

The Story: The Faith of a Foreign Woman

The longer I live the more I observe it doesn't take much time or effort to get into trouble, certainly not nearly as much as it takes to get out of trouble. In fact, a great amount of our time and energy and resources are spent getting out of the trouble we've gotten into. Of course there are different kinds of trouble. Some troubles come through no fault of our own, we're just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Everyday we read of people whose lives happen to intersect with a tornado or earthquake or some random disaster. A few months ago, Jeremy Bush, was innocently sleeping in his Florida home when the ground beneath his house caved in and literally swallowed him into a sink whole

Sometimes trouble comes from our own foolishness or sinfulness, a decision made in a moment of passion or anger or stubbornness or just stupidity can plunge us into a hole we spend a lifetime digging out of. Sometimes its another person's decision that is the source of our trouble and we find ourselves having to clean up a mess we had little part in making. Wherever it comes from, a great percentage of our life is spent getting out of trouble. And today we come to a story about a troubled family and how they make their way through it.

The story of Ruth is a story of getting into and out of trouble, and in the first 5 verses of this book we are introduced to a family that has troubles, for all the reasons I just listed. *In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So 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 Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were from Bethlehem. Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.* That's a lot of trouble for 4 verses.

The very first sentence says a lot. "It was the time when the Judges ruled." We have already noted in our study of the Judges that this was a dark and terrible time for God's people. Over and over again we are told, "Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." Because of Israel's widespread wickedness, families had to endure the oppression of the nations around them. Then comes a disaster, a famine that brings economic hardship on Elimelek's family. Then a decision is made by Elimelek that is questionable at best. We're not told it was a wicked or evil decision, but one has to question the wisdom of it. At a time of great hardship he moves his

family away from the support of his own people and locates them on the other side of the Jordan, into a wicked land, Moab. The Moabites had a long history of trouble with Israel. In the past they had seduced Israel into worshipping their gods and participating in sexual immorality. It hasn't been that long since the Moabites under King Eglon had attacked Israel and subjected them to their rule. God raised up the judge Ehud to deliver them.

With that kind of history it seems strange that Elimelek would move his family into this country, famine or no famine. It reminds me of the story of Lot who moved his family to Sodom and Gomorrah for financial reasons, ignoring the wickedness there. Ironically, the Moabites were descendants of Lot. The Lord so disapproved of them that the Law expressly commanded that Moabites were not allowed in the assembly of the Lord's people and Israel was not allowed to pursue any friendship with them (Dt 23:2-6).

Perhaps Elimelek did not mean to stay long in Moab, but his decision had terrible consequences. His sons not only make friends with Moabites, they marry Moabite girls. And then, Elimelek and his sons die in Moab leaving Naomi, through no fault of her own, in big trouble. She is a widow, with no sons, daughters-in-law she can't support, away from her people, no means of support, living in a wicked land.

Naomi is overwhelmed by her troubles. “Don’t call me Naomi, (which means “pleasant”) call me Mara, (which means bitter) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” Have you ever felt like that? Trouble comes to your house. Perhaps some of it is due to your own foolishness, but much of it seems out of your control. Naomi could not prevent the famine. She could not refuse her husband’s decision to move. She could not keep her sons from marrying women who did not know God. She could not keep her husband and sons from dying. Now she is in a mess, much of it, maybe all of it, she had little part in making. Is it any surprise she would feel the Lord had done this to her?

But Naomi is a faithful woman. We see that more and more as the story develops, but it is made clear very early in the story in the relationship she has with her daughters-in-law. These girls were not brought up to worship Yahweh, but they see in Naomi a quality of life, a virtue and character that compels them to choose staying with this widow in trouble rather than return to the security of their own people. Ruth especially expresses the impact of Naomi’s faith on them. When Naomi tries to convince they women to go back to their families where they can be cared

for and find husbands and live secure and happy lives, Ruth expresses those beautiful words so often quoted in weddings, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Its not clear what kind of faith Elimelek and his sons had, but it is clear that the faith of Naomi was great enough to convert these Moabite girls, especially Ruth, into lovers of Yahweh. In fact, some commentators have noted this book could have, maybe should have been known as the Book of Naomi.

Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem and their return creates quite a buzz in the city, partly perhaps because of the change in Naomi. “Can this be Naomi?” say the women of Bethlehem. I get the impression that the woman who left ten years ago has changed. Maybe her grief and worry has aged her far beyond the ten years she has been gone. Grief and worry will do that. But of course most of the buzz surely is due to her Moabite daughter-in-law who comes with her. Imagine an Israeli mother moving to Jerusalem today whose daughter-in-law is the daughter of Osama Bin Laden or Iranian president Ahmadinejad. To help show just how scandalous Ruth’s arrival was, some later rabbinic traditions suggested that Ruth was the daughter of the wicked Moabite leader, King Eglon.

But as scandalous as Naomi and Ruth's return to Bethlehem may be, from here on this story takes a truly wonderful turn showing us the very best in people, in community and most of all in God. Many scholars note that the word that best describes the message of this story is the word "hesed", a Hebrew word describing the very character of God. There is no single equivalent word in English that captures its rich meaning. "Hesed" refers to one who is rich in love, mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, benevolence, loyalty and faithfulness. It is usually translated as "steadfast or faithful love" and usually refers to the Lord. But in this story we see "hesed" in Naomi's care for Ruth, in Ruth's devotion to Naomi, in Boaz's remarkable love for Ruth and in the whole community's celebration of the blessing that finally comes to the house of Elimelek. And of course, most of all, we see in this story the "hesed" of Yahweh the Lord is expressed to all.

Here is a very important truth in this story. God's faithful love and his ultimate purpose for our lives is not frustrated or defeated by the troubles that come our way, whether they are disasters we could not control or decisions we could have. This story shows us the truth of Romans 8:28. "In all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose." It is true that Naomi's first reaction to her sufferings is to see them as an affliction from the Lord. Who could blame

her for that? We are all tempted to interpret our troubles that way aren't we; to think that God is against us or has forsaken us. But in this story we see Naomi's faith grow as she begins to see that the Lord is not afflicting her, nor has he forsaken her, but in fact he is hard at work for her good.

In chapter two Ruth goes out to gather the scraps of grain and barley that are left behind in the fields. You recall in the Law of Moses God instructs Israel to not harvest everything but to leave behind gleanings for the poor and the alien. Ruth qualified on both counts. When Ruth chooses a field to gather in there is a most interesting phrase used in the scriptures. The NIV says "as it turned out she was working in a field owned by Boaz." Other translations say "it just so happened" or "she found herself" or my favorite, the King James, "her hap was to light upon." The wording in the original is more explicit, "her chance, chanced upon." Today people might say, "by a stroke of luck." But the writers of scripture did not believe in luck and would not suggest this. The teller of this story and its hearers would hear in this phrase as an ironic reference to God's providence. If they had quotation marks in Hebrew, this statement would surely be in them.

The man whose field Ruth has "chanced" upon, Boaz, is a man who is very kind and generous and shows great favor upon Ruth, protecting her from mistreatment, instructing his workers to leave even more gleanings

than usual for her and inviting her to eat with him. This is particularly extraordinary in that Ruth is a Moabite, and that does not go unnoticed by Ruth. She asks Boaz “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me, a foreigner?” Boaz says the motivation for his kindness is the kindness of Ruth toward Naomi. “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before... May you be richly rewarded by the God of Israel under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

When Naomi hears of these events, it is clear to her that this was no chance event. She sees in it the providence of God. She declares of God, “He has not stopped showing his kindness (hesed) to the living and the dead.” Naomi learns that the Lord is not afflicting her; he is blessing her.

In chapter 3 Naomi puts into action a bold and daring plan. Essentially she tells Ruth to pretty herself up and go tell Boaz he needs to marry her. This part of the story is a little difficult to interpret. What makes the most sense to me is this. Up until this time Ruth has been wearing the clothes of mourning out of respect for her late husband. But now Naomi tells Ruth it is time to quit mourning and make plans to get on with her life. Naomi then devises a scheme that is a little dangerous, but it shows I think that Naomi’s

faith has grown and she is now convinced that God is working in their life and has provided Boaz to be the answer to their problems. She instructs Ruth to go to the threshing floor where the men work and sleep during harvest. After Boaz has finished his work and has gone to sleep, Ruth is to lie down next to Boaz and take the covering off of his legs. I have no idea what that means. And after reading dozens of explanations, I'm not sure anyone else does either. It may have great significance and symbolic meaning. It may just be a way to make Boaz get cold and wake up. In any event, Boaz does wake and sees Ruth at his feet and asks what is going on. Ruth is instructed to identify herself and tell Boaz that he is to be the kinsman redeemer for her family.

When a woman was widowed in Israel, God encouraged the nearest unmarried kinsmen to marry the widow so that the family would not lose its property and lineage. Naomi's plan to confront Boaz with the opportunity to be their kinsman redeemer was certainly unorthodox and even dangerous for Ruth's reputation. I get the idea that women don't ordinarily get prettied up and show up at a place where only men are. More than her appearance there, Ruth is asking Boaz to marry her; a woman asking a man, a Moabite asking an Israelite, a servant asking her boss, a poor girl asking a rich man. For Ruth to do this reveals her faith is growing too.

In chapter 4 the story shows God at work not just in the harvest fields and the threshing floors but also in the legal courts as well. Boaz is not the nearest kinsmen so he must inform the one who is. At first this man agrees to be the kinsman redeemer for Elimelek's family. When we hear this, our heart skips a beat. This can't happen. Boaz is supposed to marry Ruth. But upon hearing that this will require he marry the Moabite woman and take responsibility for having more children by her, the man balks and Boaz gladly agrees to take his place.

Boaz and Ruth are married and the whole community praises God for his kindness and faithful love. "May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah who together built up the house of Isarel. May you be famous in Bethlehem." Later God blesses Ruth with a son, Obed and the women overflow in praise at the birth of the child. "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he (Obed) become famous throughout all Israel. He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than 7 sons has given him birth."

Up to now the story of Ruth has been focused on the lower story, getting Naomi and her family through her various troubles. But the story ends with a short genealogy that shows that even as God is working for the

good of Naomi and Ruth, he is also working out the upper story, the good of all the earth, for Obed will be the father of Jesse and Jesse will be the father of David who surely did become famous in Bethlehem and all Israel.

This is a great story revealing the goodness, the “hesed” of God but also the “hesed” of people. That goodness is even more remarkable that it is seen in the time of the Judges, a time when the norm for God’s people was to do evil. Even in such a time, here is a family, a community that shows the hesed of the Lord. Go back and read this story and notice this. Everyone cares for each other. They greet each other with blessing. Boaz blesses his workers; they bless him; this story shows how we should live together, even in times of trouble, especially in times of trouble, caring for one another.

And I would make one more observation. Notice what is absent in this story. No angels appear. No miracles occur. Nothing supernatural happens in this story at all, that is, nothing that people can see. The faithfulness of Naomi and Ruth and Boaz and the whole community of Bethlehem doesn’t need to be sustained by extraordinary events because they are able to see God at work in the ordinary events. God is at work in the harvest fields, in the threshing floors in the legal courts in the every day routines and events of life.

There is nothing wrong with sending an angel or parting a great body of water or sending dinner down from heaven or tumbling down the walls of a great city. There are times when God chooses to do such things. But we should take notice of the faith of these people, who in the darkest of times, are able to see God at work in the ordinary events, the ordinary decisions, what we have been calling the lower story of our lives. If we cannot see God at work there, then we are not likely to believe even if, as our Lord once said, “someone rises from the dead.”

In our series of lessons called “The Story” the recommended title for the story of Ruth is “The faith of a foreign woman.” But this story is not just about Ruth, maybe not even mainly about Ruth. It is about the faith of Naomi and Ruth and Boaz and all the good people of Bethlehem, people who acknowledge God’s presence in their lives; people that believe that God is constantly working out things for their good. People who show us how to come together and to get through the troubled times in our lives.

Maybe for some of you, today is more like the beginning of this story. Like Naomi you see your troubles and wonder if God is afflicting you or worse has forgotten you. Well, wait awhile and see how the Lord works things out for good. And while you wait, reach out to the good people around you. In time you may even discover that the very things that seemed

most troublesome end up making possible the greatest blessing. How long it might take for such things to be revealed we never know. The Lord works things out in his own time.

But in the mean time, may we be people like Naomi and Ruth and Boaz. May Quaker be a community of people like the good people in Bethlehem, especially in times of trouble. May we display the hesed of the Lord, showing to all the world, even those Moabites around us, the love and mercy and grace and kindness and goodness and benevolence and loyalty and faithfulness that has been shown to us by the Lord, especially by the Lord Jesus who is our kinsman-redeemer, our Boaz, the one who, at great personal cost, agreed to marry us and share with us his own wealth and blessing and make us children of Yahweh, simply because he loved us.