

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Speaker: Mr. George Stevens

Bible Families: Elimelech and Naomi

Suffering families! I'm sure you've noticed that there are some families who always seem to be going through the mill. One tragedy builds on another. It gets so that the members of these families are wondering what disaster will strike next. Onlookers are saddened too, as they see the enduring sorrows which accompany the pain. An example of a suffering family is found in the Book of Ruth. There we find the Biblical record of Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons.

It is significant that this family was linked with Bethlehem-Judah. The name "Bethlehem" means "house of bread", and the name "Judah" means "praise". The town itself would have particular interest later on as the town of David. It was also known as Bethlehem-Ephrath to distinguish it from another Bethlehem situated about 11 km NW of Nazareth. It was from Bethlehem-Ephrath that Messiah was to come (see Micah 5:2). The word "Ephrath" means "fruitfulness". Putting the meanings of these words together, we have a place which should have been marked by God's provision, God's praise and God's promise.

On the other hand, the land Moab is marked out for God's judgement which will be executed by Israel in a coming day (compare Daniel 11:40-41 with Isaiah 11:14). The source of the Moabites was Moab himself. He was originally a son of Lot by a conspired but, nevertheless, incestuous union with his eldest daughter (Genesis 19:31-37). The name Moab means "entering of the father". The descendants of this man were called Moabites. They lived mainly on the plateau east of the Dead Sea between the rivers Arnon and Zered. Deuteronomy 23:3-5 show us that those of Moab could not enter the congregation of Israel because they had hindered the Israelites as they journeyed from Egypt's bondage and later attempted to have Israel cursed. Furthermore, Israel was once seduced to participate in idolatrous practices by the Moabite women while they encamped in the Plains of Moab (Numbers 22 and 25).

Knowing these things makes it difficult to understand why Elimelech would want to move from Bethlehem to Moab in particular. You may say that he left because he was a landowner who saw his livelihood slipping away as a result of a famine in the land. Yes, the land of Canaan which was previously described as a land flowing with milk and honey was now barren. Why? Leviticus 26:14-20 holds the key. The Lord had warned them that if they disobeyed His commandments and despised His statutes then various judgements would come upon them. One of these was that they would sow their seed in vain because their enemies would eat it. Coupling this thought with the days when the judges ruled, we are reminded of Gideon threshing wheat in the winepress in order to hide it from Israel's enemies - the Midianites (Judges 6:11). This was the character of those days.

"Elimelech", however, means "God is King". It is a name which emphasises that God is Sovereign. This was certainly shown to be the case by the way in which the Lord turned the apparent unbelief of Elimelech into great blessing for Israel. The records prove that God's ways are indeed higher than our ways, and His thoughts above our thoughts.

When we study the family tree of Elimelech, we can trace a line of faith back through Hezron, Pharez, Judah, Jacob and Isaac to Abraham. Yet, it would seem that Elimelech's action in moving to Moab was indeed an unfaithful action. It may have been generated by several things:

1. There was a famine which resulted in major difficulties;
2. There was the fact that he was married and had a wife to consider; and, finally,
3. He had two sons who might well have been quite weak children. I only say this because of the meanings of their names. Mahlon means "a heavy disease" and Chilion means "wasting away" or "pining". Being inspired by God, the very words of Scripture, even in our translations today, are precise. None are used without significance. This applies to names also.

However, some may say we must be careful in interpretation because Elimelech may have been faithful to his God; recognised the corrupt and ungodly state of his nation; and called his sons these names to give expression to what he thought about it. The meanings would certainly describe the nation during the days of the judges. Nonetheless, I prefer the first to be the best interpretation because the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ does not pass directly through Elimelech in Matthew 1 or Luke 3. The royal and the legal lines of the Messiah pass through Boaz who comes in to the life of Naomi later on.

There is little doubt that Elimelech would have discussed these affairs with his wife before making the move to Moab. By all accounts, Naomi assented to go and accompanied her husband on this path away from the people of God. Furthermore, he led his children away from the people whom God had chosen. All the excuses were legitimate for the move except for one, namely, that Israel were the apple of God's eye; loved by Him; and blessed by Him. He would deliver His people once they repented. Elimelech should have known this and should have been on his face before the Lord concerning the condition of the people. But he chose to rebel and move away instead. In this he failed as an Israeli, as a husband and as a father.

Today, Christian men are found in different churches with varying responsibilities. How often troubles crop up in the local churches. Unfortunately, like Elimelech, the problems become an excuse for us to move away instead of falling upon our faces in prayer as did Ezra and Daniel. These men confessed the nation's sins identifying themselves as part of them. Oh, that we may do the same for our churches or assemblies. If you wish to be "a repairer of breaches" or "a restorer of paths to dwell in" then keep the fast that the Lord prefers. The character of that fast is revealed in Isaiah 58. Also, pray both effectually and fervently as commanded in James 5. Prayer and fasting are commanded in 1 Corinthians 7:5.

Christian husbands are encouraged to love their wives even as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it. Christian fathers are to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. They are to love their children enough to discipline them as God the Father disciplines His own children (Hebrews 12). And, please, remember that love is that nature which seeks the best for the good of its object. Love for God and our Lord Jesus Christ should be our chief love. It is from such hearts that this genuine love will be shown to our families, our fellow Christians and all men everywhere (including our enemies).

Elimelech forgot the "G" factor - he left God out of his reckoning. Sadly, the chastening hand of God is seen in Ruth 1:3: "Elimelech Naomi's husband died". Hence, we now have a widow and two fatherless young men. Let's take a look at the latter.

Mahlon and Chilion had been brought to Moab in order that they could be well fed and grow physically stronger. They are now left without a father and need to support their mother. This is sometimes the case in families today. Unfortunately, some grown-up children do not want such a responsibility. But God would have us to honour our parents. In particular, the members of a Christian family should maintain their links with, and support, every other member - old or young, poor or rich, respected or shamed.

We may also be assured that, generally, the eyes of the Lord are turned to the fatherless and the widow. In Exodus 22:22, we find God instructing His people that they should not afflict the widow or the fatherless. In fact, God included in His laws to the people of Israel that provision should be made available to these needy people (Deuteronomy 14:29); their cause was to be maintained (Isaiah 1:17); and, He, Himself, would ensure their preservation (Psalm 146:9).

There are many people who claim to be religious, but have no idea of what pure religion requires. In James 1:27, we actually find the requirements which mark out a man as religious. He is a person who visits the fatherless and the widows in their affliction, and keeps himself unspotted from the world. That is, he remains faithful to God's revelation instead of being influenced by the tolerances, fads and fashions of this world which are in opposition to God.

Unfortunately, these two sons may have grown stronger physically, but they had not grown spiritually. As a consequence, they felt free to marry unbelieving Moabitish women. The God-given Law of Moses barred such marriages because Israel was God's chosen people. He loved them and was determined to keep His promise to their fathers (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). This meant that they had to be a separate people, namely, a people set apart for the purposes, pleasure and possession of God. Mahlon and Chilion would have known this. Unfortunately, they were rebellious.

Often Christian teenagers disobey both the Lord and their own godly parents when it comes to choosing a partner. They say that they simply want to marry the person they love. However, the fact that marriage is for life - yes, for life - should mean that they take careful account of every aspect of their future partner.

Today, we see marriage being attacked from many sides. Why? Simply because it was instituted by God. Satan delights to see marriage being despised because it is an institution which reminds God of the permanent bond of love between Christ and His Church - the heavenly Bridegroom and bride. Furthermore, it is also the main building block of a stable society, and the devil would rather have as much chaos as possible. Governments which do not fully support marriage in its primary sense, that is between a man and a woman, do so at their peril.

Yet Christians are commanded in Scripture: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14). The faithful Christian knows that to be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever (even the most loving,

caring and honest of unbelievers) is not the will of God. This not only applies to marriage, but to any binding or contractual situation. Why? Because light cannot have fellowship with darkness. A child of God cannot have fellowship with a child of the devil and be a shining witness for God in a world that rejected His Son. Those who became Christians after marriage are encouraged, nonetheless, to remain faithful to their partners.

So, returning to Mahlon and Chilion, we see the consequences of their actions in the written record: "And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them..." The chastening hand of God had now fallen upon both father and sons. Let's make no mistake; God will not tolerate the wilful sin of true believers. If they are bringing shame to the name of Christ, and there is no sign of repentance, then God Himself will deal with them as would a father deal with his son. In the case of some believers in the past, this meant that they also fell asleep - their lives on earth were taken from them (1 Corinthians 11:30).

At this point, it is worth emphasising that not all suffering is a result of a believer's sins. Suffering is one of the tools which God uses to sculpt us to be more like Christ. Tribulations or afflictions teach us endurance; endurance gives us experience; and, experience leads to hope. There was no sorrow or suffering to be compared to that of Christ; but He was absolutely sinless. His responses to mockery, pain and anguish set a perfect example of behaviour for us when we encounter similar problems.

Let us move on to consider Naomi. Her name means "pleasantness". Her history reveals her as a wife, a mother, a widow, a mother-in-law, a teacher and, finally, a grandmother. As a wife, she went with her husband to Moab. Today, a Christian wife is to obey her husband in the Lord. That is to say, she is to obey her husband provided that his will is not in conflict with the revealed will of the Lord. In the case of Naomi, she failed in faithfulness to the Lord. Love for her husband came before her love for God. May Christian wives be preserved from situations like this.

As a mother, Naomi finds herself with sons who want to marry outside the bounds of her own faith. What was she to do? Well, if you have ever been in the situation where one of your Christian youngsters is courting an unbeliever, then you will know the heartache it causes. The parent can only pray two things: either that the Christian will do God's will and break off the relationship, or that the unbeliever would be saved. Parents in such a situation should be assured that if you want the restoration of your Christian child, then God wants it even more than you do!

Naomi had left Bethlehem-Judah "full". She had been blessed with a husband and two sons. She was now a widow. Let's consider this for a moment. Bereavement is often quite soul-destroying. To find that someone who had always been there is suddenly gone is a numbing shock from which the bereaved may never fully recover. It is something with which we have to learn to live. In the book of Job, we can trace how Satan delights to turn people from God through loss and personal suffering. Yet, Satan can only try us if God permits it and has something for us to learn, particularly about Himself. Job could say that the Lord had given, and the Lord had taken away - blessed be the name of the Lord. Here was faith. But Job had to go on to learn that he was full of self-righteousness and was vile in comparison to God. Furthermore, he had to learn to forgive his would-be comforters and even pray for them. It was then that he was blessed with twice as much as he had lost.

Comforting someone who has been bereaved is extremely difficult. It is often better not to say anything, but simply to be there as a listener. The squeeze of a hand or a timely hug are often better than the best of scripture texts. The God who allows these things to happen in our lives yearns to be allowed to pick us up in His arms and comfort us. He wants us to depend upon Him because He is able to provide all that we need. David knew this presence of God in the darkest of circumstances. He wrote: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me" (Psalm 23). The Lord has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5).

Someone has written: "There is no getting over sorrow, but there is getting into it, and finding right in the heart of it the dearest Human Being - the Man of Sorrows Himself. I pray that you will never get over it, but through it, right into the heart of God."

Do you remember the Lord Jesus Christ at the tomb of Lazarus? Ah, the Man of Sorrows shed tears. Do you remember His words to Saul on the Damascus road? "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" He is careful to identify Himself with those He loves. He feels their sorrow and suffering as His own. In like manner, Christians are to weep with those who weep. That is, to put themselves into the other person's circumstances in order to apprehend the loss and the need felt. It is then that actions speak louder than words.

Naomi also had to bear with the loss of her two sons. Usually, the mother has a unique bond with her children showing great care and concern for them even when they are grown up. Naomi would have been no different. Death came along and broke that bond. Like many, she would try to put on a brave face in company even though she was screaming inside. The question "Why?" must have plagued her mind. Anger and resentment against God may well have developed as a result. She, herself, may even have felt, as do many in similar circumstances, guilt and remorse. So what is the answer to these things? Trite answers can only add to the suffering. But I remember reading a little

tract of comfort written by John Nelson Darby which was entitled: "This Thing is from Me." The pith of his teaching was that God had allowed these painful things to come into our lives in order to draw us closer to Himself. This shows us that we have to acknowledge that this has been allowed by the God of all comfort according to His timetable and for His purposes. The Christian is not only expected to give God thanks in all things, but also for all things. Once we realise that our times are in His hands, then we may gain some refuge in the storms of life.

Today, local Christian churches have a responsibility towards widows who are classed as "widows indeed". A description of such widows is given in 1 Timothy 5:5, 9 and 10. They are to be over sixty and without support of any kind. They have been the wife of one man and brought up children. They were to have been noted for their hospitality, especially to Christians and also to have relieved the afflicted. Younger widows, however, are advised to marry, bear children and guide the house. Many would class the latter as old fashioned ideas in our modern world; but they remain the commandments of the Lord.

Naomi was also a mother-in-law. Even though her lads had acted wrongly in taking Moabitish women for wives, it, nevertheless, must have given her some hope because the family line would be continued through any children born to them. But here was another disappointment, her sons died before any children were conceived.

It is, however, clear from the witness of Ruth in Ruth 1:16-18 that Naomi was well loved as a mother-in-law and had taught her daughters-in-law about the God of Israel. Hearing of God's blessing upon Israel, she decides to return. She advises the young women to remain in Moab. Again, poor advice, even though the reasons seemed to be genuine. It was advice that again left God out of the reckoning. Orpah, one of these daughters remained in Moab; but Ruth went with Naomi having, it would seem, trusted in the God of Israel.

During her ten years away from Bethlehem-Judah, Naomi had lost her husband and her sons without having any gains except for two daughters-in-law who would not be accepted in Israel. It is small wonder that she said upon returning to her homeland, "Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?"

Yet, in Israel, the grace of God was to meet her every need. Following her confession and restoration to the place where God would have her to be, we find blessing. There was a near-kinsman of Naomi who was of the same family as Elimelech. His name was Boaz. To cut a long story short, Boaz purchases the land of Elimelech and Ruth along with it. The couple produce a son called Obed. Naomi became a grandma. Curiously, her neighbours gave the boy a name saying, "There is a son born to Naomi." And they called his name Obed. Ruth's son was seen to be the son of Naomi. And, of course, we know that Obed was the father of Jesse; and Jesse the father of David, king of Israel. Then through the line of David, we finally come down to the birth of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Out of great sorrow and affliction, God brought joy and salvation. Blessed be our God who mysteriously works out His purposes through His people in every generation. We close with the challenge found in Romans 12:2: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

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