

FIELD OF DREAMS

RUTH 1:1-22

When you think of classic short stories a long list comes to mind... “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by Washington Irving - “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” by Mark Twain - “The Monkey’s Paw” by W.W. Jacobs – “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” by F. Scott Fitzgerald - Arthur Conan Doyle’s series, “Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.” The most prolific short story writer of all time was Edgar Allan Poe. He only wrote one, little-known novel - but he penned 65 short stories. “The Pit and the Pendulum,” “The Raven,” “The Tell Tale Heart” – to name a few.

But of all the short stories ever written none holds a candle to the book of Ruth – and it was written by an unknown author. Different theories have been advanced... the Prophet Samuel or King David... but no one knows. The penman is a mystery, yet its inspiration was clearly the Holy Spirit.

Ruth is the story of a young girl’s faith, and courage, and loyalty... It’s about a devoted friendship... it spotlights a sister’s missed opportunity... The story begins with a old woman’s bitterness over the tragic consequences of her husband’s lack of faith. It ends, with another man’s redeeming love. And the hero in the story is God... a God of providence. God works in the world in one of two ways. At times He acts supernaturally. He does a miracle where all can see His grace and glory. Miracles are visible – and obvious – and out in the open.

But God also works behind the scenes – in supernaturally natural ways. His invisible hand takes ordinary people and situations, and maneuvers them into scenarios that perfectly fit His will and accomplish His purposes. Providence works under the radar. Mysteriously – imperceptibly - God engineers the pieces into place. He connects the dots. Then one day He shouts, “Checkmate.” His overarching will has achieved another triumph. At the end of the book of Ruth we’ll all marvel at God’s providence.

The story begins, “Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land.” Think of Ruth as an appendix to the preceding book. This period of the Judges lasted 350 years – from the death of Joshua to the appointment of King Saul – from 1400 to 1050 BC. And this was one of the darkest stretches in Israeli history. The last verse in Judges sums up a generation, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” It was an age with no conscience. Man reigned supreme. God’s will was ignored.

It sounds like today. Time magazine used just five words to sum up our modern era, “Anything goes, but nothing lasts.” We live in a moral vacuum. Nothing is off-limits... but everything we try ends up woefully lacking. People today play hit or miss with heavy decisions. They opt for the path of least resistance. The prevailing authority is the loudest opinion. Having eliminated God, life has become a guessing game...

Proverbs 14:12 instructs us, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” The period of the Judges was living proof. In fact, the famine in Bethlehem was probably a commentary on the times. In the OT, famine conditions were often a God’s means of judgment.

Yet in the midst of all the darkness there was a shining light. One young woman stands out from the crowd. In a day of rebellion, selfishness, vice, and skepticism her life was one of dedication, sacrifice, virtue, and faith. We'll get to her in a moment... but first meet another family...

"And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion - Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there."

Here the writer provides us some names... which reminds me... what's in a name? I heard of a Pennsylvania man who recently tried to change his name. Gary Matthews, 44 years old, tried to legally change his name to "Boomer the Dog." Gary says it's been his nickname for the last 20 years. Well, the judge refused. He said if Gary called 911, and identified himself as "Boomer the Dog" the operator would likely mistake an emergency for a prank. Such a silly name would cause confusion.

In contrast, God uses the names in our text to bring greater clarity...

"Elimelech" means "my God is King."

"Naomi" means "pleasant."

"Bethlehem" means "house of bread."

"Judah" means "praise."

And "Ephratha" means "fruitful."

So check it out... Here's a guy who's God is King! He has a cutie for a wife. They're prosperous. He lives in the house of bread. He praises God and produces fruit. He's living the good life. What more could a man want? Yet Elimelech's faith gets tested. A famine strikes – a downturn in the economy threatens the prosperity he's enjoyed. What's he going to do?

Recently I ran across the Top Ten Signs We're In A Bad Economy?

- 10) Robin Leach has a new show - "Lifestyles of the people who still have a job." 9) Dr. Seuss is now eating green eggs and spam.
- 8) Pro baseball players switched from steroids to Flintstone vitamins.
- 7) The highest paying job in town is jury duty.
- 6) Instead of starting the Super Bowl this year with a coin toss, they'll have the Falcons and Patriots play a game of rock, paper, scissors.
- 5) Bill Gates had to switch his internet service to dial-up.
- 4) Hot Wheels and Matchbox stocks are trading higher than GM.
- 3) A truckload of Americans was recently caught sneaking into Mexico.
- 2) The Mafia is laying off judges.
- 1) Motel 6 won't leave the light on anymore.

Well, Elimelech also faced some dreadful conditions. His name means, “[my God is King](#),” but rather than believe that truth and trust God, he takes matters into his own hands. He analyzes job opportunities, and real estate markets, and the cost of living... He never prioritizes spiritual concerns. Moab was a region just 50 miles from Bethlehem. It sat on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. But it was a million miles from the will of God.

Moab got its start when Abraham’s nephew, Lot, had incest with his own daughter. She sired a son named “[Moab](#).” That was the highpoint. Moabite history went downhill from there. They ended up an idolatrous people. They worship a god called “Chemosh” by offering child sacrifices. Moab was on the wilderness side of the Jordan River. When Moses brought Israel into the Promised Land they came through Moab. That meant for an Israeli the direction from Israel to Moab was “[backwards](#).” Yet because of fear, or insecurity, or panic, or a lack of faith – Elimelech uprooted his family from the place of God’s blessing and moved them to a foreign land filled with false gods, and evil men, and wicked practices.

Elimelech should’ve trusted God and stuck it out in Bethlehem – the land God gave to his forefathers a thousand years earlier - but he didn’t! He forgot that his God was King. He resorted to his own wisdom – leaned on his own understanding. He ran, and tried to escape to Moab.

And the tragic results were immediate. Notice two more names. “[Mahlon](#)” means “sick.” “[Chilion](#)” means “tired.” Out of the will of God Elimelech and Naomi became “[sick and tired](#)” of life. I’ll never forget someone telling me, “[There are splinters in the tree of life you don’t even know are there until you backslide](#).” You don’t feel the pricks and the danger on the way up. It’s only when you slide backwards...

I’ll never forget one family. The young man give his life to Jesus, and the whole family followed suit. Mom... little brother... even dad... gave their lives to Jesus. They were learning and growing. God was blessing... Then one day they announced they were moving to Detroit. Dad worked for an automobile manufacturer and he was offered a position in the home office. It was only a few dollars more, but it would be a boost to his career. I was skeptical. Why uproot your wife and kids from a place where they’re growing and prospering spiritually - for a few measly dollars? The move ended up a tragic mistake. Both boys struggled. No one was happy. And what about his career? Well, I’ve lost touch, but with what’s happened in the automotive industry I wonder if the guy is even employed.

Don’t understand. I’m not saying it’s a sin to move your family from CC. But it always amazes me the criteria people use when faced with the decision? Bigger house. Better neighborhood. More money. Social status. Very few people consider the spiritual dynamics. Are they in a place their cared for and well fed? Are they being challenged and used by God? Do they have Christians friends? Where has God called them to be?

Rather than tightening his belt, and hunkering down, and learning to do more with less, and trusting God to provide his needs – all lessons that would’ve benefitted him had he learned them – instead Elimelech bails... He takes off for greener grass. This is what happens when a single Christian gets lonely and gravitates back to the club scene - or a Christian businessman fails to meet his quotas and takes a short-cut - or a college student who’s a Christian gets pressured to conform and compromises his standards - or a Christian struggling with life leans back on the sinful crutches that use to prop him or her up... [God is in Bethlehem, but it'll be easier in Moab](#). A recession – limited job opportunities – tighter finances had shaken Elimelech’s faith. What are our own troublesome times doing to our faith?

Notice verse 3 “Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died...” He went to Moab because he was afraid he’d die in Bethlehem. But he dies anyway. He didn’t realize the most dangerous place to be is outside God’s will. It’s safer in a stormy sea with God than in the calmest waters without Him. Elimelech dies, and his wife, Naomi “was left, and her two sons.”

“Now (the sons) took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years.” Notice too the timeframe – ten long years – a decade! When Elimelech moved to Moab I’m sure in his mind it was only for a short visit. “We’ll just stay a few months.” But they “remained there... ten years.” Step away from God and there’s no guarantee you’ll ever get back. This is the danger of backsliding. It starts out innocently. You rationalize it a thousand ways, but before you know it, you’re trapped in a tailspin.

If you hear nothing else I say today, remember this, when you violate God’s will it’s never a short-cut. You’ve opted for a long and lethal detour. We all need to memorize Psalm 86:11, “No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.” We never go wrong walking with God.

But it gets worse for Naomi. “Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.” This is what no parent ever wants to endure. Nobody wants to have to bury their kids. I plan on Zach preaching my funeral, not vice versa. God forbid! Here’s another tragedy brought on by Elimelech’s faithlessness.

Verse 6 “Then (Naomi) arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people by giving them bread.” Don’t read too much into Naomi’s decision to return home. It was probably more opportunism than faith. She’s still looking for the easy way. This time it just so happens Bethlehem has bread – “Let’s head home.”

“Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.” How far into the journey they go we’re not sure. But Naomi stops... And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each to her mother’s house. The LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.” So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.” Naomi sends them back to Moab. She realizes that among their own people they stand a better chance to remarry and start a new life.

I’m sure you realize, relationships with mother-in-laws are notoriously rocky. Mothers-in-law have a reputation. It’s said, “Behind every successful man are two women - a good wife and a surprised mother-in-law.” Once, a friend and I were talking about our mother-in-laws. I mentioned that mine lived 2000 miles away in Oregon. He said, “Wow, I love my mother-in-law so much if she lived that far away I’d try to get her to move.” I replied, “I’ve tried, but she won’t go to Japan...” I’m just joshing. I love my mother-in-law. We have a great relationship. As did Naomi and her two daughter-in-laws, Ruth and Orpah. When Naomi cuts the girls loose and sends them home, they weep and kiss. At first they balk at her suggestion.

Verse 10, “And they said to her, “Surely we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?”

She's speaking of a Hebrew custom, [Levirate marriage](#). "Levir" is Latin for "brother-in-law." Among Jews when a man died it was his brother's obligation to marry his widowed sister-in-law. If his brother died childless the brother-in-law would sire a son who could carry on his brother's name.

Naomi sees this as a problem. Her only two sons were dead. Verse 12, "[Turn back, my daughters, go - for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands?](#)" Are these girls going to wait 18-20 years for Naomi's non-son to reach marriageable age? She answers herself! "[No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!](#)" And who does Naomi blame for her losses and the tragic outcome of her life? God!

If you don't want to become a "Blamer" be careful with what you believe! Understand, three truths are taught in this story... Some people wrestle their whole life with these with these truths. You need to believe all three!

The first truth is [man's free will](#). Part of being made in God's image is the ability to choose. God gave humans the privilege of self-determination. We decide our own destiny. We make choices even God Almighty honors. I'm sure God warned Elimelech not to go to Moab. He might've sent an angel to talk him down. But when he decided to go, God didn't stop him. And God won't stop you from making foolish choices. It might break His heart, but He respects our decision. In fact, everyone in hell today chose to be there. 2 Peter 3:9 teaches it's not God's will anyone should perish... God has given humans a free will. In a sense we determine our destiny.

But this book is also about second truth... [God's Sovereignty](#). Sovereignty means God governs all things. He has ultimate control of all that happens in the universe and in my life. God is never aimless. He has a plan. Often He intervenes in my life to accomplish His purpose. And when that happens we call it providence. Never doubt God's Sovereignty. Anything less than His total sovereignty diminishes God. It makes Him less than all-powerful and all-knowing. The God of the Bible isn't subject to time, space, or matter. He knows no limits or boundaries. A sovereign God does whatever and whenever He pleases.

But there's a third doctrine taught in the book of Ruth that helps us digest the first two... [God loves us](#). He's kind and compassionate. He looks out for His people. He wants to bless. God is for us, not against us. The love of God is not as apparent in the first chapter as it will be in the remainder of the book. But Ruth is going home with Naomi and the mysterious hand of God's providence will begin to work on her behalf.

But notice what happens in Naomi's mind. She ignores this first truth. She blames God for being cruel to her, and lets her husband off the hook. The old boy chose to leave Bethlehem and God's provision for greener grass in Moab. Naomi needs to take responsibility for her own choices.

Notice too, she ignores the third truth. Yes, God allowed her husband to die... Yes, God could've prevented the death of her sons... But that doesn't negate God's love for Naomi. She had lost all faith in God's grace. Naomi doesn't even acknowledge the two devoted daughter-in-laws she got out of the experience. These girls were blessings in disguise. There are always traces of God's love, even in the worst circumstances. Yet somewhere in Moab, Naomi stopped believing in God's love for her.

Hey, God doesn't promise us an easy life. We invited sin into our world. We threw open the door to famine, sickness, and death. On a macro-scale when bad stuff happens God is honoring the choice of all mankind to rebel against Him. Sin isn't God's design. Sin's consequences break His heart.

I believe in free will. I make choices good and bad – and I reap what I sow. In a sense, my life is the amalgamation of the choices I've made. And I believe in God's sovereignty. Nothing happens in my life that God does not at least allow. Every roll of the dice or bounce of the football is subject to God's will. God is in control. He never goes to sleep at the helm. But if my faith stops here I end up defeated and depressed... For if I only believe in God's sovereignty, then when bad stuff happens (and it will) I'm tempted to conclude that God is mean, and cruel, and vindictive. "[God could've stopped my spouse from dying. He could've saved my sons.](#)" This was Naomi's conclusion. She blamed God. "[The LORD has gone out against me.](#)" She needs to believe more about God.

Yes, you're responsible for your own decisions. Yes God is sovereign. But come what may - better or worse – I've got to believe in God's love. Even if you made a bad choice, if you repent and trust Him, God can reverse the consequences of your sin. God can restore what you don't deserve. He'll redeem your life, and bless you despite your poor and sinful choices. God can and will unravel the messes that you've made. And even when God chooses not to stop a calamity from occurring - pain or death or loss or grief... it comes with a redeeming purpose.

God still loves you. I know your soul screams, "[How can God love me after what I've been through?](#)" That's how Naomi felt after three funerals in a matter of months – first her husband, and then her sons. It was brutal. But this book is adamant. Despite the bad stuff, God still loved Naomi, and He had blessings He was resurrecting out of her loved one's ashes. This is why against all odds - despite evidence to the contrary – even with feelings that say otherwise – [you have to trust that God loves you!](#) This is what it means to have faith. I believe in all three truths.

Back to the story, "[Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."](#) It's sad how grief can skewer our judgment. In sending the girls back to Moab Naomi was condemning their soul to hell. She's so depressed and down on God she doesn't see how the Moabite girls will be any better off with her - in Israel, with God's people, serving the one, true God. Ruth might as well return to her idols. Naomi is cynical, "[Maybe the Moabite gods will treat you better than my God treated me...](#)"

And sadly, Orpah went free. When finally pressed to make a choice she returned to her pagan gods and her false religion. "[Orpah went free...](#)" Did you know Oprah Winfrey was originally named after this character in the Bible? "[Orpah.](#)" According to Wikipedia, members of her family couldn't pronounce "[Orpah,](#)" so she went with what was easier, "[Oprah.](#)" Oprah was raised in a Christian family, but like [Orpah](#) she walked away. Today, she denies orthodox Christianity. Oprah is a priestess of paganism. She's living up to her namesake. Orpah also "tried God." She sampled truth. But when she didn't get the results she wanted she walked away.

Verse 16, "[But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me."](#)

What a beautiful expression of love and loyalty. These words are often heard in wedding ceremonies, but originally they were spoken as a young lady's devotion to her mother-in-law – a pledge of loyalty between friends. Chances are Ruth had never been to Israel. She knew little of God and the Bible. Yet she had faith enough to trust in Naomi's God, even when Naomi's own faith failed. Ruth's faith was for better or worse, for a lifetime.

Verse 18, "When (Naomi) saw that (Ruth) was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her." She stopped trying to send her home. "Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them..." Bethlehem was a small village. I'm sure any visitor would've caused a stir. But people remembered Naomi. She was a local girl come home... But "the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

Have you ever seen a person 30 years old, who looked 50. There's an old saying, "Rode hard, and put up wet." Sin can take a devastating toll. It's been said, "Nature has a lot to do with a person's appearance. But after the age of 30 each person becomes responsible for his own face." Naomi left Bethlehem a young beauty. Her name meant "Pleasant." She was a looker. And she'd only been gone just ten years - yet upon her return she looks fifty years older. A haggard face, baggy eyes, deep lines...

And Naomi knows it... Verse 20, "She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." The name "Mara" means "bitter." She's saying don't call me Pleasant – there's been nothing pleasant about my life. I'm now a Bitter Old Lady! This is what Moab does to a person. It promises prosperity, but it yields disappointment, and anger, and frustration, and remorse, and bitterness. Remember, "Where the grass looks greener the water bill is higher." When we fail to trust God and bolt from His will there's a price to be paid. Naomi shares her testimony, verse 21, "I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?" Four kinds of people are represented in chapter one...

First, there's Elimelech... He knows God is King, but he doesn't live like it. Here's a person who's all about putting food on the table. He does whatever it takes to get ahead in this life, yet he ignores God and the life to come. He's oblivious to things that matter most. Are you an Elimelech? Second, there's Orpah... She tried Christianity – like yoga or Weight Watchers - but when she didn't get what she wanted she tossed in the towel. God didn't answer her prayer like she thought He should. He didn't provide her a spouse – or a quick solution to her financial problems - so she kissed it good-bye and slid back to Moab. I hope you're not an Orpah? And third there's Naomi... She's bitter... she's a quitter... She ignores her own choices, and concludes God is cruel. She's stopped believing in a loving God. She cops an attitude - becomes cynical. Are you Naomi?

Or you could be a Ruth - a person of faith. Yes, God honors our free will. Yes, He's sovereign and at times even lets bad stuff happen. But yes, He loves us. All His plans are ultimately good. Faith is yes, yes, AND yes. This is hard faith, but this is real faith. And this is the faith we see vindicated in the book of Ruth. I hope you'll dare to model this type of faith.

Chapter 1 closes, "So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest." Barley harvest was in the spring of the year, probably the month of April. It marked a new season. Winter is now over. New life is about to bud. And God is about to do a new work in the life of Ruth and Naomi... Just as He'll do a new work in you, if you rise up in faith and say yes, yes, yes!