

Don't Run From Your Problems! Things May Only Get Worse

Ruth 1:1-5

Introduction

- 1). Life, by its very nature, confronts us with problems. Things don't work out like we thought they would, there is a sudden turn in the road that catches us completely by surprise. Such problems can be things like the death of a spouse, the breakup of a marriage, a debilitating illness, loss of a job, or financial ruin. When problems stare us in the face we can basically respond in 1 of 3 ways:
 1. We can face them and work thru them.
 2. We can ignore them and pretend they're not there.
 3. We can run from them and try to avoid them.

- 2). There was once a man from Bethlehem, Judah, by the name of Elimelech. He had a wife and 2 sons. Things suddenly went bad for him financially and rather than stay in the land God had given him, the place God had put him, and work thru the tough times, he packed up and moved to avoid the difficult days he saw ahead. However, Elimelech, whose name means "my God is King", and especially his wife Naomi, would painfully learn, "you should not run from your problems, because things may only get worse." As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it in 1860 in *The Conduct of Life*, "The efforts which we make to escape from our destiny only serve to lead us into it."

Transition: When times are tough and the days are difficult, rather than run from our problems we should run to our God, we should believe His promises and we should trust His plan. In the text before us, there is highlighted 3 times in particular when we should trust and not run.

I. Trust the Lord When Times Are Evil. 1:1

- The book of Ruth provides for us a chronological time marker: it was "when the judges ruled (judged)." The approximate date would be 1375-1050 B.C. Students of Scripture would immediately recall that this was a low point morally and spiritually for Israel. It was a time when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:16; 21:25). In fact, that statement is "the last word" in the book of Judges.
- The end of the book of Judges (chs. 17-21) and the book of Ruth form something of a "Bethlehem trilogy" with all 3 stories taking place in the vicinity of Bethlehem. The final 2 in Judges stand in stark contrast morally and spiritually to Ruth, and yet they are a reminder, a challenge, to trust God even when times are evil.

1). **Trust the Lord Amidst Idolatry and Apostasy. Judges 17-18**

- Story of any idolater named Micah and a nameless Levite (a priest) who was guilty of apostasy and was a priest for hire.
 - Micah made carved and molten images, a shrine with household idols (17:1-5).
 - A Levite from Bethlehem came to Ephraim where Micah lived, and Micah hired him to be his personal priest. The price: some money, a suit and some food (17:10).
 - However, a man who can be bought by one person can be bought by another and so in chapter 18 Danites come to Micah's house, steal his idols and his priest (18:17-22).
- The clear impression we get is that Israel is sick spiritually. The people are given to a form of humanistic religion, devising a religion they find satisfying and comfortable. However, manmade religion will always disappoint and unlike faith in the one true God, it can be taken away. Further, the spiritual leaders of the nations have become men for hire. They have sold their soul and their calling to power, pleasure and prestige (note Judges 18:19-20). In that day, as in ours, ministers were not held in high esteem. Tragically, they had no one to blame but themselves.

Transition: In times of idolatry and apostasy, trust the Lord. He will not fail you.

2). **Trust the Lord Amidst Immorality and Anarchy. Judges 19-21**

- These chapters record one of the darkest events in all of Israel's history: the rape and murder of a Levite's concubine who was from Bethlehem.
 - A Levite took a prostitute for himself but, being a prostitute, she "played the harlot" against him back in Bethlehem (19:2).
 - He went after her, and after numerous delay tactics by her father, he left and eventually came to Gibeah to spend the night (19:13-21).
 - However, perverted, evil homosexual men of the tribe of Benjamin came to the house where he was staying and wanted to engage him in homosexual activity (19:22-29 **read**).
 - Judges 20 records the war of the other tribes of Israel against Benjamin because of this gross evil. Thousands were slaughtered and the tribe of Benjamin was nearly annihilated.
 - Judges 21 records Israel's attempt to save Benjamin from extinction. To do so they murder the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead (who had not fought against Benjamin), sparing 400 virgins for the men of Benjamin. Later they allowed men from Benjamin to take daughters from Shiloh at an annual feast without restraint (21:10-24).
Immorality and Anarchy ruled the day. God is not visible on their moral radar screen. The lives of God's covenant people are scarcely different than the lives of her pagan neighbors. Israel had slid into a moral cesspool. And yet, God should be trusted, He is especially

needed as the object of our affection and devotion when times are evil, whether in the day of the Judges or in the 21st century America.

- Everyone may be doing their own thing, but we should determine to do God's thing.
- Everyone else may be making their own rules and establishing their own standards but we must choose to follow God's rules and his standards.
- Everyone else may be doing what is right in their own eyes, but we must determine to do what is right in God's eyes. After all, all that really matters in life, or death, is that we please God.

Transition: Who knows what God may be doing just behind the scenes, even in the midst of unbridled immorality, evil, chaos and confusion.

II. Trust the Lord During Times of Trouble. 1:1-2

- Following our chronological marker there comes a crisis marker that sets the stage for the story of Ruth: there is a famine in the land. Precisely when we do not know, for the famine is not mentioned in Judges. A famine was a time of severe crisis to be sure. In the ancient world, death by starvation was an all too real possibility. Ironically the place with no bread is Bethlehem, the "house of bread."
- Financial ruin now confronts many of the inhabitants of Bethlehem. Just finding food to survive is now a challenge. How should we respond in times of trouble?

1). Guard Yourself From a Lack of Faith. 1:1

- A man named Elimelech (v. 2, "My God is King") decides the best course of action is to run from the problem. He gathers up his wife Naomi and his 2 sons and he heads east for the expansive, grain filled plateau of Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea. A reasonable decision, but not a faith decision.
 - It disobeyed God's directions. Moab was Israel's enemy and the real land of famine (spiritual famine). Here reigned the god Chemosh. Here was a people who opposed Israel as she entered the land of promise and led her into immorality under the leadership of a king named Balak and a false prophet named Balaam (Num. 22-25). For 18 years Moab oppressed Israel during the time of the Judges (Judges 3:12-30). God was clearly not in this. Running to Moab, of all places, was a clear evidence of unbelief. From a human perspective, the grass certainly looked greener to be sure. But, we are to walk by faith and not by sight!

2). Guard Yourself From a Lack of Wisdom. 1:1-2

- Dwell in v. 1 means to live as a stranger, a visitor, to stay temporarily.

- Remain in v. 2 tells us Moab became Elimelech's home! Going to Moab disobeyed God's directions. Staying in Moab both disregarded and invited God's discipline.
- Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 clearly taught that God would curse His covenant people with famine and other judgments if she disobeyed the Lord and served other gods. The famine was God's judgment on Israel, on Bethlehem the House of Bread. Elimelech not only showed a lack of faith, he also showed a lack of wisdom, for it is impossible to run from the discipline of the Lord (cf. Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:5-13). Elimelech led his family poorly, and he and his family would suffer severely.

Application: Don't pick up and run at the first sign of trouble. Ask yourself: 1). What does God's Word say? 2). What is God trying to teach me? In times of trouble we need faith. In times of trouble we need wisdom, the ability to see life from God's perspectives and act accordingly. Unfortunately, Elimelech had neither.

III. Trust the Lord During Times of Sorrow. 1:3-5

- If things were bad in Bethlehem, they got even messier in Moab. The situation for the Elimelech family really did go from bad to worse. Yet even in the midst of sorrow, the silent and secretive hand of God was moving.

1). God Is At Work During Unexpected Tragedy. 1:3

- Verse 3 is short and concise: Elimelech died and Naomi was left with only her 2 sons. It seems sudden. The death of a mate is tragic. The death of a mate in a foreign place away from home is even more so. And yet God was at work. Attention now moves away from Elimelech to his wife Naomi. Her life, her future, her "destiny" becomes the crucial concern of the book. A family facing famine had fled to find food, but instead found death. Could God be at work in a time like this?

2). God Is At Work During Unimaginable Tragedy. 1:4-5

- Verse 4 provides a brief ray of hope, only to see it dashed and shattered in verse 5. The 2 sons marry. But we should immediately be concerned.
- First their names: Mahlon, who marries Ruth (4:10), means "sickly." Chilion, who marries Orpah, means "spent, death, destruction." Whether these were names given at birth because they were poor in health (famine related?) or coined named given some time later, the names tell a story of premature death and sorrow.
- Second, they marry Moabites, women from Israel's enemy, a people Deuteronomy 23:3 says is not to enter the assembly of the Lord for 10 generations. Thus we are grieved, but not stunned to read in verses 4-5 that after 10 years of marriage and no children, both boys die and Naomi is left alone (the 2 daughters-in-law are not mentioned in verse 5).

- Naomi suffers a double bereavement, she is alone, old and apparently with no hope and yet... might we fast forward to the end to get a quick glimpse of “the rest of the story.” (Read 4:14-21 and remember Ruth’s chiastic structure)

Conclusion:

- A famine and three funerals in quick succession do not seem to indicate a time when God is at work. But God’s word reminds us in Isaiah 55:8, “For My thoughts are not you thought, nor are your way My ways,” says the Lord.
- The death of the 3 men in Naomi’s life, on the surface, seemed to indicate all was lost.
- But then the death of the Son of God on a Roman cross seemed, on the surface, to indicate all was lost as well. But like Ruth, we need to see the rest of the story, for
 - Out of despair came Hope
 - Out of defeat came Victory
 - Out of sorrow came Joy
 - Out of death came Life.
- **In times that are evil, trust the Lord.**
- **In time of trouble, trust the Lord.**
- **In times of sorrow, trust the Lord.**

Who knows what God may be up to!