

RUTH: REDEEMING THE MESS

ruth 1.1-6: the mess we've made

Questions for Personal Study

Read Judges 2.11-19 & 17.6 to learn about the days of the judges.

How is our culture similar to the days when the judges ruled?

Elimelech means "God is King." How does his life say otherwise?

Is God absent or present in our story thus far? How so?

How have you seen the invisible hand of God in your own life?

Questions for Study in Community

Like Naomi, we all have messy life stories. Share some of your mess.

How do you see God's redemptive hand in your messy life?

How does the cross influence our understanding of God's work in the mess?

Read Romans 8.28-39. How can this be true in the midst of tragedy?

Questions for Staying on Mission

Consider this definition of "neighbor:

A Neighbor is "anyone you cannot avoid" (Guder) or anyone who has needs that you have the resources to meet. Your neighbor may be those who live next-door, those you work with, those you play with, or those with whom you share some sort of affinity, including your immediate and extended family. Paradoxically, your neighbor may also be someone you have little in common with but whom God has placed squarely in your path or specifically called or commanded you to care for. In addition, your neighbors will most likely be both in the church and outside the church.

Who are your "neighbors?" Who has God sent your community to?

Have you heard the messy stories of your neighbors?

How can you pray for your neighbors in light of the redemption in Ruth?

How might you all become agents of redemption with your neighbors?

Thoughts for Parents

The book of Ruth is a great story for kids, so each week I'll include some ideas for family time around the dinner table or before bed. Dads, take the lead on this! Don't be like Elimelech! Here is a topic for each day's discussion:

Mon: The days of the Judges; Tue: The famine as discipline for disobedience; Wed: Meaning of Elimelech & Naomi; Thurs: Why Elimelech is a fool; Fri: Consequences for foolishness; Sat: Naomi's return because of God's grace.

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Faithlessness and Famine

The story of Ruth takes place during the days of the Judges, one of the darkest times in Israel's history. Having been rescued out of slavery in Egypt, Israel was God's chosen people through which he intended to redeem all of creation, bringing his blessing to all the peoples of the earth. God had given Israel his Word and brought them into the land of Canaan where they were to flourish under his gracious and loving reign. As they responded in worshipful obedience to his grace, they would experience his abundant blessing so that they could in turn bless the world.

But God's people refused to live under God's Word. They repeatedly chose disobedience and sin, began worshipping false gods and idols, and intentionally forgot God. In what was a repeat of the first sin of Adam and Eve, Israel chose to do things their way, more interested in wealth and comfort and sex than in obedience to their gracious God. The book of Judges recounts the pathetic cycle of sin which Israel repeatedly chose: the people abandon God, so God brings judgment in the form of oppression and war; the people cry out to God for mercy, and he graciously delivers them at the hand of a military leader (a judge); the people immediately return to sin and rebellion, and the cycle repeats (see Judges 2.11-23). With every cycle, the corruption increases, until even the judges themselves become corrupt. The repeated refrain of the book of Judges is, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17.6, 21.25).

It is quite possible that the famine mentioned in Ruth 1.1 is a divine judgment against the godlessness of Israel during this time. Because they refused to live under God's reign, they experienced the withdrawal of his blessing on the land (see Deuteronomy 28.15-24). The story of Ruth, then, takes place in a time of great wickedness, rebellion, and faithlessness. It is a time not unlike our own.

The Mess Elimelech Made

It is in the midst of these darkest of days that we are introduced to a family from the little town of Bethlehem, a rich agricultural town which means "house

of bread.” Ironically, the “house of bread” has become a barren desert, and so a man by the name of Elimelech is moving his wife and two sons out of the promised land to the country of Moab. Elimelech, whose name means “my God is King,” is like many men today, confessing the name of God but not having the heart of God. Addicted to his own comfort and prosperity, Elimelech looks at his grim circumstances in the land God has placed him and decides the grass is greener outside of God’s protection. Rather than repenting of his sin and crying out to God for deliverance, he takes matters into his own hands and moves his family to one of the most godless places imaginable.

Moab is named after one of Lot’s sons, born to him as the result of having sex with his own daughter. Israel was specifically commanded to have nothing to do with the Moabites because they worshipped Chemosh, a false god whose worship included ritual prostitution. As the head of his home, Elimelech chooses to move his family away from the community of faith, out of the land of God’s blessing, and into a godless and pagan nation rather than confess and deal with his own sin. He is a picture of godless foolishness in the days when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Elimelech has no godly vision for his family, no trust in God’s provision, and in his attempt to avoid death leads his family to near extinction in a foreign land. As the head of his home, his family becomes what he leads it to become, whether he intends it to be so or not. He will very shortly reap what he has sown.

Though the narrator initially says they intended to “sojourn” (that is, stay briefly), v.2 tells us that the *remained* there, settling comfortably in to a way of life that for all practical purposes excluded God. Tragically, Elimelech dies there, leaving his wife and boys in a pagan land to fend for themselves. Elimelech’s sons, Mahlon and Chilion - their names mean “sickly” and “dying” - then marry pagan women, Ruth and Orpah, unions specifically forbidden by God (Deut. 23.1-6). Finally, after 10 years in Moab, tragedy strikes again: Mahlon and Chilion die without any children, and Naomi (whose name means “pleasant”) is left destitute in a foreign land, weeping beside a freshly dug third grave.

Naomi’s life is a mess. Though she is certainly not guiltless in all this, tragedy has repeatedly struck her life. How are we to understand her journey through life? Is life just random, full of tragedy, and then you die? Is it all pointless suffering? If there is a God, could he not stop the suffering? Or is the suffering God’s judgment on her for the sins of her family? Why is her life such a mess?

The Mess We’ve Made

These are the questions that we ask of our own lives. How can a good and loving God allow such misery? Can’t he stop it? Or is he, in fact, *causing* it? Why did this happen to me? Why is life so messy?

Life outside the garden of Eden is always messy. We sin and mess up our lives. Others sin and mess up our lives. We lack wisdom and make poor decisions and life gets messy. Even when we try our best to live according to God’s ways, we simply can’t insulate ourselves from the mess and tragedies of life.

Naomi and Ruth are ordinary people who experience ordinary hardships and losses and wonder why God seems to be absent. They are never given an explanation for the tragedies that have marred their story. No doubt Naomi never foresaw herself as a middle-aged widow without descendants in a foreign land.

In the same way, we often find ourselves in situations in life that we would not have knowingly chosen. Relationships crumble. Children are miscarried. Businesses fold. Fathers are absent. Innocent people suffer. And life goes on.

Redeeming the Mess

Finally, in v.6, we are introduced to the hero of the story, the Lord. He has “visited his people and given them food,” and Naomi makes the humbled decision to return home. God has been gracious to Israel in the midst of their sin, once again filling Bethlehem with bread, and his grace leads Naomi to return, a word often translated “repent.” Naomi is at rock-bottom, broken by the mess her life has become, and - though embittered by her trial - she is ready to return to the Lord. Though the story has begun with tragedy, v.6 introduces a glimpse of hope: perhaps the Lord is not as absent as he seems?

The story of Ruth subtly but powerfully declares that God is a redeemer, taking the mess of our lives and making good from it. Though we may not yet see it, God is purposefully at work in the mess of Naomi’s life, just as he is at work in our own messy lives.

Ultimately, the book of Ruth points us forward to the work of God in sending his Son Jesus to be our redeemer. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has reconciled us to himself, with a promise that the mess of life will not have the final word. God is working all things together for good, and we can trust that the work he has begun in us he will bring to completion. Though often all we see is the mess, the book of Ruth invites us to lift our eyes up and trust the hidden but continuously working hand of God.