

RUTH

1. Homecoming of the bitter backsliders

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When a believer chooses to walk away from the Lord by doing things he is not supposed to do and he knows it, he has no one to blame for his backsliding and the consequences that follows. But it is a common thing for others to see how much bitter he gets against the Lord and someone else as if it is His fault and theirs when the consequences of his disobedience catches up with him.

I've seen many examples of the people who have backslidden and blamed the Lord for their own actions. I am sure that you've seen them as well.

In the first chapter of the Book of Ruth, we find a backslidden Jewish woman, Naomi, in a foreign pagan land where she and her family had no business being there, yet they were there. When a tragedy struck her, she was angry and bitter toward God. From the human perspective, it is more than understandable.

But the focal point of this Book does not reside in the character of Naomi, but Ruth, Naomi's daughter-in-law. The story of Ruth adds elegance, grace, charm, and more faith in God than Naomi to an otherwise depressing scene, especially when we realize that it took place in the days when judges ruled.

This gives us hope as well. In spite of deep moral depravity, heightened perversion, and bleak surroundings of political and economical landscapes, God still has His choice instruments, His perfect schedule, and His love with grace to bring us reminders of His everlasting presence and care for us.

A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

Many Bible students agree that the author of this Book is unknown. Some say that it is Samuel. It cannot be, because at the end of the Book chapter 4, it gives a genealogy of king David. David was practically nobody while Samuel was alive even though he was anointed by Samuel to be the next king after Saul.

It was written somewhere around 1000 B.C. during the period of Judges.

B. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

The theme of the Book is Redemption. This is the Book where we learn a special phrase "the Kinsman Redeemer."

C. A BAD DECISION TO MOVE INTO MOAB

Ruth 1:1-2 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 dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion--Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there.

This was the period of the Judges when there was no king in Israel and every man did what was right in his own eyes. It was the lowest points in history of Israel and a record of division, cruelty, apostasy, civil war, and national disgrace.

Spiritually speaking, we are living today in the Book of Judges as well in this world. As there was no king in Israel, and there will not be until Jesus returns. Like Israel in the past, many of God's people today are living in unbelief, disobedience, and do what is right in their own eyes.

It seems incredible that this beautiful love story should take place at such a cesspool time in the nation's history. But the Lord still loved them and preserved them just like He does now.

It is rather ironic to read that there was a famine in Bethlehem which means "House of Bread". In the OT, if the Israelites were having famines, it only means that they were disobedient to the Lord and worshiping the pagan idols.

Leviticus 26:18-20 'And after all this, if you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. 19 I will break the pride of your power; I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. 20 And your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit.

When trouble comes to our lives, we can do one of three things: buckle under it, escape it, or endure it. If we only buckle under our trials, then trials become our master, and we have a tendency to become hard and bitter. If we try to escape our trials, then we will probably miss the purposes God wants to achieve in our lives. But if we learn to endure our trials with our God's power, they will become our servants instead of our masters and work for us. Yes, God will work all things together for our good and His glory

Elimelech made a wrong decision when he decided to leave home. What made this decision so wrong? He walked by sight and not by faith.

Abraham made the same mistake when he encountered a famine in the Land of Promise in Genesis 12. Instead of waiting for God to tell him what to do next, he fled to Egypt and got into trouble.

No matter how difficult our circumstances may be, the safest and best place is in the will of God.

Let me ask you this question: You can't run away from your terrible situation. How do you handle it? Do you walk by faith? It is so easy to say it in the church surrounded by fellow believers, but it is so difficult to live by it.

We live by claiming the promises of God and obeying the Word of God, in spite of what we see, how we feel, or what may happen. It means committing ourselves to the Lord and relying wholly on Him to meet the need.

When we live by faith, it glorifies God, witnesses to a lost world, and builds Christian character into our lives. But when we refuse to trust Him, we are calling God a liar and dishonoring Him. Not good.

I don't think that Elimelech had a deep spiritual maturity. I understand that he wanted to provide for his wife and two sons, but not at the cost of following the Lord. Did he think that the Lord God of Israel could not provide what they needed? Obviously he did. So, he picked up his family's root and moved into the enemy's territory.

The Moabites were descendants of Lot from his incestuous union with his firstborn daughter, and they were the Jews' enemies because of the way they had treated Israel during their journey from Egypt to Canaan according to Numbers 22-25. During the time of the Judges, Moab had invaded Israel and ruled over the people for eighteen years.

D. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE BAD DECISION

Ruth 1:3-5 Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. 4 Now they took 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. 5 Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.

The meaning of his name 'Elimelech' is "my God is King". But Jehovah God was not king enough in his life. It was bad enough for Elimelech to move into Moab's territory, now he allowed his two sons to marry Moabite women – Mahlon married Ruth, and Chilion married Orpah. Jews were forbidden to marry Gentile women, especially those from Ammon and Moab.

Another irony is here. Elimelech's family had fled Judah to escape death, but the three men met death just the same in the foreign land.

We cannot run away from our problems, because they go wherever we go – they are in our hearts. Oswald Chambers said in his fine book 'The Shadow of an Agony', "The majority of us begin with the bigger problems outside and forget the one inside. A man has to learn 'the plague of his own heart' before his own problems can be solved..."

E. COVER-UP OR COMMON SENSE?

Ruth 1:6-15 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread. 7 Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. 8 And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 10 And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters, go--for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, 13 would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!" 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

When Naomi heard good news about the Lord's blessing to His people in Bethlehem, she decided to go back to her hometown. Her decision was right, but I think that her motive was wrong. You don't hear confessing her sins to God and asking Him to forgive her. She was returning to the land for food, but not for the Lord.

Some might say, "Come on, give Naomi a break. She lost her husband and two sons. She didn't want her daughters-in-law to live in a foreign land with different people, different custom, and different language. It only makes sense for her to offer the way out for them. She was being nice to them." Oh really?

If that is so, look what she said in v15:

Ruth 1:15 And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

Naomi didn't have a problem acknowledging the pagan gods; at the same time whom does she blame? The God of Israel.

If she went back to Bethlehem without her daughters-in-law, nobody would know that she and her husband allowed their sons to marry two Moabite women whom the Lord forbid. Besides, you don't find anywhere Naomi repenting of her sins to the Lord.

F. RUTH'S DETERMINATION

Ruth 1:16-18 But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God. 17 Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, If anything but death parts you and me." 18 When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

Naomi was trying to cover up; Orpah had given up, but Ruth was prepared to stand up. I just love the way Ruth said in v16.

Ruth 1:16b But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God.

Some of you may say, "I know which verse Chris Tomlin used for his song 'I will follow.'"

Where You go, I'll go
Where You stay, I'll stay
When You move, I'll move
I will follow You
Who You love, I'll love
How You serve I'll serve
If this life I lose, I will follow You
I will follow You

A nice try, close. But not so. He got the theme from Exodus and Luke.

Exodus 13:21-22 And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. 22 He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people.

Luke 18:22 So when Jesus heard these things, He said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

I believe that Ruth came to know the God of Israel in spite of the bad examples of her in-laws. Her conversion is an evidence of the sovereign grace of God, because the only way sinners can be saved is by grace and mercy.

Our God often shows His mercy to the least likely people in the least likely places. This is the sovereign grace of God who will have all men to be saved, and come unto the knowledge of the truth. Our Lord doesn't find pleasure in the death of a sinner.

Micah 7:18 Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy.

Ruth's statement in Ruth 1:16-17 is one of the most magnificent confessions found anywhere in Scripture. First, she confessed her love for Naomi and her desire to stay with her mother-in-law even unto death. Second, she confessed her faith in the true and living God and her decision to worship Him alone. She was willing to forsake father and mother in order to cleave to Naomi and the God of her people.

G. HOME COMING

Ruth 1:19-22 Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" 20 But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?" 22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Usually 'Home Coming' at high schools and colleges bring a lot of fun, but not in Naomi's case. She was down just about Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh. You know his favorite line, "Nobody loves me; Thanks for noticing me." Get a life, Eeyore and Naomi.

We can't control the circumstances of life, but we can control how we respond to them with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That's what faith is all about, daring to believe that God is working everything for our good even when we don't feel like it or see it happening.

It was barley harvest when the two widows arrived in Bethlehem, a time when the community expressed joy and praise to God for His goodness. It was spring, a time of new life and new beginning. Naomi was about to make a new beginning; for with God, it's never too late to start over again.

H. APPLICATIONS

- 1) No matter how difficult our circumstances may be, the safest and best place is in the will of God.
- 2) We cannot run away from our problems, because they go wherever we go – they are in our hearts.
- 3) We can't control the circumstances of life, but we can control how we respond to them with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.