

Here I Am – In the Wilderness

Thomas Robinson, *Ruth: Life Found in Barren Places 1*, August 21, 2011

Ruth 1:1-18

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ But **Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died**, and she was left with her two sons.

⁴ **These took Moabite wives**; the name of the one was **Orpah** and the name of the other **Ruth**. They lived there about **ten years**, ⁵ and both **Mahlon and Chilion died**, so that **the woman was left without her two sons and her husband**.

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 (Yahweh) had visited his people** and given them food. 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 to the land of Judah**.

⁸ But **Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law**, “*Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD (Yahweh) deal kindly with (show hesed to) you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.* ⁹ *The LORD (Yahweh) 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**. ¹⁰ And they said to her, “*No, we will return with you to your people.*”

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? ¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, 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 (Yahweh) has gone out against me.*”

¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and **wept** again. And **Orpah** kissed her mother-in-law, but **Ruth** clung to her.

¹⁵ And she said, “*See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.*”

¹⁶ But **Ruth** said,

“Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you.

For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

¹⁷ *Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.*

May the LORD (Yahweh) do so to me and more also

if anything but death parts me from you.”

¹⁸ And when **Naomi saw that she was determined** to go with her, she said no more.

Here I Am – The Challenge of Suffering and Circumstance

We are looking at Ruth in anticipation of our Retreat: Ancient frame for modern reflection.
“Here I am.” Two focuses. This is where I find myself, my situation of life, my problems, my struggles, my sufferings, my temptations. How do we deal with suffering, evil, etc.
“Here I am.” The call of God when God seems hidden, faint, or negative. Where is God?
The “Problem of Evil” is often set as logical formula: God All-powerful + Good = No evil.
Hinduism: Karma—each life suffers for the wrongs of previous life. Inevitable, unforgiving.
Buddhism: Existence is suffering, deception of ego-centered desire. Escape to dissolution.
Modern philosophies: Evil is no problem since existence is accidental and meaningless.
Bible: Human life is real and good. Evil and Suffering is a deep problem running throughout.
No formula solution. The whole story from Eden to Cross to Resurrection is God’s answer.

Life in the Wilderness of Problems

Ruth sets us in strange/familiar setting of harsh experience seen through two women:
Famine, poverty, hunger, uprooting, refugee life. Death, sickness, grief, widowhood, loss of power, difficult responsibility. Spiritual uprooting, assimilation, loss of identity, discrimination. Pain of barrenness, loss of sons/husbands, no security, family extinction.
Naomi is like Job – loss of everything – but as a woman in a patriarchal society, she has no power to rebuild. She faces old age, poverty, begging. Only resources, Ruth & Orpah.

Where Is God? Decision in the Wilderness

Like Job, Naomi still believes in Yahweh, but believes her suffering shows God is against her (v13). We see her with Ruth and Orpah on the wilderness road back toward Judah.
She does not want them to suffer all she has faced; sends them home as their best hope.
She sacrifices her future for their sake, facing bitter darkness. Go back to your gods.
Yahweh seems completely against me. With me God offers you only bitter suffering.
Orpah faces reality and acts with good sense. She weeps with Naomi but returns home.

Commitment to a Journey – Defined by God

Ruth’s choice is different. Her decision changes the future. She doesn’t know the future.
Naomi may well be right. But she has come to know this woman in her suffering and in her faith in God. (Yahweh may be against me but He is still the living creator God.)
Even in despair, Naomi returns home, but prays for Yahweh’s love (*hesed*) to bless them (not Moab’s god Chemosh). Ruth sees the love of Naomi’s sacrifice for her.
Ruth chooses Naomi and her People and their God. Naomi has just spoken bitterly about her life and hopelessness and Yahweh’s hand against her. But Ruth knows that it is better to journey with the living God than return to the meaningless cynicism of priests trying to placate Chemosh with child sacrifice. If there is to be any hope, it must be with the God who is reality and who can’t be denied even in the wilderness of suffering.
Ruth chooses to believe Naomi may be wrong. She commits her life to the journey with God.