

“Prone to Wander . . . “
 SermonC for 19 February 2017
 Texts: Ruth 2:17-23

Genesis 18:17-19 English Standard Version (ESV)

17 The Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18 seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 For I have chosen[a] him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”

Footnotes: [a] Genesis 18:19 Hebrew **known**

Now, and this is critical, the affirmation of Abraham immediately precedes this Genesis 18:20-21 English Standard Version (ESV):

20 Then the Lord said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, 21 I will go down to see whether they have done altogether[a] according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.”

Footnotes: [a] Genesis 18:21 Or **they deserve destruction**; Hebrew **they have made a complete end** (of righteousness, justice . . . are entirely evil)

God has chosen not to hide from Abraham **what I am about to do**. (v.17). So that is why the angels of the Lord are telling Lot to get out of town. **Escape for your life. Do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley. Escape to the hills, lest you be swept away.** Lot, apparently, doesn't find that convenient! Amazing, right? *He requests permission to stop in Zoar: Behold, this city is near enough—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!*

Among the hard things God says in the book of Ruth is this: if you depart from Me and do not keep my commandments you will run into trouble—even chastisement and destitution. So, if Elimelech departed from Yahweh (the land of promise and divine covenant) and decided to go it on his own—or, perhaps, to do it his way, then the plight of Naomi, which she depicts as **chastisement**, can be viewed in light of this principle. They certainly picked a choice destination: Moab, a land of willful, self-serving convenience, depravity, idolatry and sin.

The Bible refers to both the Moabites and Ammonites as Lot's sons, born of incest with his daughters (Genesis 19:37-38).

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moab--> Wikipedia

Again, God overthrew the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot's own wife was turned into a pillar of salt for disobedience, in **looking back** (the original language suggests “with longing, or yearning for the past”). . . after being warned by the destroying angels to flee three times (vv.12-3, 15 and 17), **Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of**

the city. (Gen. 19:15) And they added lastly, **Do not look back!** (v.17) Punishment for what? For **great wickedness.** Naomi's experience pales in comparison with this!

So, and this is very wonderful, I went to Gen. 19 to check things out.

The fire falls from heaven, and destruction is rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah **and all the land of the valley.** (vv. 24-25) Then, Lot's wife made a fateful decision akin to Elimelech's decision to migrate to Moab: she **looked back and became a pillar of salt.** (v.26) She disobeyed God. Some commentators assert that she looked back as *if she yearned for the good times, the good old days of drunkenness, debauchery and promiscuity and sexual licentiousness.* Perhaps. But what the ensuing shows is that it is easier to get someone out of Sodom and Gomorrah than it is to get Sodom and Gomorrah out of that person, namely Lot's daughters. They take up residence with their father in a hillside cave.

It may be that his association with the destructions of Sodom and Gomorrah made him something of a pariah—an outcast. They, the only survivors, were all treated as social pariahs—as outcasts, persona non grata, leper, undesirable, unperson, nonperson. At least that provides a flimsy rationale for what came next: **Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come into to us after the manner of all the earth.** (Gen.19:31) Their fiances were destroyed among the wicked! So they were devastated and grieving, no doubt and feeling alone and hopeless! However, their remedy was godless, totally depraved! Besides, this is an extremely harsh thing to say about God. Not everyone takes the wrong turn, as do the daughters of Lot! In the aftermath of losing their mother, and their prospective husbands, they say, **Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him that we may preserve offspring from our father.** (v. 32) Out of a lie of convenience (“there is no man for us out there”) came an act of incest, and out that incestuous union came two firstborn sons, the father of the Moabites and the father of the Ammonites. The descendants of Lot were not godly offspring; indeed they became traditional enemies of Israel, resolute and hateful.

Their bitterness is right up there with several harsh things that Naomi says about God. Namely, **It is extremely bitter to me for your sake** (because it afflicts you two severely) **that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.** (v.13); **the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me** (Ruth 1:20) and **Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?** (v. 21) The word “testified” here carries the meaning of contending with and correcting her! These misfortunes express divine displeasure. The Cambridge Commentary notes that the Targum on this verse, “characteristically moralizes: it was on account of Naomi's sin (*in migrating to a heathen country*). Naomi, in attributing evil to God, is walking on a theological precipice; speaking as one thoroughly shaken in her trust in the wonderful ways and gracious guidance of the faithful God she claimed to follow! It is clear that Naomi may have strayed into the worldly and casual ways, with regard to worshipping the one true God, where many believers are prone to wander! However, the miracle is that Ruth knows there is more to Naomi, and more to this God of her mother-in-law, so her journey to faith continues undeterred! A testimony to trust and to spiritual resilience.

So as there began with Lot's progeny, a great deviation from the ways of God, His purposes and His commandments! What a sordidly, sinful origin. Elimelech's choice to relocate represents a poor choice. *These were the people Elimelech's sons married into and these were the people out of whom Ruth chose to come.* We are, at most eight, or nine generations down from Lot! Yes, she left that people, that land and their strange gods (strange from Yahweh's point of view!)—a far better choice!

Naomi was returning to God, but Ruth was coming to God—as a convert, a proselyte. And this movement, unlike its contrary, brought with it blessing, honor, hope and prosperity. Obey and prosper, disobey and perish. This principle runs throughout the Old Testament, and is particularly germane to the time of the Judges, Ruth's time. So the story line of Ruth is consistent with that theme. That is why, when Ruth goes into the field to glean and to find favor, she is successful. God blesses those who take refuge in Him, who own Him as their God and who determine to walk in His ways. And, yes, His blessing is tied to not looking back! It offended God when His people, whom He rescued at great cost from bondage in Egypt, complained against Him: **Have you brought us out in the wilderness to die?** Over 80 times the people of God brought this up! Sometimes out of fear, and sometimes out of hunger but always out of unbelief.

Well, actually, Elimelech left Israel and died in the “wilderness” of Moab. He and both of his sons perished outside the promised land. ***That's what happened.*** That is what Naomi's destitution “consisted of” . . . that was her **emptiness!** When Naomi returned to God, she returned from the land of the dead to the land of the living! She says, **May he be blessed by the Lord God, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!** (v.20)

I suppose that Ruth 1-2 could be taken as a cautionary tale offered to a church filled with believers some of whom are sadly prone to wander. I am afraid that is hardly worth the price of an entry ticket. Here's something better. Naomi makes a choice to bring someone to the Lord, out of her honest brokenness for having forsaken the people of God as well as the God of Israel. Still bruised, she stretches out her hand to bring someone else safely through the rubble and ruin of personal rebellion, willful independence and spiritual poverty. The wreckage of wandering still clinging to her. Battered and bandaged, she cries out, “Come home with me if you will. Let us go to the only One Who can fill us up . . . the One and Only God who heals, delivers and saves entirely. Yes, come let us worship and adore Him!”

God knows, the world is full of refugees—some from wars and some from worldliness. Either will do. Do you not have room in your heart to take another in? If the walking wounded knock at your door, would you set a place for them at the table? **And at mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.” So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed her roasted grain.** If the church were to hear that, she would have gleaned a lot!

Amen