

1

THE LORD WHO TAKES AWAY AND GIVES

(Ruth 1)

- (1) In the days when the judges ruled, a famine came on the land, and a man from Bethlehem-judah went to stay a while in the country of Moab – he, his wife, and his two sons.
- (2) The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites from Bethlehem-judah; when they came to the country of Moab, they stayed there.
- (3) Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, so she was left along with her two sons.
- (4) Now they took for themselves wives, Moabite girls; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the second Ruth. And they lived there about ten years.
- (5) Then even the two of them, Mahlon and Chilion, died, so that the woman was left without her two children and without her husband.
- (6) Then she rose up, along with her daughters-in-law, and returned from the country of Moab, because she had heard that Yahweh had looked after his people by giving them food.

NO HOPELESS FUTURE

- (7) She went forth from the place where she was – her two daughters-in-law with her, and they went on the road to return to the land of Judah.
- (8) And Naomi said to both her daughters-in-law: ‘Go on, turn back, each to the house of her mother. May Yahweh deal kindly with you, as you have done with the dead and with me.
- (9) May Yahweh grant that you find a secure place, each in the house of her husband.’ Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voice and wept.
- (10) And they said to her, ‘But we’re going to return with you to your people.’
- (11) Then Naomi said, ‘Go back, my daughters! Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they might become your husbands?
- (12) Turn back, my daughters, go on, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say, “There’s hope for me,” even if I had a husband this very night, and even if I gave birth to sons,
- (13) would you therefore wait until they grew up? Would you therefore hold yourselves back from having husbands? No, my daughters, for it is far more bitter for me than for you; indeed, the hand of Yahweh has gone forth against me.’
- (14) And they lifted up their voice and wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.
- (15) And she said, ‘Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; go back after your sister-in-law.’
- (16) Then Ruth said, ‘Don’t pressure me to abandon you, to turn back from following you, for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God, my God.
- (17) Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yahweh bring all the more disaster on me if even death separates me from you.’
- (18) When Naomi saw that she was dead set on going with her, she stopped speaking to her about it.

THE LORD WHO TAKES AWAY AND GIVES

- (19) So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they entered Bethlehem, the whole town was in a stir over them. The women said, 'Is this Naomi?'
- (20) And she said to them, 'Don't call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has deeply marred me.'
- (21) I went away full, but Yahweh has brought me back empty. Why will you call me Naomi, since Yahweh has testified against me, and the Almighty has brought disaster on me?'
- (22) So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

This passage could almost be a newspaper account, couldn't it? Verses 1-5 present 'just the facts,' but not without a touch of sympathy. It's a story of multiple adversities.

This family from Bethlehem-judah, due to the pressure of a famine, goes to Moab. While we don't have a huge map here at the pulpit, you might find a small one in the back of your Bible. Bethlehem-judah is about six miles south-southwest of Jerusalem. I'm guessing Elimelech and his family traveled northeast, around the north end of the Dead Sea, then went south until they reached Moab.

Verses 1 and 2 describe this *big move*. Then verse 3 presents a *hard fact*: Elimelech died. This is too soon followed by the *double deaths* in verse 5: Mahlon and Chilion, Naomi's sons, also died. Then we meet the *sad verb* in the repeated clause, 'and she was left' (vv. 3, 5).

We see a woman who considers herself too old to remarry, perhaps in her mid to late forties? Her sons have died. She has no heir, no husband, no sons. She has no one apparently to care for her in her advancing years, and her family is at risk of going extinct in Israel.

Then comes the *major decision* in verse 6: having heard that the famine in Judah was over, she decides to return. This ‘return’ becomes the focus of the chapter. Most all of chapter 1 depicts a scene on the road, with Naomi and her daughters-in-law beginning their journey back to Judah.

The book of Ruth is, for me, a frightening book. There are two books that particularly unsettle me in the Old Testament: Job and Ruth. You see, verses 1-5 here show how quickly your life can fall apart. Well, you can do the math: one famine, three deaths, ten years, five verses.

However, as we examine this passage that tells us what the Lord has taken away, I believe the testimony is not entirely negative. The book of Ruth seems to be saying that the Lord who takes away also gives. The question then becomes: what does he give?

Unremarkable Provision

Well, in the first place, he gives unremarkable provision. Consider verse 6 in light of verse 5: ‘Then she rose up along with her daughters-in-law and returned from the country of Moab, because she had heard in the country of Moab that Yahweh had looked after his people by giving them food.’

There was famine, which was why they had originally gone to Moab to sojourn there. And now there’s provision. The famine is over.

Yahweh has looked after his people by giving them food. This is one of the two texts in the book that speaks of Yahweh’s direct activity – chapter 1, verse 6, and chapter 4, verse 13. In other places, the work of Yahweh is more subtle. But here’s a direct action, you might say, by Yahweh.

We call this ‘unremarkable provision’ because we usually don’t think too much about this kind of provision (at least not in the west). Now, this doesn’t relieve Naomi’s poverty, and it doesn’t take away her sorrow, does it? But it does show that the God who brings famine also brings relief from famine. It’s evidence of Psalm 111: ‘He provides food for those who fear him. He is ever mindful of his covenant.’

So what do you have here? You have two facts: Naomi has terrible trouble, and she has daily bread. Those two things coexist.

This reminds me of the situation with our garbage. I don’t know how your garbage is taken care of where you live. In our neighborhood, the garbage truck backs up to the portable dumpster the city gives us to use. At least one fellow puts it next to the back of the garbage truck, then it lifts it up, dumps the contents, and puts it back down near the curb (kerb). In other places, a garbage truck will pull up and use a robotic arm to hug the dumpster, pick it up, empty it, and put it back down. No assistance needed – just a driver.

It varies, of course. They were just about to implement, I think, that robotic system when we were leaving Hattiesburg, Mississippi a few years ago. Before that, they had always done it by hand – one or two men on the back of the truck grabbing and emptying the garbage cans into the truck. Because of how they handled the garbage cans, I never put my garbage containers out at the street on garbage days. It was a good way to get your garbage cans beat up, especially if they left them in the street as targets for oncoming cars. So I always took the 39-gallon black plastic bag liners out, tied them up, and put the bags at the