

1

The setting of suffering

Please read Ruth 1:1–5

Maintaining a steadfast trust in God in all circumstances is a difficult thing to do. Early in his days of ministry, John Wesley travelled from London to Georgia in the New World. There he hoped to minister among the Indians and settlers, and he desired to see many conversions among the people. His ministry did not go well. As Dallimore remarks, ‘He was in bitter dejection, for his whole person was shaken by the realization that salvation was not to be gained by any programme of human effort.’ He fled back to England and confessed, ‘What have I learned? Why, what I the least of suspected, that I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.’¹

Wesley witnessed this steadfast trust in the lives of the Moravians, a German evangelical group. At sea when the ship was hit by a violent storm he noticed that ‘a terrible screaming began among the English’. The Moravians, however—men,

women, and children—calmly sang a hymn of trust and praise. Wesley was startled because he realized that these Christians possessed something he did not have, and he admitted during the storm, ‘I was afraid to die.’ Later, the Moravian leaders continued to ply Wesley with questions, such as, ‘Do you know Jesus Christ?’ and ‘Do you know if he has saved your soul?’ These were Wesley’s first contacts with evangelical Christianity and ‘they left a lasting mark.’

A Christian’s life should be characterized by a continual desire for greater trust in God. John Newton’s letter to a certain Captain Clunie, dated 12 October 1776, reflects this well:

I long to have a more entire submission to his will, and a more steadfast confidence in his word, to trust him and wait on him, to see his hand and praise his name in every circumstance of life great and small. The more of this spirit, the more heaven is begun upon earth. And why should we not trust him at all times? Which part of our past experience can charge him with unfaithfulness? Has he not done all things well? And is he not the same yesterday, today, and for ever? O my soul, wait thou only upon him.

At the outset of the book of Ruth we are confronted with an Israelite family that is in dire economic straits. The question is, how will this family respond to these difficult times? In what will they put their trust?

The backdrop (1:1)

The book begins with the words: ‘*In the days when the judges ruled ...*’ This expression provides the timing and background of the story: it occurs during the period that is described in the book of Judges. In general, what do we know about this period of history? The last verse of the book of Judges is a summary statement that encapsulates the aura of the times: ‘In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right

in his own eyes' (Judges 21:25). That thematic statement reflects a state of political anarchy. There is a distinct lack of a central political authority in Israel at this time. But this description is also one that indicates a lack of spiritual focus. There exists a dominant relativism. This relativism violates God's covenant in two significant ways. First, God's covenant law is no longer the standard; rather, the people are doing what is best in their own eyes. Secondly, the unity intended among Israel as God's covenant people has broken down into individualism. People are simply trusting in themselves.

Some time during the period of the judges there occurs '*a famine in the land*'. In other words, some type of economic and agricultural adversity strikes the covenant people in the land of promise. Famine in Israel was a calamity that commonly befell the inhabitants of the land in biblical times. For example, Abraham flees to Egypt as a result of a famine in Canaan (Genesis 12:10). Jacob brings the Hebrew people to Egypt from Canaan because of a particularly severe famine (Genesis 42–47). Often in the Old Testament a famine is understood as a sign of God's displeasure with an unfaithful Israel. Leviticus 26:18–20, for instance, quotes God speaking to Israel:

And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. And your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.

Of course, the period of the judges was a time of Israel's overall disobedience and unfaithfulness and, therefore, it is not surprising that a famine came on the land (cf. Amos 8:11–12). These were difficult times for God's people; it was a period

of moral collapse, great apostasy and physical hardship. How would the people of Israel respond to such adversity?

The book of Ruth begins as a story of what one man does in the midst of the famine. The text describes this person as *'a man of Bethlehem in Judah'*. Where the man comes from is important to the story.

First, the name of his home town underscores a bitter irony: the famine hits the town of Bethlehem, a name that literally means 'the house of bread', or 'the house of food'.

Secondly, the town is identified with the tribe of Judah, and that distinguishes it from another Bethlehem, which belongs to the tribe of Zebulun (Joshua 19:15-16). To the reader, both ancient and modern, the town of Bethlehem in Judah should immediately bring to mind that this was the home town of David, the great king of Israel. And, of course, the New Testament records that it was also the birthplace of the coming Messianic king, the Son of David (Matthew 2:1). Irony again plays into the story: at the time of the judges there was no king in Israel, yet the story of Ruth is set in the very place where the greatest kings in Israel's history will be born.

This man from Bethlehem in Judah takes his immediate family and leaves the land of promise to 'sojourn' in the land of Moab. 'Sojourning' is a technical term used in antiquity for a person who is living as an alien in a foreign land. It describes the social standing of someone who works in a foreign country but has few of the rights and privileges of citizenship. One who sojourns does not own land, but is generally in the service of a native who is his or her master and protector. Thus, this man from Bethlehem leaves the lands allotted to his tribe and clan in Israel to put himself in a position paramount to servitude in a foreign land.

What do we know about Moab at this time? First, the Moabites were descendants of Lot; the person named Moab, who was the progenitor of this people, was born as a result of incest between Lot and one of his daughters (Genesis 19:37). Their habitation was on the east side of the Jordan River. The Moabites were pagan, and their main god was Chemosh (Numbers 21:29). They also worshipped the notorious god Baal of Peor (Numbers 25:1–3). During the period of the judges, in which the book of Ruth takes place, the Moabites were arch-enemies of Israel (see, in particular, Judges 3:12–30).

One wonders whether this Israelite man does the right thing by abandoning his ancestral holdings and going to Moab to serve under pagan authority. I believe we can understand his reasoning—that is, he is concerned for the economic well-being of his family. On the other hand, as the story unfolds it appears that the man is actually putting his family in harm's way, rather than trusting in God's provision for them in the land of promise. The reality is that not all Israel responds in the way that this man does; many, like Boaz, remain in the land awaiting God's provision for them.

In any event, this man leaves Israel for Moab, and he takes his wife and two sons with him. Apparently neither son is married at this time.

The names of the characters (1:2)

Names of people in the Old Testament may be an integral part of the story being told.

The naming of a child may *reflect an important event in the life of the nation or family*. Thus, for instance, the name Isaac means 'laughter', and that term is a dominant motif in the birth narrative of Isaac. In Genesis 17:17 Abraham laughed when told that Sarah would bear a child in old age. Sarah herself laughed

at the thought of it (Genesis 18:12). And in Genesis 21:6, Sarah claims that everyone who hears of the unique birth of Isaac will laugh.

The naming of a person may be *anticipatory*. Abel's name, for example, means 'fleeting', or 'vapour', and, indeed, it reflects his short-lived existence.

Some names are directly *prophetic*. Isaiah called his son Maher-shalal-hashbaz, which means, 'Swift is the booty, speedy is the prey' (Isaiah 8:1-4). His naming is a prophecy of the coming Assyrian army's invasion of Israel.

Names, therefore, can sometimes be a key to unlocking an important truth or motif in a story. This is the case in the book of Ruth.

The name of the man from Bethlehem in Judah is '*Elimelech*', which literally means, 'My God is king.' That proper name is ironic considering the nature of the period of the judges, in which 'there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (Judges 21:25). In reality, not even God was king in Israel at this time, and this man is a testimony to the tenor of the period; he was doing what was right in his own eyes by leaving Israel and becoming a resident alien in Moab.

The name of the man's wife is '*Naomi*', which in Hebrew derives from a word that means 'sweet, pleasant, delightful'.² Later in the chapter Naomi will change her name to a word that will reflect the opposite of her given name, describing her as one who is in desperate circumstances (see comments on 1:19-21).

The name of their older son is '*Mahlon*'. The meaning of this name is uncertain, although it may be related to a word that means 'sickly, weak, ill'. The second son is '*Chilion*', which derives from a term that means 'failing or pining away'.³

Although we cannot be certain, it may be that the two names of the sons anticipate the deaths that will soon come upon them.

This family belongs to the Judahite clan of the ‘*Ephrathites*’ which is centred on the village of Bethlehem. Again, the reader is to be reminded at this point of King David. Early in the account of David’s life, we read, ‘Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah’ (1 Samuel 17:12). As we shall see repeatedly through the book of Ruth, the narrative is driving towards David with great clarity. In a time when there was no king in Israel, this book anticipates the kingship of David.

At the close of the verse, the family travels to Moab and they become resident aliens in that foreign land.

Dire straits (1:3)

The family is under great hardship. There is a famine in Israel, and so they go to sojourn in Moab and to live there under the authority of the pagan Moabites. Tragedy then strikes: Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, dies. Thus, matters are moving from bad to worse. Naomi is now a widow. Nevertheless not all is bleak, because she still has her two sons to care for her; she is not yet destitute.

One can imagine how difficult and heartbreaking the death of her husband would have been for Naomi. Numerous psychological studies today tell us that one of the most trying and difficult periods in a person’s life is the loss of a spouse. Many of these studies rank it as the second most difficult event that many people have to face. What is often ranked as the greatest hardship in life? We need not wait long to get the answer to that question, for in two verses’ time Naomi will endure that as well.

Life goes on (1:4)

When God's people go through trials and tribulations, they often glean comfort from the doctrine of the providence of God. In other words, if one of God's people is enduring hardship, it is because this fits into God's overall plan for that person's life. A confirming verse in this regard is Romans 8:28: 'And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.' This is true doctrine. If it happens, it is due to providence and it is brought about by the sovereign hand of God.

However, we need to be careful not to conclude, when hard things happen to us, that we are mere victims of providence or circumstance. The reality is that adversity often comes because of the way that we think, act and behave. For example, when Moses murders an Egyptian, he is forced to flee Egypt and then endure hardship in the desert for forty years (Exodus 2:11-22). Moses reaps temporal consequences for his sinful activity. On the other hand, the Lord uses such shameful activity to bring about his good purposes. In that desert of hardship, God prepares Moses to shepherd his people through that very same barren land. This reality may be summarized by Joseph's statement to his brothers after they had sinfully sold him into Egypt: 'As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today' (Genesis 50:20).

May we grasp the truth that God will use his people despite their sin. That, of course, does not give anyone a licence to sin, but it underscores the reality that God employs frail and weak vessels to proclaim his truth. God uses his people, despite their feebleness, debility and transgressions, for his glory and purposes.

This is what happens in the book of Ruth. As has already

been suggested, the act of Elimelech to move his family to Moab because of a famine in Israel was not the right response to adversity. He should have trusted in the Lord's provision and remained steadfast in the land of his inheritance. Now in verse 4 we see another errant action: Naomi's two Hebrew sons marry Moabite women. How often biblical law demands that the Israelites should not intermarry with pagan peoples! Deuteronomy 7:3–4, for example, says, '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.' Yet, as we shall see, the sovereign God will even take such sinful activity and redeem it for his own glory and purposes. The characters in the story do suffer temporal hardships because of their sin, yet all will end up to the glory of God.

The names of the two Moabite wives are provided in verse 4. The first daughter-in-law is '*Orpah*'. The meaning of her name is disputed. Some argue that it means 'to be stiff-necked or stubborn', and others that it refers to 'a girl with a full mane'.⁴ The second daughter-in-law is '*Ruth*'. Many commentators agree that her name derives from a root that signifies 'friendship', or 'companionship'.⁵

This extended family, now lacking the leadership of Elimelech, becomes entrenched in the land of Moab, having settled there for approximately ten years. Warning bells ought to be ringing. Certainly over this extended time period, acculturation and assimilation to Moabite culture would have been a constant danger and threat to these Israelites. It is reminiscent in some ways of Lot's absorption into Sodomite culture so clearly portrayed in Genesis 13–19. Lot moved to Sodom, and he became a property owner, a townsman, and perhaps married one of the

native population. His daughters married Sodomites (Genesis 19:14). All of that led to disaster.

Increase of adversity (1:5)

Perhaps the greatest hardship that people ever face is the loss of a child. Naomi loses both of her sons after the death of her husband. This is heart-wrenching; yet it is perhaps even more severe than we realize. Naomi's situation is grave: she is now a widow with no sons to care for her. Certainly the Moabites would have no sense of responsibility for the widow of a sojourner; Naomi would have very few rights and privileges in that culture. So, on top of her grief and mourning, Naomi is facing destitution, poverty, and perhaps even enslavement. The latter would appear to be her only option in Moab unless she were to marry a Moabite. Marriage for Naomi is unlikely (see 1:12). The reality is that she is in a hopeless, desperate situation as she faces some of the great miseries of life. *What will she do?*

Difficult circumstances ought to lead a child of God into a period of self-examination. They ought to cause one to assess how one is living before God on this earth. The Puritan commentator Matthew Henry says in this regard, 'When death comes into a family it ought to be improved [i.e. made good use of] for the reforming of what is amiss in the family.' Such tragedy as Naomi is facing ought to lead to change, and it ought to bring into focus the things that are truly important. For Naomi, this change is about to take place.

Points to ponder

In the middle of the eighteenth century in America, a certain young man was attending Yale University as a full-time divinity student. His desire was to be trained for the pastoral ministry. He was an excellent student, and after a few years of hard study he was close to completing his work. However, one day an unfortunate incident occurred. The student was talking to

some friends and made the unguarded remark about one of his professors: 'That man is about as spiritual as this chair I'm sitting in!'

The student was expelled from Yale. It was a sinful thing he had said, and he later repented and asked the professor for forgiveness. However, he was never readmitted to the divinity school at the university. Thus began what was perhaps the lowest, most depressing and most discouraging period in the life of David Brainerd.

But the Scriptures call us to understand that God uses even our most despicable acts to bring about his good purposes. And so God worked his good pleasure in the life of David Brainerd. After his expulsion from Yale, Brainerd agonized over his calling—but God opened up a service for him on the mission field to the Indians. That had not been Brainerd's desire, but God gave him that desire. And, of course, God blessed his ministry with great revivals among the Indians. God can use even the sin of man to bring about his good purposes for the world. He is simply sovereign, and nothing happens in heaven or on earth apart from his decrees.