

The Events Which Set the Stage for Ruth

Ruth 1:1-5

Ruth 1:1-5 – *“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. ³ 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.”*

Background Notes

The events of the book of Ruth took place sometime during the times of the Judges in Israel. After Joshua and the children of Israel conquered the land of Canaan, there was a period of about 350 years when the nation was ruled by judges. This period came before the time of the kings in the history of Israel. Although the book of Ruth is placed right after the book of Judges in the Bible, the events of Ruth didn’t follow the times of the judges chronologically. The events of the book of Ruth took place sometime during the period of the judges, maybe even as early as the time of Gideon.

Chapter 4 tells us that Ruth was the great grandmother of King David, who was the second king of Israel. We read in Ruth 4:17 that Ruth and Boaz had a son named Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. The fact that David is mentioned would indicate that the book of Ruth was probably written during David’s time. If the prophet Samuel wrote the book of Ruth (Jewish tradition says he is the author), then it was written after Samuel anointed David to be king, but before David came to the throne, because Samuel died before David came to the throne. You can read about that in 1 Samuel 25.

The book of Ruth is like an oasis in a desert. The period of the judges is not a bright time in Israel’s history. During the dark days of the judges, the people of Israel continually departed from following the Lord and His Laws. Spiritual decline and moral decay characterized the nation. Twice we read in the book of Judges that “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” In Judges 17:6 we read, *“In those days that there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* And then in Judges 21:25 we read, *“In those days that there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”*

But Ruth is an oasis in this desert of decline. After we read the final disturbing chapters of Judges, how refreshing it is to come to the beautiful chapters of Ruth! In the book of Ruth, we see God’s sovereign grace at work in spite of man’s idolatry and immorality.

In verse 1, we read that there was a famine in the land. In Old Testament times, famine was a sign of God's discipline because of Israel's idolatry and their turning away from following the Lord. Remember the famines during the times of the prophets Elijah and Elisha? In the Law God had said that if the people would follow Him, He would bless them and their land would be productive. But if they would not follow Him and His laws, then He would not bless them and He would withhold the rains from their lands. Deuteronomy 11:16 and 17: *"¹⁶ Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, ¹⁷ lest the Lords' anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you."* (See also Deuteronomy 28 in this connection.)

It was during one of these times of discipline by famine that a Jewish man named Elimelech went from his hometown of Bethlehem, with his family, to the neighboring country of Moab to escape the famine. Why Moab? Well, I'm sure one reason was that Elimelech could look southeast from Bethlehem across the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea and actually see that the hills were greener in Moab. Furthermore, the Philistines to the west were enemies of Israel and they controlled the roads leading to Egypt.

In any case, Elimelech decided to go to Moab -- temporarily, just until the famine was over. This was a major decision for Elimelech and his family. Verse 2 says that they were Ephrathites. Ephratha was the ancient name for Bethlehem and that area, thus their family roots were there. So it was quite a major decision for Elimelech and his family to leave the Land of Promise, the land of Israel, and his hometown, and go to Moab in the time of famine.

Elimelech died in Moab and Naomi became a widow. The two boys, Mahlon and Chilion, were married to Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Then the sons died also, leaving Naomi bereft of her two sons as well as her husband.

Doctrinal Points

Our two doctrinal points for this first section of Ruth have to do with decision-making, since Elimelech made a decision that had long-lasting consequences.

1. Believers should not make decisions based only on immediate circumstances.

Believers should not make decisions based only on immediate circumstances. Unfortunately, that's what Elimelech did. He made his decision based on the circumstances of the famine. "We've got to get out of here. We'll starve to death! Let's go to Moab."

Elimelech's decision was in reaction to the immediate circumstances, and it doesn't look like he considered the possible long-range consequences. What about God's covenant with His people, and the fact that He wanted His people to stay in the land of promise, regardless of negative circumstances? What about the effects of Moab on Elimelech's family? The Moabites worshiped the pagan god Chemosh – and the worship of this god demanded that human sacrifices were to be offered to the idol.

And what about the effect on Elimelech's two sons? Would they grow up and get jobs in Moab? Would they marry Moabite women and raise their families in a culture that was opposed to the true God? The Law of God warned against such marriages. In Deuteronomy 23:3 we read, *"An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD forever."*

It certainly seems that Elimelech made a mistake in his decision. Yes, God worked through all the events to accomplish his plans and purposes, but that still doesn't justify Elimelech for making the bad decision. Elimelech made a decision based too much on immediate circumstances, and he did not think through the possible negative effects of that decision.

Believers should not make decisions based only on immediate circumstances. God does use circumstances to help us in making our decisions, but let's be careful about making decisions based only on immediate circumstances. Satan can manipulate circumstances to his advantage in your decision-making process.

Here's an illustration: I know a gifted preacher who left the ministry in a time of spiritual famine. He felt there was not enough blessing and fruit in his ministry. He took a high paying job and eventually he completely lost interest in the things of the Lord. It goes without saying that this decision had negative effects on him and his family. So be very careful about making quick decisions to "leave the land of Christian service" to which the Lord has called you. Be very careful about making any quick decisions! Believers should not make decisions based only on immediate circumstances.

2. Believers should not make decisions based only on human reasoning.

Believers should not make decisions based only on human reasoning. Here again, we see that that's what Elimelech did when confronted with the circumstances of the famine. We don't read that Elimelech prayed about this decision. It doesn't seem that he took into account God's Word and God's warning about the consequences of leaving the land of Israel.

No, Elimelech reacted to the circumstances, and made his decision using only his human reasoning. There were the greener hills! Moab was not that far away. They would only be there only a short time. Elimelech may have reasoned that they would come home before there were any negative effects in the family. Elimelech probably reasoned that he would not be like Lot, and go to live in pagan cities like Sodom and Gomorrah. No, he would dwell in the countryside, near grazing area for his flocks.

But human reasoning can't see the future. Elimelech had no idea that he would change his mind and decide to remain in the land of Moab much longer than he expected. We see that in the two different words are used here. In verse 1 the word "sojourned" is used, and Elimelech's initial plan was just to sojourn in the land. But at the end of verse 2 we read that he "remained" there. It definitely seems to indicate a change of mind.

Elimelech had no idea that he had only a short time to live and that he would die in Moab. Incidentally, this may have been God's discipline for leaving the Land of Promise. Elimelech did not envision his wife Naomi being left a widow in a foreign land. He didn't picture his sons growing up in the idolatrous country of Moab -- and actually marrying Moabite women. The sons' deaths, by the way, may be a further sign of God's discipline.

Elimelech could not know these things, because his decision was based only on human reasoning. As believers, we should not make decisions based **only** on human reasoning. Of course we use human reasoning to make decisions -- we don't kiss our God-given brains goodbye when we make decisions! But we shouldn't make decisions based **only** on human reasoning!

We need to pray and seek God's direction, because He knows the future and we don't. We need to know God's Word so that we make our decisions based on Biblical principles, and not just on human reasoning.

Recently we made a decision to sell our home, the home that we've lived in for 21 years, and move to an apartment. Some of you may wonder if we made this decision on the spur of the moment. Not so! We've been praying about this decision for at least 2 years. Yes, human reasoning in reference to circumstances did enter the picture -- but not human reasoning alone! We've looked to God and his Word for guidance. Believers should not make decisions based only on human reasoning.

Practical Application

The decisions you make will make you!

Remember -- the decisions you make will make you. This works in both a negative way and a positive way. If we make bad decisions based only on circumstances and human reasoning, we will live with the sad consequences of a life that is outside of God's perfect will. On the other hand, if we pray about our decisions and seek God's will in the decision-making process, and use Biblical guidelines instead of only circumstances and human reasoning, then our lives will be molded by the results of these good decisions.

Here's an illustration: I once knew a young Christian student who spent a summer in Japan. He planned to go back as a missionary when he finished college. However, during his last year of college he really got into the sport of windsurfing. From then on, every decision he has made has been based on his love of that sport. He now lives in the Columbia River Gorge area, the "Mecca" for windsurfing in the United States. As far as I know, his Christian commitment is practically zero at this point. Now there's nothing wrong with windsurfing -- I love that sport! But let's make sure that our decisions in life are the will of the **Lord** -- not our own will -- because the decisions we make will make us.

On the other hand, I've had students who decided to give a year or two of their lives to systematically study the Scriptures before going on with their lives. This was a good decision. It has molded their lives for God, and it has molded the lives of their families as well.

Remember -- the decisions you make will make you!