

## A JOURNEY FROM PLEASANTVILLE TO BITTERNESS

When I was a kid, my cousins and I loved to hear our parents and aunts and uncles tell stories about growing up on the family farm during the Great Depression. My Grandma and Grandpa Cumings raised eight kids in traumatic times. Their adventures were the stuff of our greatest entertainment.

They told other stories too, like the time when Grandma Cumings was twelve. A tornado hit her house and turned it upside down while she was still in her upstairs bedroom. We learned about our Scottish ancestry, a relative who traveled to America on the Mayflower, and great-great uncles who fought in the Civil War.

These stories shaped my sense of heritage. They gave me a place in time and history that defined me and passed on family values.

Sadly, as my aunts and uncles pass away, these stories are fading. ■ We now live in a digital culture, not an oral culture. We value what's next, not what's past. Family roots don't grow as deep or as long.

In ancient Israel, stories were living histories, passed on verbatim for generations. Under the leading of God's Spirit, men like Moses and others eventually committed Israel's stories to writing and they became part of our Hebrew Bible. One of those oral histories concerned the remarkable ancestry of King David. Some time after David died, a skilled writer put pen to paper and left us the magnificent short story we know as the Book of Ruth. Turn with me to Ruth 1:1.

The events of Ruth took place when the judges ruled. This was the period of time that followed the death of Joshua, sometime around 1390 B.C., and the selection of Saul as Israel's first king about 1040 B.C. During that three-hundred fifty year interval God raised up local tribal leaders—judges—to lead his people and to rescue them from invaders.

They were terrible, turbulent times, marked by cyclical lapses into idolatry, God's judgement, Israel's repentance, and eventual deliverance. The last verse of the Book of Judges describes it as a time of personal anarchy when "...everyone did as he saw fit."

Sometime toward the latter third of those three and one-half centuries, Israel experienced a severe famine. It could have been the result of severe drought. It could also have come during one of those times when God allowed other nations to oppress his people. When marauding armies came, they stripped the land of its produce leaving Israel destitute. Such invasions were divine judgements on the sin and apostasy of Israel who seemed fatally bent on abandoning their covenant with Yahweh their God and pursuing the idols of the surrounding peoples.

The author of Ruth doesn't tell us what caused the famine. But it would be reasonable for anyone familiar with the Book of Judges to assume that the famine might well have been a consequence of God's judgement on his people.

Things were desperate enough for one Jewish family to migrate from Bethlehem in Judah to Moab. Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion made the difficult and risky trip east, around the northern tip of the Dead Sea and then south into Moab.

Moab was by this time already a traditional enemy of Israel. The nation had a shameful origin in the incestuous relationship between Abraham's nephew, Lot, and Lot's oldest daughter (Genesis 19:30ff). The result of that liaison was Moab.

During the Exodus, Moab refused Israel permission to pass through their borders, forcing

a lengthy march around their borders. During that same time Moabite women seduced some of the men from Israel into idolatry and immorality resulting in a catastrophic judgement (Numbers 25). More recently, during the time of the judges, Eglon, King of Moab, had invaded and oppressed Israel.

So Elimelech's decision to relocate to Moab was both desperate and dangerous. For Naomi, it became calamitous. In three terse sentences, we learn that Naomi became a widow. Her sons married but did not have children of their own. And within ten years both sons died as well.

The text is both spare and pitiless in narrating Naomi's plight. She is a foreign widow whose sole hope of support, her sons, have been taken from her. All that matters most to her is gone.

Ladies, put yourself in Naomi's place. Your husband has died and you have watched as both your children died. How would you process what has happened to you? What questions might you ask God? What Scriptures might inform your understanding?

By the way, Naomi's Bible would have had only five books in it—Genesis through Deuteronomy. Nothing else had been written yet. In Deuteronomy, Naomi would have learned about God's curse if Israel became rebellious: "However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: ... The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. ... The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. The LORD will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder; it will come down from the skies until you are destroyed" (Deut. 28:15; 23-24).

You're in a foreign country because of famine and now your whole family is dead. What conclusions might you come to about God and how God is treating you?

Look at v. 6.

This represents the first turn in the story. God has restored the fortunes of his people. Bethlehem, the "House of Bread," was once again a place of plenty. So Naomi decided to go home. At least there she would be known and welcomed.

Curiously, both of Naomi's daughters-in-law determined to return with her. It's a remarkable decision. They would leave their families, their culture and all that was familiar to them to become alien residents in Israel. Naomi must have been an incredibly winsome woman to win such loyalty from the women who had married her sons.

But on the way, reality set in. Naomi realized that these two ladies had no future with her in Israel. Listen again to v. 8-14.

Naomi graciously releases her daughters-in-law from any obligation they feel toward her. She prays for Yahweh her God to show them *hesed*, unfailing love and kindness. And she wishes for them new husbands, a woman's primary hope of security in the ancient world.

When they refused, Naomi impressed on them how dire their prospects would be with her. She could provide no other sons for them to marry. She is making reference to an ancient Hebrew custom. It was so important for Israelites to continue family lines that brothers of a deceased Hebrew man were expected to marry his widow in order to produce a male heir who would carry on his name. Naomi was long past that possibility, and her daughters-in-law would be foolish to wait.

Coming with her meant giving up all prospects of home and family and aligning themselves with a woman against whom God himself seems to be against.

Orpah, grasping the logic of Naomi's plea, returned home. Our author says nothing

negative about her choice. She grieves their parting but returns to what is safe and familiar. Most of us would have made the same choice.

Her return, however, creates a backdrop against which Ruth's decision shines more remarkably.

Ruth hangs on to Naomi. She will abandon her people and their gods. Through Naomi's life and words Ruth has come to believe that Yahweh is the one true God. So Ruth issues her own ultimatum: "Stop asking me to leave!" —verse 16-18.

Naomi's return to Bethlehem created quite a buzz. The women recognized her instantly, and then doubted their own senses. In verses 20-21 Naomi pours out her lament.

The name, Naomi, means pleasant or lovely. To this woman, her name has become a cruel mockery. Naomi's life has descended into bitterness. She went away full. In spite of famine, she still had all that was truly precious to her: a husband and children. She has returned with neither and her life feels empty.

We can imagine Naomi having rehearsed this moment over and over in her mind on the trip back from Moab. She has come to the inescapable conclusion that everything she has experienced must be God's doing. She has not abandoned faith. She takes God seriously. Her very genuine faith is the source of her desperate confusion and the basis for her eloquent complaint.

She names *Shaddai*, the Almighty as the cause of her bitterness. Commentator Daniel Block describes *Shaddai* as a name of God that emphasizes his power and majesty. *Shaddai* is the one who created all things and sustains all things. He is the one who rules the world and maintains moral order. *Shaddai* has so ordered the course of her life that it is very bitter.

Yahweh has done this. Yahweh is God's personal name, his covenant name. Yahweh keeps covenant love and faithfulness, but he has made her life empty. Further, Yahweh has "afflicted" her. Literally, he has testified against her. Naomi feels like she is in the crosshairs of God's justice and she doesn't know why. In this, she is very much like Job.

*Shaddai*, the One responsible for the affairs of this world, is responsible for the misfortune that has her in its grip.

Ever been there? Naomi cannot see anything beyond her excruciating pain. It binds her horizons and obliterates her hopes.

The author of this little short story has recorded Naomi's lament eloquently. But he has also woven into this opening segment glimmers of hope. Yahweh sent food to his people. Whatever the cause of the famine that resulted in Naomi's flight to Moab, it's over. Yahweh has restored the fortunes of his people.

And Naomi has Ruth. She does not yet understand what a remarkable treasure this young woman will prove to be. She is so focused on her own pain that she cannot see the blessing God has provided her in her widowed daughter-in-law.

There is a third shining glimmer in verse 22, a foreshadowing of good things to come. It just happened that Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. That would be right now, at the end of April. And the events that unfold during the harvest would change everything.

The author of the Book of Ruth knows the rest of the story. He knows what Naomi at this point does not. Naomi thinks she knows what God has done. She has no clue about what God is doing. God is at work. *Shaddai* is directing the affairs of her life in ways she cannot even guess at. Yahweh is being faithful to his character and his covenant and his people.

It will take another twelve centuries for an Israelite by the name of Paul to work out the implications of God's mysterious ways. Paul would write: "...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

Roman's 8:28 is writ large over the Book of Ruth. God was working at outcomes Naomi couldn't even guess at, in spite of her pain and loss. More was at stake than her immediate personal happiness. The hope of a nation and the eventual salvation of the world depend on her story.

In Deuteronomy 29:29, Moses wrote: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever..." We are going to come back to this verse in June. Ruth did not understand what was happening to her. God had his secrets and Naomi wasn't privy to them. She made the best guess she could to make sense of things. By her reckoning, God himself seemed to be against her.

Bitterness has for a time poisoned her heart. But God was on the move. This is only the first chapter. The story has just begun.