

UNEXPECTED CRISES

Unexpected Series (Part 1) | Text: Ruth 1:1-5

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RUTH

Have you ever noticed how TV news programs will often splice between their coverage of the major news a small human-interest story? In one segment they're covering the ravages of the COVID pandemic sweeping the world. In the next major segment they focus on the latest seething controversy in Presidential politics. But, in between, they sandwich in a tiny story about a beloved great-grandmother of 25 kids celebrating her 105th birthday or a fourth grader who surprised her ER nurse mom with a beautiful Mother's Day present. It's as if the TV producers instinctively know that the big events of life somehow only make sense when seen in relation to the little ones.

The Book of Ruth is like that. You'll find it in your Bible tucked between the massive books of Judges and Samuel – books that cover the huge happenings, trends, and themes of Israel's life and the movement of the great surrounding nations. The people you meet in Judges and Samuel are towering leaders – people like Joshua, Gideon, Deborah, Samuel and Saul – individuals who would have been splashed all over the national news had there been media like that in those days.

All of a sudden, however, between the great historical programs of Judges and Samuel, the Bible's camera swings away and zooms in on an almost ridiculously small local story. It narrows in on the tale of a young woman, her family relationships, a surprising marriage, and the way she copes with the aspirations, anxieties, and agonies of everyday life. Ruth is the only book in the Bible told directly from a woman's perspective. As such, it grapples honestly with themes of motherhood, widowhood, barrenness, single-parenting, and the loss of children. It reveals the perils and the possibilities of women and men in relationship with each other and the nature of power.

But in choosing to cover the story of Ruth, God's Word is telling us something equally important for men as well as women to know. The truth is that history is not just made on the big screen and the front page. It is often in the little vignettes, the small stories of life, that the great themes and directions of history are set. If you remember nothing else from our study of Ruth in the next few weeks, please remember this. The Book of Ruth proves that *the life of one person and family can be of far greater importance than we might otherwise think*. Ruth had no idea how the choices she was to make in her life would ultimately fit into God's Grand Design. Like all of us, she likely had moments when the trivial details and routines of her life felt awfully insignificant or utterly chaotic. You have those moments don't you? I bet some of you can relate to the feelings of SAMANTHA, this young mother... **[VIDEO]**.

It's hard to make sense of life when you are closeted in crisis. Isn't it? A lot of us are

feeling that these days. But the decisions Ruth made in her time of crisis, the priorities she set, the faith she developed, the relationships she formed and nurtured were VERY significant. As we'll discover in these next weeks, the choices this one woman made amidst the chaos of her times would have a ripple effect that would transcend her lifetime and bring hope and help to billions of people.

Had Ruth not been and become the person she was, had she not surrendered to God as she did when calamity was closing in on all sides, there would have been no King David to write the Psalms, no enduring nation of Israel, no Savior born in Bethlehem, no Christian Church to shape the course of history and the institutions of mankind, and you and I would not be having this conversation today. Remember that, will you, the next time you're inclined to think, "What I believe, what I say and do today, the way I love and live doesn't really mean all that much."

THE SETTING OF RUTH

So, let me just get us started on this amazing story today. The Book of Ruth opens up with words that tell us something about the larger historical setting in which everything we'll read about takes place. We're told in verse 1 that it was **In the days when the judges ruled...(Ruth 1:1)** that Ruth lived out her life. Scholars date the Era of the Judges from around 1200-1050 B.C.

It has been more than a century now since the Israelites made their dramatic Exodus from Egypt. They had wandered with Moses, learning the lessons of the Wilderness for 40 years. Then, under the leadership of Joshua, crossed the Jordan River and began their conquest and settlement of Canaan/Palestine – the Promised Land. Under the system Joshua set up, the twelve tribes of Israel have split up and spread out to create homesteads across the countryside.

The children of Israel will not establish a formal monarchy for another century or so when Saul will be crowned their first human king in 1050 B.C. In the meantime, each tribe is governed loosely by its elders, and all tribes are ostensibly to be subject to the lawful governance of God. Moses had repeatedly taught that Israel's king was the Lord himself, and as long as Israel kept their covenant with Him, all would go well.

But during the Time of the Judges, God's law is not always remembered or observed. As Israel settles into this new period of its history it starts to forget the grace of God that had gotten them so far. The Jewish people begin to exult in their own achievements or dabble with the rituals of the Canaanite religions round about them. The spirit of dependence on God and interdependence on one another that Israel had developed in the Wilderness period progressively dissolves and gives way to a decline of faith and rising divisions between the various tribes of Israel. One verse from the Book of Judges summarizes this period of history as follows: **All the people did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6)**. Sound familiar at all.

To make matters worse, explosive conflicts arise in various parts of the country between the new Israelites and remaining native Canaanites. The unfriendly nations around Canaan (e.g. Moab, Philistia, Ammon) periodically invade the land to kill its men, rape its women, and plunder its wealth. It is a time of crisis after crisis.

In this context, the Israelites start to move through a recurring pattern of spiritual and political change that I've labeled, "***The Sin-Salvation Cycle.***" First there occurs a time of increasing sin, individualism and disloyalty to God. As the scriptures say, "All the people do what is right in their own eyes." Because sin and separation from God are unhealthy and dangerous, this results in a period of personal or national decline and eventually serious troubles or vulnerability to the attack of an enemy. In the midst of this crisis, people feel pain and fear which leads them to conviction of their sin, and a willingness to change their ways, so they cry out to God. In his mercy, God then raises up a "judge" (a gifted leader) who unites and leads the people to a creative response to their times. This results in eventual deliverance and triumph over the crisis or enemy. Which leads to a temporary period of stability and faithfulness, during which people progressively come to figure that they don't really need God and can make up the rules on their own. And then the cycle repeats itself – almost like a community that keeps getting re-infected with a virus.

This cycle repeats itself seven times in the Book of Judges -- as it repeats itself countless other times through human history and in the lives of most of us. The war and devastation that arose during these cycles in the life of Israel resulted in unnecessary deaths, the ravaging or interruption of agricultural life, and often – as the opening of Ruth suggests – in periods of mourning, famine, and displacement for many. This is the deep background for what we're about to read.

THE STORY OF RUTH

Let's pick up the story at Ruth 1:1... **In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name NAOMI, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. (Ruth 1:1-2)**

Now, up until this moment, Bethlehem is not a particularly well-known or distinguished place in the ancient world. Located in the hill country of Judah, just southeast of Jerusalem, Bethlehem's only claim to fame was that... Jacob's wife, Rachel, was buried on the road to it (Gen 48:7). Scholars believe that the region around Bethlehem had once been inhabited by a strong clan called the Ephrathites whose name became synonymous with the town. This is why we often find the two words used in conjunction with one another. Hence the statement we hear in Micah's famous

Christmas prophecy: **But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times (Micah 5:2).**

Remember that last line.

Now, here in Ruth 1, we learn that during a period of great famine, a man named **Elimelech** (which means, "My God is King"), an "Ephrathite from Bethlehem," the text says, decides to leave his homeland and move with his wife and two children east, across the river Jordan, to the land of Moab – presumably because there was better work and more food there.

For Elimelech to go to Moab, the famine in Israel had to have been bad. Moab was one of the nations the Israelites had fought and conquered along the route to the Promised Land. They had gone to war again with them earlier in the period of the Judges. It would be like going to one of your worst enemies and asking if you could live with and work for him so you could feed your family. Elimelech must have been desperate.

But as bad as things were, it was about to get worse and then worse still, till the story of Naomi begins to sound a bit like Job's. **Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.** Naomi is now a widow in a foreign land, trying to raise two kids all on her own. Somehow she managed to do it. **They married Moabite women, one named Orpah** (close to Oprah! It actually means "fawn") **and the other Ruth** ("friend"). But **After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon** ("sickly one") **and Kilion** ("pining one") **also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:3-5)**

Sometimes I read sentences like that last one and just continue on. This week, however, the stunning implications of that sentence hit me anew. Amy and I have talked often this week with a very dear friend who is a modern-day Naomi. JEANNE lost her son to an accident when he was just four. She saw another child permanently brain injured in a different mishap. Her wonderful husband was taken by cancer a couple of years ago. And, very recently, she lost her third child to a senseless act of violence. Motherhood can be filled with rapturous joys. I hope that has been your Mother's Story. But the Bible is very honest that life can also deal to parents and to all of us such profound and UNEXPECTED losses. If you are such a mother or father or sufferer, all of us bow in humble respect before you and the courage it takes to go on.

For Naomi, this moment had one additional dimension of crisis to it. In the ancient world, your family was not only your emotional support system but also essentially your social security system. Any woman unfortunate enough to lose her husband in mid-life (i.e. after the typical marrying age), or to lose even one of her wage-earning sons, would be in serious trouble.

Among the people of Israel, there was a safety net in case that happened. God's law

instructed that the nearest relative of the dead husband should take in to his home the bereft wife and children. Such a figure was known as a “kinsman redeemer.” We’ll have a lot more to say about that later. But God forbid that you should suffer such losses when you were far away from such an extended family.

Can you see now how phenomenally disastrous are the UNEXPECTED CRISES that have befallen Naomi? We’re just five verses into the Book of Ruth, and already Naomi’s husband is dead; her children are gone; and there are no phone lines, no email, no Zoom channels with which to plead for help from family back in Israel. Thankfully, this story does not end with heartache and disaster, but it certainly begins there. As I wind this harrowing first episode to a close, let me just make a few observations for you to take with you.

It is a rare life that is not marked by painful losses and difficult challenges. When you’ve retreated to the closet because you don’t know how to handle the chaos anymore... when you’ve been to the graveside far too often... when you’re facing a future that seems so uncertain... or just can’t seem to win for all your losing... remember you are not alone. There are a lot of us who understand that LIFE is what happens when we’ve made other plans. Dare to reach out to others.

Secondly, hang onto the truth that individuals are of immense importance to God. As I said at the start, one of the messages of the Book of Ruth (and indeed the whole Bible) is that it is not the huge headlines but precious people that God cares for most. No matter how forsaken you may feel in your worst moments (even Jesus felt that), you matter to God. He sees you in the darkness. He is with you and those you love and even those you’ve temporarily lost. Dare to trust his love.

Thirdly, remember that the crisis you are going through is only one set of verses, one chapter, in a much larger story. Our lives are part of a greater design than can be seen at the moment. You’ll be amazed at what happens in the larger story we’ll read in this book. And I believe you will one day be stunned by how the events of your life fit into the vast saga of God’s magnificent plan to redeem this Creation. Dare to have faith.

Finally, remember that The choices we make in the face of our struggles can alter the outcome for good. As you’ll start to see in next week’s episode, the Book of Ruth is about people who didn’t get to choose the hand life dealt them, but who learned to play the cards they had with unusual commitment, character, and creativity that took them a long way from this moment of heartache in which we meet them today. You’re going to love this story.

My closing encouragement to you today is: Dare to write your own great story. Like Naomi and Ruth in this tale, when you are confronted by UNEXPECTED CRISES, you can choose to hope instead of giving in to despair. You can choose to reach out to others rather than isolating yourself. You can choose to communicate rather than

going silent. You can choose to ask for help rather than trying to do life all on your own. You can choose to say NO to that vice – to break the Sin-Salvation cycle instead of giving in again. You can choose faith over fear, action over apathy, forgiveness over hardness. Just take the next step in the direction of God and his good and, one day, you'll be awestruck at how far from this tough time you have travelled.

Please pray with me...

Lord, we thank you for Naomi and Samantha and Jeanne and every mother who has modeled for us what it means to keep moving forward with faith, hope, and love when that was anything but easy for them and who have cherished and companioned us during our own times of crisis. In this season now, inspire and strengthen us to live a life worthy of our calling as followers of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.