

A Famine on Many Fronts

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 February 2022

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] I wonder whether you've seen life when it hits rock bottom. Perhaps not you personally, but maybe someone you know and love.

You know the situation when it's not just one aspect of life that falls apart, but multiple, health, job, relationships. It's like that perfect storm hitting all at once on many fronts.

And we all hope it won't be us, but when it does happen, it turns our lives upside down. It makes us wonder, when we're Christians, where God is in all of this sometimes.

And well, as we begin our series in Ruth this Sunday, I believe that's what's happening to Elimelech and his family. The first five verses, which we've heard read, sets the scene for us, where we read that in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.

So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech. His wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Marlon and Kilion.

[1 : 18] They were Aphrodites from Bethlehem, Judah, and they went to Moab and lived there. Now, Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Opa and the other Ruth.

After they had lived there about ten years, both Marlon and Kilion also died. And Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. If you looked at the sermon title and the first heading, what's happening here is that a famine is occurring, but not just physically, but on many fronts.

The physical famine itself must have been pretty nasty, enough to uproot Elimelech and his whole family, take them away from the promised land. Perhaps and most likely any land he owned would have to be abandoned.

And something that you don't do lightly unless it's a last resort. Now still, the hope was to live in Moab, as we read, only for a while.

But as it turned out, things did not go to plan. They may have found food, but Elimelech lost his life. And so Naomi's focus now turned to her sons.

[2 : 34] Yes, the imperative now was to continue Elimelech's line by having children through her sons, Marlon and Kilion, which leads to their marriage to two Moabite women, even though I believe that would have risked turning their hearts away from God.

Now, mind you, such a risk was probably already present by the mere fact that they were living in Moab. But it was a risk worth taking for the sake of children.

Unfortunately, though, and I believe probably they were trying for about 10 years, Marlon and Kilion also died without children. So here then is a second kind of famine, of progeny.

Death threatened to bring an end to the line of Elimelech. But there's also a famine of a third kind, which we find in the very first verse. For all of this happens, as we read, in the days when the judges ruled.

Now, some of you will know this is a nod to the book of Judges. Where in the very last verse, it's actually the verse right before Ruth chapter 1, verse 1, we read these words.

[3 : 48] In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. You see, the time of the judges was also one where there was a famine in godly rule.

It was a time when even if they acknowledged God in name, they lived without regard to Him. So we read in the book of Judges that no sooner had God raised judges to get them out of trouble from their enemies, no sooner did they return to their godless ways.

And so you might wonder, is this famine God's indictment on them for this? Well, we can't be sure, but this is the spiritual climate within which these events occur.

Israel had pretty much pushed God out of its consciousness. And if you read Deuteronomy, God said that there would be consequences. He said He had warned them that He would withhold blessing from the land.

And a blessing which included the promise of children as well, so that Israel would be great in number. And so if you put all these things together, you can see how Naomi's life has hit rock bottom.

[5 : 01] No family, living in a foreign land, the only ones with her, two widows just like her, and foreign Moabite women to boot.

So where can Naomi now turn? Remain in Moab and be treated like an outsider without the protection of husband or son? Or return to Israel, even though the prospects probably aren't that much better back home?

Well, she makes her choice in verse 6. When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of His people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

With her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she'd been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. And so even though the road ahead was uncertain, Naomi decides to return home to Judah, because she hears that the Lord has come to the aid of His people.

Initially, she thought to bring her daughters-in-law with her, but then she has a rethink. Verse 8. Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go back, each of you, to your mother's home.

[6 : 13] May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. Both Opa and Ruth, out of loyalty and kindness, had stayed with Naomi and was even prepared to return to Judah with her.

But Naomi realized this was costly for them. If they did that, they would forgo a chance for a family themselves. What chance do you think a Moabite woman would have had of finding a husband in Israel?

Very slim, right? They stood a better chance of rebuilding their lives by remaining in Moab, by returning to their mother's home, to find rest in the home of another husband.

And so she says, Go home. But initially, they resisted. Well, Naomi tries again in verse 11. She says, Return home, my daughters.

Why would you come with me? And her logic, as you follow it, is pretty compelling, isn't it? Am I going to have any more sons who become your husbands? Return home, my daughters. I'm too old to have another husband.

[7 : 30] Even if I thought there was still hope for me, even if I had a husband tonight, not very likely, and then gave birth to sons, not very likely, would you wait until they grew up?

Would you remain unmarried for them? No. No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me.

Now, just briefly, you can see her love for them. She still calls them her daughters. But the theme here is that of going home, isn't it?

Four times we hear this reference to the word home and a plea for them to return to it. And if you think about it, that's all of our most basic needs, isn't it?

Our deepest need is to find a place to call home, somewhere to belong. That's why, for instance, so many people yearn for marriage, because they see that to be the answer to that question or that need.

[8 : 28] That's why when the borders were closed in the pandemic, that was traumatic, isn't it? Because even though you can call on FaceTime, you can send cards and gifts and things like that, there's no substitute, is there, for being able to go home, to go where your loved one is.

And so even as Naomi was thinking of these two daughters of her, she realized that if they were to both leave her, that would be very costly for her, for her own chance of finding family and home. She would be making the trip home alone. And when she got there, she would not know how or where she would find a home, would she? Hence, she concludes, it is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me.

Well, at this point, Opa relents. They have another good cry, but she finally departs, but not Ruth. Instead, we read in verse 14 that Ruth clung to Naomi.

Now, I was very tempted at this point to get a reenactment. It's a powerful scene, isn't it? I was going to ask Ruth to come because she was so happy that we were actually going to preach from her book.

[9 : 56] And I was going to get her to come. And we do have a Naomi as well. Is she here? I don't know. But anyway, I was going to ask Ruth to demonstrate how she would cling to Naomi. Would it be a bear hug?

Or would it be around the knees? But anyway, we're not going to do it. Unless, Ruth, you want to do it. I don't know. But you can imagine, can't you? That particular scene, how heartbreaking, how moving it would be.

And Naomi says in verse 15, look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her. You do the same. Naomi really does care for Ruth, but it's rather telling, isn't it? This final plea. Because when we read it, much as Opa was returning home, she was also returning home to her gods, isn't it?

You see, this is not simply a decision as to where to call home. It also came with a choice as to which god they would serve. For Opa, going back to her people meant going back to their gods.

[11 : 08] Ruth could see this very clearly. And that's why she makes that very different choice. And she says now, she replied, don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.

Where you go, I will go. And where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people. And here's the words, your God, my God. That's the crux. Where you die, I will die.

And there I will be buried. And so this is more than just an act of loyalty to Naomi. Admirable though that is, Ruth saw clearly the real choice before her.

And in that choice, Ruth chose Naomi's God. Your God will be my God. Hence, where you go, I will go. Where you die, I will die.

I cannot leave you, Naomi, because I don't want to be separated from your God, is what she's saying. And such is the strength of her conviction that she says, may the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, even if death separates you and me.

[12 : 12] And look here, Ruth, like Naomi, doesn't hesitate to call God the Lord. She's a Moabite, but it doesn't stop her from putting her faith and fate in the God of Israel.

And so her choice of home was simply a result of that. She will make her home amongst God's people, and then whatever the consequences flow from that, so be it.

That was her choice. And you have to say, as you look at her, this is a courageous woman, isn't she? Full of faith, and might I add, full of audacity as well, as a Moabite woman, claiming to have God as her Lord.

Well, as they've made their decisions, so they head home, verse 19. So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the woman exclaimed, Can this be Naomi?

Don't call me Naomi, she told them. Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.

[13 : 20] Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. It's such a bittersweet homecoming, isn't it?

Her name, Naomi, means pleasant. But what has she now got to show for it? No, she says, Call me Mara instead, which means bitter, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.

She went away full with a husband and two sons, yes, to escape a famine, but full of hope. Now she returns empty, no husband, no son, no family, no physical home either, even though Israel is her home.

And all of this, Naomi says, is the work of God's hand. It's very clear, isn't it? There is no escape from the sovereign rule of God, is Naomi's conclusion.

Never mind that everyone else in Israel did as they saw fit. For Naomi, God was still the master of her destiny. So in verse 13, back in verse 13, she said, the Lord's hand had turned against her.

[14 : 27] Now here, in these verses, she says, the Lord has afflicted her, and the Almighty has brought misfortune upon her. Now, has she necessarily done anything wrong to deserve this?

Nothing in the text suggests so. If any wrong was done to leave the promised land, I would say it's a limelax fault, isn't it? And so, I don't think the Lord is afflicting her for her sin.

And yet, allowing her to go through bitterness is still God's doing. Even though we can't quite see His purpose just yet.

Even though we will take the rest of the Ruth to understand what God's doing. Now, as for Ruth, her choice was a vexed one as well. For in order to follow the true and living God, she had to face the reality of hardship and adversity.

An uncertain future awaits her. Even though she could have taken the easier route, as Naomi had suggested, return to her mother's home. But if she did that, that would be at the cost of forsaking God and His people.

[15:40] And I say, we too have this same challenge in our lives. God has made a wonderful invitation for us to come home to Him. But, it comes with a choice, a costly choice.

For instance, Jesus Himself, on His Father's behalf, has said in chapter 14 of John's Gospel, My Father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I'm going there to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. Here's the invitation. Come home to the Lord. I've prepared a way for you.

He's prepared it by going to the cross on our behalf, giving His life so that we can be reconciled and our rebellion against God is forgiven. Jesus has prepared the way for us. And yet, for us to accept this invitation and find our way home requires us to walk the road of humility and faith.

It needs us to humble ourselves to admit our failure, our need for forgiveness from God. It needs us to repent and turn away from our sin and follow Christ.

[16:50] And we know it's the right thing to do. Many of us know that. But, it's humbling regardless, isn't it? And therefore, not easy. At the same time, once we've done that, God then calls us to a life of faith.

That is, obedience in doing what's right. Even if it brings adversity. We are to live in dependence on Him. To trust in Him wherever He may lead us.

Even when it's not easy. To trust Him even when we don't know what's going to happen. Even when it may lead to trials and suffering. And so often, I think we make a bargain with God.

We say, you know, God, I will follow you if you can guarantee me that if I do, you will help, you know, you will take this or that away from me and guarantee that I would not have to go through this or that.

But if you think about it, that's not really faith anymore, is it? That is trusting in the outcome. Not in God, is it? Because when we put our trust in Him, we entrust our whole lives to Him.

[17:56] We rely solely on God's Word and God's character, His character of goodness, without insisting that it translates into knowing every detail of our lives.

And in our second reading today, Peter's encouragement is that if we do that, it is worth it. Despite the unknown and suffering, it is worth it.

God won't let us down for He says in 1 Peter chapter 5 verse 6, humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God. So that's the hard bit.

But then read, that He may lift you up in due time. God's intent when we humble ourselves before Him, when we come to Him in repentance and faith, is actually to restore us and to lift us up.

But notice those last three words. Not necessarily immediately, but in due time. We step out in faith and then we wait patiently for the Lord to lift us up.

[19:06] And even if our circumstances doesn't change immediately or even for the rest of our lives, we actually come out in front. Why? Because we're home with God.

We're where God's loving care is. And so the psalmist says in Psalm 84 verse 10, Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, and being a doorkeeper is a position of humility, than dwell in the tents of the wicked. And this, my friends, is where Ruth and Naomi find themselves.

They've made the humbling but right decision to return to Judah. Naomi, in humble recognition of her affliction, Ruth, in faith, despite the uncertainty of prosperity.

And there, right there at the end of the chapter in verse 22, when they're at their lowest point, we find a glimmer of hope for Ruth and Naomi.

[20:11] So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by Ruth, the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

You see, they have come home just in time for the start of the barley harvest. Now, it's not yet clear, if you haven't read the whole story, just what certainty that gives them.

Because, you know, for example, they don't really have a land to harvest in, do they? Nor a husband to provide. But, you know what? They were home. They were where God had come to the aid of His people.

They were in amongst God's work of providence for His people. In other words, they were in the right place. Whatever the circumstances, they were in the right place.

And so, likewise, your life, my life, may be hard and full of adversity right now, but if we have come home to God by faith and in humility, then we're in the right place.

[21 : 15] We're in amongst the work of God's providence where He seeks to bless His people and provide for them. And you and I have that hope in Christ Jesus.

It doesn't mean that everything will then be right in a whole instance, but you are right where God wants you to be. Where, if we wait patiently, He will lift us up in due time.

So, my encouragement is that we continue to cling like Ruth to the Lord by faith and wait on Him to lift us up in due time.

Let's pray. Father, in this life we are often afflicted by many famines and trials of many kinds, sometimes through our own sin, but at other times merely through living in this world.

Help us to choose a home with you by faith in Jesus at all times. May the God of Jesus Christ be our God. and as we wait upon you in humility, bring us into the joy of your eternal kingdom, there to feast at your table in the house of God.

[22 : 32] We pray and ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.