

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Choices: Choosing to Follow God - Ruth 1

There are only two books in the Bible which carry the names of women. Both are in the Old Testament. Both paint pictures of women who have attractive, loyal and determined characters. The first of these women is Ruth and the second, Esther.

Today, we begin to consider the book of Ruth. It is a short book with only four chapters and we shall look at a chapter each week.

As the first verse of the book tells us, the events of Ruth are set in the times when the judges ruled Israel, that is the times described in the Bible book prior to Ruth, the book of Judges. Exactly when in the times of the judges Ruth lived we are not told. However, most of those times were bleak. God's people, Israel, kept forsaking Him and God brought punishments on them via the surrounding tribes. When Israel could not bear the punishment, they prayed to God for help. God then provided a judge who delivered them. For a while, Israel would then be faithful to God but soon would return to their old ways. The whole pattern was then repeated. The last verse of Judges reads: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes". Immediately after that verse appears the delightful little book of Ruth which, although beginning with failure, ends with the mention of David, the king through whose line Christ would appear. In the Bible, eight often speaks of a new beginning. Ruth is the eighth book in the Bible, introducing hints of a new beginning through Christ, after the failure of what occurred before He came into the world.

I thank God for those dear Christians who in my younger days built up my appreciation of the Old Testament and showed me some of the types, or pictures, of future events which can be drawn from these early Bible books. In looking at Ruth today, I want to suggest just some of those pictures.

So, we turn to Ruth 1 with the title for today being: "Choosing to follow God". The titles for the other three chapters will also begin with the word "choosing". I would like to divide today's chapter into four sections,

1. verses 1-5 - Going to Moab;
2. verses 6 and 7 - Leaving Moab;
3. verses 8-18 - Decision time; and
4. verses 19-22 - Back in Bethlehem.

Verses 1-5 - Going to Moab

Let me read verses 1-5, using the Authorised Version of the Bible and remembering that going to Moab is our heading for this first section. "Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a 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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem-judah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there. 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 dwelt there about ten years. And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband".

In these verses we are introduced to six of the seven named characters in the actions in the book of Ruth; the seventh is Boaz who is brought in at the very first verse in chapter 2. The first four characters are Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Elimelech, as head of his family, was faced with a difficult situation. His home town, Bethlehem, was suffering from a severe famine. Should he move from his home in the land of promise given to Elimelech's people by God? Elimelech decides to move his family to Moab where there is food. In Moab, Elimelech dies. His two sons marry girls from Moab, Mahlon marrying Ruth and Chilion marrying Orpah. Then Mahlon and Chilion die. Naomi had lost the three men in her life. She, Ruth and Orpah were all widows.

In Bible times, the meaning of names is important. Parents named their children bearing in mind the meaning of the name given. Look at the instances when God changed someone's name; there was always a reason for the change

as God wanted to convey something by the meaning of the new name. Place names also had important meanings. Bethlehem means house of bread, yet here was a situation where there was no food in the house of bread! Was God trying to tell Elimelech something? We don't read of Elimelech praying about this matter, seeking God's mind. On the face of it, the decision he took to move his family seems perfectly reasonable; his main concern surely was to ensure the physical wellbeing of his sons and wife. But for a follower of God is that really the matter of over-riding importance? The Bible teaches us that our spiritual needs come first; in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 the divine order is spirit, soul and body and not, as often misquoted, body, soul and spirit. Where did God's things fit into Elimelech's reckoning? The people of Moab had regularly been Israel's enemies and they worshipped false gods. Living amongst them might get food in the short term but at what cost to the spiritual wellbeing of his wife and sons?

Elimelech's name means to whom God is king. Elimelech is one of those people whose actions did not live up to his name. He didn't make God king of his life. The consequences of his decision to move to Moab were disastrous for his family. He died leaving them in a strange land with no head of the family, his sons married girls who were not followers of the true God and then his sons both died.

Here are lessons for Christians today. How important it is always to put God's things first, to pray long and hard about matters until God makes His mind clear to us. Dear listener, I'm not suggesting it was easy for Elimelech; it was a hugely difficult decision for him and ensuring that the spiritual welfare of our families comes before everything else is no easy thing for us. Elimelech shouldn't have left God's house of bread whatever the short term difficulties might have seemed and whatever the superficial attractions of Moab appeared to be. Moab was a spiritually dangerous place.

Verses 6 and 7 - Leaving Moab

In verses 6 and 7, the second section of our chapter, which I am calling leaving Moab, Naomi, Elimelech's widow, hears that there is food again back in Bethlehem. Presumably there continued to be food available in Moab. But after more than ten years in Moab Naomi is faced with a decision: will she choose the bread of Bethlehem, God's place, or the bread of Moab, the world?

Let us take the chance to think a little more about Naomi. Her name means pleasant and, despite all her problems, she comes across as an impressive woman, devoted to her family. Whatever she thought of her husband's decision to move from Bethlehem to Moab, she remained loyal to him. We will see shortly that, in Moab, she must have shown a testimony to God sufficient to introduce God to her daughter in law, Ruth. Through chapters 2, 3, and 4 Naomi provides sound advice to Ruth and is always there to give support. What an invaluable role a godly woman can have! She lives up to her name by having a pleasant and wholesome effect on others.

In verses 6 and 7, Naomi makes the right decision. She puts aside the bread of Moab and sets out to return to the bread in the place provided by God. Today, Christians can't be sustained and built up other than by feeding on Jesus who said, "I am the bread of life" and on the Word of God, the Bible. Naomi would have got nowhere spiritually if she had remained in Moab. She set out to return, taking her daughters in law with her. If any Christian has strayed from God's things, a return in repentance is always possible, but that initial decision to return and then real action to return must come from the individual.

Verses 8-18 - Decision time

We come now to the third section of our chapter covering verses 8 to 18 and which I am calling decision time. Let me start by reading from verse 8 to the beginning of verse 11. "And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me. The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept. And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people. And Naomi said, Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go with me?"

Naomi then goes on to tell her daughters in law that there are no natural reasons why they should go with her. Naomi says that she is too old to have another husband and to bear sons. Even if she did, her daughters in law would not wait until those sons became old enough to marry. She urged them to go back to their people.

Why did Naomi go out of her way to emphasise to her daughters in law all the downsides if they were to go with her to Bethlehem? Surely it could only be a good thing for these two young ladies to move from Moab, a land of idol worship, to Israel where the true God was known. And yet Naomi seems almost to discourage them from going with her.

Could the Bible here be presenting an important principle? Clearly, Naomi had maintained a testimony to God in her home; the evidence for that is in verses 16 and 17 of our chapter, which we will come to shortly when we consider Ruth's response to Naomi. But these young ladies each had to make up their own minds, not to be committed to

Naomi, but to be committed to Naomi's God. They would be stepping out into an uncertain future with no possessions in a country strange to them. Things would be much easier with support back home from their families. Naomi could help and guide but unless Ruth and Orpah each had a personal commitment to God, the way ahead might prove difficult. It is no different today. The Christian life is tremendous and has a promised goal of being in heaven with Jesus for eternity. But that life is not easy and unless it is underpinned by a firm personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, problems will arise.

We now pick up the Bible narrative for this third section, from verse 14. "And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her. And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law. And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her".

In these verses 14 to 18, we have the differing responses of the two young ladies to what their mother in law had presented to them. Each of them had to make up her own mind. This is why today's chapter has been given the title "Choosing to follow God". Orpah was full of tears and kissed Naomi. Orpah chose to go back to her own people and, following the application which we are giving this true story, turned her back on God, not prepared to step out for Him. We don't read any more about Orpah.

What a lovely contrast there is in the choice made by Ruth! She wasn't deterred by her sister in law's decision, but made the choice firmly and beautifully set out in the words which we have just read in verses 16 and 17. Ruth chose to move to a new country, a new home, a true God, a different future. There was the expression of full commitment to God. It effectively is what we would nowadays call confessing Jesus as Lord, not just acknowledging Him as Saviour. Here near the border of Moab and Israel is a young woman facing lots of uncertainties but sure in her knowledge that she is committing herself to the Lordship of heaven. It fits perfectly with what Paul and Silas told the jailor in Philippi: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31) and with what Paul wrote in Romans 10:9: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus [that is, Jesus as Lord], and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved".

When anyone becomes a Christian, that person is moving from the control of one master, Satan, to be subject to the control of a new Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord's control is demanding but not onerous. A Christian is expected, not to live for himself or herself, but to live for the One "who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

In this Old Testament picture, Ruth made this commitment in these verses. We never read of her practically falling short of that statement. I find this quite a challenge.

Last year, my wife and I had the privilege of being present at a Christian wedding in Bristol. Verses 16 and 17 of our chapter were used in the wedding service as a statement of commitment between bridegroom and bride. I had never heard that before in a wedding service but Scriptures often can be applied in a number of ways. Commitment to one another in marriage vows is important. Real commitment to the Lord Jesus is vital for Christians. Ruth has much to teach us.

When Naomi perceived that Ruth had made up her mind to continue with her to Bethlehem, Naomi accepted the situation, no doubt happy for Ruth to be with her. A good thing to be "stedfastly minded" to proceed along the way ahead, just like Ruth in verse 18.

Verses 19-22 - Back in Bethlehem

This brings us to the final section of chapter 1, from verses 19-22, which I am calling back to Bethlehem. Let me read verses 19-21: "So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi? And she said unto them, 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?"

It had been many years since Naomi had left Bethlehem with her husband and two sons. The years away had been tragic ones and I don't doubt that not only would Naomi have aged in the natural process of growing older, but also the sorrow of sad events would have left their mark. As we noted earlier, Naomi's name means pleasant but she suggests to the Bethlehem women that it would now be more appropriate to call her Mara which means bitter. In leading her to come back to her spiritual home, God had had to take her through many difficult circumstances so that

she was now empty of all that she possessed when she left Bethlehem. Sometimes when we as Christians stray from our spiritual roots, God has to take us through difficult circumstances to show us that our true resources are only in Him and where He directs. God always aims for restoration and blessing for His people. At this stage, Naomi did not know that blessing would come through Ruth.

The last verse of chapter 1 reads as follows: "So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest".

In this last verse, I would like to draw attention to the phrase "Ruth the Moabitess". This is the first of five times in the book of Ruth that this phrase is used. Let us spend a short time considering what it meant to belong to the tribe and land of Moab. If you were to read the last few verses of Genesis 19, you would see that Abraham's nephew, Lot, became drunk on consecutive nights and his two daughters slept with him. They both became pregnant. The sons born as a result of these sad events were called Moab and Benammi and their descendants, the Moabites and the Ammonites, became enemies of God's people, the Children of Israel. The tribe of Moab settled on the east side of the Dead Sea. The Old Testament has many prophecies against Moab. The tribe which was begun in the act of sin in Genesis 19 was excluded from God's things. For example, part of Deuteronomy 23:3 says that a "Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD".

In this last verse of Ruth 1, we have the statement that "Ruth the Moabitess came to Bethlehem", the very place where around 1,300 years later Jesus would be born. As we read through the book of Ruth, we see Ruth brought more and more into God's blessing, despite being from Moab. Ruth didn't deserve it, but through Naomi's testimony and the actions of Boaz she is found by the end of the book bearing a son who was the forefather of David, in whose royal line Christ was born. Ruth is even mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus, in Matthew 1:5. Yet constantly in this book there are reminders that she was a Moabitess. What a picture of everyone who becomes a born again believer in Jesus! No believer deserves it! Each believer has been brought, like Ruth, from the distance of sin right into the presence of God the Father. What a good thing constantly to remind myself that I was like a Moabite, a sinner, and to recognise God's grace in making me one of His people.

In the next talk on chapter 2, we will be introduced to Boaz, the man of strength who made all the difference to Ruth. Dear listener, do you know the Lord Jesus Christ who has made all the difference to me and can change your life and destiny if you trust in Him?

Ruth's name means friendship. We see this evidenced in the last verse of chapter 1 when Naomi and Ruth arrive together in Bethlehem and then in subsequent chapters where Ruth is loyal to her mother in law.

I should add that in this talk I have concentrated on a limited number of applications of the individuals in the book of Ruth. There are additional applications which can be made, particularly in seeing some of these people as being types which fit the Bible prophecies about the Jewish nation and in seeing Ruth as representing the bride of Christ.

I trust that you enjoy this short series on the book of Ruth and that you enjoy the relevancies and the challenges which she and other characters can bring to our Christian position and lives today. Above all, I hope that you will see the crucial influence of Boaz, pointing forward to the fact that everything that Christians have now is based on who Jesus is and what He has done.

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