

Message #2**Ruth 1:1-5**

It was predicted by God, in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, that He would raise up a series of kings through Abraham, who would rule Israel and then raise up a Divine King who would rule Israel and all peoples of the world (Genesis 17:6; 35:11; 49:10). This prophetic fact was stated in multiple passages of Scripture—Numbers 24:17; Deut. 17:14-20.

When we come to this book of Ruth, we come to the point in time when God starts that work and He does it with a story like no other. In fact, how God actually begins to accomplish this is something only He could orchestrate. No one could even dream up this story.

THE GREATEST BLESSINGS OF GOD ARE GIVEN TO REAL PEOPLE, WHO LIVED IN A REAL TIME, WHO LIVED IN A REAL PLACE, WHO EXPERIENCED REAL FAMILY TRAGEDY, BUT TRUSTED GOD.

These first five verses of Ruth begin to tell a real story and they begin by telling a sad story about a sad family that had things go horribly wrong. This story is about major family tragedy that eventually will lead to tremendous blessings that have far-reaching, prophetic implications. No one would ever think this of those who were actually involved in this story. But this is the story in which God was working.

Your life story may be one of having experienced one tragedy after another. That is not the final story of your life. You don't know what God is actually sovereignly doing in your world. In fact, if a person chooses to do what God would have him/her do, those tragedies may be used to lead that person to the greatest blessings of God. Blessings they never would have imagined.

There are a series of seven introductory facts that are brought out in these verses that are critical to the rest of the book:

INTRODUCTORY FACT #1 – This occurred at a time when judges governed. **1:1a**

The days of the judges were a distinct time period in Israel's history. The first judge was Othniel (1373 BC) and the last judge was Samson (1049BC). The times of the judges were times in between these 300 plus years. This was certainly not a good time spiritually for Israel.

The thing that characterized the times of the judges is that it was a time when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Not too many people were interested in praying to God and pursuing the will of God; most did what they wanted to do.

When the events of this story occurred, the people were being governed by "local chieftains." What this means is these actual events occurred between the death of Joshua and the inauguration of King Saul as Israel's first king. In fact, the last verse of Judges says, "In those days there was no king in Israel" (Judges 21:25).

It was somewhat of a primitive time in which various judges made judicial decisions and determinations. The leaders would sit at the gates of a little city like Bethlehem and make decisions pertaining to life. But there was no real spiritual leadership.

Now the specific book that really presents what life was like during those days is the book of Judges and as we mentioned, it was a time when everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. This was the condition of things when this story occurred.

INTRODUCTORY FACT #2 – This occurred at a time when there was a famine in the land.

1:1b

The writer does not tell us the specific reason for the famine, it just tells us that a famine hit. We certainly know from Scripture that God is sovereign over a famine and often times it is a judgment of God and a curse for rebellion (i.e. Lev. 26; Deut. 28). During the 300 plus year gap of time of the judges, things had spiritually deteriorated and a famine judgment from God would be a real possibility.

During the time of the judges, there was a famine that hit Israel as a judgment during the days of Gideon (1190 BC-1150 BC) (Judges 6:1-6). It was due to evil and it occurred 150 years plus before David.

Apparently a great famine hit the land. The land being referred to is the Promised Land of Israel. This had been the land into which Joshua had led them. But after Joshua died and was gone, the nation drifted into horrible evil (i.e. Judges 2:11). So more than likely this famine was a judgment of God.

It must have hit all of Israel and it must have been very severe. If a Jewish family actually felt they needed to move out of the Promised Land and leave their house and land to relocate to a foreign country just to get food, it must have been a very severe famine.

I doubt that not too many of these people were thinking about God's judgment or even God's will in this. They just realized they were in a bad famine. Sometimes when bad things happen, people don't actually know for sure why they happened, so they just react to it.

People need food to eat. When a famine would hit an area, it was not uncommon for a family to relocate to where they can find work and get food.

INTRODUCTORY FACT #3 – Because of the famine, a man from Bethlehem went to live in the land of the Moabites with his wife and two sons. **1:1c**

Whenever an Israelite leaves the Promised Land to go to a foreign land, their story will not be a happy one. The land was under judgment and instead of seeking to get right with God, this family decided to move.

Sometimes people move to another state or even country for a better life. Grass looks much greener somewhere else. It was not unusual for a famine to prompt someone to relocate to a place where there was not a famine. In Genesis 12:10, Abraham went to Egypt because of a famine and in Genesis 26:1, Isaac also relocated for the same reason. When there is no food, one needed to go to where one can get food and apparently this family felt it needed to move.

It is not that unusual for people to move for better economic situations. But when you are an Israelite, in a land given to you specifically by God, and you decide to leave it and move out of it, this probably is not a really wise move to make.

Bethlehem is an honored place in the Bible. In the O.T. it was the home of Boaz, where Ruth eventually married. It is the home town of King David, and in the New Testament it was the birthplace of the Son of God. So Bethlehem is a very sacred spot in Scripture. In fact, it is quite apparent that Boaz did not move away from this area due to the famine, so this was not the only option.

This typically was a good area to live. It is about six miles south of Jerusalem. It sat on a ridge and it was normally a very fertile area. It was known for its olives, wheat, barley, fig trees and vineyards. In fact, the name “Bethlehem” means house of bread. It was a great area to live.

When this family decided to move, they did not head south to Egypt; they headed NE to the land of Moab. When the famine hit, this family decided to relocate to the north east about 50 miles. They decided to go out of the Promised Land to the land of Moab, which is modern day Jordan. This land was located east of the Jordan, which indicates that the famine was apparently not in those areas but just seemingly the Promised Land.

The family consisted of a husband, wife and two sons. So this was a family of four. This family was specifically said to be in Bethlehem of Judah. **It does not appear that any from this family consulted God about this move.**

Many Bible teachers have observed that this was not a wise move to move out of the Promised Land, which is why many in this family will end up dead. Others have said that it was legitimate to make a move in famine times, as we have already cited. What we do know is that it does not appear that God was consulted about this move.

What we cannot deny from this book is that God was sovereign even over this move because Ruth lived in Moab and she will end up being in the lineage of Jesus Christ. Had not this family moved out of Bethlehem to Moab, Ruth would not even be in the picture. So even if we conclude this was not a right move for the family to make, it is still a move over which God was sovereign.

Now it is interesting that this man is not named until **verse 2**. So the first emphasis given here is the emphasis that this man took his family out of Bethlehem in Judah, and moved to “the land of Moab” (**v. 1, 2**).

Moab is a mountainous kind of area east of the Dead Sea. There is about a 25 mile wide fertile plateau area located thousands of feet above the Dead Sea's eastern shore. This must have been an intimidating move. As Robert Hubbard said, they are moving from the known to the unknown and from the familiar to the unfamiliar (*Ruth*, p. 87). But the land did not look like a famine territory.

It is land about 50 miles long and 30 miles wide. The Arnon River flows through it and subdivides into several valleys. To actually get to this land from Bethlehem, they must travel past Jericho and along the Jordan River, which was land God gave to Israel. It must have crossed their minds that we are going the wrong way.

The irony of this is that the name "Bethlehem" means house of bread and obviously the issue here is that there was no bread or food. The fact that this family was going to sojourn there indicates they were not planning to live there forever. Their intention was to go there for a while and then come back home.

They were going to stay there until the famine was over and then go back home. So this story starts with God's people crossing borders into a foreign land in order to survive.

INTRODUCTORY FACT #4 – The family from Bethlehem is identified. **1:2**

There are four names of people that we meet in this verse and many put quite an emphasis on their names:

(Person #1) - The husband and father was Elimelech. El - God; Melech - King.

The name means "God is King" which suggests that Elimelech was raised in a God-honoring home. Now the irony of his name is that these events occurred in the days of Judges before there was a king. We cannot help but marvel at the fact that the God King will actually be connected to this guy's family.

One other point worth noting and that would be it appears the move was made without consulting God. So even though Elimelech's name means God is King, he was apparently not the king over his life when he made the move.

The fact that he moves out of the Promised Land may indicate that he doubted God was the sovereign King. There is no hint that he prays and asks God what to do. He just packs up his family and moves. The one person who led this family into disaster was this husband and father.

(Person #2) - The wife and mother was Naomi. NM - lovely or pleasant

Naomi is mentioned as being Elimelech's wife, but she will become a key and central part of the book. Naomi must have been a very sweet and pleasant woman. In fact, later in the book both of her daughter-in-laws loved her and wanted to live with her.

(Person #3) - The son was named Mahlon (MHL) - sickly

We learn later in the book that Mahlon was the one who married Ruth (4:10). His name may describe his spiritual condition that was sick and in decline.

(Person #4) - One son was named Chilion (KLH) - complete or end.

Chilion was the one who married Orpah. His name means complete or end and he would come to his end in the land of Moab.

The family was from the Ephrathite region of Bethlehem. This seems to have been a suburbia area near Bethlehem. By the naming of this place, not only does this directly link to King David (I Sam. 17:12), but also to Jesus Christ (Micah 5:2). This becomes a critical point to this entire book.

INTRODUCTORY FACT #5 – Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died. **1:3**

We don’t know the age of Elimelech when he died, but the text says he died. God took him and ended his life while he was living in the land of Moab and that is the way Naomi, his wife, saw it (1:21). She believed it was God who decided that her husband die in that foreign land. That left her a widow.

As they were trying to survive in famine time, Elimelech died. Naomi was left with her two sons and left with the responsibility of having to bury her husband in a foreign Moabite land. She never expected this to happen. Suddenly everything changed in Naomi’s world. She had to bury her husband in a foreign Moabite land.

Think of what would have gone on in her mind. Her entire family had been forced to move away from her home because of a famine. While she was living far away from her home, her family and friends, her husband dies and she is left with her two sons. She has no more income; she has no life insurance policy; she has no pension; she has no social security; she is in a foreign land with two sons and, of course, there was God. When this tragedy hit, she had no way of knowing what God was going to do. All she knew is that she felt alone.

Now typically when a husband dies, the widow finds great strength from family and friends and also from the children, in this case from two boys. But certainly this would cause Naomi to wonder. This would be a major setback because you are miles from where you should be living.

This was not the ideal place for God to take her husband’s life. She could not have helped but wonder why and there must have been many questions.

What Naomi would eventually learn is that God did have a plan, even in the death of her husband. He did have something in mind. His sovereign will was being fulfilled in the life of this grieving wife.

INTRODUCTORY FACT #6 – The two sons marry Moabite women. **1:4**

In **verse 4** we move forward in time and we go from something that is so sad to something that seems to be so happy. We go from the dark days of a funeral to the joyous days of a wedding. Each of Naomi's boys got married.

The two sons each took a Moabite wife. One was named Orpah, the wife of Chilion, and the other was named Ruth, the wife of Mahlon.

The text says that they married these women and they lived in this land for about ten years. So what this would tell us is that Naomi did not move the family back to her homeland when her husband died. She lived about ten years in the land.

Now this has been a point of controversy because some have said that these two should not have married Moabite wives. These Israelites had immigrated to Moabite land and they literally disobeyed God's word and married these women.

The Mosaic Law did forbid Israelites from marrying Canaanites (Deut. 7:3), but the Mosaic Law does not specifically say they could not marry a Moabite wife. Although we do know that when King Solomon married a Moabite wife, he ended up serving other gods (I Kings 11:1-6).

But the truth is these are two good Moabite women. They were, as one commentator said, "virtuous, kind, devoted" and they apparently conformed to their husband's worship of the God of the Bible.

Naomi must have viewed this as a happy time. She probably felt like she had some stability and security as a widow in a foreign land. Life rolled on and they were there about ten years. But then tragedy hit again.

INTRODUCTORY FACT #7 – The two sons died. **1:5**

Naomi not only lost her husband, but both of her sons. They apparently died childless. So what we have here is a wife and mother who looks to be all alone in a foreign land.

At this point, it appears that her life is over. She has no means of support. She is living in a foreign land. She doesn't even know how she will survive.

This is not the kind of context one would expect to find God working. You would not expect that this woman would ever be happy again. You would not expect that this woman who was so depressed and so low and so empty could ever have a fullness of which she never imagined.

What she didn't know is that God was leading her to the greatest blessings of her life, and these were the very circumstances He was using to get her to those blessings.