

When Bad Things Happen . . . Be All In!

As with any good story, and this is a whopping good story, it's helpful to start with the when, the where, and the who.

First, when. Lots of our favorite stories start with the words "Once upon a time." This one is a little more specific. "*In the days when the judges ruled.*" Insiders know that this is a reference to a specific time in the Old Testament, after the children of Israel had entered the promised land, and before they had any kings. Instead of kings they had what were called "judges" ruling over them. This was a chaotic time in the life of Israel. There were some good judges, and some not so good judges. Sometimes Israel was faithful to God, and sometimes they weren't. All the author tells us is that "*there was a famine in the land.*" And in the Bible, famines were often God's punishment for the people's unfaithfulness. Was that the situation here? The author doesn't tell us.

Next, what about the where? The story begins in the "*country of Moab.*" Now, everybody knows—well, insiders know—that Moab was almost always the enemy of the Israelites. This goes way back to Numbers 22, where the Moabites were trying to prevent the Israelites from entering the promised land. (Remember the story of Balaam?) And in Deuteronomy 23, where the Israelites are receiving an updated version of the law, Moabites are specifically forbidden from ever entering the assembly of the Lord. "*Even,*" Moses says, "*to the tenth generation.*" (You can look it up: Deuteronomy 23, verses 3-6.)

And now let's talk about the who. This is where the story gets real interesting. We are first introduced to "*a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah*" (which of course is part of the land of Israel, specifically the southern part). The name of the man, the author tells us, is *Elimelech* (which is a fun name to say! If you want, say it with me: Elimelech). Elimelech means "My God is king." So Elimelech must be a good guy. The name of Elimelech's wife is *Naomi*, which means "pleasant" and "sweet." So she also sounds like a nice person. Naomi and Elimelech had two sons. Their names were *Mahlon*, which in Hebrew sounded like the disease that struck the Egyptians way back when, and *Chilion*, which comes from a root meaning "to perish." (It frankly doesn't sound like they're going to be around very long.) And finally, there are the sons' Moabite wives (imagine that: they actually took Moabite wives! Enemies of Israel!). The name of the one was *Orpah*, which means "nape of the neck," and the name of the other was *Ruth*, which means "friend." Got it? Good. (Let's review. What does Elimelech mean? "My God is King." Naomi? "Pleasant, sweet." Ruth? "Friend.") Okay, we're finally ready to talk about the what—we're ready to tell the story.

You have to understand all the irony. Not only is Moab traditionally the enemy of Israel, but the name *Bethlehem*, where the family was from, means "house of bread." And right now, there ain't any bread there. There's a famine. So these "*Ephrathites*" (and the word Ephrathite ironically means "fertile, fruitful, productive") move to Moab. And that's where bad things start to happen. First Elimelech dies. (This was just before his boys had taken Moabite wives. Who knows, maybe that would have killed him anyway!) And then, "*when they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.*"

Do you know what this means? Naomi now has nothing. Without her husband and sons, she has no property. She has no status. All she has are her two Moabite daughters-in-law. Who also have nothing.

What do you do when bad things happen? What do you do when you almost die from a brain bleed, and then you begin losing your eyesight, and then you fall down an entire flight of stairs, fracturing your shoulder and two ribs, right before you were planning to move? What do you do when your car loses traction on a gravel road, and you are thrown out of it, severely injuring your spinal cord, leaving you partially paralyzed? And you have a wife and three young sons? Bad things happen. A lot.

Back to our story, did you notice that while verses 1-5 focus on the men, starting with verse 6 the focus is all on the three powerless women? (I told you it was a whopping good story!)

Naomi had heard that the famine had finally lifted back home in Bethlehem (or as the writer puts it, “*the Lord had considered his people and given them food.*”) She weighed her meager options, and decided her best option—or maybe only option—was to return to Bethlehem. Which hopefully was once again “the house of bread.” At first Orpah and Ruth accompany her. But then Naomi tells them that, no, they should go back to their own people in Moab. What she actually said was, “*Go back each of you to your mother’s house.*” Not “your father’s house,” which is what readers and hearers of this story would have expected. The story of Ruth is very unusual in the Old Testament in how it highlights the important—indeed vital, if often overlooked—role of women.

There was a law at the time, called “the Law of Levirate marriage,” that said if a woman becomes a widow, but has no children, then her deceased husband’s brother must marry her, and include both her and any children they may have in his household and entitled to his property. (You can look that up: Deuteronomy 25:5-10) The problem was, as Naomi points out, Mahlon and Chilion had no more brothers. And there aren’t going to be any more brothers. She is too old to have any more children. Their best hope is to return to their homeland, and try to find themselves husbands there. “*Turn back, my daughters . . . it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.*”

With a heavy heart, Orpah grudgingly goes back. She is the obedient one, the compliant one, the socially acceptable one. But Ruth refuses. She is the stubborn, strong-willed one. We heard her poetic speech to Naomi. It’s the only part of the Book of Ruth most people remember. Taken out of context, they’re great words for a wedding. But in this context, they are words of indignant refusal to go back on her previous commitments—to Naomi’s son, and to Naomi herself. “*Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge.*” She had already decided. “*Your people [are] my people*” (no future tense here!). “*Your God [is] my God.*” Ruth was “all in.”

With Eric and Danielle’s permission, I share that after he had had his accident and had begun the long journey toward rehabilitation, a fundraiser had been planned for them. And t-shirts were made that said “Be all in.” [Show t-shirt.] That, at least in part, was Eric and Danielle’s commitment to one another, or rather, their renewed commitment, following the one they made on their wedding day. It was their family’s commitment to one another. Including

their church family. Whether or not we received one of those shirts, or ever put it on. We too were all in.

And with Deanne Duerksen's permission, I share that she is all in with Nadine. As is her sister Brenda. They're not going anywhere. And neither, I trust, are we.

It's interesting that God doesn't play a major role so far in the story, except as the object of Naomi's bitter complaints. After all, hadn't she gone to Moab full, and hadn't the Lord brought her back empty? "*Call me no longer Naomi,*" she tells her kinswomen back in Bethlehem. The name Naomi means pleasant and sweet, remember? "*Call me Mara,*" which means "bitter," "*for [as she says] the Almighty, El Shaddai, has dealt bitterly with me.*"

What Naomi has temporarily forgotten—and we can't really blame her, can we?—but what she will eventually remember, by the end of the story, is that El Shaddai, the Almighty, Yahweh, the Lord, is all in with her. Always has been. Always will be. Oh, and by the way, so is Ruth. I'd call that the very best kind of "friend."

When bad things happen (and they can happen to any of us), God is all in. May we be as well.

Amen.