The Widows Return after a Bitter Past

Ruth 1

Ruth 1: Synopsis and Big Idea

• After the bitterness of famine, relocation, and loss of her husband and sons, Naomi departs with her loyal daughters-in-law, sends Orpah back to Moab, and arrives in Bethlehem, where she experiences God’s provision through the harvest and through Ruth’s extraordinary acts of faithfulness.

• God is present in his provision and care for his people, even when they experience suffering.
Ruth 1: Key Themes

• The light of loyalty shines brightly during the dark age of the judges.
• God graciously provides for his people and cares for their needs.
• God is present with his suffering people even when his justice seems obscure.
• God’s faithfulness can be expressed through the faithfulness of others.
• God cares for the vulnerable people of society.

Ruth 1: Background

• When the judges ruled (1:1)
  – The Settlement Period: Iron Age I (1200-1000 BC)
  – A transitional ‘dark age’ characterized by Israel’s ‘Canaanization’

• Country of Moab (1:1, 2, 6)
  – Probably refers to the plains north of the Arnon River
  – Moabite territory was north of the Zered River
  – Moabites were descendants of Lot and banned from entering the assembly of YHWH (Deut 23:3-6)
Ruth 1: Theological Emphases

• Naomi experiences **God’s justice**
  – Drought, disease and death dominate 1:1-5
  – She accepts that her bitter situation is from “the LORD’s hand” (1:13)
    • Even though she is afflicted and destitute (1:20–21), she is not necessarily bitter or contemptuous toward God, nor does she adamantly claim personal innocence or accuse God of injustice.
    • The text is silent about whether her circumstances are a consequence of her own sin, Elimelek’s sin, the corporate sins of her people, or something else.

Ruth 1: Theological Emphases

• Naomi experiences **God’s provision**
  – The Lord visited his people “by providing food for them” (1:6)
    • This gracious gift from God provides the setting for the rest of the story as the two widows arrive in Bethlehem when “the Barley harvest was beginning” (1:22)
  – God cares for her personal needs
    • Orpah and Ruth have already been serving as agents of *hesed* toward Naomi (1:8)
    • God will continue to take care of her needs through Ruth’s continued presence and actions (1:16-17)
Common but inappropriate trajectories

- Ruth’s response (1:16-17) as a blueprint for religious conversion (cf., Jewish rabbis)
- Ruth as a typological representation of the Gentile church (cf., church fathers)
- Ruth & Naomi as a model for in-law relationships or wedding ceremonies today
- Condemnation of Orpah for returning to Moab
- Evaluation and diagnosis of Naomi’s psychological disposition

Ruth 1: Application

- God is the gracious provider
  - *Directly*: God gives them a harvest of barley (1:6, 22)
  - *Indirectly*: the past faithful acts of Orpah and Ruth (1:8) and the future faithful acts of Ruth (1:16-17)
- God’s provision does not always come in the forms or time frame one might expect/select, but God knows the needs of his people (cf. Heb. 4:15–16), and he delights in giving them “good gifts” (Matt. 7:11).
- Importantly, God often provides his love through the loving actions of his people toward each other (cf. John 13:35; 1 John 4:12).
Ruth 1: Application

• **God cares deeply for the disadvantaged**
  – Torah reveals God as the Great King who “defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing” (Deut. 10:18); cf., Exod 22:21-24; Deut 10:19; 24:17-22; 26:12-13; 27:19
  – These attributes are certainly on display in this chapter as God protects and preserves disadvantaged women.

• **God cares deeply for such disenfranchised women** (cf. Luke 18:7–8)
  – He wants his people to follow his lead so that his community can be a place of safety and thriving for those who are socially disadvantaged (cf., Matt 25:31-46; Acts 6:1; 1 Tim 5:3-16; Jas 1:27)

Ruth 1: Application

• **God is the sovereign Judge**
  • He usually does not disclose why he administers justice the way he does.
    – It is generally true that suffering (like in 1:1–5, 13, 20–21) is a consequence of sin in the world, but the specific offense or offender is usually unknown to the sufferer.
  • God’s people in every age will inevitably wrestle to understand the causes of their crises, and they may be tempted to question God’s justice.
    – But the wise approach to suffering is to seek the Lord and to put trust and hope in him because he has purposes that are far better than we can understand (see John 9:1–3).
    – Furthermore, God remains present with his suffering people (see Pss. 23:4; 139:7–12).
Ruth 1: Expository Remarks

• Famine (1:1):
  – This may be a reference to divine judgment (cf., Deut 11:13-17; 28:1-14, 23-24, 48; 32:24)

• Bethlehem in Judah (1:1):
  – The “(store)house of bread” ironically lacks food
  – “Bethlehem of Judah” is only found elsewhere in Judges 17; 19 and 1 Sam 17
  – Name occurs on a 8th/7th century seal
  – Located five mile S of Jerusalem

Modern Bethlehem
Ruth 1: Expository Remarks

• Ephrathites (1:2)
  – Ephrath is an early name for Bethlehem that may refer to a geographical district or a clan ancestor
  – May connote a higher socioeconomic status or reputation within Bethlehem (cf., 1:19-21)

• The road (1:7):
  – Probably included the Jerusalem-Jericho road; a 70-100 mile trip (about one week by foot)
Ruth 1: Expository Remarks

• Mother’s home (1:8)
  – Associated with marriage matters (cf., Gen 24:28; Song 3:4; 8:2)
  – Based on typical marriage traditions in the ancient Near East, one can estimate that Naomi is in her mid-forties and Ruth and Orpah are in their mid-to-upper twenties.

• The LORD’s hand (1:13)
  – Can signify blessing, guidance, or protection (cf. Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh. 2:8, 18; Acts 11:21) or, as here, can signify curse, discipline, or judgment (cf. Exod. 9:3; Deut. 2:15; Judg. 2:15; 1 Sam. 5:9; 12:15; Acts 13:11).

Ruth 1: Expository Remarks

• Orpah’s gods (1:15)
  – Chemosh was the national deity of Moab, but common people would likely relate to lesser deities of the pantheon
  – Women often retained allegiances to their native deities even after marrying into a foreign family (cf., Gen 31:19; 1 Kgs 11:8; 16:31)
  – The good daughter-in-law, Orpah (1:8), serves as a literary foil to the great daughter-in-law, Ruth.
Ruth 1: Expository Remarks

• Your God my God (1:16)
  – Ruth’s expression of commitment is primarily to Naomi (cf. 2:11); it’s not necessarily a confession of monotheistic theology
  – She previously married the people and the God of Mahlon. Here she commits to continue that ‘package deal’ and assume the role of Naomi’s daughter even though she is not obligated to do so
  – As a foreigner
    • Ruth’s loyalty shines brightly during the dark age of the judges
    • Her faithful actions could be viewed as an indictment against ethnic Israel (cf., Caleb, Rahab, Othniel and Jael)
  – God uses Ruth’s act of faithfulness (1:16-17) to show his own faithfulness to his people

Ruth 1: Expository Remarks

• If even death separates (1:17):
  – NIV & NRSV are best; not “anything but death”
  – Ruth commits to care for Naomi in her old age, death, and burial, and perhaps even beyond the grave, since Ruth would be buried in the same plot
  – Ruth selflessly chooses to risk jeopardizing her own future as she would likely be alone in her own old age, death, and burial

• The Almighty (1:20-21):
  – Shaddai probably identifies YHWH as lord of the mountain-steppe and may represent a Transjordanian dialect