

This week we start a new series in the **book of Ruth**. It's a great story: a story of love and faithfulness, of restoration and redemption, of despair and hope.

I just want to check if you were listening earlier, so when did this story take place? During the time of the judges. What was it like in Israel during the time of the judges?

Judges is a complete contrast to Ruth:

- Judges includes the stories of many people, Ruth just a few.
- Judges is a relatively long book while Ruth is one of the shortest.
- Judges covers the whole of Israel, Ruth one small town.
- Judges spans 200 years, Ruth one generation.

Ruth can be read as a sort of Mills and Boon romance although, as we will see as we go through it, it's not as simple and straightforward as that.

It was a period when God's people continued to move from *disobedience to defeat to deliverance*. The last verse in the book of Judges helps us to understand why. **Judges 21:25** says, "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever he wanted.*"

That sounds pretty familiar to most of us today. Actually, what happened was a cycle developed where the people drifted away from God, followed by a period of judgement by God, followed by a period of restoration and following God, then back to drifting away. We are told in Ruth 1:1 that there was a famine in Israel and it may be that this was during one of those periods of judgement. **Elimelech left Bethlehem** (map) with Naomi and their 2 sons and settled in the land of Moab. If you come here regularly you know by now that there is very often significance in the name of a person or place. Here in the heart of an area of famine, Bethlehem is known as the house of bread; Elimelech translates as my God is King. If they had only learned the lessons from Israel's history they would have known that searching for food outside Israel always lead to problems, as the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob testify.

You can pretty much see the land of Moab from Bethlehem as it was in the Hill country to the south-east. However, it was a place where the people had led Israel into immorality and pagan worship and Moses had forbidden any Moabite to enter Israel's assembly for 10 generations. In fact, the Moabites had overcome Israel and ruled there until the Israelites drove them out under the leadership of the 2nd of Israel's judges, left-handed Ehud (Judges 3). So what we find is that Elimelech was doubly disobeying God by trying to flee his judgement, and by going to live among the Moabites.

So, this story starts off with a series of wrong choices and today I want to look at some good choices that we can make as the people of God.

The 1st is this: **choose the right priorities**.

Naomi, Orpah and Ruth were eventually left without their husbands and with no hope for the future. Each of them had to prioritise their future options.

That's what Ruth was doing in **vs. 16**, when she told Naomi, "*Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.*" That word "urge" has the idea of sincerely or anxiously urging someone to do something, even begging someone to do something. In effect, Ruth was saying, "Naomi, please stop begging me to go back home to Moab. I want to do the right thing. I want to help you."

Ruth made this right choice even in the worst of times. Her husband was dead. She was a poor widow. She could have gone back to her family and friends, like Orpah. But Ruth chose to stay with Naomi and made it a priority to look after her. She chose to stay with Naomi and help her.

The lesson here is that God wants us to be like him: generous, unselfish, and ministering to the need of others. When we focus on ourselves it's easy to become bitter. That's what happened to Naomi, she became bitter – she was very 'woe is me', forgetting that her daughters in law had also suffered.

Ruth chose the right priorities, and that's what God wants us to do. But choosing the right priorities can be hard. Sometimes you will not be appreciated. Naomi did not appreciate what Ruth was trying to do. Orpah chose to return to her people and her gods and she is never mentioned again. She prioritised what she knew, what she was familiar with, rather than sticking with Naomi. Naomi tried to persuade Ruth to go **back to Moab**:

⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. ...

⁹ May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.'

¹⁰ and (they) said to her, 'We will go back with you to your people.'

¹¹ But Naomi said, 'Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me?

¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. *It is more bitter for me* than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!'

¹⁴ At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ 'Look,' said Naomi, 'your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.'

Five different times Naomi tries to get Ruth to go away

Now, Naomi was an Israelite who believed in God. But there she was in vs. 15, basically saying, "Go back to your gods. Go back to your false gods, Ruth." -- What on earth was she thinking?

This reminds us that we are going to get a lot of terrible guidance as we go forward in life. You are going to encounter teachers, co-workers, and misguided friends who will try to tell you that wrong is right, and right is wrong. Don't let yourself be deceived. Let God's Word be the ultimate guide for both your beliefs and your behaviour.

Naomi reminds us that even other Christians can give us some terrible advice. Ruth will be eternally grateful that she ignored Naomi's guidance. But in the end, you will never regret following God's Word.

Naomi did not appreciate what Ruth was trying to do, but Ruth did the right thing anyway. She chose the right priorities, and so should we, because it will always make a difference

2. Choose the right priorities. -- And **choose the right place.**

That's what Ruth did in vs. 16, when she said, "Where you go, I will go; and where you live, I will live." Ruth was blessed beyond measure, because she chose the right place.

Notice here that Ruth made a total commitment to be in the right place. In vs. 16, Ruth didn't just say, "Where you go, I will go," but "where you live, I will live." And in vs. 17, she said, "Where you die, I will die." Ruth was blessed in an amazing way, because she made a total commitment to the right priorities and the right place.

But what about her mother-in-law, Naomi? -- She was going back to a place she never should have left, but the Lord blessed her too! She probably didn't have much choice about leaving, she would have followed Elimelech, but even in these dire circumstances, she knows that she needs to go back. And she's not just going back to her people, she is also going back to God.

And there is a great lesson for us here: Maybe you have gone down the wrong path. Maybe you have moved away from God's will for your life. But the Lord will welcome you back with open arms.

In Luke chapter 15, Jesus tells a story of a father who had 2 sons. The youngest one claimed his inheritance, abandoned his father and set off for the city. He lost all his money and ended up eating the food for the pigs he was looking after. He realised what he had done, and how wrong he had been, and went back to his father looking only to become one of his servants. And in one of the most grace filled **verses of Scripture** we read these words: *'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.'* Luke 15:20

He was welcomed home, not as a servant but as the son he truly was. What we learn though is that his brother, despite never having left home, didn't share his father's joy. He was angry and bitter. He had never learnt to enjoy his father's presence. There's a real challenge in that for those of who have been around church for a long time. Have we just been around church, or have we been around God?

As you think of the Path of Renewal process are you excited about people coming to God, or are you jealous of the joy they have, that you feel you've missed out on?

As Naomi and Ruth head back to Bethlehem they have chosen the right priorities and the right place.

3. Choose the right people.

That's what Ruth was doing in vs. 16, when she said: "*Your people will be my people.*" Ruth could have gone back home to the Moabites, but she probably would have wound up worshipping their false gods.

The people we spend time with have a huge influence on us! Some of the biggest mistakes I have ever made in my life were helped along by running with the wrong crowd. And some of my greatest victories came through the good people who influenced me. We need to choose to spend time, when we can, with people who will encourage and help us. People with whom we can be ourselves without fear of ridicule or destructive criticism. **We need to** choose to meet, as often as we can, with God's people so that we can be discipled and learn to disciple others. Making disciples is not for a chosen few; it's not for the super spiritual or ultra holy; it's not just for people who have a degree in theology, for church elders or ministers. All of God's people are supposed to be disciples of Jesus, learning to become more like him, and to disciple others.

This doesn't mean we should shut ourselves off from the world. In John 17, Jesus was just a few hours before the cross, and the Bible records one of the prayers He spoke in those crucial moments. In that prayer Jesus spoke to His Heavenly Father, and said this about His followers:

John 17:14-18 *¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*

God wants us to reach out to lost family and friends. He wants us to love them, to share Jesus with them, and help meet their needs. But we have to be careful about the choices we make, because our friends really do have an influence on us, either for good or for bad.

4. Choose the right Provider

That's what Ruth did in vs. 16, when she said, "**Your God will be my God!**"

We have no idea what Ruth knew about God. We are never told any detail of conversations where Naomi explained theology to Ruth. **We are told** (v6) that they had heard that the Lord had come to the aid of his people in Israel and provided food. And in verses 20-21 Naomi recognises that it is the Lord that has brought her misfortune and I suspect she assumes that he must be displeased with her.

We don't know if there was something in the way Naomi and her family behaved that drew Ruth towards God. It is quite likely that, at least initially, this was simply a commitment to Naomi rather than God, and that he simply came along with Ruth's promise to adopt Naomi's people and place. And yet, in doing that, even unwittingly, Ruth chose the only one who would really provide for her.

Isn't it ironic that Naomi left with her family in search of food because their stomachs were empty, yet in **verse 21 she says:** ²¹ *I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.* She thinks she was full because she had a husband and sons, but she was looking in the wrong place for provision. And yet, here again we see God's grace because the chapter ends **with these words:** ²² *So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.*

And think about what the Lord did for Ruth. The Moabites came from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter. But the Lord took her out of that corrupt, godless background, and gave her a home with the people of God.

Then, we'll see in chapter 2, God met all of Ruth's physical needs, when she went to the field to glean. Gleaning was one way that God took care of the poor, because His law required the harvesters to leave some of the harvest for the poor.

Then in chapters 3-4, God gave Ruth a new husband: The generous and kind kinsman-redeemer, Boaz. Boaz is a picture of Jesus, because he was taking care of Ruth before she even knew it.

Boaz also paid the price for her. He rescued and redeemed Ruth. And he chose Ruth to be his wife. Then the Lord gave Ruth King David as her great grandson! God also gave her the privilege of being an ancestor to Jesus. Ruth is in Jesus' family tree!

Now think what the Lord Jesus has done for us. He has created us, and taken care of us. He has blessed us in countless ways. Jesus came to Earth for us, He died on the cross for us, and He rose again from the dead. Now our Risen Lord Jesus will give eternal life, if you will accept him as your Lord and Saviour. And all of these blessings come from God's amazing grace.