi reflects the lives of many, not least the Exiles returning home in the days of Ezra.

By the cold logic Naomi applies to her situation, going back can be no worse than staying. In Moab she will certainly starve. In Bethlehem she may well meet with the same fate, but at least she will be home. Orpah is persuaded by this same logic to return to her home, but Ruth sees things differently. There is something more important than

logic, no matter how clear and compelling it may be, and that is commitment. Ruth, the Moabite outsider, responds to Naomi with a deep expression of abiding love. And this is just as well because if, like Orpah, Ruth had returned to her home Naomi would have been deprived by the power of her own argument of the very means God will use to bless her. But the message of Ruth is not simply that commitment is more important than common-sense. Naomi wrestles with real pain. She feels rejected by God, who has afflicted her and brought misfortune upon her (1:21).

However, underlying the story of Ruth is a second story – the story seen from God’s perspective. Whereas Naomi sees her life through her own eyes (and what else can she do?) we, the readers, glimpse the same scene through God’s eyes, and through those eyes we see a sovereign, loving God. The story does not give pat answers. There is no word of comfort for Naomi. Indeed, she continues throughout the story to believe she is God-forsaken and must find her own solution. Only at the very end does she begin to understand. Thankfully, Ruth does not buy into Naomi’s logic. Human wisdom cannot accomplish the will of God. Maybe Naomi loses her grip on God in these years of suffering and trial, but one thing is certain, God never loses his grip on Naomi.

Although we may not suffer the tragedies that befell Naomi, we may well share some of her feelings of loneliness, powerlessness and bitterness. We may attempt to fill the void in our lives with our own plans to rise above our troubles, yet there is a quiet place in our hearts that still feels the emptiness. ‘I don’t fit in.’ ‘I don’t feel understood or appreciated.’ ‘No one cares.’ Where are we to find the antidote to such feelings?

Naomi feels alone in the world without hope or a future, but that was not God’s purpose. “For I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”. Amazingly, our laments and complains are heard by God, even though we may not always think so. And just as God was at work to answer Naomi, so he is at work on our behalf.

Amen

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