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THE GRASS MAY BE GREENER BACK HOME!

Today's Text: Ruth, Chaps. 1-4

Extract:

“Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that *there was famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem-judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 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. And Elimelech, Naomi’s husband died; and she was left, and her two sons. And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth; and they dwelled there about ten years. And Mahlon and Chilion died also and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband. Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab; for she had heard ... how that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread.”*

[Ruth 1: 1-5]

The United States operates a “diversity” lottery scheme by which it admits 50,000 immigrants each year from other countries. For the October 2001 lottery, for example, there were 8 million applicants for just 50,000 places, that is 160 applicants for each place! [Www.csmonitor.com/2002/1125/p02s02-usgn.html]. There are also over 5 million illegal aliens in that country, that is, foreigners who may have come in legally as visitors but have overstayed or those who stole in by beating the border watches. The southern border states of California, Texas and Florida account for over 60% of such illegal aliens [http://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/archive_rmn/apr_1997-14rmn.html].

According to an African proverb, when you see a village elder running [a very rare event!], he is either pursuing something or something is pursuing him! When floods of immigrants are taking extreme risks to leave home and to stay abroad, there must be a driving force. Some do succeed and achieve their goals. However, many of them soon discover that they have not come to an El Dorado, a heaven on earth, but to sweat and tears. A few of them may have the courage to return home. However, perhaps out of pride or destitution, the majority may find it difficult to go back to the greener pasture that they have left behind at home. That green pasture may be a previous place of abode or job/profession or marriage, or interest

In today’s lesson, we shall study the story of Naomi and her family who left famine behind in Bethlehem only to find death in Moab.

1. An empty house of bread?

There was famine in Bethlehem of Judah. That is an irony because “Bethlehem” means “the house of bread!” Elimelech took his wife, Naomi, and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, and moved abroad to Moab, a country of the descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew [**Gen. 19:37**]. Elimelech came from Bethlehem of the tribe of Judah, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, Abraham’s grandson.

Soon after their arrival in the new land, Elimelech died. Perhaps to justify their determination to remain in the new land, his two sons married the daughters of the land, Orpah and Ruth [**Ruth 1: 3-4**]. We are familiar with that practice! The family’s visitors’ visas might have been issued under the “file” of the father of the house. Now that he was dead, his sons wanted to accelerate the process of becoming citizens of Moab by marrying its daughters. In the US, a legitimate marriage of a foreigner to an American citizen qualifies him/her to obtain a resident visa, popularly called the “Green Card.” With that visa, they can work and after the qualifying length of stay (currently five years), they qualify to apply for citizenship. Naomi and her family enjoyed their new country for ten years. Then, her two sons also died [**v. 5**].

Stuck with two daughters-in-law that she could hardly cater for, Naomi now faced a dilemma: to remain in Moab or to return home? It was then that she received a report that the famine in Bethlehem was over because “the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread” [**v. 6**]. In other words, her green pasture turned out to be the country that she had escaped from ten years earlier!

How many of us are there right now? Why did we “leave home” and where are we now? How do we feel about our current situation? Can we like Naomi take the bold decision to accept the reality and return “home” to our green pastures? These are the issues we want to examine in today’s lesson.

2. Why did you leave home?

Let us rule out those cases where you moved in obedience to the word of God. For example, Abraham left Syria to move to Canaan because God had asked him to do so:

*Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing.... So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him [**Gen. 12:1-2, 4**]*

After Joseph had become the governor of Egypt, he sent for the rest of his family, including his aged father, Jacob (Israel). Again, God confirmed to Israel “in the visions of the night,” saying, “fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there

make of thee a great nation. I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will surely bring thee up again” [Gen. 46: 2-4].

In the absence of clear direction from God, we tend to move for one reason or the other, such as the following:

a) *Economic necessity*

In the case that we are studying, Elimelech took his family out of Bethlehem-judah because “there was famine in the land” [Ruth 1: 1]. A place that was literally the house of bread no longer had enough food for the people. So, Elimelech was forced to move, hopefully, to another land where he expected to be able to feed himself and his family.

The majority of immigrants into the advanced countries of America and Europe tend to come from developing countries with high unemployment rates. There is the phenomenon, called *brain drain*, with the brightest and the best leaving the universities and laboratories of the poor developing countries into the waiting arms of the advanced world. However, there may be other immigrants that are not so welcomed abroad. These are the victims of hunger and disease due to natural causes, such as drought, or man-made, such as corruption and mismanagement. These are immigrants without the requisite skills but who are desperate to get out. American immigration authorities are in constant battles with such illegal aliens from Mexico, Cuba and Haiti trying to land on American soil. European authorities watch out for African stowaways in the bowels of ships crossing the Mediterranean Sea into the European Union.

When these immigrants land in their new world, the first shock that they discover is to know that the streets are not paved with gold, that they will not receive any red-carpet treatment.

b) *Persecution*

Some people are forced to migrate because of political or religious or racial/ethnic persecution, among others. Just before the Second World War, some Jews fled Nazi Germany to settle in North America. Most of those who did not leave were killed in Hitler’s *pogrom*. Since the introduction of *Shariah* law in the predominantly Moslem Northern part of Nigeria, some Christian families have relocated to the predominantly Christian South. We have heard of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Hindu/Moslem clashes in India and Protestant/Catholic violence in Northern Ireland. Such factors can force unwilling people to migrate to safety elsewhere. When Herod threatened the life of infant Jesus, He had to be taken to Egypt for safety [Matt. 2: 13-15].

Persecution can also take other forms. For example, some wives and children are the victims of domestic violence perpetuated by the man of the house. Some husbands may also face nagging from domineering wives. On the job, subordinates may face sexual harassment or mental torture from their bosses. Where the victims can no longer face it, they may be forced to leave and relocate to another part of town or country or even move abroad.

c) *Greed*

The only reason that some people want to migrate is simply greed. They just look around and their age or schoolmates have all gone abroad. Therefore, if that is the “in-thing,” they do not want to be left out. Whether they qualify to move or not, they must go. They will forge travel documents to obtain visas and steal funds to buy air tickets and travellers’ cheques. When they get to their new world, they cannot report the reality to other aspirants back home. Instead they send pictures of themselves driving big cars and living big. In reality, the pictures were shot with them standing by other people’s cars in a public parking lot!

Look at the Prodigal Son. He used false pretences to get travel funds from his father because “not many days after, the younger son gathered all together and *took his journey into a far country*, and there wasted his substance with riotous living” [Lk 15: 13].

Many happy marriages have broken up because the parties listened to their friends or family who painted to them a false picture of a greener pasture elsewhere. By the time they discover the error, it is too late. Some people have been lured out of a developing rewarding career job to jump at an offer of a dead-end and temporary but high-paying contract job elsewhere simply out of greed. When it is all over, the green pasture is way behind!

3. If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging!

According to the “law of holes,” if you find yourself in a hole, stop digging. Unfortunately, for most of us, the hole is already bottomless and yet, we have not stopped digging! Happily, with God nothing is impossible [Lk 1: 37]. So, if we find that we have left our green pasture behind, here are some steps that we can take to get back there:

a) *Summon enough courage to return home*

With the death of the breadwinners (husband and sons), Naomi knew that there was no more future for her in Moab. So, she decided to return to her home in Bethlehem-judah [Ruth 1: 6-15]. For most of us, this is a tough decision to take. We have fed our ego with so much falsehood that we

cannot now find enough humility and courage to reduce its weight. “Wouldn’t I look foolish to return to the marriage that I gave up so many years ago?” “How can I face the jeers of my family and friends if I should return home with nothing to show for my long years abroad?” Of course, those are realistic questions that we cannot answer, using our logical minds!

b) *Let God take over from there!*

Since the decision to go home is in God’s will, in the sense that your greener pasture is in the new direction to which you have turned, then, let God direct your steps from now on. Your decision to go back is a form of repentance. After all, if God had sent you, as we saw in the cases of Abraham and Jacob, your greener pasture would have been abroad. Now that you have decided to return home, you have told God that you are ready to go His way. Therefore, let Him take over from there. As soon as the Prodigal Son realized his mistake to go abroad, he said, “I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee. And I am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.” Having made that great confession, God took over his situation and “*when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him*” [Lk 15: 17-20]. Is that not amazing? His father forgave him even before he could open his mouth because God had softened his heart.

When Naomi decided to return home, she anticipated shame and loneliness. She saw herself as one who “went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty” [Ruth 1: 21]. However, God had other plans for her, as follows:

- First, one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, accepted to go with her “for whither thou goest, I will go; ...thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” [v. 16].
- Second, at the time of their return to Bethlehem, it was “the beginning of barley harvest” [v. 22] and “all the city was moved about them” [v. 19].
- Third, love grew between Ruth and Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi’s husband who had the right to redeem Ruth and make her his wife [Ruth, Chaps. 2, 3 & 4].
- Fourth, by Ruth and Boaz, a son was born named Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David [Ruth 4: 13-17]. Jesus Christ came “forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse” [Is. 11:1] to sit on “the throne of His father David” [Lk 1:32].

From the above, we see that Naomi's greener pasture was behind in Bethlehem and it was never abroad in Moab.

4. Conclusion: the need for patience

One of my favourite songs was taught me in a mission primary school and it goes like this:

*I come to Thee once more my God
No longer will I roam
For I have sought the wide world through
I never found a home.*

Home is where God wants us to be, where He can contact us whenever He wants us. For example, each time God wanted to speak with Adam, He came to the Garden of Eden, the greenest pasture that ever existed on earth [**Gen. 3: 8**]. However, out of greed for knowledge, Adam and Eve fell from that grace and were expelled into a hard world where "in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" [**Gen. 3:19**]. In His infinite mercy, God has sent a second Adam in the person of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, the Shepherd who has now made us "to lie down in green pastures" [**Ps. 23: 2**]. By faith in Him, God has accepted us as His sons and daughters [**Jn 1: 12**]. This same Jesus has gone to His Father's house to prepare a place for us so that we may be where He is [**Jn 14: 2-3**]. Can we again afford to forsake such comprehensive grace in search of a greener pasture, which does not exist? God forbid!

Abroad is where God does not want us to be. It may be a wrong location or ministry, an immoral job or relationship or any state of disobedience. If we persist there, we might be struggling in vain because "the way of transgressors is hard" [**Prov. 13:15**]. Therefore, learn to return home "for thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, in returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" [**Is. 30:15**].

There is no place like home!