

THE BACKGROUND OF THE SAGA
RUTH 1:1-2

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

There is a malaise affecting our land. One of the dictionary definitions offered for “malaise” is “**a general feeling of discomfort, illness, or uneasiness whose exact cause is difficult to identify.**” A Fox News poll released a little over a week ago found that 56% of Americans right now are not proud of our country. A decade ago only 28% of Americans said that they were not proud of our country.

According to a Monmouth University Poll released this week 88% of Americans think that our country is on the wrong track. A June Gallup Poll worded the question a little differently. They asked: “**Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in the US at this time.**” 87% of the respondents said that they were dissatisfied. We recognize that most Americans are upset right now about inflation and about an increase in crime. Some are also upset about the border crisis and others about the overturning of Roe vs. Wade. But the problem runs deeper than that. Gallup has asked this poll question regularly for the last 45 years. It is twenty years since a slight majority of Americans last were satisfied with how things were going in our country. I suspect that most Americans would have trouble putting their finger on exactly what the underlying problem is.

The Bible may have some answers for us. In particular the little Old Testament Book of Ruth may be helpful. Perhaps more importantly it has lessons for us about how to live in a world that seems to be not quite right.

In the messages that I give on Sunday morning I tend to move back and forth from the Old Testament to the New Testament. In my twenty years in this church I have preached about most of the major Old Testament characters. I have not done any sermons on Ruth. I know that the ladies had a study on this book, and Bob Jarrard led a Sunday School class on it not too long ago. The majority of us were probably not a part of those opportunities, and my experience is that every preacher and teacher has a little different interpretation and different applications that makes any Biblical study worthwhile. Hopefully that will be the case here.

I.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE SETTING FOR THE BOOK OF RUTH) I would like to begin by giving a fair amount of attention to THE SETTING FOR THE BOOK OF RUTH. The first verse begins with the words, “**In the days when the judges ruled...**” The reference is to the period described in the Book of Judges which precedes Ruth in our Bibles. The judges were local military leaders whom God raised up and empowered to defeat Israel’s enemies during this time period.

(JUDGES TIMELINE 2) I would date this period from sometime in the 1300s BC to roughly 1000 BC. What preceded this time period chronologically was the deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. The Lord graciously intervened and used Moses to lead this miraculous deliverance from Egypt. The Israelites entered the Sinai wilderness. They received the Law from God at Mt. Sinai. They failed to trust God to enter the Promised Land. So that generation was punished by having to wander in the wilderness for the next forty years. Then Joshua led them into the Promised Land of Canaan. The Lord sovereignly and miraculously intervened by helping them to conquer cities like Jericho. Our Scripture reading from the beginning of Judges said that the generation that followed Joshua followed the Lord, but then the people went astray. They began this repeated cycle of falling into worship of idols and the false gods of the Canaanites. The Lord would raise up enemies to persecute them. The Hebrews would eventually repent and call upon God for deliverance. He would respond by raising up judges--- deliverers--- who would fight off these oppressors.

Details of this Canaanite worship are not provided in Judges. But in Deuteronomy there is this brief description of one of the evils of Canaanite religion. (DEUTERONOMY 12:31) In Deuteronomy #12 v. 31 Moses writes, “...**they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.**” We get other glimpses of how bad life gets for the Hebrews in the time of the Judges. We see one of the sons of the judges kill 70 of his brothers, which also indicates that the father of this murderer, Gideon, had multiple wives. The most famous of the judges, Samson, is very promiscuous. In #17 we learn about a Levite who moves from his assigned area and helps a man in the land of the tribe of Ephraim set up worship to an idol. In #20 we learn about a town in the tribe of Benjamin that defends the rape and murder of a woman.

The last verse of the Book of Judges (JUDGES 21:25) summarizes the moral climate of the era with this evaluation: “**Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.**” It is some time during this time period when the story of Ruth takes place.

That description of the moral climate of the time of the Judges and the Book of Ruth could likewise be ascribed to our culture, could it not? How did we arrive in our condition? One of the primary philosophies underlying the direction of our culture is the theory of evolution. In most of the world of science evolution is treated as a certain explanation for the origin of life on our planet. Yet when one examines that proposition a bit more closely, there are major problems which are discovered. Charles Darwin argued that life developed over thousands and millions of years as the result of small mutations that led to higher forms of life.

Yet over time the fossil record has provided very little evidence of transitional forms. A scientist by the name of Richard Goldschmidt from the University of California Berkeley recognized this problem and proposed the idea described as “Hopeful Monsters,” whereby there must have been sudden macromutations which produced new species of creatures. He was largely ridiculed by other biologists. But later a couple of other scientists developed a variation of this theme. Niles Eldredge, from the American Museum of Natural History, and Stephen Jay Gould, paleontologist from Harvard, came

up with the idea that they called “punctuated equilibrium.” During history there have supposedly been sudden quick changes in the development of advanced species on earth. Geneticists don’t quite know how that could be.

In more recent years Professor Richard Dawns has acquired a fair amount of fame. He has a background in zoology at Oxford University. He wrote a book several years ago talking about how bad religion has been for Western culture. When asked about the origin of life, this atheist suggested that life came about as the result of alien seeding. Aliens from somewhere in the universe seeded this planet such that life could be developed. Left unexplained is how these alien life forms came to be. For having so much supposed certainty about evolution as the explanation for the origin of life it is fascinating to see so much uncertainty and disagreement among evolutionists about how life actually came about.

The popular thinking is that Charles Darwin and other scientists looked at the biological evidence and came up with this theory of evolution with its ideas of survival of the fittest and inevitable biological progress. The reality is that the ideas about evolution preceded him. In my political science background I studied a guy by the name of Herbert Spencer. He was around before Darwin and he was talking about evolution before the scientists were. He applied his ideas to political theory and suggested that mankind is moving toward more and better forms of government. Karl Marx came along and used some of those ideas to produce what has become known as Communism. In his view the inevitable result of evolutionary progress will be a classless society. So how has that worked out?

A friendlier version of that inevitable evolutionary progress was a hope that the world might be dominated by liberal democracies, such as we have in the US. When Communism collapsed in the Soviet Union and Europe, there was hope that we might be entering a great political situation in the world. There was a political scientist by the name of Francis Fukuyama who famously wrote an essay in 1989 entitled “The End of Human History?” He wrote, **“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”** (*The National Interest*, Summer, 1989) As we look back on that claim thirty years later, and consider the world situation today, can we rejoice in the arrival of a universal adoption of Western liberal democracy? Does our own country have its political life all figured out?

This idea of evolution has also been applied to the realm of theology. In the elite universities of our country the departments of religion teach that religious life began with the worship of trees and plants and the moon and stars. It evolved over the years to the idea that there might be one God. The belief in the Jewish God of YHWH in the Bible was the product of centuries of evolutionary development.

What the Bible teaches, however, is devolution not evolution. It says, "In the beginning God..." What has happened is that man tends to go astray. It is only the gracious intervention of God which causes there to be progress in the world around us. In the early part of Genesis we find that man goes astray and builds the Tower of Babel. God intervenes and confuses human languages. Man continues to go astray, and God brings about a universal flood, out of which only Noah and his family survive.

It was God who sovereignly chose to bless Abraham and to make promises to him and to his descendants. The sons of his grandson Jacob began to go astray. So the Lord sent them to Egypt to grow into a nation. The Lord intervened and delivered them from slavery. They failed to trust Him initially to enter the Promised Land. So they had to wander in the wilderness for forty years. The Lord intervened and enabled Joshua and His people to conquer the land of Canaan. But then again they went astray and began to worship the Canaanite gods. Thus it is that we find the situation described for the setting of the Book of Ruth that everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes.

That is the situation which we find around us today. The problem was assessed years ago when Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a refugee from the prison system in the Soviet Union, warned his audience at Harvard University, "Men have forgotten God." In his recent book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* Professor Carl Trueman describes the thinking of people today as centering around the autonomous self. In other words, we Americans to an unhealthy extent have bought into the idea that we can do what is right in our own eyes. Our highest goal should be self-fulfillment and the pursuit of personal happiness. Anything which interferes with that should be opposed. If we have an inconvenient pregnancy, we should be able to get rid of it. We would not consider sacrificing our children to a Canaanite god. But we would consider sacrificing them to the god of autonomy. If we find unhappiness in our marriage, we should be free to dump our mate. If we decide that we want to have a different gender, we should be able to choose that. If old sexual restrictions keep us from doing what we want to do, we should dump them.

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat says about us Americans in his book *Bad Religion*, "**Our vaunted religiosity is real enough, but our ostensibly Christian piety doesn't have the consequences a casual observer might expect. We have some of the most liberal divorce laws in the Western world, and the high divorce rates to go with it. We sentimentalize the family more than certain cultures, yet we also have one of the highest rates of unwed births. Our opinion polls suggest that we're more pro-life than Europeans, but we tolerate a much more permissive abortion regime than countries like Germany or France. We are more likely to fight over stem cell research than other developed countries, but our fertility clinics are among the least regulated in the world. We nod to God, and then we do as we please.**" (p. 239) "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Such is the setting for the story of Ruth. Such is the relevance for us today.

II.

Consider then THE PRESENTING PROBLEM IN THE BOOK OF RUTH. (II. THE PRESENTING PROBLEM IN THE BOOK OF RUTH) Doctors and counselors often speak of their patients and clients as having presenting problems. A patient, for example, may complain of a backache. But the real problem may turn out to be a problem with the heart. So the presenting problem in our story is a famine. Verse 1 reads, **“In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land...”** In the next verse we learn that “the land” is the town of Bethlehem. (BETHLEHEM-NAZARETH MAP) Bethlehem was a small town five or six miles south of Jerusalem. It was in the territory assigned to the tribe of Judah.

Famines in the Old Testament which affect the people of God are usually associated with a test or a judgment. The first famine which we encounter in the Bible occurs in Genesis #12. God has called Abram to leave Ur and go to the land of Canaan. The Lord has promised to give this land to Abram and his descendants. But soon after he arrives there, we are told about a problem. According to Genesis #12 v. 10 (GENESIS 12:10), **“Now there was a famine in the land.”** So Abram responds to that situation by moving to Egypt. There he tries to pass his wife Sarai off as his sister. He gets in trouble for that. But the Lord intervenes and his clan returns to Canaan.

The second famine is described in Genesis 26. Abram’s son Isaac is involved in this. (GENESIS 26:1) According to the first verse, **“Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines.”** Gerar was about 60 miles southwest of Hebron. (GERAR MAP) Isaac faces a test similar to that of his father. His wife Rebekah is very attractive. He tries to pass her off as his sister. This gets him in trouble with the Philistines. God graciously intervenes and they return to the land of Canaan. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The third major famine in the Bible involves the transplanting of the sons of Jacob to Egypt. Joseph is sold as a slave into Egypt, but he ends up becoming the second most powerful man in the land. What precedes this story is the information provided for us in Genesis #38 that Judah, from whom is to come a future king of Israel, is intermarrying with Canaanites and hanging out with temple prostitutes. The chosen people are in danger of being absorbed by the pagan culture around them. So the Lord providentially sees to it that they are forced by a famine to go to Egypt where they will grow into a nation among a people who don’t want to intermarry with sheep herders and goat herders.

The next encounter that we have in the Bible with famines, which relates to our understanding of the famine in our text in Ruth, comes from the law code which the Lord hands down to Moses at Mt. Sinai. In this Mosaic Law, as it is sometimes called, the Lord promises physical blessing when His people follow His law. But he also warns that there will be negative consequences if and when His people turn away from following His law. (LEVITICUS 26:18) In Leviticus #26 vv. 18 & 19 the Lord says, **“And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your**

sins, (LEVITICUS 26:19) and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze.” In Deuteronomy #28, beginning at v. 15 Moses repeats this warning about negative consequences. (DEUTERONOMY 28:23) In v. 23 he writes, **“And the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron.”**

So when we read in our text in Ruth that there is a famine in the land, we need to immediately suspect that God is judging His people for their disobedience to His law. Given the setting of the time of the Judges, we are also aware that there was this repeated cycle of Israel’s falling away from God, followed by a recognition of wrongdoing accompanied by a calling out to God for help. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that our story is taking place during a time when Israel as a whole has strayed away from God. Such a time also poses a test for how individual Hebrews will respond to this judgment. How will the family in our story respond?

We do not have to be scientists to realize that droughts are a typical cause of famines. This Deuteronomy passage makes reference to that. The United States is not Israel, and I have doubts as to whether there are genuine prophets of God around today. But perhaps as the people of God we should at least be aware of the possibility that droughts we are hearing about in this part of our nation could be something which God is using to get our attention. (PROJECTOR OFF) Lake Mead and the Colorado River are at historic low levels. The river provides water to important agricultural areas as well as directly to people. California is experiencing significant water shortages. Eventually this drought could affect the production of food in this part of the country. We are also reading and hearing about how the war in Ukraine is causing grain shortages in places like Africa. The cultural elites around us attribute the drought problems to human caused climate change. Perhaps the real problem is a human caused morality problem, and the Lord is wanting us to get back on track with Him.

Hard times today for us, whatever their source, always pose a test for us. How will the children of God respond? What will we do? Even if the Lord is not disciplining us individually, which sometimes He does, He may bring hard times upon us as a culture, as a country, and the issue for us as individual Christians becomes: How will I respond? We are going to see how the characters in our story respond and what lessons there may be here for us.

III.

The third thing which we are going to consider this morning is THE CHARACTERS AND THE LOCATION IN THE BOOK OF RUTH. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE CHARACTERS AND THE...) **“In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.”**

So we have Elimelech and Naomi. "Elimelech" in Hebrew means "God is king," or "my God is king," using the generic Hebrew word for God. His name suggests that his parents had some kind of belief in God. Ironically this little book will answer the question: "Is the God of Israel king?" We might also notice the entire last verse of the Book of Judges. I earlier quoted just the last clause of the verse. (JUDGES 21:25) But the whole verse reads, **"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."** Is God--- YHWH--- not even king in Israel in those days?

Naomi has a name that appears nowhere else in the Old Testament. The scholars say that it is found in other nearby people groups and has the meaning "pleasant." The parents name their sons Mahlon and Chilion. The meaning of their names is less certain. (PROJECTOR OFF) Some scholars speculate that "Mahlon" is related to an Arabic word that means "to be sterile," or "to be sick." But what parents would name their kid that, unless this was a nickname applied by sad people later in life? Some scholars speculate that "Chilion" is related to a Ugaritic word that means "complete," or in a negative sense "annihilated."

The main thing to notice here is that this is a family of no particular fame and no particular wealth. They are not royalty and they are not from the cultural elite. They are pretty ordinary people. They do come from the tribe of Judah. They do come from the town of Bethlehem. That town may ring some bells for some of us because we have cheated and read ahead in the story of the Bible. But at this time Bethlehem was a small town which was dwarfed in significance by the much more important city of Jerusalem which lay just five or six miles to the north.

There are brief references made to Bethlehem earlier in the Bible, and they should be noted. Jacob was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. He fled to the north to avoid being killed by his jealous brother Esau. In the land of Haran Jacob married two sisters, Leah and Rachel. From them and their maids came the twelve sons who were leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife. Upon the return of this clan to the Promised Land, Rachel gave birth. (PROJECTOR ON--- GENESIS 35:18-19) We read in Genesis #35 vv. 18 & 19, **"And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)..."** Ephrath may have been the original name for Bethlehem. Perhaps it was a district which included Bethlehem.

We next have a judge of Israel named Ibzan who is said to come from Bethlehem. (PROJECTOR OFF) This is in Judges #12. Then in #17 there is a Levite who comes from Bethlehem. He left Bethlehem and moved to territory belonging to the tribe of Ephraim. There he became a priest for a man who made an idol out of silver. Then in #19 of Judges there is a story about a man from the tribe of Ephraim who acquires a concubine from Bethlehem. She is later murdered. With the exception of a judge who

comes from Bethlehem, there is nothing in the history of this small town that is especially attractive.

Now the area around Bethlehem was agriculturally productive. It is at an elevation very close to that of Boulder City. Bethlehem lies on the ridge that runs through the center of Israel. Down through history it has produced wheat, barley, olives, almonds and grapes. The name itself means "house of bread." But now the house of bread is not producing bread. There is a famine in the land. Everyone is affected. What will this family do about it? How will they respond?

That is the issue that the nation of Israel faces in this book. That is the issue that this family will face. How will the nation respond to national suffering? How will this family respond to this famine and to individual challenges that they will face?

That is the challenge before us today. If our nation experiences a more difficult time, how will our country respond? How will we as individuals respond? All of us are going to experience personal challenges. Probably many of us are facing significant challenges right now. How will we respond? How are we responding?

What Carl Trueman describes as the problem in our culture of the autonomous self, a Christian psychology professor by the name of Paul Vitz simply calls "selfism." He says that modern psychology is deeply committed to narcissism, egoism, and worship of the self. Selfism says that self-gratification is the only ethical principle. Our focus should be upon satisfying our own perceived wants and needs and desires.

Paul Vitz says, "[Selfism] seems plausible enough when life is going well--- but it becomes less and less convincing when people begin to suffer sickness or loss. After all, what do you say to the man who discovers, at age forty, that he's dying of cancer? What do you tell a middle-aged woman who will never have the children she so desperately wants? What do you say to the couple whose only child was killed by a drunk driver?" (Breakpoint, 12/13/2004)

Selfism and belief in the autonomous self is becoming the dominant philosophy of the world around us. We need to not buy into it. Especially in the face of suffering we need to turn to the God of the Bible, who gives us hope. For we who identify as Christians follow One who experienced the worst suffering that life has to offer. Because of His death for us on the cross, He guarantees us a great eternity. He promises us eternal life. He assures us that suffering in this life is not without meaning. In coming weeks we will see how the characters in this book learn that basic lesson. They don't yet know about Jesus, but they will learn about the redeeming power of God and the assurance of His providential care, even in the midst of suffering. It is that same providential care to which we must turn in times of difficulty.