

Ruth - The Story of Salvation the Light of Human Failure

In the book of Ruth, we are introduced to a family from Bethlehem. The father's name was Elimelech which means, "My God is King." His wife's name was Naomi, (pleasant) and they had two sons, Mahlon (weak, sickly) and Kilion (frail person). They had been living in Bethlehem (house of bread), but when famine came, Elimelech took his family to Moab purportedly to "save their lives." While they were there Elimelech, Mahlon, and Kilion died, leaving only Naomi and her two daughters-in-law.

We are told, further, that this family lived during the time of the judges, who we can read about in the book of Judges. During that era, the people regularly turned away from the Lord, the Lord withdrew his hand of blessing and protection leaving the people in distress, they cried out to the Lord for help, and he saved them by sending judges or leaders to vanquish their enemies. As we know, the book of Judges shows us a whole series of judges/leaders who become increasingly sinful and disregarding of God's ways until we reach the last listed Judge, Samson, who was a womanizer and violent murderer. The cycle of Judges (turning away from God, distress, crying out to God, salvation) should have taught the people that they could and should depend on their covenantal God for everything, yet they failed to do so.

As we read the opening verses of the book of Ruth, we should be somewhat disturbed. Elimelech, whose name professes that God is King, takes his family from Bethlehem, the place where God would provide food for his people, to go to Moab where the Lord was not known or worshipped. Elimelech made the decision to leave the Lord and put his trust in the Moabite god, Chemosh. We should be disturbed because Elimelech abandoned the God who had promised to provide for his people to put his trust in a different god. The NIV translates the Hebrew saying that he went there for a time, having us believe that he was only going to wait out the famine, but the Hebrew doesn't need to indicate that. Rather, the Hebrew can be understood as saying that he went to Moab and was seen as an obvious foreigner, but he tried to overcome that by integrating his sons into the Moabite community by having them marry Moabite women. Years earlier, in the book of Numbers (Numbers 31), we see a similar integration and the purpose of that integration was to intentionally turn the Israelites away from the Lord to worship other gods. Elimelech's intention to save his family from famine by bringing them to Moab resulted the removal of God's covenant protection and in Elimelech's death and the death of his sons, thus, in effect cutting his family off from history.

Added to all of this, because the Moabites years earlier had refused to provide for the Israelites as they travelled to the Promised Land but rather tried to bring a curse upon them through Balaam (the one of the talking donkey), any Israelite who had a Moabite ancestor in their previous 10 generations could not become fully integrated into the Israelite community (Deuteronomy 23:3-6). Elimelech, by finding Moabite wives for his sons, in effect, was preventing his grandchildren for the next 9 generations from being recognized as full Israelites and consequently, from being able to worship the Lord. The opening verses of the book of Ruth, thus, show us a faithless Israelite man who put his trust in foreign gods and bore in himself and his family the punishment for his unfaithfulness. Elimelech brought disaster on himself and his family because of his bad decision.

Meanwhile, back in Bethlehem, we see the people prospering. Further, we see the people there faithfully serving the Lord and thus experiencing his blessings. What is left of Elimelech's family (his wife and two daughters-in-law) decide to return and perhaps be able to survive in Bethlehem and receive a small piece of the prosperity of that place. Naomi, when she returns, speaks of the bitterness of her life, and she seems to want to blame God for the disaster that befell her family. She says, "the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me" (Ruth 1:21). It sounds like she is blaming God, but we do not have to take it that way. In her words we can also see a recognition that leaving the Lord to trust the foreign false god, Chemosh, was a bad decision, one worthy of God's anger and his withholding his blessings. It is unlikely that Naomi is accusing God but, more likely, is recognizing that God gave her family what covenant breakers deserve: a difficult and empty life.

What follows, however, in the book of Ruth is a complete reversal of fortune. As we know, Ruth, who commits herself to the Lord (in contrast to her late father-in-law), becomes the wife of a prominent Israelite and the eventual ancestor of one who would become king of Israel, David himself. What is particularly incredible is that God "forgets" his injunction that anyone who has Moabite blood less than 10 generations back not be included in the Israelite community and not be able to worship God and puts in place a descendant of Ruth the Moabitess who then becomes the king of God's people and his son the builder of God's temple.

What is more, Elimelech's name is not forgotten. True, we remember him as a faithless one, an example which we should avoid following, but there is more. When Boaz marries Ruth, their children, in effect are Elimelech's descendants to the effect that Elimelech's name "does not disappear from among his family or from his hometown" (Ruth 4:10). Elimelech's faithlessness does not result in his being excluded from among the people of God.

The story told in the book of Ruth, then, is not a story of one man's failure or of one woman's (Ruth's) faithfulness. It is the story of God's redemptive work in faithless man who did the best to erase his name from history by turning away from the Lord and who, by God's grace, circuitously, is included in the story of Jesus' ancestry. Elimelech sought to save his family and ended up doing just the opposite where as God worked through the failures and brought salvation not to Elimelech and his family but also to a member of the Moabite nation, something that we would never have believed could have happened. The story told in the book of Ruth, then, is a story of the power of God's salvation in spite of the oft-times best efforts of humans to make the opposite true.

Pastor Gary