

December 1, 2019

THE ANATOMY OF SIN AND A GLIMPSE OF GRACE

RUTH 1

(1 of 3 in a series through Ruth)

One of the many benefits of reading a story is that it allows you to see elements in other characters that can be quite difficult to see in yourself. How many times, for example, have you found yourself condemning the Israelites for not trusting in God after he had provided manna for them in the wilderness, only to recognize that you've been blinded to your own struggle to trust God despite all that he's provided for you? Somehow we're blinded to things in ourselves that we can see so clearly in others. Well, over the next three weeks, we're going to study the book of Ruth, and my hope is that as we look at chapter 1 this morning, we'll find ourselves able to diagnose areas in our lives where we need to repent or temptations we need to walk away from by seeing these things in the characters present in this first chapter. I say this because I think Ruth 1 allows us to have a glimpse of the anatomy of sin—the way sins develops and works—by seeing it in the lives of others. Therefore, with this clearer view of sin, may we find ourselves strengthened as we look at this chapter not to go down that road.

Before diving into chapter 1, let's familiarize ourselves a bit with the book as a whole. The book of Ruth is about how the Lord works through a seemingly impossible event to preserve a particular line of Israelites which would bring about the birth of King David and ultimately—through David's line—the Messiah. In other words, this book tells us of a moment when the Messianic line was at risk of being cut off before the arrival of the Messiah and how the Lord amazingly preserved this people so that his promise of the coming Messiah would be a reality. In this way, this is the perfect book for us to look at over the next three weeks as our minds are especially focused on the birth of Christ.

This book, then, is a book of joy and provision and mercy. But it doesn't start out that way. The desperate situation that leads to this crisis of the line possibly being cut off is actually one of sin—sin we see especially revealed in chapter 1. This chapter, then, is the dark before the dawn, we might say. What then does this chapter show us about sin? Let me list a few things.

Sin tempts us to try to be wiser than God

The first thing we see is that sin tempts us to try to be wiser than God. Now, I don't know that we would say that this is what we're trying to do when we sin, but it is exactly what we're doing and saying when we sin. Isn't this what Adam and Eve were saying in the garden? They thought they could decide better than God what was good for them. And it's the same thing you and I do every time we sin, as we decide that what we want is better than what God has commanded. But before saying too much here, let me show you this in the text.

The sinful decisions in this text are not greatly obvious to us, but if we understand the background of the earlier books in the OT—that provide the context for this book—it becomes

more apparent. The text begins, “In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons” (v. 1). And, again, on its face, the sin isn’t obvious. But I think it’s there. Let me show you why. First, we’re told that these events unfolded in the days when the judges ruled. That is a reference to the time recorded in the book that immediately precedes this one titled “Judges.” And if you read the book of Judges, you’ll see that it is a time of repeated unfaithfulness on the part of the Israelites. The book is arranged in a repeated pattern whereby Israel is unfaithful to the Lord, the Lord brings punishment against him, the people cry out, the Lord sends a judge to deliver them, and then once delivered they go right back to their sinful ways. Phrases like, “The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD,” “And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD,” and “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” fill that book. So when the author of Ruth tells us that these events occurred in the days when the judges ruled, we’re already being told that these events occurred during a time when Israel was characterized by their sinful rebellion against the Lord.

Then we’re told that there was a famine in the land. And again, that could be a detail that carries no theological significance in our minds. But any careful reader of the law knows that famine was one of the signs of the Lord’s judgment. So, for example, God had said to his people in Deuteronomy 28, “If you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today . . . cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. . . . All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you” (vv. 15, 18, 45). What then should Israel do when they find themselves bearing the Lord’s curse in such times? The Lord simply commands repentance. He tells his people in Deuteronomy 30:1-3, “And when all these things come upon you . . . which I have set before you, and you . . . return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you.”

It’s pretty straightforward, isn’t it? Disobey and you’ll be cursed. And when you’re cursed, just repent, and the Lord will have mercy. And there’s where the book of Ruth begins. A time of unfaithfulness—when the judges ruled—and bearing a promised curse for that disobedience—there is famine in the land. So, we’d next anticipate repentance wouldn’t we? But that’s not what comes. Rather, we read that a man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi and his two sons decide to go to Moab. In verse 1 specifically we’re told that he went to sojourn there, suggesting that he was there to wait out the famine and then return to Bethlehem. In other words, he’d figured out a better, wiser path than the path of repentance the Lord had demanded—at least in his own mind. He’d simply go to Moab.

And in one sense, it makes sense, doesn’t it? Perhaps there’d be more food there. Prospects of a better life. But, first, this isn’t what the Lord prescribed. Second, the Moabites were always seen as a people who were enemies of Israel. They’d come about through the incestuous relationship of Lot and his daughter (Gen 19:30-38), had refused to let Israel pass through when

they'd come out of Egypt (Num 22-24), had lured the Israelites to rebellion and idolatry (Num 25:1-9), and had recently come against Israel, leading Ehud to stab their tremendously fat king, Eglon (Judg 3:12-30).¹ Needless to say, this was not the move of a faithful and obedient Israelite.

Then, once there, we're told that the Lord's promised curses simply continued. Elimelech died so that Naomi was then left in Moab with her two sons. Does this then lead to repentance? No. Rather, we're told that the two sons took Moabite wives named Orpah and Ruth, when the Lord had explicitly condemned the Israelites from taking foreign wives. And so the curse continues. Both of Naomi's sons die, and then all that are left are three widows: Naomi, and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, and it's been ten years since they left Bethlehem.

So, that's the note of tragedy. Elimelech's name is at risk of being wiped out of existence. His sons have died without having any sons themselves. His line is in jeopardy. And I think it's fair for us to argue that all of this is due to his attempt to be wiser than God. He refused to go the path that God commanded. He thought he'd figured out a way of beating the famine without repenting.

Brothers and sisters, that is the nature of sin. It always holds to us a path that seems wiser than obedience to God. It always hold out an alternative to simply bowing the knee to what God has spoken. And if you're there now, maybe having judged that some seeming small act of disobedience is actually a better way to go, then recognize it for what it is—you're attempting to be wiser than God. And once you realize the foolishness of such a thought, turn from sin and back to the Lord in repentance this morning.

But that's not all we see about the nature of sin. We also see that sin leads us to ignore our responsibility and grow bitter toward God.

Sin leads us to ignore our responsibility and grow bitter toward God

I want to look at some elements in verses 6-18 in more detail soon, but for now, let me simply summarize what happens. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law get news that the Lord has ended the famine in Bethlehem, and so Naomi decides it's time to go back. And so they set out on their way to Bethlehem when suddenly Naomi stops them and urges them not to go with her but to go back to Moab, where they're from. Her argument is simple. She knows that these women want husbands and children, and they stand a better chance of that happening if they go back to their home of Moab. And at first, both of them refuse, but then Naomi ratchets up her argument.

She makes the point that with both of her sons dying and her being old, she isn't going to produce any more sons. And, even if she were to remarry and have sons, then these women aren't going to wait for her sons to grow up and be of marrying age. And at this point, Naomi's

¹Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 627.

argument is at least convincing to one of her daughters-in-law, Orpah. And so Orpah turns back and heads toward Moab. But Ruth refuses, pledging herself to Naomi, her people, and her God. So, when Naomi sees that she's not going to be able to convince Ruth to go back, she stops arguing, and they enter Bethlehem together. Naomi is not alone, but this gracious event serves to highlight the nature of sin in Naomi's heart as we see her response to the people when they arrive in Bethlehem.

As they come into Bethlehem, you'd think that Ruth would draw much of the attention, but she doesn't. She is not even spoken of by name in verses 19-21, as Naomi becomes the focus. And what we see with Naomi isn't a pretty picture. First, we see her growing in bitterness toward the Lord. We read in verses 19-20, "So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.'"

This change of names could be lost on us because the meaning isn't obvious to us, but the name "Naomi" means "pleasant" while the name "Mara" means "bitter." Naomi is expressing her bitterness. But I think it's even deeper. You see, we've seen this term before. We see it in Exodus 15, right after the Israelites are brought through the Red Sea in a miraculous way so that it parts before them, and they cross on dry land. I mean, it seems that it'd take a while to come down off of such a high. However, we read in Exodus 15, right after Israel crosses through and Pharaoh and his army drown, the very next scene is Israel coming to a place where there is water, but the place is named "Marah" because the water is bitter. And the text tells us, "And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'" (Ex 15:24).

Now, we know as we continue on after Exodus 15 that this grumbling against the Lord becomes what characterizes the people of Israel. In fact, it grows to the point that the Lord tells us that these people were hardened in their hearts and that he "loathed that generation," swearing that he would not bring them into the promised land (Ps 95:8-11). And all of that grumbling and ungratefulness and hard-heartedness started at the pool of water named Marah, because it was bitter. And now Naomi is associating herself with that name, and I don't think the connection would be lost on an Israelite. She knows and is making very clear that she is bitter against the Lord. She's become the grumbling Israelite.

And just when we might be tempted to say, "Bitter at God? Doesn't she recognize that what has come about is directly tied to her family's rebellion against the Lord and his promised judgment?" the answer comes to us clearly, "No." She says in verse 21, "I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" She's blaming God.

Contrast this with David in Psalm 51. His sin had brought great calamity on him so that he'd lost his child, and yet his response is, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment" (Ps 51:4). There is no acknowledgment from Naomi that what has happened is just—as we see with

David—that God has simply done what he promised he would do in the face of rebellion. There is no ownership of sin. There is simply the avoidance of responsibility, blame toward the Lord, and bitterness against her God.

Brothers and sisters, this is what sin does to our hearts. Sin can't be isolated simply to the act of our sin. There are all kinds of consequences that come with it. The effect it has on our hearts is painful. We can be blinded toward our responsibility and may well desire to blame the Lord in bitterness for our circumstances, when all of it stems from our sin. And since we just came through the book of Hebrews, which calls for us to persevere in faith, I could note story after story of individuals who chose sin and when the sin left them empty-handed—as sin always does—they walked away from the Lord, blaming him and bitter against him for their lot in life. Let us not think this morning that sin is something to trifle with, as if we can pursue it without cost. And on that note, let me list one other element of the nature of sin.

Sin causes us to ignore God's blessings

In saying that sin leads us to ignore God's blessings, I don't only mean in the present but also his potential blessings in the future. Let me start, though, by noting how it leads us to ignore God's present blessings. Even in the midst of Elimelech leading his family to run to a foreign land, his sons to marry foreign wives, and to keep rebelling despite the judgment God was bringing, the Lord was still working mercy and grace and blessing toward Naomi. It's interesting that Naomi says that she left full and that the Lord has "brought [her] back empty" (v. 21) because standing beside her is Ruth, a daughter-in-law who wouldn't leave her side even when she tried to make her go. We all know people who have suffered loss, grown in bitterness and struggle, and try to push others away as a defense mechanism. They're thinking, "I'll push this person away so that I don't have to face the possibility of them voluntarily turning away from me." It may well be that Naomi was doing that in regards to her daughters-in-law, but Ruth wouldn't budge. It's hard to overestimate Ruth's loyalty.

What Ruth says to her is a powerful declaration of loyalty and commitment. She says in verses 16-17, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." This language is so strong that some have used this pledge of loyalty from a daughter-in-law toward her mother-in-law in their wedding ceremonies. And you can see why. Marriage is not the context, of course, but the language of commitment is powerful. Despite the family's rebellion against God, the Lord has given her a daughter-in-law of such commitment and loyalty that many have never known from a neighbor, friend, or family member in this life. Yet, Naomi simply sees herself as being left empty-handed by her God. The effects of sin are blinding her to God's blessings. And it's not even just the blessing of Ruth. The chapter ends with the mention that Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem "at the beginning of barley harvest" (v. 22). Naomi left in a time of famine but she is returning at a time of harvest, but all she can see are empty hands and a bitter heart.

And we can add that it's led her to miss what the Lord might do as well. One of the schemes of the devil, working through the destructive nature of our sin, is to convince us that we are hopeless. Maybe he whispers to our hearts, "In light of what you've done there is no hope." Maybe that's what Naomi felt. Maybe she had begun to recognize her sin, but her sense of hopelessness blinded her to the path of repentance and left her thinking she could only blame God and be bitter toward him. After all, how could she have hope? She'd lost her husband, lost her sons, and the potential for grandchildren is seemingly removed. There's nothing that can come from this, right?

Well, if we know how the story ends, we know better. This is a book that ends with a genealogy, giving us the names of Ruth's child, grandchild, great-grandchild, and great-great-grandchild, who happened to be King David. God is going to work in ways that Naomi could never have imagined. Her sin has blinded her not only to the Lord's present blessings but the possibility of blessings in the future as well.

Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:8, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." What schemes does he use to devour people? The answer is as old as the first sin. Sin holds out the enticement of trying to be wiser than God. It says, "I know what God has said, but he's holding out on you." And once we go after it, we get way more and way less than we bargained for. In one sense, it leaves us empty-handed. It gives fleeting happiness and loss and emptiness. And in another sense, it brings more than we ever wanted. It blinds us to our responsibility so that we might not repent and hardens us toward the Lord so that we blame him and grow in bitterness against him, even being blinded to his blessings and potential for blessing in our lives.

What then do we do? For one, if you're feeling the lure of sin, allow this first chapter of Ruth to open your eyes and do not go down that path. And, if indeed, you've been wading neck deep in sin, allow this chapter to jar you into repentance. Let us turn from our sin and turn to the Lord who is merciful and gracious. If you think, "I sure wish I had someone who would be committed to me like Ruth toward Naomi," the glorious news is that you have one who committed himself toward you when you were his enemy. And he is one who has committed himself to you in a far greater way than any other has. Christ lived for us, died for our sins, and rose from the dead. And as our crucified and risen Lord, he both commands us not to sin but also tells us that if we have sinned, he is our advocate with the Father. In other words, our God pleads with us to come to him in repentance, knowing we will find mercy because of Christ's work for us. So, this morning, let us learn from the example of Naomi in this first chapter of Ruth, turn from our sin, and run to the Lord, recognizing his blessings for us in Christ. And let us do this now as we come to the table. Amen.