

Ruth part 1

INTRODUCTION

During the course of this week we are going to be reading the story of Ruth together. My guess is that most of you are familiar with the story or at least parts of it, but if you're not, you will be by the end of the week.

The very first verse of the book of Ruth sets the story in a particular time in the history of Israel, *'In the days when judges ruled'*.

1200-1020BC is known as the period of Judges, and that's essentially the time between the death of Joshua (Josh 1:1) and the coronation of Saul (1 Samuel 10).

It was a time of social and religious chaos.

The last verse of the Book of Judges explains why...

'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.'

LET'S READ FROM RUTH CH 1

Ruth 1:1-5 NIV

[1] In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a

while in the country of Moab. [2] The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. [3] Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. [4] They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, [5] both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

PRAY

MAIN SECTION

In the days when judges ruled, there was famine in the land...

...the land is not identified in the text but for a Hebrew only one country was 'the land' and that was of course Israel, the promised land.

And we're told that a man from Israel, more specifically Bethlehem in Judah (the birth place of Jesus), makes a decision, due the famine, to leave with his family and go to live in Moab.

It's really quite an astonishing decision...and there are two key reasons for this:

1. God's presence was distinctly in the land, in Israel. If ever there was a place where God would

provide for His people, it was in Israel, in the land he had given to them, not in Moab.

2. God, had told his people explicitly, to avoid the Moabites. Don't spend time with the people of Moab, don't get involved with the people of Moab. (Deut. 23, 2 Kings 3, Numbers 21).

- The Moabites had originated out of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter (Gen. 19:30-38);

(PAUSE)

But Moab was a mountainous region with a fertile plateau that ran for about 25 miles a few thousand feet up above the dead seas eastern shore...Moab had food...

(PAUSE)

The ultimate irony had occurred in Bethlehem whose name means "house of bread". God had sent famine through because of the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel.

The house of bread had become a place of no food...and so this man decides to take himself and his family to Moab.

(PAUSE)

He could have stayed in Bethlehem, the empty bread basket of Judah, mourning the sin that surrounded

him, encouraging his people to repent, trusting God to provide for him and his family...but instead he chose to leave the promised land in search of greener fields.

... this husband and Father had a duty to look after his wife and his children...(PAUSE)

...but had he forgotten that God had delivered his people from Egypt and brought them to Israel as a special place for them to live, a place where they could enjoy the presence and provision of God (if only they would remain faithful) and this man had no business leaving Bethlehem to go anywhere, least of all Moab!!

(PAUSE)

Who was this man?

His name was Elimelek (v2) which means “*My God is King*”...It appears however, that there was no king in Elimelek’s life, and instead of choosing to trust the Lord to provide for his needs, like the others in his day (and like most people today), *he chose to do what was right in his own eyes.*

APP

Every decision you make however seemingly large or small, contributes in some way to the direction your life takes.

It’s been said that “*choices are the hinges of destiny*”.

Sometimes in the defining moments of your life, the factors that weigh most heavily in the decisions you make are those that seem most likely to provide you with comfort and security.

One commentator says:

We rarely think seriously about the impact our choices will have on our ability to live closely to God, to grow in our relationship with him, to raise a Christian family in a world that is often less than ideal, to fulfill the great commission in our lives. All too often, like Elimelek, we act as the sovereign of our own lives, making choices that seem best in our eyes, without reference to God and without serious thought of the long term implications.

Many bear the label 'Christian' yet their Christianity has no real impact on decisions, small decisions and life-defining decisions...The roads we choose for ourselves often make our deepest commitments plain for all to see.

What do your decisions and choices say about the position you give God in your life? Is it comfort and security first or is the will of God paramount in your life? Is God even part of your life at all?

(PAUSE)

Elimelek chose comfort and security in the form of the road to Moab...and it turned out to be a road to nowhere.

He went to Moab with and his family who we are also introduced to in verse 2

...his wife's name was Naomi (meaning pleasantness), and the names of his two sons were Mahlon (a name derived from a noun which means sickness or illness) and Kilion (from a word that means extermination or failing).

While Elimelek's relatives back home in Bethlehem were starving, Elimelek and his family settled in Moab where food was plentiful, and after a while Moab became their home.

It seems initially Elimelek only intended to live there temporarily but as it turned out he lived there for the rest of his life.

Suddenly in V3 we are told that Elimelek died, and Naomi was left with her two sons.

(PAUSE)

We don't know how he died, what age he was when he died, or where he was buried—we're often told those things when someone dies in the Bible...no so Elimelek...he simply died.

(PAUSE)

And after Elimelek died, the rest of the family had a decision to make – they could repent and go back home to their own land and their own God, or they

could stay where they were in the land God had commanded them not to go to.

Tellingly, their choice was to stay.

They still rated their prospects more highly in Moab than in Judah...

...one commentator says:

They felt more at home in the land of compromise than in the land of promise.

And as a result of that road not taken, they fall further away from the Lord V4 Naomi's sons ... *married Moabite women...one named Orpah and the other Ruth...*

APP

It began with a move to Moab, now it's intermarrying...the road to continued and deepened disobedience is often smoothly paved, and provides little resistance.

A small step in the wrong direction paves the way for another which makes way for another and before you know it you've sold yourself out, God no longer has his place as King of your life.

Making the right decision early on is hugely important.

If we seek to ensure that God is the reason for every decision we make, no matter how big or small, we

won't go wrong, and the very best decision you can ever make is to put your trust in him and allow him to be Lord of your life.

(PAUSE)

Even after Elimelek had died, Naomi was still reasonably placed in her life.

She had her sons, after all.

They were young and married and had every prospect of providing future descendants to take care of her in her old age.

But there's no mention of children or childlessness. It's strange.

As a family they had lived in Moab for a total of ten years... they had faced a lot, but Naomi could not imagine the tragedy that was about to unfold.

Both of her sons died.

No cause of death is given, no record of their age and no place of burial, they just died.

(PAUSE)

Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband...and she had no grandchildren.

In the space of half a verse Naomi's whole world comes crashing down around her.

Who would support a foreign widow in her old age?
She was an aging single woman of no significance in a family-oriented culture.

What a sorry scene it is!

A lonely widow, living in a foreign land without either the protection or provision of a husband or sons in a male dominated society - no one to care for her and no grandchildren to cheer her up. It's hopeless!

(PAUSE)

Naomi now sits alone...an alien in a strange land, driven from her home by famine, robbed of her loved ones by death.

APP (CONCLUSION)

Naomi finds herself in this position as a result of the rejection of God in her life and the lives of the members of her family.

Now, let me say this - our disobedience isn't always the cause of trial and suffering in our lives – the story of Job is included in Bible to help us see that that is not always the case...but sometimes it is...and when the time of trial comes our direction we should examine our lives, and trace our paths to see if somehow, even perhaps unbeknown to us we are living in Moab when we ought to be in Israel.

(PAUSE)

Should we conclude that our current trials are as a result of walking in the wrong direction...there's good news...we can be absolutely certain that the pain of God's chastening work in our lives is never too harsh; and is never more than is absolutely necessary to turn us to himself...there's always a way back to God. He's waiting for you to run back to him with his arms wide open just like the father was in the parable of the lost son.

Every trial that we face is permitted and measured, not to push us over the edge, but just far enough to cause us to return to him and to his ways.

(PAUSE)

A senior citizen was driving down the motorway, his phone rang. Answering, he heard his wife's voice urgently warning him, "Darling, I just heard on the news that there's a car going the wrong way on the M1. Please be careful!"

"Honey" said Herman, "It's not just one car, there are hundreds of them!"

Which direction is your life taking right now? Be sure to make decisions and choices that lead you in the right direction, decisions that are in line with the will of God for your life, decisions that are in line with what the Bible has to teach us. If you haven't made

the decision to trust Christ as yet, that's the first decision you need to make.

(PAUSE)

Surely now Naomi will have to return to Bethlehem where she had heard there was food again.

It was time for the prodigal daughter to go home.

We'll pick up the story from there next time.

For now. Let's pray.