

Ruth 1 for 20 April 2008

Trusting God when it Hurts

Introduction

Sometimes life can deal us some pretty bitter blows. The tragic loss of six Elim Christian School students and their teacher drowned while canyoning at the Sir Edmond Hillary outdoor pursuits centre this week is deeply disturbing. What does that do to your faith in God when such things happen? That was the question the media were asking; Why do bad things happen to good people? Is this God's plan or just a horrible mistake over which he has no control?

Transition

There are many tragedies that happen in our short lives: a young mother dies after losing her battle with cancer, a young couple have their first child and their joy is dashed by concerned looks of the hospital staff, a work accident that leaves a person invalided for life, a rebellious teenager, a failed business venture, or the loss of a lifetime of savings in a finance company collapse. These are challenges and tragedies that are common to life.

Naomi and Ruth had to deal with these issues in this book we're looking at. We will focus on ch.1 and last part of ch.4.

Explanation:

Elimelech and Naomi move to the neighbouring land of Moab with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion because of a drought in Judah. They are a godly family in a foreign land and surrounded by false religions. So, it would have been a concern to the parents when they married Moabite girls, Orpah and Ruth.

While there a dreadful tragedy strike the family when first Elimelech dies followed by his two sons. Naomi is now a widow and childless in a foreign country far away from her family support. It is difficult for Kiwi's living in the 21 Century to appreciate how dire her situation was.

Naomi hears that things are better in Israel, so she decides to return to her family. Both Orpah and Ruth initially declare that they will stick with their mother-in-law, but Naomi manages to dissuade Orpah by saying: But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? (12) Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, (13) would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me." (1:11-13)

Ruth, on the other hand, seems even more adamant, and in those famous words declares: "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 my God. (17) Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." (1:16,17) This is a classic expression of devotion and loyalty. Ruth rejects her own people and religion for Naomi the widow and the Lord God. She sealed it with a solemn oath and curse on herself if she reneged.

This is an all-or-nothing confession of faith. Ruth, however, wasn't looking with natural eyes but spiritual eyes, which is what we need to do more often.

Arriving back in Bethlehem Naomi caused quite a stir. But in response to Bethlehem's excitement, she tells everyone to call her 'Mara' which means 'bitter'. She says, '*The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune on me.*'

Back in Judah Ruth meets a kind and loving man Boaz. Boaz and Ruth fall in love and Boaz gains the approval of the elders to marry Ruth. They have a son – a grandson for Naomi – who is named Obed.

As we look at this story on one level we see human suffering and tragedy – tragedy that cannot be denied. However, on another level the sovereignty, wisdom and love of God. We see that:

1. God is Intimately Sovereign

The thing about this book that people notice is that God is present, but not seen or heard directly. There is no voice from heaven, but you know God is there. Here we see that God is intimately in total control of the lives of these people – these nobodies. God almighty is involved in the affairs of all people – from parliament to this church, from Buckingham palace to your house – God is involved. Naomi expresses it by her many references to the hand of God on their lives, while Ruth expresses it by her confession (16-17).

The prophet Daniel expressed this same truth when he wrote: *"Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. (21) He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; (22) he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him."* (Daniel 2:20-22)

The Lord Jesus taught Pilate this same truth at his trial: *So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" (11) Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."* (John 19:10-11)

God is in control of all things in our lives – intimately. Nothing is too small for him. He knows the number of hairs on your head and about the sparrows in the trees. He isn't blind to these details. What a great comfort this is. You can entrust every area of life into God's capable hands.

However, saying that God is intimately sovereign doesn't mean that your life will be completely happy and peaceful. *'God is sovereign, even in the smallest details of her life, and although not always easy, it works out for good and brings ultimate freedom.'* (Piper)

2. God's Sovereign Rule in Your Life is Not Always Easy

The prophet Jeremiah said; *'Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? (38) Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? (Lamentations 3:37-38)* The fact that God is intimately sovereign doesn't mean that your life will always be easy. Notice how Naomi puts it thus to her daughters-in-law (13), but far more powerfully to her family back in Bethlehem (20,21). These words of Naomi may shock us, but they are true. This is healthy and biblical.

Notice that Naomi recognises that it is God who has brought these tragedies on her life. She wants her name changed to 'Bitter' because God has made her life bitter – very bitter. Note the name of God used here, the 'Almighty', or the sovereign God who excludes all other gods, demons or spirits – even the Moabite Chemosh and his ilk. Only God is in total control. God took her from being a happily married mum with kids to a childless widow.

Where I might depart from Naomi is in verse 21 where she explains her predicament by God's judgment against her. She says that God has brought court action against her (testified against – ESV) and brought evil on her. The Bible rather explains these sorts of events have happening by God's permission, like when he allowed Satan to attack Job (Job 1& 2).

3. The wisdom and goodness of God's sovereignty

While this is not addressed directly in this passage, this is the major theme of this book. God is at work in this family in very trying life circumstances to do one of the greatest acts in Israel's history, and set the path for the greatest act in all of world history.

'So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. (14) Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! (15) He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." (16) Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse.'

(Ruth 4: 13-17) Note especially the change in Naomi. Now she is beginning to see the sunshine behind the cloud.

Here God is preparing the ancestor of the great and godly King David through the life of little Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth. Who would have thought? Even better, Jesus came as the Son of David to rule on David's throne – all the way from Naomi and Ruth! All things do indeed 'work together for good to those who love God'!

I encourage you to look at you life like this. Not in a fatalistic way, but trusting in our sovereign God's works of providence as he directs your life and those around you.

'Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (34) "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (35) "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" (36) For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33).

4. Finding freedom by trusting God's sovereign love

When you have the faith of Naomi and Ruth you are free. You can do all kinds of things – leave your job, move far away from your home, take on the care of all kinds of difficult people, face severe trials and difficulties – without fear and uncertainty, but with peace and hope. No longer fret over all the ups and downs, but rest in his sovereign saving grace.

Saving grace? You see, the major theme of this book is that there is a kinsman redeemer who delivers this total outsider Ruth, and that this is part of God's plan for the '*only Redeemer of God's chosen ones, Jesus Christ.*' Why? Because you know that your God is sovereign in his love.

By this I mean that Ruth and Naomi ultimately experience that their God is full of love, even though things are tough. Naomi's friends recognised this (14), and Ruth experienced this through Boaz's kindness towards her.

'In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. (10) In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.' (1 John 4:9-10.)

What is your greatest life need? Not freedom from pain or grief, but freedom from sin and its deathly effects. *Behind a frowning providence there hides a smiling face...* the 'face' of the Lord Jesus Christ saying, "*Come unto me...*"

Conclusion

At the end of the day we often don't know why bad things happen to good people. Why did these seven young people lose their lives? But we do know that God is sovereign, God is all-wise, and God is infinitely loving. Naomi and Ruth both experienced this as they trusted God through the blinding tragedy that was their lives.

At the end God sent Obed the father of Jesse, the father of David...the father of Jesus, the Saviour of the world. We know that God sent his Son into the world, so that whatever happens we can say with Paul, "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*" Let this be our anchor and freedom today.