

ENGAGE

This week we begin a sermon series on the Book of Ruth. I have title it, "From Ruin to Redemption". We open with Ruth 1, which shows the devastation that can take place in a person's life and different responses from three different ladies: Naomi, Ruth and Orpah.

- Focus on how negative events and choices we make bring us opportunity to choose between running away, falling into despair or going closer to God.

EXAMINE**A. Background: Elimelech and his sons.****1. (Ruth 1:1) A sojourn in Moab.**

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.

a. In the days when the Judges ruled: This account begins in the closing days of the Judges, a 400 year period of general anarchy and oppression when the Israelites were not ruled by kings, but by periodic deliverers whom God raised up when the nation sought Him again.

i. Notable among the Judges were Gideon, Samson, and Deborah. Each of these were raised up by God, not to rule as kings, but to lead Israel during a specific challenge, and then to go back to obscurity.

ii. The days when the Judges ruled were actually dark days for Israel; the period was characterized by the phrase everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, and 21:25).

b. A certain man of Bethlehem: In these days, a man from Bethlehem left the land of Israel to sojourn in the country of Moab, because of famine. Bethlehem was a rich agricultural area (the city name means "House of Bread"), but times were tough, so he went to the pagan land of Moab.

i. To do so, he had to hike through the desolate Jericho pass, through the Judean wilderness near the Dead Sea, going across the Jordan River, into the land of Moab. This was a definite departure from the Promised Land of Israel, and a return towards the wilderness from which God had delivered Israel hundreds of years before. These were clearly steps in the wrong direction.

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c. A famine in the land: God specifically promised there would always be plenty in the land if Israel was obedient. Therefore, a famine in the land meant that Israel, as a nation, was not obedient unto the LORD (Deuteronomy 11:13-17).

d. Went to sojourn: This means to leave with the intention to return. The next verse tells us the name of the man was Elimelech and his intention of short visit turned into ten, tragedy-filled years - and Elimelech never returned to Israel. The name Elimelech means "God is king" - but he didn't really live as if God was his king.

2. (Ruth 1:2-5) Tragedy in Moab.

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. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. 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. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.

a. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died: When Elimelech and his family came to Moab, they did not find life easier. Elimelech soon died, and his wife Naomi was left to care for their two boys, Mahlon and Chilion.

i. It is hard to say that this was the direct hand of God's judgment against them. It is sometimes difficult to discern why tragic things happen. What is certain is that the change of scenery didn't make things better.

ii. We sometimes think we can move away from our problems, but find we just bring them with us. No matter where you go, you bring yourself with you - so the same problems can continue in a different place.

b. Now they took wives of the women of Moab: Mahlon and Chilion grew, and took wives among the Moabite women, named Orpah and Ruth. Again, this was not in obedience to God; God commanded the Israelites to not marry among the pagan nations surrounding them.

c. Both Mahlon and Chilion died: As time went on (about ten years) Naomi's sons died. So now there were three childless widows - Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

i. To be a childless widow was to be among the lowest, most disadvantaged classes in the ancient world. There was no one to support you, and you had to live on the generosity of strangers. Naomi had no family in Moab, and no one else to help her. It was a desperate situation.

Sources

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B. The return to Judah.**1. (Ruth 1:6-7) The three widows head back to Judah.**

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. 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.

a. She had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people: From distant Moab, Naomi heard that God was doing good things back in Israel. She wanted to be part of the good things that God was doing.

i. Our life with God should make others want to come back to the LORD just by looking at our life. Our walk with the LORD should be something that makes others say, "I want some of that also!"

b. She went out from the place where she was: This set Naomi apart from many others people. Many hear of the good things God is doing in the lives of others, and only wish they could have some of it - instead of actually setting out to receive it. Naomi could have stayed in Moab all of her life wishing things were different, but she did something to receive what God had to give her.

2. (Ruth 1:8-9) Naomi petitions her daughters-in-law to go back to Moab.

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. 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.

a. Go, return each to her mother's house: By all common sense, this was the wise thing to do. Orpah and Ruth had stronger family ties in Moab than they did with Naomi, so it made sense for them to stay in Moab instead of going to a new land - Israel - with Naomi.

b. The LORD deal kindly with you ... The LORD grant that you may find rest: With these words Naomi freely blessed them. She prayed that they would remarry (each in the house of her husband).

i. Deal kindly is the ancient Hebrew word *hesed*. "*Hesed* encompasses deeds of mercy performed by a more powerful party for the benefit of the weaker one." (Huey)

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ii. In Ruth 1:9, Naomi described marriage as a place of rest: The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband. God intends that each marriage be a place and source, of rest, peace, and refreshment in life.

c. She kissed them ... they lifted up their voices and wept: This emotion shown is evidence of the real relationship of love between Naomi and her daughters-in-law.

3. (Ruth 1:10-13) Naomi pleads with her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab.

And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people." 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? 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, 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!

a. Are there still sons in my womb: According to the laws of ancient Israel, if a young woman was left widowed, without having had a son, then one of her deceased husband's brothers was responsible for being a "surrogate father" and providing her with a son. Naomi here says that she has no other sons to give either Orpah or Ruth.

i. Trapp on even if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons: "Without having a husband, she doth not once think of having children, as many wantons and light-skirts do; making themselves whores, and their children bastards, and all for satisfying the rage of present lust, though after they repent with grief and shame."

b. The hand of the LORD has gone out against me: This obviously weighed heavily on Naomi's heart and mind. She felt that the calamity which came upon her family came because they were disobedient, probably in leaving the Promised Land of Israel and marrying their sons to Moabite women.

i. Perhaps Naomi felt a particular guilt; perhaps she was the one who pushed to move out of Israel, and who pushed to marry off the sons.

c. The hand of the LORD has gone out against me: Despite this feeling, Naomi is going back to the land of Israel - and going back to her God. Though she felt that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me, she did not grow bitter against God. She returned to Him in repentance, knowing that the answer is drawing closer to Him, not going further from Him.

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i. Naomi didn't accuse God of doing something wrong against her. She acknowledged His total control over all circumstances. It was actually an expression of trust in Him.

ii. If Naomi was bitter or angry against God, she probably would have gone another way - further from the God of Israel, rather than back to Him. Instead, she showed that she trusted the sovereignty of God, and knew that despite her personal calamities, He is a good God who blesses.

iii. What Naomi could not see is that the hand of the LORD would go out for her shortly! There is never reason for us to despair if we believe the hand of the LORD has gone out against me. If we will return to Him, His hand will go out for us again! Naomi had no idea - not the slightest - of how greatly God was going to bless her in a short time.

4. (Ruth 1:14) Orpah stays in Moab; Ruth continues on with Naomi.

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

a. They lifted up their voices and wept again: Both Orpah and Ruth felt deeply; both loved Naomi; both were anxious about the future. But a choice had to be made, and Orpah chose to stay in Moab, while Ruth clung to Naomi.

b. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her: There comes a place in our following after God where it comes down to doing. Ruth and Orpah both felt the same feelings but Ruth did differently than Orpah.

i. Some are content with feeling Christian feelings - with feeling a love for God, with feeling a love for His Word, with feeling a love for His people. But what will you do? We are glad God that didn't just feel His love for us; instead, For God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten Son. (John 3:16)

c. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law: What happened to Orpah? Of course, we don't know. But men have always concocted traditions to make up for what they don't know. Jewish traditions say this request of Naomi came four miles outside of Moab; and that Orpah shed only four tears over the thought of parting from her mother-in-law Naomi. But the rabbis go on to say that in recompense for the four miles that she went with Naomi, Orpah gave birth to four sons - Goliath and his three brothers.

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5. (Ruth 1:15-18) Ruth's eloquent statement of faith.

And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 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. 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." When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

a. Look, your sister-in-law has gone: Naomi did what she could to discourage Ruth from coming with her back to Israel. It wasn't that Naomi didn't want Ruth to come, but she didn't want a fair weather friend either.

b. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people: This was a noble - even outstanding - friend-to-friend commitment. But Ruth's commitment to Naomi went even further: And your God, [will be] my God.

i. This was more than change of address. Ruth was willing to forsake the Moabite gods she grew up with, and embrace the God of Israel. She was deciding to follow the LORD. This Gentile woman, once far from God, had drawn near to Him.

ii. And your God, [will be] my God meant that Naomi's relationship with God made an impact on Ruth. This is striking, because Naomi did not have an easy life. She had been widowed, had lost both her sons, and believed that she had caused each calamity by her disobedience. Yet she still honored and loved the LORD.

iii. People should be able to look at your life, just as Ruth looked at Naomi's, and say "I want your God to be my God." Your trust in God, and turning towards Him in tough times, will often be the thing that draws others to the LORD.

c. Your God, my God: Ten years of Naomi's compromise in Moab never made Ruth confess her allegiance to the God of Israel. Yet as soon as Naomi stood and said, "I'm going back to the God of Israel, I'll put my fate in His hands" Ruth stood with her. If you think you will persuade your friends or relatives to Jesus by your compromise, you are mistaken. Perhaps you are sincere, but you are mistaken. Only a bold stand for Jesus will really do it.

i. "Ah! You will never win any soul to the right by a compromise with the wrong. It is decision for Christ and his truth that has the greatest power in the family, and the greatest power in the world, too." (Spurgeon)

d. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me: Ruth had little knowledge of the true God, the God of Israel - but she knew He was a God of fairness and justice, so He could be called upon to hold Ruth accountable to this promise.

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6. (Ruth 1:19-21) Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem.

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?" But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 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?"

a. The two of them went until they came to Bethlehem: It was a long walk from Moab to Bethlehem, and the trip was mostly uphill. We can imagine along the way, Ruth asking her mother-in-law Naomi all about the God of Israel and the land of Israel.

b. All the city was excited because of them: Bethlehem was just a large village; everyone in the village would have known everyone else, and remembered those who had left years ago.

c. Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara: The name Naomi means "pleasant"; the name Mara means "bitter." Naomi used this to tell the people of Bethlehem that her time away from Israel, her time away from the God of Israel, had not been pleasant - it was bitter.

i. Naomi wasn't a phony. She wasn't going to go home, pretend everything was fine, and be "pleasant." She was going to be honest, and say "Here I am and my life has been bitter."

d. The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me ... the LORD has brought me home again empty ... the LORD has testified against me: Naomi was not afraid to see the hand of God in all her calamity.

i. Naomi knew that the tragedy that came into her life was not because of fate, chance, or blind fortune. She felt the tragedies were an example of God's affliction because she could not see the end of His plan. But she knew there was a sovereign God of heaven, and didn't think she had just run into a string of "bad luck."

ii. Yet, in the midst of all these bitter circumstances, Naomi was not bitter against the LORD. We can imagine one of the villagers asking, "Naomi, if God has dealt very bitterly with you, if the LORD has brought you home empty, if the LORD has testified against you, then why have you come back?" And she would have said, "Because I want to get right with Him again. Things have been terrible, and the answer isn't in going further from God, but in drawing closer to Him."

iii. Not every reacts to trials the way Naomi did. "Many are humbled, but not humble; low, but not lowly. These have lost the fruit of their afflictions ... and are therefore most miserable." (Trapp)

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7. (Ruth 1:22) So Naomi returned ...

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.

a. So Naomi returned: Naomi came back repentant and honest. She has felt that the Almighty has afflicted me. But in the coming chapters, it will be shown the Almighty will bless her. If only she could see it!

b. Now they came to Bethlehem: It would have been easy for Naomi to focus on what she had lost. She had lost a husband, two sons, and one daughter-in-law. She had lost all kinds of material possessions. All she had left was one daughter-in-law, Ruth. But through that one thing she had left, God was going to bring unbelievable blessing into her life.

i. All the good that happens in the future chapters begins her: With Naomi's godly repentance and honesty. It will make a difference not only in her life, but in the life of her daughter-in-law Ruth - and in the destiny of the nation Israel - and in your eternal salvation.

ii. It is possible for God to accomplish amazing things both for now and eternity, if we will turn towards Him today, not only in our feelings, but also in our actions.

QUESTIONS

- The backdrop to the story of Ruth is the period of the judges, which is recorded in the book of Judges right before Ruth. Read the last verse of Judges and reflect on what a society is like where "everyone did what was right in their own eyes."
- Look on a map (perhaps in the back of your Bible) at the relative locations of Judah and Moab.
- What was involved in traveling from one country to the other?
- Why might there have been food in a country that so closely borders Judah, and they were without?
- They stayed in Moab 'ten years' (v. 4). It's difficult to imagine a famine lasting that long.
 - Think of the reasons they might have stayed so long in a foreign land.

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- One of the great questions in Ruth 1 is whether Elimelech and his family were acting in direct disobedience to God by leaving the country.
 - Is it possible his death and the deaths of his sons were divine discipline on the family?
 - Why or why not?
- Naomi describes herself as 'bitter' in 1:20-21. She sees God as her enemy.
 - Is there a time when you have felt that way?
 - Why would she choose to view her losses in that way?
- Why would Naomi have so strongly urged her daughters-in-law to go back?
 - Think through the possible reasons for so strongly encouraging them to return.
- Think through a time when you have had to decide if you were going to return to a place you had been, but were doing so empty-handed.
 - Can you empathize with Naomi's response?
- It says in v. 18, And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.
 - What kind of silence was it? Acceptance, unease, annoyance, irritation, frustration, resentment? Think about it.
- What accounts for Ruth's determined response in v. 16-17?
- How was it that Orpah, facing exactly the same circumstances and the same counsel, made an exactly opposite decision?
- God's 'providence' is sometimes defined as the way God directs the circumstances of the world, and of individual people in it. Note the ways God's providence is beginning to be displayed in this first chapter.
 - How has God directed your life through circumstances that you had no control over?

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