

Ruth 1 (Matthew 6:24-34)

Heavenly Father, may we continuously look to You and Your strength; seeking Your face always by the leading of the Holy Spirit and remembering Your wondrous work of redemption revealed in Your Son, Christ our Lord in Whom we pray. AMEN.

Have you ever been faced with a threatening situation and reacted: 1. fearfully rather than cautiously; 2. hastily rather than patiently; 3. foolishly rather than wisely? I have, and, when taking matters into my own hands, I generally make matters worse; especially when I did not seek wise counsel. When faced with any scary situation and an uncertain outcome, we are usually tempted to rely on ourselves rather than on God and His faithfulness to His Word. We may doubt God's goodness; His willingness and ability to provide for our genuine needs; His love and loyalty to us as His People. We easily forget God's love and loyalty toward us when faced with horrible circumstances such as famine and death. Then, we foolishly go it alone and rely on our own finite resources. Nevertheless, God is loving and loyal even when we are distant and disloyal to Him. God takes the bad of our circumstances and uses them to empty us of ourselves so that we will return to Him for rest and refuge. God's abounding kindness toward us when we are most vulnerable empowers us, sustains us, and enables us to reflect His loving loyalty to others who are scared and uncertain like we are. Such mutual loving-kindness among God's People toward one another, especially when there is shared suffering, reminds us of God's loving-kindness to us, so we may return to Him for rest and refuge. This is the backdrop of our four-week "Run Down of Ruth".

"The Book of Ruth" serves as a bridge between the time of the "Judges", in which this story is set when "everyone did what was right in their own eyes" and the rise of Israel's monarchy in 1 Samuel. While the Lord God is rarely mentioned in Ruth, He is providentially in the background, even during some of the darkest days of Israel's history, to fulfill His sovereign plan of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles (even Moabite widows) through His King. While God is in the background, His loving loyalty is reflected in the main characters of this wonderful story that takes place at the time of the "Judges" - a time of widespread covenant disloyalty to the Lord Who had successfully brought His People into the Land as He promised. Because of Israel's disloyalty, the Lord afflicted His People to bring

them to repentance, so they would cry to Him for deliverance. Because of the Lord's divine loving loyalty, He would subsequently deliver His People.

1. The Critical Setting (Verses 1-5) **Famine and Death**

a. **Famine** - That there is a famine, and of all places in Bethlehem, which means 'house of bread', may be indicative that this famine was God's response to covenant disloyalty among His People which was common during this time. While God would use such occasions to bring His People to repentance; so they would 'return' to Him; Elimelek foolishly decides to turn away from God and His People by leaving the Land in which Yahweh promised to provide for His People and to be present among them.

i. It is difficult for us to understand how foolish, and disloyal, it was for Elimelek to do this. In essence, Elimelek is rejecting God and his inheritance, like the Prodigal Son in Jesus' parable, and going to serve other foreign gods, in Moab of all places (an enemy of Israel; remember Balak who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites). Elimelek, by his actions, is saying, I trust these foreign Moabites and their gods more than Yahweh in the face of this famine.

1. Yet, we often do the very same thing today, yet the gods we turn to for security amid uncertainty is money, comfort, power, and the self-help folly of the world.

b. "Elimelek" means 'my God is king', yet Elimelek either does not view Yahweh as His king, or he does not trust that Yahweh is a lovingly loyal king Who will provide for the needs of His People.

c. **Death** remains the outcome, not only for Elimelek, but for his sons and, from all appearances, his family line. Elimelek sought to avoid death due to famine, but death came anyway; now death simply occurred outside of God's Promised Land; in a foreign land, among foreign people, who worshipped foreign gods.

i. As we will see, this crisis for Elimelek's family line is, more importantly, a crisis for the royal line God promised.

2. The Critical Response (Verses 6-18) **Return and Kindness**

a. **Return** This is the same Hebrew word used by the prophets for 'repent' and 'turn back to God/from evil'.

- b. Kindness “*chesed*” often translated loving-kindness and means covenant love, loyalty and faithfulness. I like R.C. Sproul’s preference of translating this word, especially in this particular context of Ruth, as “loyal love.”
- i. Ruth toward Naomi...what a comfort; something that reflects God’s loyal love, and something that is to be present among brothers and sisters in Christ within the local congregation.
 - ii. Verses 14-17 Ruth’s “clinging” loyal love towards Naomi is also a “clinging” loyal love toward Yahweh and Yahweh’s People; through thick and thin.
 1. What implications does this have for membership and relationships among Christians within the local congregation?
 - iii. This is quite a risk for Ruth; a desire to be among the Israelites. She has three strikes against her. Yes, Naomi is marginalized as a widow without children, but she is still an Israelite, a member of God’s Covenant People. Ruth, however, is a widow, childless, and a foreigner; and not any foreigner, a Moabite, which the Book of Ruth makes clear on a number of occasions.
 1. ***Deuteronomy 23:3-6***
 - iv. Naomi seems to realize the condition of their low and vulnerable status in Israelite society....
3. The Critical Assessment (Verses 19-23) ***Empty and Bitter***
- a. Naomi means ‘pleasant’, but Mara means “bitter”
 - b. It is interesting that, despite the famine which was the reason for her relocation to Moab, she indicates that she was “full” in verse 20. Now, she has returned, just in time for the barely harvest.

Naomi, with Ruth, **Returned Empty** to the Lord in the Land with His People for His promised provision. Notice that the Lord came to the aid of His People while Naomi was away (verse 6). Naomi, realizing her emptiness and bitterness returns to the Lord God because of His loving loyalty in providing for His People. Additionally, within Naomi’s unfavorable circumstances, the loving and loyal Lord God provided Ruth, a Moabite daughter-in-law, who reflected His Own loyal love personally toward Naomi. What a comfort! God is present even when we are absent from Him. God, Who is sovereign over all human affairs and natural

occurrences, also provides for our needs through the blessing of fellowship with others in times of fear and uncertainty. Why would we not believe this? The same God Who sent Ruth to Naomi sent His Son Jesus to demonstrate His supreme loyal love for us while we were far from Him, empty and bitter towards Him.

When we face the consequences of our own folly and realize the emptiness of our own personal resources to deliver ourselves, we must: 1.) trust that God is there able and willing to provide for our needs, and 2.) confidently return to Him.

Like Elimelek, when in a threatening and uncertain situation, do we fail to 1) seek the Lord, 2) trust in His Promises, or 3) believe in His ability to Provide for our needs? Do we act according to the folly of our own abilities and resources and forget about God's loyal love, even when things are scary and uncertain? The implications for us in our daily lives are numerous when we face a job loss, receive an unfavorable medical prognosis, loose a loved one, or face the depths of depression. Remember from Proverbs: "the fear of the Lord is a secure refuge". Nevertheless, Ruth's commitment/her clinging to Naomi was also a commitment/a clinging to Yahweh in Whom both of these marginalized woman sought refuge. What applications does this have for us, as Christians, when faced with difficult circumstances? 1) When we find ourselves empty and bitter, we must repent / return to the Lord for wisdom and refuge. 2) We are blessed with the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in Whom we have the loyal love of Christ. 3) The divine loyal love we have received should overflow into our relationships with one another. 4) Our mutual fellowship and our self-sacrificial love toward one another during difficult times provides strength and support, and it reflects the loyal love of Christ our Lord to the glory and honor of our Father in heaven. AMEN.

Bible Study Discussion

While I would not say this passage is about immigration, I think there may be some implications for Christians who fearfully live in war-torn nations and seek to immigrate to other countries, even if by illegal means. I think Christians facing such terrible circumstances must ask what comfort is there, now, in the new growing international Kingdom of the Son of Man that has no geographical boundaries. Is Jesus the King of kings, Lord of lords, and God of gods able to provide for the needs (not necessarily the desired comforts) of His People regardless of their national residence? Then there is the other side for those to whom Christians, or non-Christians, migrate. How are Believers to respond to immigrants on a personal level? We may gain more insight into this consideration as we progress through Ruth.