

When Times are Hard

Ruth 1:1-18

¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and 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. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your 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 security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰ 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? Do I still have 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. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³ would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." ¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ So 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 press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

The transitions generated by the cycles of life present many hard times and challenges for human beings. Families go through tremendous tumult with the cycles of death between generations. The tragic disruptions of death and suffering touch us all. The book Ruth begins with tragedy and suffering. **Dale P. Andrews**

From our reading we learn: "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab" (v. 1). This was not a good time to live, for "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). Without a king or a centralized government, Israel was troubled. But the more pressing problem was famine. Ironically, Bethlehem literally means the "house of food," but there was no food in Bethlehem. When Elimelech and Naomi could not find means to support their family, they sought better opportunities elsewhere. Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, crossed their border to live as resident aliens, immigrating to the border country of Moab, a country with a negative history of religious and sexual practices (Num. 25:1-2). But soon Naomi become a widow. Elimelech, whose name means "My God is king," dies. Mahlon and Chilion, married Ruth and Orpah, women of Moab. I can imagine that Naomi has spent ten years teaching Orpah and Ruth about the faithfulness of her God, how they follow the Ten Commandments, about their religious and dietary laws. But after 10 years of living in Moab, their husbands, her sons, also die. Widows in that day, faced peril, for without husband or sons they are without support. Now, the family was completely devastated. This immigrant family has just experienced what most first-generation forced migrants encounter in times of plight and flight—suffering, loss, hardship, and pain in a new context—when they made their difficult journey to escape just such hardship.

Naomi hears from the fields of Moab that the Lord has visited those in Judah and given them food. As she starts the journey back, her two daughters-in-law accompany her. Naomi commands them to go back to "*their* mother's house." From Naomi's description, both Orpah and Ruth were also fatherless. This might explain why Ruth and Orpah, Moabites, left their own ethnic community to marry outsiders.

Naomi says her daughters-in-law have shown loving-kindness, faithfulness, and loyalty to their dead husbands; now, Naomi also seeks loving-kindness, faithfulness, and loyalty for her daughters-in-law. Her ultimate wish for them is to "find security...

in the house of *their* husbands" (v. 9b). After Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth, the women all lift their voices and weep. The daughters-in-law will return with Naomi to her people.

Naomi vehemently rejects this proposal. She sees no possibility of a future marriage for herself, nor additional sons for them to marry. Naomi calls her life bitter; she declares that the hand of the Lord is against her. **John Ahn**

Naomi is overwhelmed by the same theological judgment that Job rails against in last week's scripture. It is the struggle to determine the meaning of evil and human suffering. Naomi and the friends of Job respond to tragedy in believing that God invokes suffering to punish us for some offense in sin. Simply put, this old formula says that if you're suffering, you must have sinned. Naomi believes God had punished her with loss of her husband for moving to Moab; and she is now being punished for allowing her sons to marry Moabite women. When Job tragically lost his livestock, children, and health, his friends used the formula on him. "Who, being innocent, has ever perished?" Eliphaz said, suspecting Job's guilt (Job 4:7). Bildad even told Job that his children only died because they had sinned (8:4). Ignorant of the real cause of Job's calamities, they tormented him with simplistic reasons for his pain, later receiving God's rebuke. Now Naomi inflicts the same guilt and shame on herself. Naomi's name means "pleasant" in Hebrew, but her bitter life belies all pleasantness and she blames her fate on God. She perceives herself to be utterly alone and without a future, and so gathers up the human experience of despair. But, suffering is a part of living in a fallen world. Like Job, it can happen for reasons we may never know. **Dale P. Andrews**

So, the women weep aloud, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, a symbolic sign of going back to her own people. Ruth did not kiss Naomi, but emotionally and ever so powerfully clings to her.

Naomi tells Ruth to go back, like her sister-in-law Orpah, to her people and gods (v. 15). But Ruth says, "Do not press me to leave you or turn back from following you!"

In the ancient world, tribal and family origins firmly fixed one's identity and one's gods, and people did not voluntarily abdicate either. Yet Ruth abandons people and gods to vow undying love for her mother-in-law and for the God of Judah. The outsider is the faithful one, the one who expresses and lives her commitment to God and God's people.

There are four components in Ruth's speech. First, Ruth is determined to be with Naomi. Even if Ruth is not related to her mother-in-law by nationality or heritage, she will not be separated from her even by death. Instead, death has brought about a bonding more powerful than life. Second, wherever Naomi goes and wherever she decides to lodge, Ruth will do likewise. The lodging here may be understood to be a place of discomfort, laden with complaints or bitterness. Third, Naomi's people and God will be Ruth's people and God. This is a reality of the future Ruth anticipates. Even if she is rejected in Judah as a Moabite, so that the people there murmur and complain about her, Ruth will nevertheless remain in solidarity with Naomi's people and her God. And lastly, where Naomi dies, Ruth will be buried next to her. **John Ahn**

Naomi herself remains lost in the bleakness of her situation. She projects that grim world onto the future, but "Ruth clung to her" (v. 14). Ruth is a foreigner, a woman, a widow, and, perhaps of most importance, she is an enemy of Israel. Thus, family bonds are broken and a new family is born. Katharine Sackenfled notes, "Even if her prospects in Moab were not good in her own thinking, commitment to stick with an older woman whose reception at home is uncertain is still a striking decision.... Whatever Ruth's motives, she was presumably wise enough to know of potential difficulties in the path she was setting for herself."

We can get a sense of the decision of Ruth by tapping into sentiment toward those of Middle Eastern descent after 9/11. These "aliens" (even native-born citizens) were searched more vigorously in airport security lines, had their civil rights violated in the interest of "national security," were looked at with suspicion and contempt by even the most "enlightened" citizens. For a Moabite—and one who had been a part of a mixed

marriage with a Hebrew man—to set foot in Bethlehem would have been to set off all the cultural, social, and religious detectors of the time. Leaving Moab, Ruth would face not only a language barrier, a food barrier, a social etiquette barrier, and a religious practice barrier; she would also face the constant subtle and not-so-subtle reminders that she was "not one of us." Ruth is the story of a foreign woman who refuses to allow external boundaries to prevent her from maintaining her *hesed*, loving-kindness, faithfulness, and loyalty for her Hebrew mother-in-law. Ruth crosses over the border from Moab to accompany Naomi.

Katharine Sakenfeld offers a sobering reminder of the consequences of Ruth's decision for Naomi, "For Naomi, Ruth's presence is as much a reminder of tragedy as it is a potential comfort. Naomi has no idea how she herself will be received upon returning to Bethlehem, and now she has also a foreign companion to be explained." Ruth speaks to people often constricted by some sort of social, ethnic, racial, or religious boundary. Ruth's devotion begins a story of how God can work across and despite the most entrenched positions and established boundaries to bring new life and new hope. **Gary W. Charles**

Through their relationships the women already begin to break the bondage of tragedy. The various struggles in these relationships focus on how the women will be with one another. They struggle to give to each other, to act in each other's best interest.

Ruth's faithfulness and her care do not simply lead to a deeper relationship with Naomi and her own new relationship with God, but also evidence how God works with us through relationships. Faithful human relationships reflect divine care and therefore the covenantal care of community.

Through the care we extend to and receive from one another we encounter the gifts of God. We encounter the grace of God. God's activity has already begun in our relationships. Last week with Job and his friends, we discovered God directing relationships in restoring our own well-being. With Ruth and Naomi, we discover that

God is so intimately involved in our relationships that it is hard to reduce God's presence to a linear equation of cause and effect. God is in the extra measure of relatedness we seek. God's power and character in the midst of human suffering are experienced in that extra measure. Even in our most difficult times, God nurtures relationships and helps us through the hard times of life. **Dale P. Andrews**

In the midst of hard times, God acts through Ruth and her unquestioning fidelity to Naomi. This means that the outsider, stranger, widow, and enemy woman becomes the unexpected model of loyalty and devotion. The God for whom Ruth abandons everything is the God of the lowly, the widow, the stranger, and the enemy. This God does not belong to one people alone but gathers peoples into this wide family.

In the book of Ruth, the action takes place among humans in everyday life, but God's role is implicit in the interactions and plot of the story. Naomi's life at this point is about despair and death, but Ruth will not allow her to experience this journey alone. Naomi can only see barrenness and negation. Ruth, by contrast to the altered Naomi, remains a consistent figure, faithful and stalwart. Her story tells of ordinary and harsh human life in which the providence of God is manifest. **Kathleen M. O'Connor**

Just as the story began with Elimelech immigrating with his family to escape famine in order to live, we see a similar new beginning for Naomi and Ruth. The journey to Judah will be a journey back for Naomi, but a first move for Ruth. Knowing something of the marginalization, bitterness, rumors, judgments, and murmurs that may await them, the two widows migrate to Judah. In essence, Ruth is willing to die to her past so that her mother-in-law and she may live anew. Ruth, an outsider, moves to give life through her willingness to die. **John Ahn**

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