

The Love Song of Ruth

Text: Ruth 1.1–5

Theme: God's lovingkindness, even when it appears unseen, never ceases to act on behalf of His children no matter their circumstances.

Introduction — Get to know the book called Ruth

- good hymn to help us learn about the Lord from the book of Ruth,
- I think it would be that of William Cowper, hymn writer in the 18th century
- Cowper was a very popular poet of his day in England
- he also came to faith in Jesus Christ and wrote many hymns, alongside his pastor, mentor, dear friend, indeed, even human savior, John Newton.

Here's the hymn:

*God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs, and works His sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding ev'ry hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flow'r.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.*

This is indeed, the song of Ruth:

- God's lovingkindness, even when it appears unseen, never ceases to act on behalf of His children no matter their circumstances.

Let's learn a bit more about this book

one of five Megilloth, small scrolls read at annual Jewish feasts

- Song of Songs at Passover, Ruth at Feast of Weeks (Pentecost, if you're keeping track), Lamentations on ninth of Ab commemorating fall of Jerusalem in 596B.C.; then Ecclesiastes during the Feast of Tabernacles, followed by Esther at the Feast of Purim
- so it held a particularly liturgical place in God's people's lives

Love story, a 3,000 year old love story

- but not a romance story like we think
- yes, man, woman, matchmaker, and a wedding
- but nothing like modern romances; with no apologies to Nicholas Sparks or the Hallmark channel

- rather, this story has a complex interweaving of family history, socioeconomic commentary, racial and religious cultures and depths of human desires and longing, along with some of their more shallow points
- yes, it is a love story, but far more of God's covenantal love for us, His people, than necessarily ours for Him

Ruth is a story which nearly all of us can relate to:

- it's the story of everyday people coping with life in various ways because life has gotten very difficult at the time.
- Elimelech is coping, perhaps not wisely, but he is coping and God will take care of his unwise choices
- we see Naomi, first widowed, then left childless and essentially destitute in her life
- Naomi was going to try coping in the best way she knew how: go home and just die there
- thankfully, though Naomi blames God for all her hardships—and she isn't necessarily wrong there—she is still faithful to God in her bitterness and despair.
- Orpah, an unbelieving foreigner, deals with her tragedy in a very pragmatic manner:
- I'm going home to mother and hope to find another man.
- she simply stayed with what she knew, what was comfortable and lived out the motto: Change? Why change? This is the way I've always done it"
- and then there is Ruth...but I'm getting way ahead of the story, so let's learn the song of Ruth this morning so we can see and hear it being sung each of the next several Lord's Day mornings:

God's lovingkindness, even when it appears unseen, never ceases to act on behalf of His children no matter their circumstances.

We can see this song being sung as we meet...

I. THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

- each one of these characters in the first few verses plays a part, even if very short
- so, let's meet Naomi's family

1. Elimelech

- the head of this family has a name which means, "*God is my king*"
- at the time of the judges, this was a vitally symbolic name
- there was no king in Israel
- God was their king and Naomi's in-laws had named their son accordingly
- he is also an Ephrathite, from the region of Bethlehem
- this meant he had long roots already in his hometown
- this makes his leaving, even owing to economic hardship, all the more meaningful

2. Naomi

- her name means "*sweetness, pleasant*"
- and perhaps she fulfilled that in her marriage to Elimelech
- bearing two sons would have been a great boon: the line would go on
- however, there may be a foreshadowing of things to come at the naming of these boys

3. Mahlon and Chilion

- these were the two sons born to Elimelech and Naomi
- Mahlon means "*frail*"

- Chilion means “*weak*”
- not certain if named because these were the conditions of the boys when born
- or if simply names; but OT names almost always give us some sense of character

4. The Wives

- Chilion will eventually marry Orpah, whose name means “*stiff-necked, stubborn*”
- this might seem to be the case with Orpah, in her refusal to go with Naomi
- it may, at least, be a commitment to her homeland and people
- Ruth, who we’re told married Mahlon, in 4.10, is the featured star of our drama
- her name means “*friend, companion*” and this will prove true throughout

Now that we know the players, let’s look at...

II. THE SETTING

- the writer of this book helps us a great deal
- whoever wrote this, tells us the time frame, the location, and the situation

1. The time frame

- **“In the days when the judges ruled...”**
- preceding book is all about this extended period of time for Israel
- not a good time, by any stretch of the imagination
- **Judges 2.10—“And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel”**
- series of cycles of sin, judgment, lament, deliverance, mild obedience, then sin again
- each deliver was raised up by God to judge the people and their enemies
- all in all, not a good time for God’s people
- **Judges 21.25—“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”**
- not certain during which period, but might be time of Ehud, from Judges 3
- Ehud was used of God to deliver Israel from...wait for it...Moab
- after killing Eglon, their king, period of rest from oppression
- so, Elimelech, taking his family to Moab, might have been during this time of rest

2. Location

- we begin in Bethlehem in Judah
- just to help you out here, Bethlehem is about 5–6 miles south of Jerusalem today
- southern region of Israel, about 20 miles from Dead Sea
- Moab lies just on other side of the Dead Sea
- Bethlehem’s name means “*house of bread*,” fertile region for agriculture
- you can see the irony now, in v. 1: there was a famine, no bread to be had

3. Situation

- Elimelech longs to care for his wife and two young sons
- it appears there is no other solution than to head to Moab
- apparently Moab must have ample food
- tension presented here, without us seeing it in Ruth
- must look to previous O.T. to know the problems this presents

1) tough beginnings

- Genesis 19 tells us where Moab began

- Lot has fled Sodom prior to God’s destruction of that city
- daughters fear they’ll never find a husband, so sleep with their father
- oldest daughter conceives and gives birth to a son
- she names him: Moab
- Moab means — “*mo*” = *who?*; “*ab*” = *father*
- he eventually gives rise to a nation which was begun by incestuous relationship
- already under curse of God

2) didn’t improve

- generations later, when Hebrews exiting Egypt & heading for Promised Land
- Moab refuses them aid and a place to stay on their way
- Israel goes to battle and Moab is soundly defeated
- later, Moabites are forbidden from entering the assembly of the Lord
- **Deut. 23.3 — “No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever”**
- so, knowing this bit of information, we can see that Elimelech’s decision may not be wisest

4. Deterioration

- while Elimelech’s family obviously survives, it goes south quickly
- three verses into this tale and head of family dies
- causes unknown, but this leaves Naomi, widow, with two boys
- unclear how old they are, but not quite marrying age...until
- v. 4: they each took a Moabite woman for a wife—again problematic
- **Deut. 7.3–4: “You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.”**
- this makes v. 5 hit so hard
- Naomi, no husband, no sons, two foreign daughters-in-law
- no provision, no protection, no prospects, no place left

From all these horrible circumstances, we begin to understand...

III. THE PROBLEMS THAT ARISE

- not just tensions added for a good plot line development
- real problems, decisions made, consequences lived out

1. A father’s poor choice

- you may ask: “What was wrong here? He was trying to provide for his family.”
- yes, but two things become clear, difficult for us to understand
- we don’t think in these terms at all today; don’t take them seriously

1) Elimelech takes family out of land

- this was their heritage, their inheritance from the Lord
- this was the land promised them through covenant with God
- for a Hebrew, may not have been unthinkable, but certainly untenable
- because he took them out of the land, a second problem is created

2) he took them from their place of worship

- again, our 21st century minds think: church on every corner, no problem

- besides, what's the big deal about missing church once in a while?
- I'm there half the time each year, so no sweat
- the threat to an Israelite was not simply missing out on worship
- Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, was present there
- it was great and grave temptation of being led away from God

2. Exposure to danger

- while Moab may have been in a relative state of peace with Israel at this time
- didn't mean it would last (and it didn't)
- going there exposes this small family to all sorts of dangers
- and when the men of the house all die, Naomi is left helpless, hapless, and hopeless
- she could easily have been taken advantage of
- her two daughters-in-law, even though from Moab, could have been horribly abused
- these problems arise from the circumstances of life surrounding Naomi

But this isn't here, just for story's sake; we must ask...

IV. WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THIS SO FAR?

- Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 10.11**—“**Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.**”
- just prior to this, in 1 Cor 10.6 we read: “**Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.**”
- so, let's consider what is here for us so far

1. The choices we make in this world have consequences

- we all make choices, some good, some bad, some wise, some foolish
- consequences from these may pass quickly; others last a lifetime
- reading thru Proverbs, one chapter each day, each month, for whole year
- learning the great value of wisdom; now only hope I can learn to apply it
- let's do the same here for a moment
- Elimelech takes his family to another place; doesn't seem that big a deal
- but, as pointed out, took them from other family, from place of promise
- but, with even more potential for devastating results, from place of worship
- all Moab had to offer was Chemosh, who many times demanded child sacrifice
- now, this family exposed to innumerable spiritual dangers
- disobeying commands of God, flying against the covenant promises, ignoring God
- all too real for us even today

1) Parents: hear what I'm about to say with the grace God gives us:

- outside your home, the church is the most important place for you to raise your children.
- Take them away from this worshiping community,
- forsake the teaching that comes from the Word in this place, and spiritual peril lies before you.
- This is not a promise or a prophecy by any means.
- It is simply a pattern seen time and time again by me and so many others.
- *“We don't really know why our child left the church when they left home. I mean, we made it when we could, but there were an awful lot of school activities that just demanded that we be away.”*
- *“Yes, it disappointing that our child doesn't have much to do with church or believers anymore, but we let him or her make that decision when they were still in our home. I guess they just chose poorly.”*

- Christian parents, do not follow Elimelech's example and take your family away from God's people.
- Fathers, this responsibility lies heavily with you.
- If you dedicated your child to the Lord, to raise that child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, there is a covenant binding you to this.
- However, as we'll learn in this story of God's never-ending lovingkindness, there is forgiveness with the Lord.
- Not an excuse, mind you, to neglect covenant obligations and responsibilities, but forgiveness when we fail at them.
- But don't take that risk or make that a need in the first place.

2) Christian young people, be aware of whom you will marry someday.

- God made commandments against marrying unbelievers in both testaments for a very good reason:
 - in every example given in Scripture, the unbelieving spouse led the other away from the faith.
 - Parents, teach your children, pray for them and their future spouse.
 - If you have young toddlers at home, begin now to ask God to bring a godly young man or woman into their life one day.
 - If they are teens now, it's still not too late.
 - And again, I'll point out that God's unfailing covenant love prevailed here, but using that as an excuse to sin is never the point of the story: *"well, I'll marry whomever I wish, it won't matter because, well, God's a loving God and He'll forgive me, right?"*
 - Yes, He is forgiving, but consequences of sin carry on, sometimes for generations.

2. We misunderstand God's plan when we interpret God's lovingkindness for us by our own circumstances

- we live in age where we base so many vital decisions upon our feelings
- we judge things, events, people by circumstances around us
- it takes a mind that is maturing to learn to see God's hand in all things
- it especially takes an enduring faith to see that hand when it is invisible
- we find ourselves receiving doctor's pronouncement
- our children grieve us with cold hearts
- a spouse turns away and ceases to love the one for whom vows before God were made
- dozens more circumstances could be cited
- we need to sing the song of Ruth, from the hymn mentioned at beginning
- *Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence—there are our circumstances, right there—
He hides a smiling face*
- God's lovingkindness, even when it appears unseen, never ceases to act on behalf of His children no matter their circumstances.
- even if you feel abandoned, God is giving you His utmost attention and care
- He has always, always, always proved faithful in the past
- do not think, just because you don't feel it, that He won't be faithful in present and future

Conclusion – Hebrews 12.1–2 tells us...

- **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,**

who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

- Have you ever experienced disappointment with God?
- It happens when you do what you think the Lord wants,
- but then things don't turn out the way you expect.
- God doesn't come through—like when you stick your neck out and do the ethical thing at work, but instead of getting praise, you get punished or fired.
- Naomi had experienced disappointment with God. She lost her husband, her two sons, her wealth, her position, and her looks.
- It's interesting ... she gave up on God's goodness, but she did not give up on God.
- She became an embittered believer who interpreted God in a “worst case” scenario whenever possible.
- “Why don't you show yourself loving to me? Show yourself kind to me? Or just show yourself?”
- Sometimes it seems easier to identify the hand of Satan than the fingerprints of the Savior, doesn't it?

We must learn to look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith

- if we gaze only upon this world and our circumstances, we will lose sight of God
- we must learn the song of Ruth:

God's lovingkindness, even when it appears unseen, never ceases to act on behalf of His children no matter their circumstances.

Let's pray...

- O Lord, it is so much easier to live by sight than by faith.
- Yet we know that you are the Sovereign of the universe and that nothing comes into our lives that has not first passed through your hands.
- We embrace the truth that all things are working together for the good of those who love you.
- At times this is clear; at other times we “see through a glass darkly.”
- We ask that you give us the ability to see the big picture through your eyes, that we gain your perspective
- Through Christ our Lord. Amen.