

This morning I will begin a series of sermons on the OT book of Ruth. There is no special reason for choosing Ruth other than it's in the OT and been a while since we have spent much time in the OT. The main principle that guides what I choose to preach about is expressed by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:16 where he says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...." God has given us a wonderful resource in the Scriptures and the best way to preach is to cover as much of it as we can and so for the next little while we will work our way through the book of Ruth.

The book of Ruth tells a story. In that it is similar to many other parts of the Bible. The Bible is God's message to us and he has chosen to give a lot of that message in the form of stories. And all of the stories of the Bible make up one overarching story that begins with creation and ends with the new creation. Between the beginning and the end, God tells us the story the unfolding of his plan of salvation and judgment. Jesus Christ is at the heart of that plan. The OT leads to him. And the NT after the gospels flow from him. And we are meant to understand ourselves and our lives and the whole history of the world in the light of that story and live accordingly.

The book of Ruth is story that connects with and contributes to the larger story that the Bible tells. Just as we are to understand our lives in the light of the story that the Bible tells, so the little story of Ruth must also be understood in the light of the larger story that the Bible tells. We must keep that in mind as we proceed. In the story of Ruth, Ruth is an example of loyalty and kindness among other things and Boaz is a positive example in a number of ways. But because of its connection to the larger story of God's plan of salvation, Ruth and Boaz are not simply inspiring examples of how to live our lives. This is a story about what God was doing as he prepared the way for sending his Son into the world for our salvation. God was working through the characters in this story. There are places where they are inspiring examples for us to imitate in our lives, but we must understand all the details in the light of what God was doing as he guided history towards Jesus Christ and through him to the defeat of sin and the renewal of all things.

Today we will consider chapter 1:1-5. The story is set in the time when the judges ruled. That is important and we will come back to that. There is a famine in the land and a man who lived in Bethlehem took his wife and two sons and moved to the country of Moab where there was more food available. We are given their names. The man's name was Elimelech. His wife's name was Naomi, and the two sons are named Mahlon and Chilion. We are told that they moved to Moab and that they remained there. Then Elimelech died. The two sons took Moabite wives named Orpah and Ruth. After ten years Mahlon and Chilion died and we are told "that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband."

This first paragraph is very concise. It covers many years in a few verses. It sets the stage for the rest of the story. The woman – Naomi – is left helpless in a foreign country – without a husband and without sons. She has two daughters in law. She is in a dire situation. There were no social safety nets. What will she do? Who will look after her? How will she survive? The rest of the story will answer those questions.

Let's go back and look at some of the details. The story takes place "In the days that the judges ruled..." That setting is important for the meaning of the story. The days when the judges ruled were not good days in Israel. The book of Judges tells the story of the people of Israel shortly after the days of the conquest of the promised land under the leadership of Joshua. Let me give a bit of background. Hundreds of years earlier God had promised Abram that his descendants would one day live in the land of Canaan – that is why Canaan is often called the promised land. At one point the descendants of Abraham ended up in Egypt also due to a famine and as they grew from a family into a nation, the Pharaoh in Egypt oppressed them as slaves. Through Moses God delivered his people from Egypt and eventually brought his people to the promised land. Under the leadership of Joshua, the people of Israel took the promised land. This was God's way of punishing the wicked people who lived there as well as giving the land to his people. The book of Judges tells the story of the first generations of the people of Israel living in the promised land. And it is not a pretty story.

The people of Israel were supposed to serve God by loving him and obeying his commands. But they failed to do that. They lived wicked lives. Much of the time they lived no differently than the nations around them. And so God would raise up one of those nations to defeat them and oppress them. Then Israel would cry out to God and God would raise up a leader – called a judge – to lead them in war against their enemies so that they would be free again. That cycle happened many times over the next few generations. And things went from bad to worse. The last few chapters in Judges describe unspeakable wickedness among the Israelites. The whole situation was summed up like this in Judges 21:25 – "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

This is a very significant verse for the whole story of God's plan of salvation. We must always remember that all of this history with Israel was about God choosing them to be his holy people in the midst of a wicked world so that they could be a blessing to the rest of the world. God was going to overcome the devastation caused by sin through choosing this people and blessing them and giving them his laws so that they could be a light to all the other nations of the world. But instead, what was happening in the time of Judges was that Israel was living like the nations. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

It is very significant that in connection with that, the book of Judges says, "In those days there was no king in Israel." These words suggest the need for a righteous king who will lead the people of God in the ways of righteousness. Back in Deuteronomy 17, God had promised that he would one day give them such a righteous king. That passage teaches that the king that God would rise up to lead Israel must be different than the kings of the nations – that he must read the book of God's law every day and live and rule according to it. There is in the whole story of God's dealings with his people a theme of a king who would lead the people in righteousness and that theme is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

But in the time of Judges – "there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Then we read in the opening lines of the book of Ruth, “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.” The mention of Bethlehem is a reminder of king David because king David also came from Bethlehem. The mention of Bethlehem at this point may not seem significant all by itself, but in the light of the fact that the book ends by telling us that Naomi’s grandson, the child of Ruth and Boaz, would be the grandfather of king David, the mention of Bethlehem at the beginning of the story is a hint that this story may have something to do with king David. When we read the story told in the book of Ruth in the light of its ending, we understand that it is about how God was working through the lives of Naomi and Ruth to answer the problem that the book of Judges describes. “There was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” The fact that the family described in these first verses come from Bethlehem is a hint that this story has something to do with king David.

And therefore, it also has something to do with Jesus Christ because Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise that God would make to David that one of his sons would rule over the people of God forever. In the story told in Ruth we see God at work preparing the way for Jesus Christ who would come to save his people from their sins.

And one of the things that we see in this story is that God uses both sin and suffering as well as obedience to fulfill his purposes. God is never the author of sin. God himself is never tainted by sin. But God does use sinful actions of people to accomplish his purposes. The most prominent example of that in the Bible is the death of Jesus. Those responsible for Jesus’ death were sinning when they condemned Jesus to death, but the Bible is very clear about the fact that Jesus’ death was also the result of God’s plan for the salvation of his people. In Acts 2:23, Peter is preaching his Pentecost sermon and he says that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.” But in the same verse he also says that Jesus was “crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”

We see this same principle operating in the story told in the book of Ruth. The end of the story shows us that God had planned that Ruth, a Moabitess, should be the great-grandmother of David. These first 5 verses of the book of Ruth show us how God included some sinful decisions of Elimelech in accomplishing that plan.

The move of this family from Bethlehem to Moab was the expression of their failure to trust God and their failure to prioritize the spiritual wellbeing of the family and instead to prioritize their physical wellbeing at the expense of their spiritual wellbeing. The land of Canaan was the promised land. It was the place that God had provided for his people and it was the place where he had promised to dwell with them. It is true that these were terrible times in Israel – everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes – but the people of Israel were the people God had chosen to be his own and what Elimelech and his family should have been doing was seeking the Lord within the community of God’s people. The famine was a chastisement from God, the purpose of which was to encourage the people of Israel to repent and return to the Lord.

Back in Deuteronomy God had warned his people that if they turned away from serving him, he would send famines or other punishments upon them. But he also promised that if they would repent of their sins and cry out to God for mercy, he would hear them and remove his chastisement from them. And we see this happening a number of times in the book of Judges. The proper response of Elimelech and his family would have been to stay in Bethlehem among the people of God in the promised land, endure the hardships and turn to the Lord and seek his mercy.

The land of Canaan had a significance for the people of Israel that no country has today. If one of us would have a good job prospect in the US, for instance, there would not be any sin in taking that job, assuming that there was not some other reason that it would be wrong to make such a move. We can serve God just as well in the United States as we can in Canada. But the land of Canaan, when Israel lived there in OT times, was theologically significant. It was the promised land. It was the home that God had provided for his people. It was the place where he had promised to dwell among them. Even though during the time of Judges, Israel was far from what she ought to have been, the land of Canaan was still the land which God had given to his people in which to dwell and serve him.

And Elimelech and Naomi, by leaving it for Moab, were compromising their faith and putting their family in grave spiritual danger. The language of these verses suggests that the original intention was to stay there for a while and then return, but what actually happened is that they stayed there and put down roots. Verse 1 says that the family went to sojourn in Moab. Verse 2 says that they remained there. Verse 4 says that the two sons took Moabite wives.

That is a serious and sad progression. Elimelech and Naomi's compromise led to their sons marrying Moabite wives. This was very different from what Boaz would later do when he married Ruth. When Boaz married Ruth she had already embraced the God of Israel. When the sons of Elimelech and Naomi married Moabite women, they were marrying unbelievers. And that was a spiritual disaster.

The Bible consistently forbids God's people to marry unbelievers. In Deuteronomy 7:3-4 God says to his people concerning pagans, "You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods." This has nothing to do with ethnicity. As we have already seen there was no issue with Ruth marrying Boaz once she embraced the God of Israel. Indeed, the fact that she was a Moabitess is highly significant in a positive way as we will see as we work our way through this book. What is consistently and strongly forbidden in the Bible is people of God marrying those who are not followers of God. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:39 commands believers to only marry in the Lord.

So, Ruth 1:1-5 are describing a spiritual disaster. And as such these verses are a warning to us to prioritize our spiritual wellbeing in the decisions that we make including major life decisions such as where we will live. Elimelech and Naomi made a decision that was better for them economically, but which was a disaster for

their relationship with God. And it is a warning for us not to make the same mistake. The most obvious parallel would be to take a dream job in a place that is not served by a faithful church. But the principle applies to any major or minor decision that we make. We must ask – how will this impact church life? Will this decision help or hinder my relationship with God and my involvement in the church community? We can produce the same disaster as Elimelech did by immersing ourselves in worldly influences and minimizing our contact with God and his people. We can do what Elimelech did without moving by choosing to surround ourselves with worldly influences and having minimal exposure to God and his people.

The most important relationship in life is our relationship with God and that relationship is inseparable from our relationship with the people of God and that must be the most significant factor in all the decisions that we make. How will this decision impact my relationship with God and with his people? How will this decision impact the spiritual growth of my children? This is what Elimelech did not do and the result of that was catastrophic for himself and his family.

The death of Elimelech and his two sons is important for the story in a number of different ways. No doubt the death of these men was as judgment of God upon them, but the focus in the story is how these deaths impacted Naomi. After the death of her husband, Naomi continued to live in Moab. She still had her two sons with her. She stayed in Moab and it was during that time that her sons married Moabite wives. She could have returned to Bethlehem after the death of her husband, but she chose to stay in Moab and because of that decision her sons ended up taking Moabite wives.

So then, the two sons died, and Naomi was left without a husband or sons. She was alone with her daughters-in-law. No doubt this had something to do with Naomi returning to Bethlehem. Verse 6 says that she returned when she heard that there was food again in Israel, but it is clear that the death of her sons was also a factor in her decision to return to Bethlehem.

Though those deaths, God was working in Naomi's life to bring her to return to Israel. The contrast between the dead husband and sons and Naomi is important. The three men were dead. They died in their sins. Naomi experienced terrible suffering due to the loss of her husband and sons, but that suffering was a factor in bringing her to return to Bethlehem where it would become clear over time that God was going to bless her.

Here we see an example of God's sovereign choice. The men's lives were taken in Moab. They never repented. But Naomi was spared and ended up being blessed by God in Bethlehem. And part of the way to that blessing was terrible suffering.

There is a lot of mystery concerning suffering, but one of the reasons that the Bible gives is that God uses it for the spiritual wellbeing of his people. This in no way minimizes the pain of suffering, but in the end, Naomi was a lot better off under God's blessing in Bethlehem than she would have been had she experienced a life without hardship in Moab and died there estranged from God. Hebrews 12:10 says that God "disciplines us for

our good, that we may share his holiness.” This does not mean that we always know exactly why God sends or allows suffering in our lives. The book of Job teaches us that there is always an element of mystery. But there is no doubt that in one way or another it is meant for our spiritual growth and wellbeing.

At the end of verse 5, Naomi is has lost almost everything. She has lost her husband. She has lost her sons. She has two daughters-in-law, but other than that she is alone in the world. At that point her situation looked hopeless. But consider where she ends up by the end of the story. After Ruth was married to Boaz and had a son with him, we are told what the women of Bethlehem said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renewed in Israel. He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for the daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him” (Ruth 4:14-15).

It is good for us to think of this when we are facing trials and difficulties. At the end of 1:5 things looked pretty hopeless for Naomi. But by the end of the story, she is provided for and has a future. And she has been used by God in a significant way in his plan of salvation. The story of the book of Ruth is about how God directed the lives of Naomi and Ruth to provide for them but also to make Ruth the great grandmother of king David. The story, as a whole shows, how God was working through the lives of Naomi and Ruth to provide Israel with a king who would lead God’s people in keeping God’s law. David is the answer to the problem posed by the book of Judges. “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

And David is the forerunner of Jesus. Just as we see God guiding the story told in the book of Ruth to provide Israel with a righteous king in king David, so we know that this is part of a larger story that leads to king Jesus. And Jesus is the one through whom, the people of God are delivered from their sins and enabled to live lives of obedience rather than doing what is right in our own eyes.

The story of Israel shows how the wages of sin is death. We see that point made in these first few verses of the book of Ruth. The way of turning your back on God and living for the things of this world is the way of emptiness, futility and death. It shows that the way to life is the way of repentance and returning to the Lord as Naomi having hit rock bottom finally returns to her people and her God. But the story of Israel also shows the need for a king greater than king David. David’s influence in Israel was certainly positive in many ways, but both his story and the rest of Israel’s story showed the terrible destructive power of sin. When Jesus was born, Joseph was told to name him Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. Jesus was the son of David who would finally break the power of sin in the lives of his people.

In the story told in the book of Ruth, Naomi is brought from emptiness to fullness. We who live after the time Jesus was on earth live with the assurance that the God who directed Naomi’s life is the same God who directs our lives, but we have a much greater blessing because we experience the salvation that Jesus obtained for us on the cross. Naomi did too, but she experienced it in the time of types and shadows. We experience Jesus’ victory over sin in the time of fulfillment. Through trusting in Jesus, we are forgiven all our sins, but also set

free from the power of sin through the work of the Holy Spirit. And God promises to work all things together for our good.

These first few verses of the book of Ruth make the powerful point that to live apart from God is death. But connected with the rest of the story they show that turning to God – looking to him to help us and provide for us is the way of life and fullness. May the Lord encourage us to dwell in the place where God dwells with his people – and provides all their needs for this life and for the life to come. For us that place is in Christ and in his body, which is the church.