

The Journey to a Gentile Country

Preached in New Hope Reformed Fellowship Church, Middleville, MI, on
Sunday morning, February 13, 2022 by C. VanSteenselen.

Text: Ruth 1:1-5

Psalter 1:1,4,5

Psalter 300:5-7

Psalter 47:7-9

Psalter 196

Congregation,

Traveling to other countries! That can take much time and effort. You need to have the right paperwork. A valid passport and a ticket for the airplane. When it comes to time, you need to be on time at the counter to check-in. Afterwards, you can board. What about the security screening? Are you really a tourist? Do you have any weapons or dangerous devices with you? And then the journey itself. That can take a long time. Some flights are 8 hours for 4000 miles. But finally you arrive at the final destination.

What if you travel to a foreign country? Then you need even more to prepare yourself. You need to know the language, the culture and how the electrical system works. Where is a church? Where can you find a school for the children? All these things you need to figure out beforehand. Even at arrival, there are things to check. Where is the grocery store? At which location can you find an ATM? All this takes energy and stress. Maybe you even need the help of others. Well, today we also hear about a journey to a foreign country. Elimelech and his family are ready to go. What will happen there?

Theme: The Journey to a Gentile Country

I. A Promising Beginning

II. A Challenging Continuing

III. A Disastrous End

I. A Promising Beginning

Though the beginning seems to be promising, the background is a great challenge. We read in verse 1, “Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land.” The phrase “when the judges ruled”

literally means “when the judges judged.” Maybe you ask, what are judges? Are they the same as a king? No. We read in Judges, “In those days there was no king in Israel” (Judg. 21:25). What then? One commentator says, “A judge was for specific time with a particular mission that had a leading role. It was not inherited.” Another commentary says, “They were military leaders raised up by Yahweh to deliver people Israel from their enemies.” This is a good description. They were needed for deliverance. But a king reigned continually. Note that God appointed only two judges directly: Gideon and Samson. When it comes to our passage, which judge ruled? Most likely this was Gideon. He judged Israel for seven years. Keep this timeframe in mind during this sermon. Now, why was there a judge? As we have said, they were needed for deliverance. That means there were issues. The problem now was, “There was a famine in the land” (1:1). A famine is an extreme scarcity of food. Famines were often a judgment of God. He had threatened Israel to do this if they would sin (Lev. 26:19-20). Think about the example of Elijah and Ahab. 3.5 years there was a great drought and a famine. The reason was Israel’s sin in following after other gods.

Application

Israel was in a time of challenges. What challenges do we have? Have we maybe financial struggles? That can cause much stress. But where do we seek deliverance? Young people, do you have struggles with yourself? You ask yourself the question, who am I? Who does understand me? Who can help me? Know this, my friend, there are more people that struggle with the same questions. Remember that God has made you! He knows about such struggles. Go unto Him with your questions and riddles.

The text gives us another application. Today, we also have spiritual judges. What do we mean? Preachers of the gospel. Why? Because we are all born in a spiritual famine. It is true. This is due to God’s judgment. But what is the purpose of that famine? That we would cry out to God. That would be a hope for spiritual delivery too. That is why God still gives preachers. Why for deliverance. No, this is not in the might of the preacher. But they are chosen by God. Such poor sinners are delivered by His power. Then the question comes to us, how do we listen to the preaching? Is it a word of man or a word of God? Do we listen with all reverence?

What about this, congregation, is there not also a famine in the church? What do we mean? An unbalanced preaching? Where do we still hear: Death in Adam and

life in Christ? Is preaching in the churches not often become one-sided? But, God cares for His church. He will cause true preachers to be sent out. He will work till the end of times true conversions. Let us now return to our text.

Elimelech's Plan

Elimelech has a plan. It is only temporal. What is it? We read in verse 1, “And a certain man of Beth-lehem-Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons” (1:1). Do you see them go? A small family, two parents and two children. They “went to sojourn.” That means, to live as a stranger for a definite or indefinite time. Their plan is to flee Israel. To go to a land of external wealth. It is only for a time. Is that wrong? It depends on the situation. Jacob and his sons had permission. Yes, in his time, there was a famine in the land also (Gen. 43:1). When Jacob is on his way, he sacrifices the Lord. What is the answer of the LORD? He says, “I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt” (Ge. 46:3). But in our passage it is wrong! Why? For three reasons. First, they do not submit to God’s judgment. The result is devastating. What would have been the solution? To confess their sins, and to become humble before God (Lev. 26:40-42). Second, this family has no communion with God. We do not read anything about prayer. It seems that their decisions are only of the flesh. The name of God or the LORD is missing. Third, they go to a gentile country, Moab. The meaning of Moab is, “The seed of the father, or a desirable land.” This country worshiped an idol, Chemosh. That was dangerous! Intermingling with them was forbidden. What was the reason for that? God had said, “For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods” (Deut. 7:4). This will have consequences! Elimelech! Do you know what you are doing?

Application

What are our plans if we are in trouble? What do we do if we struggle with ourselves? Do we flee to use wrong and unbiblical means? Do we want to intermingle with the world? Maybe the means you want to use are legitimate. But is God in the picture? Do we have God’s permission? Yes, we need to make decisions. And it is true, God does not always answer directly. But do we wait for God? Or do we take action ourselves?

Is there maybe a burdened sinner? When you see your spiritual famine, where do you seek the solution? Is it maybe with children of God? Those that are spiritually rich? No, they cannot save you. Is it maybe your own righteousness?

That means, you are not as bad as others. At least, you try to live according to God’s law. Would God then not hear? Friend, this is dangerous! You try to intermingle works with grace. And God will never allow for that. This will have consequences! It will not save you. No, it will rather kill you. Think of Christian in Pilgrim’s Progress. When he came to that mountain of the law, it would almost kill him.

Child of the LORD. Are you not a pilgrim? Elimelech wanted to sojourn in a foreign land. But that was wrong. But are you not also sojourning in a ‘foreign’ earth? A sinful Moab? One day, you will be fully delivered. Then you will arrive in that eternal ‘Canaan.’ There will be an abundance of satisfaction. Let us now return to our text.

Elimelech’s Well-meant Purpose

What is the purpose of Elimelech? That all seems to be well-meant. We read in verse 2, “And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem-judah” (1:2). Which word do you find the most in the verses 1 through 5? The word “name.” It is found three times in verse 2 and two times in verse 4. Names in the Bible were important. They expressed something of the person’s essence. Even more, the repetition here shows that it is important for the writer. The whole situation is about the name and reputation of Elimelech. At the end of the Book, it is said to Naomi, “[The LORD] hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his *name* may be famous in Israel” (Ruth 4:14). Elimelech wanted to be famous, he wanted his name to continue in the future.

Let us have a look at the meaning of their names. What does Elimelech mean? Yes, “My God is King.” Ironically, he runs away from God. Naomi means the “Pleasant one.” What are the names of their two sons? Mahlon, that means “sickly,” and Chilion, which means “weak.” What depressing names! Another name we find in our passage is Bethlehem-Judah. Bethlehem, that is to say “house of bread.” What an irony to read this in a time of famine! Now, here is specifically Judah mentioned. Why is that? Well, there existed another Bethlehem in Zebulun. This place was 7 miles north-west from Nazareth (Josh. 19:15). What does happen after their journey? We read further in verse 2, “They came into the country of Moab, and continued there” (1:2). To continue means to be there. Their plan seems to have changed. From temporal to permanent reticence.

Application

Let us make a few points of application. Fathers and husbands, how do you rule your family? Elimelech had good intentions, but he made the wrong decision. How do you make decisions? Maybe you have plans to move because of different work. Do you inquire the LORD? The decision you make can impact your whole family.

Congregation, we have seen different names in our passage. As we are born, we all seek or own name and built our own reputation. But we have a very bad name, that is: sinner! Paul even calls himself, “The chief of sinners.” You say, he? Yes. He knew his heart. Now, we need to learn that God is King. But how? That can only be by One name that is give by which we must be saved. It is Jesus Christ. What a sweet name! What a beautiful name. Have we learned to spell it? His name is indeed who He is. It describes His character and His work. Where was He born? Yes, in Bethlehem, the House of Bread. He is the heavenly Bread for a hungry soul that perishes of famine. Have you eaten from it? After that were you satisfied? Yes he came indeed for a well-meant purpose. To save a people in life. Who? Sons of daughters that are “mahlons,” sickly, and that are “chillions,” weak. What a wonder. He was willing to do that. He underwent challenges. He even continued unto death. Yes, also the family of Elimelech will face challenges. That is what we will see in our second thought.

II. A Challenging Continuing

A Dying Head

The first challenge this family will face is that there is a dying head. We read in verse 3, “Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.” Remember that Elimelech was the head of the family, the husband and caregiver of Naomi. But we read that he died. It is not known when it happened. Probably within five years, because they are about ten years in Moab and the boys still will marry. Most likely, Elimelech did not die very old. His sons were unmarried and in the time of the Bible people married earlier than today. But what a blow! Naomi lost her husband, the two sons lost their father. Why did this happen? Well, it was because of the wrong choice of Elimelech. Dachselt says, “Going to Moab was not the will of God. This can be seen by their death. Neither did they have the commandment of God to go as with Abraham.” Notice that also the headship changes. We read first that Naomi was “Elimelech’s wife,” but now we see that Elimelech is “Naomi’s husband.” What is now the result? “She was left.”

Literally it says, “she be let remain.” That means, to be left over, to be left alive or survive. It is like Noah, where we read, “And every living substance was destroyed...and Noah only *remained alive* [and family]” (Gen. 7:23).

Application

Widow or widower, you know the pain of Naomi. You have lost a husband or a wife. That gave much tears at the grave. But that loss was only realized much later. Maybe you struggle with it every day. You miss him or her so much! You lived together for many years together. But now you are torn apart! What a pain! May the LORD grant you strength, wisdom and help.

Let us draw another application from our text. Elimelech was a head of the household. Likewise, Adam was the head of the covenant of works. God required him to keep the commandments perfectly. But he did not. He fell. And in him, we too. Now, we are lost. Death came into the world. We are out of the communion with God. We have all sinned in Adam. But have we learned that our selves? And of who was Adam a figure? We read in Romans, “Of Him that was to come.” That points to Jesus Christ. What a picture. Also, He was a head. But then of the covenant of grace. What is the covenant of grace? Hellenbroek says in his booklet, “[It is] is the way by which God through Christ becomes the *property* of the sinner and by which he in turn becomes the *property* of God.” Even more, even Jesus Christ died as head. That the sinner may become the property of God. The question to us is, are we the property of God? Have we seen the payment for it? Let us now return to Elimelech. He, the head of the family, died. What happens?

Two Gentile Marriages

Both sons marry with a gentile woman. We read in verse 4, “And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth” (1:4). What happens when their father dies? They both marry. Any return is no longer in their mind. The sentence literally reads, “They brought for them wives.” This word “brought” is used in the later periods of the Old Testament to speak about marriage. In the earlier times the word “to take” is used, think of Abraham (Gen. 11:29). These sons continue with the decision of their father. They “took...of the women of the Moabite.” In those times, marriages were often arranged. Think of Isaac and Rebekah. Here they took for themselves. Mahlon, likely the oldest, marries Ruth. Her name means “friend or companion.” Chilion marries Orpah, which means “to drip.” You might ask, was

that allowed? Commentators differ. Jamieson writes that this was a violation of the Mosaic law (Deut. 7:3). Others say that it was not forbidden according to the letter but according to the spirit of the law. Why? The simple reason is that the Moabites served idols. As such, it was indeed forbidden to marry such a wife (Deut. 7:3). In this case, it is most likely wrong. Later we will hear why. No, not only marriage takes place. They also want to continue. We read, they “dwelled there for ten years” (1:4). It is the same word that is used for Ruth later when she “dwelt with her mother in law” (Ruth. 2:23).

Application

The text speaks about marriage. For those that are married. How did you receive your spouse? Was it in a way of prayer? Do you know that God has brought you together? What a blessing if that is the case. Yes, marriage is still a flower that is left us from paradise. Do you know what it depicts? The marriage between Jesus Christ and his bride. But may I ask you, how do you act towards your spouse? In Ephesians 5 we read that the husband should be a loving leader, and his wife willingly submit. What a blessing if that happens. Husband, act towards your wife as Jesus Christ does towards his bride. What a love and what a care is that. What a leadership. We read about Him, “That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). Wives, do submit yourself to your husband as the church to Jesus Christ. What a beautiful adornment that would be.

Young people and singles, if you seek a spouse, how do you seek? Do you pray for it? Do you seek a godly one? What would that be a blessing. And if you have a date, it would be good to agree on the doctrines of Scripture and on the church. Yes, it can be a challenge in such matters. But what would it be great if you can say, it is a gift from God. And that you might confess, like Adam, I have received her from the LORD. But what happens after the marriages of Mahlon and Chilion?

Two Dying Children

Both sons will die. In verse 5, it says, “And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them.” The Targum adds, “And because they transgressed the decree of the word of the Lord. [Also because they] joined affinity [=affection] with strange people, therefore their days were cut off.” The Targum is a translation of the Old Testament in Aramaic. That was the global language in those days, like English is today. So, according to this writing, their early death was a judgment of God

for their wrong marriages. Yes, we read more often about young people that died. One example is the sons of Judah, Er and Onan. They were both wicked, and God killed them (Gen. 38:7-10). But what was the wickedness of the sons of Naomi? Was it that they served Chemosh, the god of Moab? It seems. God had given a warning in Deuteronomy for that. He said, “For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee *suddenly*” (Deut. 7:4) . And this was exactly what happened to them. Goslinga writes, “These marriages were not blessed. They died without children.” No children was seen as a curse (Holman, Gen. 20:18). All these challenges happened within ten years. Yes, we need to be cautious. Not all difficulties are a judgment from God. We see that with Job. But here it is much related to the curse in Deuteronomy.

Application

Are there those without children in our midst? That can be so painful, especially when there is that desire. God withheld children. He closed the womb. This burden is often not understood. It can be such a wrestling. God, why? Yes, you may ask that why question. Jesus did it on the cross. But He still prayed, Thy will be done! No, not having children is not always a curse of God. Think about Sarah. Why was she childless? Not as curse but to show God’s glory. Maybe for you it is to bring you on your knees and much prayer. May we give you a suggestion? How much do you care for the young people in the congregation? Do you pray for their conversion? Do you invite them in your homes? For example, providing them a meal or for some singing. Maybe that is your duty, as it is for all of us.

May we ask others, is it not a wonder that you are still alive? Think of your youth. How many wicked things did you do? Did you steal? Did you curse the name of God? Were you entangled in a false religion? What a wonder that God did not take you away. No, he still gave you some time of grace. You are still in church. How do you act on God’s patience? Have things changed?

My unconverted fellow, it is a wonder that God lets you live. Every day you add to your sins. When does He get tired of it? When will it be over? He can do with you like Er and Onan. But He still gives you time to convert. Please! Let your life not be like those men or like Mahlon and Chilion. Be wise! Turn to the one Child that died, Jesus Christ. He died for sinful people. Now in our text, the question is, what is the end for Naomi? That is disastrous! Our third thought.

III. A Disastrous End

We see first that Naomi lacks support. We read in verse 5, “The woman *was left* of her two sons and her husband” (1:5). What do we see here? It says, “the woman...her two sons...her husband.” It is no longer Naomi, one with a name, but she is nameless. Remember, Elimelech wanted to save his name. And now, they are all nameless, the “woman,” “sons,” and “husband.” Yes, this is clearly the judgment of the LORD as we see in Psalm 109. We read that she “was left.” That means to be left behind, or survived. It is the same word as in verse 3. She had no grandchildren. And ultimately, she was left of God. This is Gods judgment. A very clear picture is drawn in Psalm 109, “7. When [the wicked/deceitful] shall be judged, let him be condemned...8. Let his *days be few*...9. Let his *children be fatherless*, and his *wife a widow*... 13. Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following let *their name be blotted out*” (Ps. 109:7-9,13). This is clearly a picture of Elimelech and his family. They had a few days, the children became fatherless, and his wife a widow. His posterity was cut off. His name was cut off. What a blow! Indeed, the LORD testified against Naomi. He afflicted her (Ruth 1:21). This is the testimony of the LORD against her. Yes, it is true, later she does receive blessings again. Her name will not be cut off (Ruth 4:10). But this is only true after repentance, her return unto Israel.

Application

Are there any nameless? What do we mean? Those that cannot give their situation of their heart a name. No, they can no longer live in the world. And at the same time, they cannot say that they are a child of God. What a struggle. They feel the blow: the LORD has testified against me. I am afflicted under my sin. It testifies against me all the day long. Maybe your question is, will I ever be cut off? Will I be blotted out from this earth? How must it go? May we encourage you? Naomi and Jacob thought that all was against them. But it was for their good. At the end of Ruth we read that Naomi has an abundance of blessings. The same for Jacob, he will see Joseph and will survive the famine. I you seek the LORD, will He cut you off? No! Think about the Prayer of David, “The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me: Thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever: Forsake not the works of thine own hands” (Ps. 138:8). Will God forsake His work? No! Will complete it till the end. Why? Because the elect sinner is too costly for Him. It took the life of Jesus Christ. No, God cannot let them go. But what for Naomi, are there more challenges? Yes. One more.

Lack of Future Security

Naomi lacks any future security. We see this in verse 5, “And the woman was left of *her two sons and her husband*” (1:5). A husband was important in Scripture. One commentator says, “The role of the husband is leadership. It includes provision and protection.” Thus, a husband was for three things: 1. a physical provider. 2. a spiritual leader, and 3. the head of the household. You have to know that there was not a social security system in those days as we have it today. This was one’s husband or child. But now they had all died. What future did she have? She was old. She could not marry any new husband. She could not get any more children (Ruth 1:12). It made her downcast and feel empty (Ruth 1:21). Another issue in those days was that widows were often misused. One commentator says, “Without any additional protection, a widow could be exploited or oppressed (Job 22:8–9; Isa 10:1–2).” And it is clear from Scripture that they were victims (Isa. 1:23). Their only hope could come from God. He had given laws to protect the widows (Ex. 22:22, Deut. 24:17). God had said when He would hear the cry of the widow, he would kill the oppressor (Ex. 22:23). Did Naomi cry? We do not know.

Application

Widows, are there times that you feel alone? Feeling lonely? Know yourself to be oppressed? Do you cry to God? He hears widows! He shows a special care to them, especially in the Old Testament. HE can be a husband, even more than a physical husband can be. The poet says, “The LORD preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and *widow*” (Ps. 146:9).

Are there spiritual widows here? What do we mean? Those that see the loss of a spiritual husband, God. They have no children of themselves. That means no fruits to glorify God. They lack any spiritual security. What future do they have? They do not know. They feel themselves oppressed by their sins, empty of any spiritual good. May we encourage you? If God hears the widows, will He not hear the spiritual widows too? Yes, we read in the Bible, “For he shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper” (Ps. 72:12). He promised that He will help. Not a maybe. Keep crying, friend. Keep begging, poor and needy one. He will deliver. But at His time. Look unto Him. Entrust yourself to Him. But what about Naomi? Does she truly have no future? No, she has.

What will Naomi’s future be? This will end in a future Son. For this we have to go to the New Testament. We read in Matthew 1, “And Booz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse; And Jesse begat David the king” (Matt. 1:5-6), “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David” (Matt. 1:1). Her future reality will be that a Son will be born out of Boaz and the gentile Ruth, Jesus Christ. Yes, in our passage the sons died because of judgment. But for Jesus Christ it was far worse. We read, “He was taken from prison and from *judgment*: And who shall declare his generation? For *he was cut off* out of the land of the living” (Isa. 53:8). He underwent the judgment of God! His name was cut off. Because of His sins? No! We hear Isaiah say, “For the transgression of my people was he stricken” (Isa. 53:8). That means for all the elect. For every single sin of them. How many were that? Infinite. Let us give an example. How many of you have felt fire? Imagine that you have to stand in the fire for some time. Who would be able to remain in it? No one. It is too painful We would scream and try to get out. But what about Jesus Christ? He remained. He bore the eternal punishment of all the elect in three hours! Then we read, “When Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he *gave up the ghost*.” (Luke 23:46). *The Son of God died*. Willingly. Why? To bring in gentiles, those that came out of Moab. He bore their iniquity and sins. What a wonder.

Conclusion

We have heard about a journey to a gentile country. All of us are traveling to eternity. There are only two destinations: heaven and hell. May I ask it in today’s terms, what ‘airplane’ are you on? Do you know its destination? Who is the ‘pilot’? Is it the Son of Ruth and David, Jesus Christ, or is it the father of lies? What if you knew that your plane would crash? Would you remain seated? Or would you jump out? How would you get from ‘airline “Lucifer International Airlines”’ to ‘Christ’s Heavenly Airlines’? Then you need a transfer from the one to the second. You need to have a new passport. One that has your name on it, but signed with the blood of Jesus Christ. Do you have that, friend? For that transfer you need also to have a ‘security check.’ That will scan if there is no self-righteousness or pride. The only thing that will be allowed in such planes is emptiness. Only those are allowed to go through that security gate. Congregation, may I ask you again, have you had this transfer? If not, pray God, “Please transfer my airline from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.” Amen