



Ruth 1:1-5

“Famine in the Land of Milk and Honey”

NKJ Ruth 1:1 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.

The book of Ruth explains to us how a woman from Moab became the great-Grandmother of David and ended up in the Genealogy of Jesus Christ (and incidentally, I hope you realize that there are actually three Canaanite women in Christ's bloodline Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth). But it does much more than that, as I hope you will see it shows us a beautiful picture of sin, repentance, redemption and justification.

But before we start to see how it does that, let's spend some time talking about the context of this book. First when did these events occur? Well as the first verse tells us, they occurred in a sad time in Israel's history, it was some point during the time of the Judges (roughly 1250 to 1050 BC). God's people had entered into the promised land under Joshua, and by God's grace they had defeated many of the Canaanite inhabitants, but following the death of that generation, they had begun to forsake the Lord and to follow false gods. As a result of their apostasy, they went through cycles of turning away from God, being chastened by Him, and then turning and crying out to Him. God would then raise up a Judge like Gideon or Deborah to deliver them from their oppression. But once they were delivered they would turn away again and the cycle would start again.

Now it wasn't only enemies that God used to chasten his people for their faithlessness, before they went into the promised land God had told them again and again that he was delivering into a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey, but He warned them in Lev. 26:19-20 what would happen if they despised Him and ignored His commandments:

Lev. 26:19 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 Ruth starts that is exactly what is taking place, God is chastening his people with a famine, and even in Bethlehem – which literally means *house of bread* because the land is so fertile – there isn't enough to eat. And as we read because of the famine a man named Elimelech decided to move his family out of the promised land, so he takes them east across the Dead Sea to Moab. Incidentally, the ancient name of Bethlehem was Ephrath so people like the Elimelech and his family who were from there were called Ephrathites.

The names of the members of this family are important to. The first is Elimelech, his name means God is King, his wife is Naomi which means Pleasant or delightful one. Those are nice names, the boys aren't quite so nice, Mahlon means "sick" and Chilion means "pining" and it is possible that it was perhaps because the boys were born sickly and weak in a time of famine that Elimelech decided he had to move for the sake of their health.

Then there are their wives, Orpah meaning Gazelle, and incidentally ORPAH is Oprah Winfrey's given name, every mispronounced it in her childhood and Oprah stuck and Ruth which means "Friendship."

Now, regarding the move to Moab that this all starts with, it is commendable that Elimelech wants to provide for his family in hard times, and that he doesn't cut and run from them, which was sadly quite common. I'm always appalled by the story of Hansel and Gretel, as soon as the woodcutter and his wife run out of money, she plans to get rid of the kids. But Elimelech's solution is actually worse than the problem.

Now you may be wondering, why is going to Moab so bad when Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob all left Canaan during times of famine. But that was before God had delivered the land into their hands, while they were still nomads wandering about. God had told the people specifically that their time of sojourning or wandering was over, he brought them into the land, he delivered on his promise and he said stay here, don't waver in your faith, and I will bless you abundantly.

Elimelech breaks that command of God, and he leaves the land and the people of God, he could probably have found someplace in Israel that wasn't so destitute but he doesn't do that. He sees that there is plenty of food in Moab, and he goes, and that before his own resources were exhausted. We know that because Naomi will confess in verse 21 that they went out "full" from Israel and ultimately, he is going to bring disaster on his family. As Matthew Henry put it Elimelech forgot that the Moabites have food not because God loves Moabites better, but because they have *their portion in this life*.

Now if I can make two applications here:

Guys, there may be times when you think that you have to ignore God's commandments for the good of your family. For instance, you may be offered the opportunity to do better economically by moving to the dark side of the moon. And you may say, well if I go there we'll do better. But in doing so, so many men don't stop to consider whether they are doing spiritual harm. What does it matter if there is food in Moab? *The Lord's people and the place to worship him are in Israel!* Do you really think your family can live on bread alone? Also remember no hardship comes your way that the Lord does not intend for your good, staying and suffering a while with God's people would have served Elimelech far better, but while his name may have been "God is King" his actions in the crunch showed he didn't really believe that.

Single Ladies, you need to marry strong Christian men, not Elimelechs. Don't go after Men who have profession of faith, but revert to worldly solutions in times of difficulty. Wives, you must encourage your men to put Christ and His commands first in all things.

Now after they are in Moab, where things were supposed to be better, things begin to go desperately wrong. First Elimelech dies, then his sons break God's commandment not to take the daughters of the Canaanites to be their wives. Even though they were living in Moab they could have sent for daughters from amongst the people of God, but they don't. Now God is going to use their evil decision for good, he does that all the time, but that doesn't make the action good. God may use Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery in Egypt to be the means by which he saves the whole family from starving, but that doesn't mean good to sell your brother into slavery. I hear that reasoning all the time incidently when it comes to bad terrible abuses in God's church, but just because God can bring a genuine conversion in the midst of false preaching is not an argument for false preaching being ok. We should also note that evil actions generally do produce evil results.

But why did Mahlon and Chilion do the wrong thing anyway?

A parent's hope is generally that their children will excel them, for instance, we always hope that while we may have done well economically, our children will do better. Or if we have progressed in holiness, our children will far outstrip us. Unfortunately that particular rule of thumb, works in both directions. If you set a weak example spiritually, your children will be weaker still. If you show disinterest in God's word, your children will show contempt. Elimelech probably didn't think that his sons would marry Moabite women, but he set the example by the initial transgression of going to Moab, the boys just continued in the same direction. I'm always struck that as the Christian faith was being systematically weakened by change after change in the 19th century, that all of the men making the changes keep writing its just a little change, *"I'm not saying let's have crazy disordered worship, I'm just saying lets just not be quite so strict about sticking only to the bible and while we're on the subject of the bible, its not like we don't think its almost entirely the word of God, we just have a few problems with some stuff about miracles, the rest is all good."* They just went a little way, and then their children went a little further, and then their kids went a little further, and so on...

Well eventually Mahlon and Chilion also die, and only the women are left, we will find out what happens to them next week.

Three obvious but related applications –

Famine in the church – Not a physical famine, we have an over abundance of good things (A palm example) we are going through a spiritual famine. A famine of God's word. Faithfulness to God's word would have produced plenty – Jer. 6:16 *Thus says the LORD: "Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'* And the problem is that this famine, which should have produced repentance has been responded to by going to the world. And it is killing us.

Secondly, when Christians are chastened we need to remember that that is a sign of God's love, "whom the father loves he chastens" and that his design is to refine us, to break us of our pride, to teach us to turn to him and learn that his grace is sufficient and that we can rest upon Christ. If we will turn to him: Romans 5:3 *"And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope."* You will

never learn those difficult lessons by running from trouble all the time. And you will generally find that running and pragmatism doesn't bring the relief that you expect and it means you cannot strengthen your own brethren who are suffering in that place as well. One of the reasons we have such weak churches is that when troubles start, often the pastors solution is to punch out and find a new calling, and then when he does the members do as well.

FOLDERS - "It is an evidence of a discontented, distrustful, unstable spirit, to be weary of the place in which God hath set us, and to be for leaving it immediately whenever we meet with any uneasiness or inconvenience in it. It is folly to think of escaping that cross which, being laid in our way, we ought to take up. It is our wisdom to make the best of that which is, for it is seldom that changing our place is mending it.

Thirdly, we can spend our lives like the worldlings running from place to place trying to find things that will make us happy, but never finding contentment and finding that even if we do have the things of the world for a time eventually they leave us or we leave them. It is therefore our wisdom to make sure of those comforts that will be made sure and of which death cannot rob us.

Mat. 6:19 " Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal;

20 "but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

21 "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"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."

What is your treasure? Is it things, is it people, or is it Christ? Where is your treasure is it here on earth? Or is it in Heaven?