

Ruth 1: 1-18 “Your God Shall Be My God”

Introduction

I'm betting you have probably made a lot of decisions in your life. Whether or not to go to college, whether or not to get a job, whether or not to get married, these are all important decisions that affect your future. On what basis do you make these decisions? What kinds of things do you tend to prioritize?

Today we're beginning Advent, and we're taking a look at the book of Ruth. In the first part of Ruth, an Israelite family makes some very important decisions. How do they make those decisions? What were the results?

Ruth 1:1-18

¹ In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.

² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.

⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years,

⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.

⁷ So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May 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 of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

¹⁰ And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.”

¹¹ But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?

¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons,

¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake 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, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where 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. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."

¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

In this passage, three significant decisions were made. The decision to immigrate to Moab, the decision to return home to Israel, and Ruth's decision of faith.

Today, let's look at three points from this story. First, we'll focus on seeking God's will, not human wisdom, when it comes to making important decisions in life.

Second, I'd like to draw out the gospel, that God answers us with grace no matter what decisions we make. Finally, we'll look at the importance of placing our faith in God when we make decisions.

1. Seeking God's Will

As we read, an Israelite family, Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons, left their home in Bethlehem because of a famine and immigrated to Moab. The reason for the famine isn't stated, whether it was because of a natural disaster, destruction of crops by pests, a civil war, or, perhaps a war with another nation. Ironically, "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread," but there was no work and no food, so they had to flee their home as refugees.

The place they fled to was called Moab, which was known for being one of Israel's hated enemies who often invaded them. It goes without saying the language, culture, and customs were different. But more than that, the Moabites worshipped an idol called Chemosh, and even sacrificed their children to him, so the Law of Moses strictly warned Israelites not to get close to them.

In spite of all this, they chose to flee to Moab, which must have meant the famine was unbearably bad. They settled in the "fields of Moab," or the plains, where food was likely readily available. The husband's name was Elimelech, which means "my

God is king." They were probably hoping that God, as their king, would protect them as they left their homeland.

However, in verses 3 and 5, Elimelech and his two sons after him died. How sad and tragic must that have been! Fortunately, the sons had married Orpah and Ruth, so Naomi wasn't left alone; however, only the three women were left behind, which was an incredibly precarious situation. In an ancient patriarchal society, it was impossible for women to survive on their own. Naomi's husband died, her sons died, and, furthermore, her daughters-in-law hadn't borne any children. She lost her beloved family, had no fortune, and had her joy and happiness, her honor and identity pulled out from underneath her.

1:5 "...both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband." (emphasis added)

Here, it doesn't use her name, it doesn't say "she," it deliberately uses "the woman." This emphasizes that she has lost everything, and no longer has any esteem or even an identity (especially for women at that time, the family was their very identity).

Do you think their decision to move was a good one? Was it God's will? Ruth 1:1 says that this story takes place "in the days when the judges ruled." This is referring to the time period in the book that precedes Ruth, the book of Judges, which was a very turbulent period in Israel's history before they had a king.

At that time, there were military leaders called judges, however, those judges did not rule politically over the whole land. For a period of time, they would use military power to rule over a region in Israel, and, at least to some extent, bring peace to the area. But then the people would cease to trust God and begin to worship idols, justice and social order would be lost, and they would be invaded by their surrounding enemies. And this was a repeating cycle.

Judges 21:25 "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Ruth 1:1-5 depicts fleeing refugee families at the mercy of a famine, but there is no mention of God at all. Were they following the trend of the time and “doing what was right in their own eyes”? I don’t find any language in this text to be critical of their decision, so readers shouldn’t be too quick to be critical of them or say they were lacking faith.

However, there is a clear need for faith in God and an attitude that seeks his will. As we face the hardships in front of us, it is essential to seek God in prayer, ponder his plans, and rely not on our own wisdom but on his wisdom. If you have to make a decision, first, seek the Lord. What kinds of decisions have you been making lately? Proverbs 16:3, 9.

16:3 “Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. 9 The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.”

2. God Answers us with Grace

So, what was God doing to this floundering family? When they had to flee to Moab because of a famine, when Naomi’s husband and sons died, when the three women were left behind, where was God? What was he doing? Questions like this have likely come up in your own life on many occasions.

Naomi received a big welcome when she returned to her hometown, Bethlehem. We didn’t read this section, but verses 20-21 record what Naomi said when she looked back on that part of her life.

1:20 “She said to them, ‘Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?’”

The name Naomi means ‘pleasant’ or ‘delight.’ However, as she recalled her suffering as a refugee in Moab, she revealed her grief and lament by asking to be called Mara, which means ‘suffering.’

However, if you look at her words closely, you’ll see that she calls God ‘Almighty,’ and it seems that this God she intimately calls ‘Lord’ was with her during her painful

experience in Moab. She says that it was the Almighty that caused her suffering. She also confesses that Israel's covenant God of salvation has led her back home. Despite having lost her family and property, Naomi thinks of the works of the Almighty's hand and the grace of the God of promise. The rule of the Almighty and the grace of her Lord.

God is always with you no matter what decisions you face or what path you have to walk. When Naomi decided to return to Israel from Moab, news of the Lord's grace echoed in her ears. It says in verse 6, "She had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food." God's grace prompted her to make this new decision to return.

When Naomi made this decision, she urged her daughters-in-law to return to their families, remarry, and be happy. Thinking of Orpah and Ruth's futures, she entrusted them to the God of grace saying, "May the Lord deal kindly with you... The Lord grant that you may find rest" (v 8,9).

Naomi still remembers God's grace. And, surprisingly, she entrusts these gentile Moabite women to the Lord, even though they are returning to their Moabite families. In other words, the Almighty God gives grace not only to the Israelites, but to all people in any nation.

When we read this story, we are also reminded of Abraham, who also fled his home to Egypt with his wife Sarah because of a famine (Genesis 12:10-20). Abraham deceived Pharaoh, telling him that Sarah was his sister, so Pharaoh forced him to leave. However, he actually returned home with even more wealth.

We can learn three things from this pattern of hardship and grace in the Bible. First, God is the Almighty who rules over everything. He is guiding all things, the good and delightful things as well as the bad and painful things. Second, God is advancing his plans even in our suffering and even in our bad decisions. In other words, there is meaning in our sadness and suffering. Often, we aren't able to understand right away, but these are necessities given to us for our growth and for our faith. Romans 8:28.

8:28 “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good,[a] for those who are called according to his purpose.”

And third, God always answers suffering with grace. This truth hasn't been revealed yet in chapter 1, but, as we will see, Naomi made her decision in faith.

Hebrews 11:1 “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

3. Making Decisions in Faith

Finally, let's focus on Ruth's confession of faith, because faith that trusts in God's grace is the key to opening the door to a new life after suffering and hardship.

1:16 “But Ruth said, ‘Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where 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. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.’”

The most profound reason Ruth wanted to follow Naomi no matter what was God himself. It was not food or wealth, or any other apparently good thing that God gives. It was her relationship with God, and her faith that sought to walk together with God's community.

For Ruth, who was born in Moab, Israel was a new world, an unknown country with a different culture and different customs, and where she didn't know anyone. She must have been very worried and anxious. It wasn't just a trip for a little while, she was devoting her whole life.

We shouldn't underestimate how many sacrifices she was making and how much pain she was undertaking. I don't know how much Ruth knew about Israel or the God of Israel. But she left behind her family, her country, her familiar culture and lifestyle, and her traditional religion, and instead loved God and loved and accompanied her neighbor.

Because she was a poor, foreign widow, she had no acquaintances and had no legal rights. What's more, Israel and Moab were enemies, so she would likely suffer from ethnic prejudice, harassment, and discrimination. In spite of all that, she promised to stay, even if Naomi died.

One biblical scholar asks an interesting question as he explores Ruth's faith.

"Is Ruth a "convert" to Yahwism? Since the very question is a modern one, the answer must be a qualified yes. In style and tone, her words sound like a confession. Further, her commitment involved a change in life direction—one opposite to Orpah's—away from her past ties and toward a new God, Yahweh." (Hubbard, p.119)

When we are making a decision to start down a new path, let's make our decisions like Ruth. It is crucial to have a faith that trusts in God, obeys him, and walks with him in devotion. Matthew 6:33.

6:33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Who else opens new doors with this kind of faith? Not just Ruth, let's also look at Jesus himself. He left his home and immigrated to earth, becoming for us. There was no lack in his home country, in fact it was filled with riches and glory. Despite that, he threw it all away and came for us. He gave his life for you. Let's trust this Jesus, and turn our hearts to God's wisdom, not our own.