

Up From Despair
A Sermon on Ruth 1:1-22
by Russell Smith

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year.” The Christmas season is upon us. How many of you went shopping this weekend to take advantage of the post-thanksgiving sales? The most wonderful time of year indeed – I saw a number of stressed out people, trying to get the best bargain they could find. The holidays are supposed to be a wonderful time, but let’s admit it – they don’t always live up to the hype.

In fact, there are some who go into the holiday season quite depressed. Holiday depression is so prevalent that many people seek professional help. It’s easy to understand why – this is supposed to be a season of happiness and cheer, a time spent with friends and family. But perhaps you’re going through your first holiday after the death of someone close – perhaps this is your first holiday in a new city far from family and friend. Perhaps your relationship with your parents or siblings or loved ones has broken and you are emotionally distant from them during the holidays. Perhaps in the midst of the spending and extravagance, you’ve become aware of how little you actually have. Perhaps you are looking at the bills mount ever higher. Perhaps, in the sagging economy, your employment is uncertain or you are out of a job – and the prospects look bleak. Perhaps you are dealing with a medical diagnosis that makes your outlook on life bleak. All of these events darken our lives, but during the holiday season when all are supposed to be cheerful, the pain can be especially acute – it can even be labeled as despair.

If you don’t know what despair looks like, then you are one of the fortunate ones. You’ve never looked around on the world and felt the sky closing in on you. To give you an example of the feeling of despair – consider these lyrics from Pink. Pink is one of the hottest musical acts out there today – she is known for her edgy and harsh style and lyrics. These are from the song “Don’t let me get me”

“Never win first place, I don’t support the team
I cant take direction, and my socks are never clean
Teachers dated me, my parents hated me
I was always in a fight cuz I cant do nothin’ right

Everyday I fight a war against the mirror
I cant take the person staring back at me
I’m a hazard to myself

Doctor, doctor, won’t you please prescribe something
A day in the life of someone else
I’m a hazard to myself.

Don't let me get me
I'm my own worst enemy
It's bad when you annoy yourself
So irritating
Don't wanna be my friend no more
I wanna be somebody else"

Do you hear the anguish in the lyrics? Do you hear the despair that comes at you – and when you hear the actual song, you can hear the anguish in her voice. The despair is very real.

Our story today gives us a picture of someone in despair, Naomi. Our text is Ruth 1:1-22:

Ruth 1

¹In the days when the judges ruled in Israel, a man from Bethlehem in Judah left the country because of a severe famine. He took his wife and two sons and went to live in the country of Moab. ²The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in the land of Judah. During their stay in Moab, ³Elimelech died and Naomi was left with her two sons. ⁴The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth. But about ten years later, ⁵both Mahlon and Kilion died. This left Naomi alone, without her husband or sons.

⁶Then Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had blessed his people in Judah by giving them good crops again. So Naomi and her daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab to return to her homeland.

⁷With her two daughters-in-law she set out from the place where she had been living, and they took the road that would lead them back to Judah.

⁸But on the way, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back to your mothers' homes instead of coming with me. And may the LORD reward you for your kindness to your husbands and to me. ⁹May the LORD bless you with the security of another marriage." Then she kissed them good-bye, and they all broke down and wept.

¹⁰"No," they said. "We want to go with you to your people."

¹¹But Naomi replied, "Why should you go on with me? Can I still give birth to other sons who could grow up to be your husbands? ¹²No, my daughters, return to your parents' homes, for I am too old to marry again. And even if it were possible, and I were to get married tonight and bear sons, then what?

¹³Would you wait for them to grow up and refuse to marry someone else? No, of course not, my daughters! Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD himself has caused me to suffer."

¹⁴And again they wept together, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Ruth insisted on staying with Naomi. ¹⁵"See," Naomi said to her, "your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You should do the same."

¹⁶But Ruth replied, "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. I will go wherever you go and live wherever you live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷I will die where you die and will be buried there. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!" ¹⁸So when Naomi saw that Ruth had made up her mind to go with her, she stopped urging her.

¹⁹So the two of them continued on their journey. When they came to Bethlehem, the entire town was stirred by their arrival. "Is it really Naomi?" the women asked.

²⁰"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Instead, call me Mara,^[1] for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. ²¹I went away full, but the LORD has brought me home empty. Why should you call me Naomi when the LORD has caused me to suffer^[2] and the Almighty has sent such tragedy?"

²²So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by her daughter-in-law Ruth, the young Moabite woman. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Let's set the stage quickly. Verse 1 tells us that this story takes place in the time of the Judges. This was in the early years of the Israelites being in the land – there was no king and chaos ruled. There was little social order in the land; strong men imposed their will upon the weak, and the Israelites were continually subject to invasion by the surrounding nations. It was a time of chaos and instability. During this time, Naomi's family went to live in Moab to escape a famine. Moab was the land of Israel's distant cousins, the Moabites. The Moabites always had a shaky relationship with the Israelites. For later study, you can look up chapters 22-25 in the book of Numbers to get a picture of how the Moabites were suspicious of the Israelites. While in Moab, Naomi's two sons married Moabite wives. Remember that the ancient Israelites were not supposed to marry outside of Israel – the foreign wives might lead their husbands into worship of false gods.

The long and short of the story – Naomi loses both her husband and her sons and she decides to go back to Israel. Her two daughter-in-laws at first offer to go back with her, but she tells them to stay with her people, and then only one of the daughter-in-laws insists. That daughter-in-law is Ruth. Naomi brings her daughter-in-law Ruth with her back to Israel, and the first chapter comes to a close.

First of all, notice Naomi's despair. At first she puts on a brave face for her daughter-in-laws, but finally she comes out with these lines in verse 13 "it is more bitter for me than it is for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me." If you think that's harsh, remember her words to the Israelites when she returns (v20-21). She is in a period of deep despair. Now linger here for a moment. The Bible doesn't say that a comforter came right in and cheered her up. The Bible doesn't say that God told her to get over it and have a stiff upper lip. Naomi is not condemned for her feelings. As we work through the story, we see that God does work things out for Naomi, but for the first chapter at least, Naomi is allowed to wallow in her grief.

God doesn't promise some quick easy fix to our problems. God doesn't promise that life will be easy at all, but he does promise that he will never abandon us. God doesn't say that we must be happy all the time, rather he says that we must trust in him all the time. There is a difference between our emotional mindset at a particular moment and the actions of our will in a particular moment. We can be feeling a great deal of anxiety and despair, and still, by an act of the will trust in God.

That leads us to a second observation: God's provision. In our relationship with Him, God always takes the initiative. Throughout the book of Ruth, we will always see the assumption of God's hand behind the scenes guiding events. No, we won't see spectacular miracles or divine appearances. But what we will see are ordinary people in ordinary circumstances. These ordinary people, however, are guided by our extraordinary God. Yes, Naomi attributes her misfortune to God's hand, but look also at verse 6 – "when she heard that the Lord had come to the aid of his people" – her hope was in the Lord's aid for his people. Later in verse 8, she hopes that the Lord will show kindness on her daughter-in-laws. This is not some pithy formula – this reflects a profound understanding that the events that take place around us are often the direct result of God's intervention.

Here we see that intervention in action – God ends the famine in Israel. Naomi’s return to Israel is a dramatic act of faith; she could have let her despair paralyze her. Instead, she moves out in faith, still hurting, but trusting that God will take care of her as He is taking care of her people the Israelites.

God nudges the heart of this pagan girl Ruth to faith; look at that fantastic statement in verse 16-17. And God has even more in store for Naomi, as we shall see in later chapters. God does provide, even in our darkest hours. God provides for those who trust in him. The greatest expression of that provision was in the work of Jesus Christ in dying and rising again. Jesus’ work enables us to enjoy a person to person relationship with God in the present and eternally enjoy that relationship in the life to come. All the hopes and dreams of the Old Testament Saints were in shadowy pictures of what Christ would do.

So for practical application – It’s OK for us to be in times of despair – but not hopelessness. Remember Paul’s attitude in Romans 8:35-39.

Romans 8

³⁵Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death?

³⁶(Even the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") ³⁷No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

³⁸And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. ³⁹Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

However, in our dark times, we should always keep our eyes open to God’s provision. So many times God works through ordinary people to accomplish his extraordinary ends. How many times have we let pride get in the way of letting ordinary people help us. How many times have we in our stubbornness refused a blessing that someone offered because we didn’t want to be indebted to them, or perhaps we were afraid of being let down. It’s easy for us to give to other people, it is much harder to let other people give to us. But the very message we see here is that Naomi receives – God uses Ruth to be a blessing to her. Ruth has to be persistent. If you are in your time of darkness, look to see who is your Ruth, your blessing in the midst of trial.

Over the four weeks of the Advent season, we’ll see how God works through quite ordinary people to do extraordinary things. We’ll see how God brings Naomi up from despair to realize abundant blessing. We’ll see how God works through this unexpected pagan girl Ruth to be a blessing to his people. We’ll meet others as well, and we’ll see how Naomi herself is used by God to be a blessing. I hope that you’ll be reviewing the scriptures yourselves during this month, and we’ll enjoy this journey up from despair together. Until next time, amen.