

Ruth 1:1-18

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.

PREDESTINATION

A friend asked someone where they went to church,
and that person replied, “I’m a Presbyterian.” And
the friend asked, “Presby...what? Is that a cult?”

Unfortunately, Presbyterian has gone from being
mainline to sideline in some quarters. But, for those
who have heard of us they usually associate
Presbyterians with another “P” word, Predestination.

The doctrine of Predestination is important not only
to the Presbyterians but to all Christians. It gives
guidance on the big questions of life, questions like,
“Is the Sovereign Lord, the Creator of the universe
really interested in me? Do things happen by chance
or is there a greater purpose, a divine plan at work in
even the workaday world of the average Jane or
Joe?”

The doctrine of Predestination does indeed teach us
that God is interested in us, in all of us. Things may

seem to happen by chance. But, sometimes, through the eyes of faith, we can detect the hand of God working God's purposes out in even the most mundane and difficult of circumstances.

A FEMALE JOB

In the first church I served there was a main highway that was close by. From time to time somebody in an old car would drive up to my office and say, "Can you help me with some gas. I'm running on empty."

By the looks of them they were right. They were running on empty...not only their car but also their life as well.

We too know what it's like to be running on empty. I suspect that many of you here today feel that way.

The Bible has a lot to say to people who are running on empty.

For example, several weeks ago we considered the plight of Job. Suffice it to say that if it weren't for bad luck Job would have had no luck at all.

And Job's difficult situation overwhelmed him. He was filled with anger and doubt and pain. He even began to doubt the goodness of God.

Well Naomi is a kind of female Job. Naomi, like Job was a righteous person. Her name means "pleasant" and from what I read of her in the book of Ruth, I tend to think that Naomi was well named.

Naomi seemed to bring out the best in people. A little later in the story we learn she is such a nice person that even her foreign daughters in law weep over the prospect of leaving her.

But, we're getting ahead of ourselves. Naomi, the pleasant one whom everybody loves finds herself in the middle of great tragedy and turmoil.

Have you ever thrown up your hands and asked, "What's this world coming to?"

A lot of people were asking that same question in Naomi's day. The Bible tells us that Naomi lived in the time of the judges, and those days were marked by lawlessness. People did what was right in their own eyes.

And it didn't work so well. Society was falling apart.

FAMINE

And to make matters worse, the people in that region were also experiencing a natural disaster. There was a famine in Naomi's hometown, Bethlehem.

So she and her husband and her two sons were forced to move to a foreign land to make a living. They were economic refugees.

We know that the native population almost always resents economic refugees. That's why securing our borders is such a big political issue today. It was the same back then.

In fact it was worse. Moab and Israel were sworn enemies. But, now, because of the family Naomi and her husband Elimelech had to leave their part of the Promised Land behind and go to a place where they were not welcome.

It's hard to move under the best of circumstances. But, moving to Moab makes it worse.

I wonder if cheerful Naomi made the best of the move. The Bible doesn't say, but I suspect she did.

People like her have a way of making any place into a home...even Moab.

DEATH

Unfortunately, tragedy continued to follow Naomi. First, Naomi's husband died, and she was left with her two sons. Naomi was a single mother.

Now I'm sure she tried her best to keep the boys in line. I'm sure she told them that one day when the famine was over they would return to their true home in Bethlehem. There they would find girls from a good family who worshipped the God of Israel.

But, boys are boys wherever they live. They didn't listen to their mom, and they married Moabite women. I suspect cheerful Naomi still lived up to her name. She tried to be upbeat about it. She accepted these Moabite women as if they were her own daughters.

But, tragedy struck their home again. Both her sons died. Our text states it in such a matter of fact way. And yet these events were an unspeakable disaster in Naomi's life.

You see, the ultimate tragedy in that day and time was to have no children to carry on the family name.

It was more than just tradition. It was a way to be remembered by your ancestors, a sort of immortality by remembrance. And so, if there were no male children to carry on the family name it was the ultimate tragedy.

In fact in order to try and prevent such things the ancient world had what we would consider to be a very unusual rule.

If a brother died leaving his wife childless, and he had another brother living, then it was the living brother's duty to take the deceased wife as his own wife. In this way it was hoped that the family line could be continued.

NO MORE OPTIONS

But, Ruth and Orpah had no such options.

All the men in the family had died. And, as Naomi put it, even if she married and conceived that very night, it would be unlikely that her widowed daughters in law would be willing for the boy to grow up and continue the family line.

Naomi could not think of any more eligible relatives. And, even if there were some, it was doubtful that these Moabite women would be received as proper brides.

No, Naomi did the kind thing, the only thing that she could do. She told her daughter in laws to go back to their own people and their own gods. She would pray for their happiness and security, but Naomi would make the trip back home to Bethlehem by herself.

One daughter in law, Orpah reluctantly agreed with Naomi's decision. Orpah lovingly kissed her beloved mother in law goodbye. But, the other daughter in law, Ruth refused to leave. The Scripture says that Ruth clung to Naomi.

CLUNG

That word translated "clung" is the same word used in Genesis to describe the relationship between a man and a wife. When people get married they are to cling to one another instead of their parents.

In fact Ruth's poetic statement of devotion to her mother in law is often used at weddings to express

the commitment of those who are getting married. Ruth said, “Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.”

Naomi tried to talk Ruth out of staying with her. But, Ruth would not be moved. She truly loved Naomi and was committed to staying with her for the rest of her life.

We live in a culture that does not understand the importance of love and devotion. Having someone to cling to is still important. And yet many in our culture will not make that kind of commitment. In fact being “clingy” is seen as a bad thing.

Those days were not that different. In those days, the days of the judges everyone did as they pleased. People lived by self-interest alone.

Devotion like that shown by Ruth to her mother in law was very rare in those days. And it is rare in our time as well.

Yet this life of devotion and love is the kind of life that the Scripture promotes. In fact as we shall soon see, God’s will is often accomplished through the

lives of those who remain loving and devoted despite difficult circumstances.

MARA

Ruth and Naomi do make it to Bethlehem.

But, the tragedies and the years have taken their toll on Naomi. The folks in Bethlehem can hardly recognize her. They say, “Can this be Naomi, the pleasant one?”

And Naomi replies,

“Don’t call me Naomi. I don’t deserve that name. I’m not the pleasant one any more. Call me Mara, the bitter one because that’s who I’ve become.

I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me. The Lord has brought misfortune upon me.”

Naomi gives us the dark side of Predestination. If God wills our salvation, then does that also mean that God wills our destruction?

Naomi had done the right thing, but her righteousness had not been rewarded. According to Naomi this was God's will and she just had to accept it.

Call me Mara for my life has become bitter. (For those who like American literature that sounds a bit like the opening line in Moby Dick. "Call me Ishmael." In the Bible as in literature names often foreshadow what is going to happen or describe what has happened.)

But, in this case the name does not stick.

What Naomi didn't realize and what we often don't realize in our own life was that the story wasn't over. God was not finished with old Naomi, and God is not finished with us either.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Let me briefly tell you (as my friend Paul Harvey would put it) the rest of the story. Ruth's first attempt to feed the family was a job gleaning leftover grain from a field, and that field "just happened" to be a field that belonged to a guy that was a relative.

His name was Boaz. And Boaz noticed Ruth in a romantic way.

Ruth was not so sure about this. She told Naomi that he seemed a bit old for her.

But, Naomi who had been around the block a few times told Ruth, “Don’t worry honey. Old men are good in marriage. Besides, he’s the only man we’ve got!”

Naomi was right. Ruth got married to Boaz. They had a son by the name of Obed, and Obed carried on the family name. Obed became the father of Jesse. And Jesse was the father of David.

And through the line of David there was eventually born a man named Joseph. And Joseph married a woman who had another baby boy in the town of Bethlehem.

You know that boy. His name was Jesus, which means “God saves.”

That’s my view of Predestination. It’s not a cold doctrine that just says God does what God wants to do.

It is a way of saying that God is working God’s purposes out through ordinary people who sometimes

display extraordinary love and devotion. In the Providence of God Ruth, a woman from Moab becomes a means of grace not only for Naomi and for the people of Israel but for the whole world.

And that story continues.

LOVE AND DEVOTION TODAY

As I reread this familiar story I was reminded of someone in our family who cared for an invalid mother for over twenty years.

She was a fun loving person who had a lot of friends. She had a boyfriend who wanted to get married. But, she put all that off in order to take care of her mother.

I'm sure some thought she was giving up too much. But, she persevered and eventually she married that boyfriend who was willing to wait.

And in my estimate she is today a person of great spiritual stature because of her willingness to serve all those years.

I'll bet there are people in your own family who fit that description. I know that some of you are

demonstrating a similar kind of love and devotion in your own situation.

And I want you to know that your love and service matter. I want you to know that though at times it may seem like you are wasting your time and talents that it is not true.

Your love and your service is the way God chooses to work in our world. We might not understand how God will work out His purposes in our life. But, be assured that His will is being done.

LIFE REINTERPRETED

The Apostle Paul said, “Our view of the future is like looking through tinted glass. What will happen in the future is a bit hazy, a bit dark, and even a bit frightening.

But, one day we will see that future clearly. One day we will see the glory of God face to face.” One day we will see how God was working with us and through us through the good times and especially the bad times of our life.

Paul knew what it meant to struggle. In particular he had some kind of physical ailment that troubled him.

We don't know what this "thorn in the flesh" was, but we do know that he prayed that God would take it from him.

But, the problem was never removed. Instead God helped Paul look at the problem in a different way. God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

And so Paul began to reinterpret his life.

In a life filled with difficulties, with insults, with persecutions and broken relationships Paul saw the hand of God. When Paul was weak he had to rely on God more. (2 Corinthians 12:8-10)

To put it another way, when Paul looked back on his life he saw how even his worst negative was turned into a positive by the grace of God.

Paul should have guessed that would be true. Paul's Savior was after all the crucified One. Paul (like all of us) was saved not by strength but by seeming weakness.

In the story of the One whose body was broken and blood was shed we find the grace of God. In the story of Jesus we find hope for life everlasting.

Predestination doesn't mean that we'll have good luck if we're good...or bad luck if we're bad. Nor does Predestination mean that God rules from upon high in a capricious way.

Instead, Predestination means that in our ordinary lives and in our ordinary problems God is at work. God uses us to bless the world with His extraordinary love just as he used a woman from Moab long ago.

Her name was Ruth. And her story played a key part in the story of salvation.

The story of God's grace continues in our story.

Let us be alert to the role we will play in that salvation drama. And let us trust the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus to carry us home.

Amen.