

CHOOSING THE WRONG SECURITY BLANKET
RUTH 1:6-13

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The Russian war on Ukraine continues to grind on. We have become almost numb to the daily reports of Russian atrocities. Schools, apartment buildings, and shopping centers seem to be regularly targeted. Civilian casualties mount. All of this has created tremendous insecurity for the Ukrainians. According to United Nations figures seven million Ukrainians have been forced to leave their homes but have relocated within the country. An estimated nine million refugees have fled to other countries. I find it rather fascinating that 1.4 million of these refugees fleeing to other countries have ended up in Russia.

A Ukrainian psychologist who still lives and works in the country says, **“All of them have the same fears about their future or about their relatives.”** (*World*, 7/16/2022) People younger than 35 have found it relatively easy to leave their homeland. Those who are over 50 have tended to stay. They find it harder to leave their homes. Their sense of security is tied up in the places where they have lived and invested their time and energy and money.

For us Americans one of our greatest sources of insecurity is the inflation that we see all around us. Rent, gas prices, and grocery bills have all been skyrocketing. Interest rates have started to rise, which makes harder to buy a house or to take out a loan. The current economic situation poses a certain threat to our sense of security.

In a similar way, it was a threat to economic security that was the tension that set the stage for the drama which we have been studying in the Old Testament Book of Ruth. Like the Ukrainians, the family of Elimelech chose to leave their country and seek refuge outside their home territory of Judah and their town of Bethlehem. Like the Ukrainians who have fled to Russia, the Melech family fled to enemy territory in Moab. (BETHLEHEM MOAB MAP)

I argued last time that it was not the right thing for this Jewish family to leave Bethlehem and flee to greener pastures some fifty miles away on the east side of the Dead Sea. The Lord told Abraham and his descendants that the land of Canaan was the territory which He had given to Abraham and his descendants. In early Biblical history the Hebrews tended to get into trouble when they left the Promised Land. Furthermore, the Moabites were the traditional enemies of the Jews. The Law of Moses warned the Jews not to intermarry with the Moabites and other people who lived in and around the land of Israel. The main reason was that the religion of these pagans would lead the children of Israel astray.

Some of the residents of Bethlehem stayed when the famine came to their area. But Elimelech and wife Naomi and sons Mahlon and Chilion chose to go to Moab. (PROJECTOR OFF) The desire for immediate relief was strong. What was probably an original intention to stay for a short time became a residence of at least ten years. Elimelech died. His two sons chose Moabite women for their wives. They did not bear children for the family. The Law of Moses had warned that not only famine would be a judgment for the waywardness of His people but also barrenness. Then Mahlon and Chilion died. This was a disaster for the widow Naomi. The principle lesson I borrowed from John Bunyan: **“It is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out.”**

There were no more males in the Melech family. There was seemingly no way to carry on the family name. The provision for daily needs was in doubt. The situation was seemingly hopeless. Perhaps some of us have encountered seemingly hopeless situations. Fortunately we have a God who specializes in hopeless situations.

I.

In vv. 6 & 7 of Ruth #1 (p. 222) we learn about THE PROVIDENTIAL PROVISION OF HOPE IN THE MIDST OF INSECURITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE PROVIDENTIAL PROVISION OF HOPE...) With her husband and two sons gone, Naomi has only her two daughters-in-law left. In that early culture women were dependent upon men for provision and security. Naomi's difficult situation called for some kind of action. Thus we read in v. 6, **“Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.”**

Naomi and her family came from Bethlehem, which name means “house of bread.” Because Bethlehem had not been producing very much bread, Naomi's family had left the area. But now conditions are improved. Notice how the report is framed. It is not just that the rains have returned and the fields are producing grain. It is that the Lord has visited His people and given them food. It is also not that the generic word for God is used. The report is that YHWH, the God of the Hebrews, has intervened.

The term that is used to describe the Lord's intervention is noteworthy. It is a verb that means “to call upon, to take note of, to look after.” It is used in the Old Testament of God's rescue of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. It is used of God's response to the infertility of Sarah, the husband of Abraham, who was unable to bear children. It is used of God's response to Hannah's prayer for a child, the response to which is the birth of the prophet Samuel.

So there is a recognition in the situation before us that the Lord is active and responsible for the positive change in climactic conditions. Naomi appears to believe that evaluation of the improved economic conditions in the vicinity of Bethlehem. She has some kind of belief in the God of Israel. At the same time her family seems to have disobeyed the directives of the Law of Moses about staying in the land of Canaan and not intermarrying with the Moabites.

We have a similar situation in our country. According to the latest research 63% of Americans identify themselves as Christians (Pew Research Center, 12/14/2021) Yet the behavior and beliefs of Americans so often go against what Jesus and His Bible have to say about how to live. A recent Gallup Poll says that 70% of Americans approve of same-sex marriage. (6/8/2021) Same-sex marriage is completely contrary to what the Bible says is the divinely created institution of marriage. We have a president who claims to be a committed Catholic. Yet he is committed to defending and promoting abortion along with the LGBTQ agenda. The president before him also claimed to be a Christian. Yet he said and did things inconsistent with Biblical belief. He claimed, for example, that he almost never sins.

So this Melech family falls into this category of uncommitted, inconsistent believers. They have suffered the consequences of disobedience. In the midst of her desperation Naomi arises to return. The original Hebrew verb for “return” appears 12 times in Ruth #1. Perhaps there is spiritual significance to the prevalence of that verb. Naomi does need to return to the land of promise. God’s people need to return to Him.

There is reminder here of the story of the prodigal son. The prodigal son went off to a far country and lived life on his own terms. It was only when disaster struck that he came to his senses and recognized his desperate need to return to his father. Naomi was only the wife in the Melech family. But she apparently went along with the direction of her husband. Now she is making the right decision to return to the land of promise. Only she does not seem to recognize that her family did wrong in leaving Bethlehem. She hasn’t learned the necessary spiritual lesson.

According to v. 7, **“So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return--- there’s that word again--- to the land of Judah.”** Notice that the two daughters-in-law are choosing to go with their mother-in-law. As we will see in a moment, both of these Moabite women have their original families around. They could return to them. How many women would prefer to live with their mother-in-law rather than their own mother? Some. But I suspect that most would be more comfortable with their own mothers and with the families of their birth. Then keep in mind also that Naomi’s economic situation is probably much more difficult than that of their own original families. Naomi will also be taking them to a different country and a different culture with a different language.

So what does this say about the kind of woman that Naomi was? She must have been a really nice person. Remember, her name means “pleasant.” It appears that she was indeed a pleasant person. They were willing to follow Naomi in her pursuit of what little hope that she had in the midst of a very insecure situation.

Viktor Frankl (VIKTOR FRANKL) was a Jew, like Naomi, who lost his family in the midst of tragic circumstances. He was a psychiatrist and neurologist in Austria when the Nazis arrested him and sent him and his family to a concentration camp in 1942. His father died there of pneumonia and starvation. In 1944, Frankl and the surviving members of

his family were sent to Auschwitz, where his mother and brother were killed in the gas chambers. His wife died later of typhus in Bergen-Belsen.

The suffering which Frankl witnessed was incredible. What he noticed among those who survived the concentration camps was that they held on to some kind of hope. They tried to cling to some kind of meaning and purpose in life. He says that there was a camp song that was sung in Auschwitz. Its English translation went something like this: **“We still want to say ‘yes’ to life; Because one day will come---/then we will be free.”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

For Ruth it appeared to be the hope for food, for physical sustenance, which seemed to keep her going. In that faint hope she saw some evidence that God was alive and active. This faint hope stimulated her to action.

In the midst of our darkest trials we need some glimmer of hope to sustain us. Like Naomi, we may see mostly death and disaster around us. Sometimes part of the problem is that we have strayed away from Him, and it is harder to find Him in the midst of confusion and despair. But so often, as with Naomi, He offers us a glimmer of hope to hold on to. What is needed is to arise and return to Him.

II.

We come then in vv. 8-12 to THE MISGUIDED WITNESS FROM THE WRONG CHOICE OF SECURITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE MISGUIDED WITNESS FROM...) According to v. 8, **“But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.’”** Here we find the first words from Naomi in this book.

Literally Naomi says, “Go! Return!” The two women have begun to go with Naomi toward Judah. After Naomi has thought through things a bit more, she urges the two of them to return to their Moabite families.

Normally the cultural expectation would be that such women would be encouraged to return to the house of their fathers. The term translated here as “mother’s house” is used three times in the Old Testament. It appears twice in the Song of Solomon and once in Genesis #24 v. 28. In each case the place referred to involves a context of love and marriage. The suspicion of many of the scholars is that the mother’s bedroom is where marriages were arranged and planned. The implication here would be that Naomi is urging the two women to return home to marry new husbands.

Naomi here is also uttering a prayer. She is calling upon YHWH to deal kindly with them as they have dealt kindly with her and her family. So Naomi still has some kind of faith in the true God. Likewise in our culture many, probably most, Americans speak about praying to God, and may indeed send prayers toward heaven. But oftentimes this is done without a knowledge of the true God who is really there and who has revealed

Himself in the Bible. These prayers may not always be so effective because they come from people who are unwilling to submit the direction of their lives to Him.

But this prayer from Naomi also shows that these daughters-in-law are indeed good women. They have been kind toward Naomi and her sons. Likewise we recognize that there are good and virtuous people in the world around us who are not always genuine Christians.

In describing these ladies Naomi uses a term that has considerable significance in the Old Testament. (CHESED) She uses the word *chesed*. It is a word which is variously translated as “loving kindness, mercy, or loyal love.” It is a word that appears in the Second Commandment to describe the character of God. (EXODUS 20:6) In Exodus #20 v. 6 we read, “[**God shows**] *chesed* to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

Naomi’s daughters-in-law have shown that kind of loyal love toward her and toward her sons. She now calls upon YHWH to show that loyal love, that merciful kindness, toward these women. But does Naomi believe that God has that kind of love toward her? Do we believe that He has that kind of love toward us? (PROJECTOR OFF)

Naomi at least has enough correct theology to believe that God’s sovereign power extends to the land of Moab. For the thinking of most of the people in the Ancient Near East was that each locality and region had its own particular god, and the power of that god was often thought not to extend beyond that territory.

Naomi continues her prayer to God in v. 9: “**The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband! Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.**” Naomi wants her daughters-in-law to find rest. The original Hebrew word for “rest” has about it the idea of security. The issue is: Where are we to find this security?

In Deuteronomy Moses addressed his people before they entered the Promised Land. This is what he said to them in Deuteronomy #12 vv. 8-10 (PROJECTOR ON--- DEUTERONOMY 12:8-9): “**You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes---** That was the moral evaluation given by God at the end of the Book of Judges, remember? That is the setting for the Book of the Ruth. It is also a problem for the Hebrews before they entered Canaan. It is an apt description for the cultural and spiritual climate of our own day, is it not?--- **9 for you have not as yet come to the rest---** that’s the word we are looking at--- **and to the inheritance that the Lord your God is giving you.** (DEUTERONOMY 12:10) **But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety...**” Rest and security are to be found for the people of God in the land of promise.

In our passage Naomi is encouraging her daughters to find this rest in their Moabite families with future Moabite husbands. But is that the best place to find security? Is the Moabite culture with its false gods the best place to find real peace and security? On a superficial level that may be the case. This is the situation in which they will find family and friends and culture with which they are familiar and comfortable. But is this the setting in which they will find ultimate security? Are they likely to learn about eternal security in this environment? It seems to me that this is bad spiritual advice. From the eternal perspective it is in the land of Israel only where they can make a connection with the true God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Consider the implications for our own witness and advice and influence. Is there something to be said for encouraging people to live in a nice, safe community like Boulder City? Is there something to be said about sending our kids to a better public school system like we have in Boulder City, or to a Christian school, or to schooling our kids at home? Is there wisdom in encouraging people to save and invest their money in stocks and bonds and 401ks and real estate? We can find Biblical support for these kinds of decisions.

But where is it that we can find the best peace and security? Is it not in a relationship with the God who is really there? Is it not in a relationship with Jesus Christ who has guaranteed us eternal life as a result of trusting in Him? Is it not from following God's Word to the best of our ability?

It is an emotional scene that transpires in this pending separation. The daughters-in-law respond to Naomi's words in v. 10: **"And they said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.'"** She should have let them come. This was an opportunity for them to connect with the true people of God. This was an opportunity for them possibly to have children who would grow up with a connection to the true God.

Verse 11: **"But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?'"** The strength of Naomi's bond to her daughters-in-law is reflected here when she refers to them simply as her daughters. But it seems to me that she is giving them a misguided witness.

Naomi continues in v. 12: **"Turn back---** There's that word for 'return' again. The issue is where should people return? **Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?"**

Some scholars suggest that the custom of levirate marriage is the background for Naomi's reference to producing more sons for them to be their husbands. The Law of Moses said that if a man dies without having a son, his brother is obligated to marry the widow. The first son that results from that union is to carry on the dead man's name and to inherit his estate.

Whether that custom is in view here or not, the point is that Naomi has no more sons to offer them. Security is to be found in having a husband. She thinks that this is what they really need. She has nothing more to offer them in that regard. But she does. She has a connection to the true God. She thinks that she is putting their welfare above her own. She would really like to have these women around. But what they really need is a husband and a place of security, and those things are to be found among their own people. But Naomi is wrong. The spiritual and eternal welfare is more important than their earthly welfare and security. And that is to be found in the land of Israel and in the God of Israel. Likewise it is in the God of the Bible where we should find our ultimate security.

III.

We come then to v. 13 and THE MISGUIDED PERSPECTIVE ON GOD FROM THE WRONG CHOICE OF SECURITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE MISGUIDED PERSPECTIVE ON...) Naomi continues her address to her daughters-in-law in v. 13, **"...would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me."** Literally she says, **"Much more bitter for me than for you."**

Naomi's name means "pleasant." Her daughters-in-law have indeed found Naomi to be pleasant. They like her. They want to be with her. They are willing to go to a strange country and a strange culture with a different language for the sake of keeping this extended family together. But Naomi has become bitter. She is putting them off. Why? Because she has become a source of bad luck. People around her die. She has become bitter. She thinks that she is doing what is right in sending these gals away. She perhaps sees herself as heroically sacrificial in sending them away when she would really like to have them around. But her perspective is totally wrong. She has a wrong view of God and her situation. She has chosen wrongly for her choice of security. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Why is life sometimes hard? One reason is that we are frail creatures who live in a fallen world. We have bodies that wear out, that are subject to disease and expired warranties. We eventually die.

Life is sometimes hard because we are sinners who live among sinners. We live among people who do selfish things. We live in a world where dictators think that they can attack other countries for their own selfish reasons. We live in a world where people want power over other people. We live in a world where people want their own way. We live in a world where some wish to take advantage of those who are perceived to be weaker.

Life is sometimes hard because we live in a world where there are spiritual battles going on involving invisible forces of evil. The Bible says that there is a real devil and there are real demons who use evil people to do nasty things. They use our own sinfulness and our own lusts to mess us up and to mess up people around us.

The Bible says that these spiritual battles sometimes go on in an invisible realm in a way that is unknown to us. That is one of the lessons of the Book of Job. Job was a godly man who lived as righteous a life as it is possible for a sinner to live in this world. Yet horrible things happened to him because of a spiritual war that was going on in heaven of which he had no knowledge.

Bad things sometimes happen to us because they are necessary to motivate us to turn to the God who is really there. If life was always easy and smooth, we might never recognize our need to connect with the God who is really there. A loving God uses hard things to get our attention.

Life is sometimes hard for the people of God because hard things are necessary to make us grow. It is only difficult experiences that mature us, that make us better people. It is through difficult times that we develop virtuous character, that we learn empathy and care for others.

Life is sometimes hard because God has a plan for our lives so that we can be in positions where we are useful to Him. Joseph was a virtuous young man. Yet he was sold by his brothers into slavery. He was a virtuous young man in the house of Potiphar in Egypt where he was chief servant in the household. He was wrongly accused of acting inappropriately toward his master's wife. He was thrown into a rotten prison. Yet it was because of his involvement there with a fellow prisoner that he became the second most powerful man in all of Egypt. It was in that position that the Lord God of heaven was able to use him to preserve the people of God in Egypt whereby they could grow into a nation.

Life is sometimes hard because we have messed up. We have gone off to Moab when we should have stayed in Bethlehem. We have married off our sons to pagan women. We have chosen the wrong things to be the source of our security. We have disobeyed God's word, and we don't want to acknowledge it. We suffer the natural consequences of that, and God Himself disciplines us to get us back on track with Him. But when we fail to admit our wrongdoing, we become Naomi. We become bitter. We decide that God is mean. He doesn't really care about me.

If that should be true for any of you within the sound of my voice, your responsibility is to recognize and admit your responsibility for being in your hard situation. If you will confess it to God, He promises to forgive you. Your responsibility then is to get back on track with Him. Submit yourself to His word.

The best proof that God loves us is Jesus Christ. He left His residence in heaven and became a human being. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin and mine. No matter what hard things we experience in life, He promises us that we have an incredibly great eternity to look forward to if we have put our trust in Him. We will live forever and ever and ever in such a wonderful future that we can only barely imagine it.

Trust in this Jesus. He really does care for us. He has a great eternity in store for us, if we have trusted in Him.