

Greener Grass

When Fairytales Come True – Part II

Ruth 1:1-5

Introduction

As I drive to and from my home, there is a pasture on the side of the road with a half dozen horses grazing. In spite of the fact that their pasture is fertile and green, it is not unusual to see one of the horses straining over the top rung of the fence to try to get a mouthful of grass on the other side, which is not nearly as green.

This never fails to remind me of the myth of the greener grass. This is the belief that somewhere else, life is better, easier, more fulfilling. It cannot be in the middle of your own pasture – the grass looks a lot greener:

- in a different house;
- with a higher paycheck;
- in a different job;
- at a different school;
- in a different neighborhood;
- driving a different car;
- next to a different spouse;
- belonging to a different family.

The grass is just greener everywhere else but here.

We cannot ignore the fact that some situations are harder than others, and that sometimes we need to make some changes. The problem comes when we decide that surely God would not purposefully make life difficult – or uncomfortable, or challenging – He wants everyone to be happy. Greener grass must be proof of God's leading.

The truth is that greener grass might be the most dangerous pit we will ever escape.

Erma Bombeck had a funny way of summing up this myth when she entitled one of her books, *The Grass Is Always Greener over the Septic Tank*. It looks promising and rewarding, but we have no idea what is underneath.

We are about to witness the myth of greener grass literally played out in real time and in living color in the lives of real people.

Now, if you have ever read a fairytale to your daughter, and it is all make believe, then you know that before the first page is turned, or the hero shows up, the story becomes dark and troubled. Storm clouds gather overhead.

In the fairytale of Ruth and Boaz, which happens to be for real, the same storyline emerges. The background to this love story barely gets past the first few words before the clouds begin to gather.

Let us look at verse 1 of Ruth chapter 1.

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons.

The Crisis

Now, without a doubt, this man and his wife and two sons are facing a crisis. This is when thoughts of greener grass usually find their way into our minds and hearts. For this man, there was a famine in the land, which affected Bethlehem.

Added to his crisis was the political upheaval during the days of the judges. There was a collapse of civility, morality, and true religious piety that we looked at in our last session.

Then compound this man's crisis with living in fear of a Midianite attack, which could result in the loss of cattle or even his own life.

Pile on to this the fact that the investment potential in the land of Bethlehem had never looked bleaker.

Now, at the very top of the heap in this crisis, the cupboard is empty and the hayloft as well.

There is a certain irony or pun in the Hebrew language that Jewish readers would have immediately caught in verse 1.

. . . famine in the land . . . And a . . . man of Bethlehem . . .

Bethlehem meant "house of bread". In other words, the bread basket of Judah is empty. People who live in the "House of Bread" are going hungry.ⁱ

The original audience would have immediately caught the contradiction in terms; the pun – “There is a famine in the House of Bread.”

This is like talking about an increase in gang warfare in Philadelphia, the “City of Brotherly Love,” or the rise of demonic activity in Los Angeles, the “City of Angels”.ⁱⁱ

The association of famine with Bethlehem – the bread basket of Judah – would have created an obvious twist in the story.

Bethlehem lay about six miles south of Jerusalem and its name, “House of Bread,” was evidently well-earned. Wheat, barley, olives, almonds, and grapes were plentiful in ancient times.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, now there is a famine in Bethlehem. More than likely it is the famine mentioned in Judges chapter 6, which helps us place this story with the leadership of Gideon and the oppression of the Midianites. Even more importantly, it helps us understand that this famine was a result of the Israelites’ rebellion against God.

God often used famine to bring the nation to their sense of need. His design was not for the people to leave the House of Bread, but to repent and obey Him and He would again fill their houses with bread.

God had a way of using famine to refashion faith – faith in His promises and provision. It was testing that deepened character.

To add even more to the play on word meanings is the fact that this man and his family will move to Moab. The Lord called Moab, in Psalm 60:8, a “washpot”. This was the pot used to wash dirty feet. It would be akin to calling Moab a trash can – where things to throw away were kept. This region was the waste basket.

So, this Jewish family is in a crisis of faith and is basically leaving the “House of Bread” and moving to the dumpster. They moved from the bread basket to the trash can.

Now, before we go any further, let us take a look at the characters in this unfolding drama.

The Characters

There are six key players in this drama, but after the opening verses, only three of them will be alive.

Verse 2 informs us that the patriarch of the family was named Elimelech. Loosely translated, his name meant, “God is my King”.^{iv}

The tragedy of Elimelech’s life was simply the fact that he did not live up to his name.

The next character is Naomi, Elimelech’s wife. Naomi means, “gracious one”.

Then, Naomi and Elimelech’s sons make their brief curtain call. Their names are Mahlon and Chilion. They have rhyming names, which means they could have been twins or they simply had a mother like many of us, who wanted their children’s names to begin with the same letter or end in a rhyme.

They could have been like my ministry-minded parents who named their four sons, Daniel, Jonathan, Timothy, and Stephen. They said that often when they introduced us in churches where they were raising support, they would say, “We have four sons – two from the Old Testament and two from the New.” See if you can top that!

However, they could not resist, and my mother gave three of us middle names that started with a “D” – Duane, Dean, and Dale. Three “Ds,” which looked a lot like my report cards growing up!

I do not know, but maybe Naomi had a little paperback book, “200 Names for Boys that Rhyme”.

The reason I suggest this, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but somewhat seriously, is that Naomi must have liked rhyming names because the meanings of her son’s names are not good at all. Mahlon means, “puny or weakling,” and Chilion means, “pining”.

Imagine – their names mean, “puny and whiny”. “Way to go, Mom! Thank you for giving me that for the rest of my life.”

While we are at it, verse 4 gives us the names of the future wives of these sons. One was named Orpah, which means, “obstinate,” or literally, “strong neck” or “stiff necked”.^v

This is such a lovely name for a girl. I am fairly confident we do not have any Orpahs in the audience, so I can say that.

Then finally, the name of the second wife was Ruth, whose name means, “comfort,” or perhaps “friend”.^{vi}

So, we have Mr. Puny marrying Miss Strong Neck and Mr. Whiny marrying Miss Comfort.

Frankly, Ruth is the only one who does not seem to fit the picture.

The truth is that they will nearly all literally play out the meanings of their names. All except for one – the only one who does not live up to his name is the one who really should have – Elimelech, or “God is my King”. In other words, “God is the master of my

life. God is sovereign in my decision making. God comes first.” Not quite.

I want to point out one more clue about this family. It is found in the middle of verse 2, where we are told that they were,

... ***Ephrathites of Bethlehem*** ...

Ephrath was the name of the wife of Caleb, the famous and fearless comrade of Joshua. According to I Chronicles 2:19, Caleb’s descendants were the ones who settled Bethlehem.

Ephrathites were members of a clan that, as one author said, “was the first family of Bethlehem; the aristocracy of the town of Bethlehem”. This is to simply underscore the riches-to-rags crisis hitting this family.^{vii}

What we have here are the Rockefellers now living as immigrants; the Vanderbilts now homeless and hungry.

So why should this family stay in Bethlehem where the famine has reduced them, and everyone else, to handouts?

“We’re used to a better life than this. Why stay in the land of our faith and our forefathers? Let’s move to where the grass is greener.”

So, the crisis now leads these key characters into compromise.

The Compromise

From the ridge of hills on the edge of Bethlehem, one can see the land of Moab. Moab was well watered by winter rains that were driven inland by the winds of the Mediterranean Sea.^{viii}

Elimelech probably stood on this ridge overlooking the dry grass and brown, parched fields of Bethlehem and could easily see, less than fifty miles away, just on the other side of the Dead Sea, the green, fertile fields of Moab. Perhaps he thought to himself, “We’ll only go for a short period of time. God won’t mind. Our flight from His land and His people will only be a quick visit and that’s all.”

Notice the progressive terms used in the first few verses:

- verse 1 says they, “***went to sojourn in the land of Moab,***” with sojourn being a word that refers to a temporary stay;
- verse 2 says they then, “***entered the land of Moab and remained there***”;
- verse 4 says, finally, in an astounding text that informs us, “***they lived there about ten years.***”

Learn from Elimelech – the danger of greener grass is that it can turn into quicksand.

However, this does not mean the greener grass felt like quicksand. This family’s move was evidently successful. They had ten years of provision. They had a place to live. They had brides for the sons. Life was good.

At the same time, they had knowingly forfeited participation in the assembly of the Lord. They had walked away from a community they should have stayed to help. Elimelech could have led the way to repentance and genuine worship. Instead, he ran away, viewing greener pastures in Moab as worth more than worship and fellowship with the assembly – which were forfeited according to Deuteronomy 23.

It is no wonder that the first five verses of Ruth form the only part of this entire book in which God is never mentioned once. And in a narrative like this, the absence of God’s name implies the absence of desire for God’s will. This is the only paragraph where the name of God does not appear.

Elimelech could have argued, “I’m not gonna become a Moabite. C’mon, I would never offer my children or grandchildren to Chemosh, the god of the Moabites. I’m not into child sacrifice and idolatry. I would never do that or condone that. I’m not a Moabite, I’m just gonna temporarily, you know, forsake God’s word and the worship of God and go live with Moabites.”

However, before long, sometime before his death, Elimelech evidently picked out Moabite women for his sons to marry.

Without warning, perhaps even to him, the covenant promises of the land and the seed and the prophets and the covenant-keeping God no longer mattered – they all just faded away.

Pursuing greener grass has a way of lulling our spirits to sleep.

What seems like a temporary compromise, no big deal . . .

- just a quick trip . . .
- just a quick phone call . . .
- just one bet . . .
- just one sip . . .
- just one personal expense charged to the company account . . .
- just one little lie . . .
- just one purchase . . .

- just one click of the mouse . . .

. . . and the greener grass grows into a wilderness where one can barely see daylight.

Perhaps Elimelech never intended to return, if things worked out. Either way, this leading patriarch of a leading family in Bethlehem who had scandalized his community by moving to Moab, would never return again.

The Consequences

Greener grass may lead to the graveyard.

Notice how suddenly the writer reports the deaths of the men of this family. In verse 3, we read,

Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.

Two verses later, we read in verse 5,

Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died . . .

There is no explanation; no medical diagnosis, just the shocking news to everyone around them in Moab, and certainly headline news in Bethlehem.

Most Jewish writers and evangelical writers as well, read between the lines and contend that the deaths of Naomi's husband and sons were divine judgments upon their unbelief.^{ix}

This is like the subtle reference to the New Testament believers in I Corinthians that certain church members had died early deaths because they approached the Lord's table while cherishing, planning, engaging in secret sins (I Corinthians 11:30).

These sons of Elimelech disobeyed God by not returning; by not converting their wives to the God of Abraham; by not coming back with their father's body; by not caring about the ways of God. Their early deaths were judgments for having assimilated into the lifestyle and culture of Moab.

Now, the paragraph ends in verse 5 with Naomi virtually alone. Notice she is,

. . . bereft of her two children and her husband.

She alone was left to wonder, "Where did those ten years go?"

Conclusion

Let me offer four observations from this scene in which we have watched a man chase after greener grass.

1. Observation #1: One sinful decision, apart from seeking God, can lead to more wrong decisions that draw us further and further away from the path of wisdom.

You might say, "Stephen, what do I do about my sinful decisions? I've made several of them and now I'm off the path. I'm out of fellowship with Christ. Am I going to die in Moab?"

Oh no. Jesus Christ can and will forgive every sin you will confess – for those of you who believe, restoring your fellowship with the Father; for those of you who will believe, forgiving the record of sin against you. And He happens to specialize in redeeming sinners. I should know – I am one of them.

However, if you are a believer and you have made some wrong decisions that dishonor God, know that true repentance is willingness to own up to these actions and decisions as sinful violations of God's word and will.

Furthermore, true repentance will take responsibility for the consequences of these sins – it does not push it off on someone else; it does not hide it under the carpet or try to get out of it.

True repentance owns up to sin and accepts the consequences. In fact, consequences that may last for years become God's way of reminding you of His grace and forgiveness and strength to do the right thing and walk in obedience to Christ.

2. Observation #2: Deciding to pursue greener grass rather than the glory of God is the fountainhead of grief.

Five verses happen to represent a volume of sorrow and grief. And it all began with a look, and then a longing, and then leaving.

Greener grass merely disguised great grief.

3. Observation #3: Greener grass may make a lot of sense, but making sense and trusting Christ can be two different things altogether.

Greener grass might make wonderful economic sense, but spiritual loss. Greener grass might make great personal advancement, but at the same time, tragic spiritual digression.

Let us put this out on the table. The reason greener grass can make so much sense is because our hearts are selfish and corrupt and our minds are in need of daily renewal and transformation (Romans 2:1-2).

The heart of every problem is the problem of every heart. We are our greatest obstacle to wise living.

Because of our sinful hearts, disobedience can make so much sense.

4. Observation #4: Famine in the will of God is better than a feast outside the will of God.

Take it from Naomi, who would say, “Have I ever learned this one. Our short trip became a ten year stay, and now it seems like it has ended with three widows and three graves.”

This is not the end – in fact, all of this merely sets the stage for a new beginning. God has a way of taking people lost in Moab – the trash dump – and setting their feet back on the path to Bethlehem – the house of bread.

However, this will require submission. Naomi and Ruth will experience the grace of God because they ask for it. They return to the land of the Lord for it. They are available for it.

God has a way of redeeming wasted years and foolish decisions for those who want Him to, so that like Naomi and Ruth, we can enjoy the favor and fellowship of our Kinsman Redeemer, Jesus Christ our Savior.

However, I am getting way ahead of myself. The path back to Bethlehem is for our next study.

ⁱ A. Boyd Luter, Expositor’s Guide to Historical Books: God Behind the Seen (Baker, 1995), p. 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert L. Hubbard, New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ruth (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 85.

^{iv} C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1991 ed.), p. 472.

^v Hubbard, p. 94.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 91.

^{viii} David R. Shepherd, Shepherd’s Notes (Broadman, 1998), p. 12.

^{ix} J. Vernon McGee, Ruth: The Romance of Redemption (Thomas Nelson, 1981), p. 53.