



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for March 21, 2010
Released on Wednesday, March 17, 2010**

"Family as Community"

Lesson Text: Ruth 1:1-9, 14b-16

Background Scripture: Ruth 1:1-16

Devotional Reading: John 20:24-29

Ruth 1:1-9, 14b-16

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 sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.

2 And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem—judah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.

3 And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.

4 And they took them 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 And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread.

7 Wherefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.

8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

9 The Lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.

.... ..

14b And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law; but Ruth clave unto her.

15 And she said, Behold, thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister-in-law.

16 And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

Today's Aim

Facts: to show how one young woman from Moab found refuge in a family who knew the true God.

Principle: to affirm that our families can be places of refuge and safety if we follow God's order for them.

Application: to show how we can make our families places of community when we leave behind our old life and choose to follow Christ.

How to Say It

Chemosh. Kee-mosh.

Chilion. Kil-ee-on.

Elimelech. Ee-lim-eh-leck.

Ephrath. Ef-rath.

Ephrathites. Ef-ruh-thites.

Mahlon. Mah-lon.

Mesha. Me-shuh.

Moabite. Mo-ub-ite.

Naphtali. Naf-tuh-lye.

Introduction

The family is the basic unit of a community. When family units suffer, the whole community suffers.

Heartbreaking stories of family tragedy permeate newspapers and newscasts today. We hear not only of the house fires, traffic accidents, and neighborhood shootings that claim children's lives; we also hear of horrible dysfunctions within family units. Spouses divorce and fight for the children; former spouses kidnap children; disturbed parents beat, molest, or even kill unwanted or disabled children.

Ironically, out of such wretched conditions come some unlikely stories of success and love. God bestows grace so that the selfish, abusive, poor, and abused can be transformed and may yet glorify Him and bless their communities with good deeds.

Such is the outcome of the biblical account of Naomi and Ruth. It begins as a family tragedy, but it ends in a way that brought blessing to Israel and all mankind. Our lesson unfolds the beginning of this remarkable account.

Lesson Background

Today's text from Ruth comes from one of the two books of the Bible named for women. (The other is the book of Esther.) The date for the events in the book of Ruth is uncertain. David was the great-grandson of Ruth, and he became king over Judah about 1010 B.C., then over the entire nation of Israel in 1003 B.C. The primary account in Ruth can therefore be no later than 1100 B.C., and it may be earlier.

The author of the book is not given. Jewish tradition ascribes it to Samuel, who had anointed David as the king to follow Saul on the throne (1 Samuel 16:1-13). Samuel died before David became the king, so it is sometimes thought that a person such as Nathan, a prophet who was prominent in David's life, may have written the book. Solomon is not mentioned, and that is significant in this regard (allowing for cautions of using an argument from silence).

The book of Ruth is considered one of the finest literary works in all of ancient literature. There is drama in each chapter, and the lesson for today is from chapter one.

A Family Migration (Ruth 1:1-2)

1. What is meant by "the days when judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1a)?

The first phrases of the book give the historical background. An entire book of the Old Testament is dedicated to the period of *the days of the judges*, meaning about 1375-1050 BC. In this time frame, God raises up people called *judges*, who are

military deliverers or magistrates for His people. God allows times of suffering or oppression to come on the Israelites when they sin. When repentance takes place, God rescues His people by using one of the judges as a military deliverer. A period of peace follows, and the cycle starts again.

The time frame in view here is narrowed to an occasion when there is a *famine*. Famines are usually caused by lack of rain, the presence of insects (such as a locust invasion), or the fact that oppressing nations rob the people after the harvest is complete. Famine is one of the judgments that God promises if the people of Israel do not comply with the terms of the covenant (Deuteronomy 28, especially verse 24). It seems likely that this time the cause of the famine is drought-related.

2. Where did Elimelech and his family live? Why did they go to Moab (v. 1b)?

Elimelech and his family lived in Bethlehem in the tribe of Judah. This account in Ruth is more than just a time, a tragedy, and a town. It is about people who live in that time, in that town, and who experience the tragedy of a famine. It is about a *man, his wife, and their two sons*. In the midst of these circumstances the father makes a major decision: they will move to *the country of Moab*. The word *Bethlehem* means "house of bread," and it is ironic that the family feels compelled to move to Moab to have bread.

On a clear day the hills of Moab are visible from Bethlehem when a person looks to the east across the Dead Sea.

3. What were the names of Elimelech's family (v. 2)?

Personal names in biblical times are often significant in their meaning. The name *Elimelech* means "my God is king." *Naomi* means "pleasant." The son who will marry Ruth (Ruth 4:10) is *Mahlon*, meaning "weak." His brother is *Chilion*, or "pining." The latter two names suggest physical weaknesses. The decision to move and the health of the brothers may be related factors. To move from a place that had been assigned to an ancestor back in the days of Joshua is difficult, but parents will make such sacrifices for their children.

The entire family is designated as *Ephrathites*. Ephrath seems to have been a former name for *Bethlehem* (again, Genesis 35:19). The word *judah* is added to the name to distinguish it from another Bethlehem that is in the northern tribe of Naphtali (Joshua 19:15, 16).

A Family Tragedy (Ruth 1:3-5)

4. What tragedies befell this Israelite family in Moab?

Naomi has already experienced the emotions prompted by moving to another land. Now she has the grief that is associated with the loss of her *husband*. She and *her two sons* have to bury their loved one in a foreign country instead of the familiar environs of Bethlehem.

The words "and she was left" carried serious implications. The death of a family head would have been a severe blow even in this wife's own community, for it would deprive her of all livelihood. How much worse when it happened in a foreign country! Naomi was also left with her two sons, which in her circumstances was more a blessing than a burden. They were probably young adults at this time and could work to support themselves and their mother. She could also take comfort that despite their father's death. They could perpetuate the family name.

5. What did Naomi's sons decide to do in Moab (v. 4)?

We might expect Naomi and her sons to return to Bethlehem after the death of Elimelech. There they would at least have the support of their community. Instead,

they put down roots more firmly in Moab when the young men married Moabite women.

Again we might raise the question of whether these marriages were sin. Jews were not forbidden to marry Moabites, as they were Canaanites. Nevertheless, some of the same spiritual risks were involved, since the Moabites worshiped a false deity, Chemosh (Numbers 21:29). They could easily lead Israelites astray. In fact, it was Moabite women who seduced Israelites to worship Baal-peor as they journeyed to Canaan (25:1-3).

These marriages thus entailed perils, and the more scrupulous Israelites of that day would probably have frowned on them. But perhaps in the loose atmosphere of the times, few would have found fault.

The names of the two wives were Orpah and Ruth (Ruth 1:4). This text does not tell us which wife married which man. We only learn in 4:10 that Ruth was married to Mahlon. After this Naomi and her sons continued to live in Moab. "About ten years" indicates that they have become relatively comfortable there.

6. What kind of future did Naomi face after her husband and sons died (v. 5)?

Now, without explanation, the deaths of the two sons are reported. This left Naomi in a most pitiable condition. The family had disintegrated; the only ones left were three widows, and the two young women could be of no help to Naomi.

She was deprived of all income and faced a future of poverty. A woman without a man's support was utterly destitute, for economic life centered around the family. She also faced the end of the family name, for she was too old to bear more sons. With the utter hopelessness of her situation must have come questions: Was there any meaning in this? Was she in any way responsible for all this?

A Family Parting (Ruth 1:6-9)

7. What factors led Naomi to decide to return to Bethlehem? (vs. 6,7)

At least one piece of good news reached Naomi at this time: "the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread." In His sovereignty, He had ended the famine in Judah.

Naomi therefore decided to return to Bethlehem. Moab had no further attraction for her, and she had reasons for wanting to escape its hold on her life and her memories. She would be better off among her relatives in Bethlehem.

As she made her way homeward, her daughters-in-law accompanied her. They no doubt considered it their duty to do so. By marrying into an Israelite family, Orpah and Ruth had severed some ties with their own people. But now that their husbands had died, they were in an awkward situation. In a sense, they were women without a country, since their family ties on both sides had been dissolved. For the moment, Naomi was their only point of identification; so they went with her.

Their willingness to break ties with their homeland and to enter an alien culture also gives evidence of a close bond of loyalty. They apparently loved Naomi and refused to let her face the future alone. Their affection speaks well of their character. It also speaks well of Naomi, whose godly virtues had attracted such loyalty. Here, then, were three women united by a common grief and facing an uncertain future. But they determined to face it together.

8. What are some godly things to do when circumstances go from bad to worse?

The temptation to pity self presents itself in such circumstances (compare 1 Kings 19:10). Rejecting God may run through our thoughts (compare Job 2:9). Neither, of course, is godly. Naomi demonstrated right thinking: returning to the place where

God was demonstrating love and concern, returning to be among people who cared about her.

Leaving a place one associates with tragedy and loss may be a good choice. Those who are widowed sometimes find they simply “cannot stay” in a house they shared for decades with a departed love one. Seeking the emotional and physical closeness of those whom one knows will care is a good step. God created family and friendship for such times; the godly person does not consider such benevolent requests to be inappropriate.

9. What did Naomi urge her daughters-in-law to do? How did they initially respond? (vs. 8,9)

Naomi recognized the difficulties Orpah and Ruth would face in Israel. They were young, with hopes of remarrying and rearing families. But their prospects of finding husbands in Bethlehem were slim because of cultural barriers. So she released them from any obligation to her. “Go, return each to her mother’s house,” she said. We might have expected her to say “father’s house,” but she was referring to the women’s quarters of their home. There their mothers could comfort them, and they could prepare for another marriage.

We should note that Naomi prayed to God that He would find favor with Ruth and Orpah. She did not pray to Chemosh, the false deity of the Moabites. Even though she was in Moab for 10 years, she still held firm to her faith in the one true God.

Naomi kissed Orpah and Ruth as she anticipated a final parting, but this merely stirred their emotions: They broke out into loud weeping. As they wept, they protested that they would indeed stay with Naomi. But she discouraged them, arguing that she would have no more sons for them to marry. Why should they stay with someone whom God had forsaken?

A Family Loyalty (Ruth 1:14b, 16)

10. Why did Orpah return to her home (v.14b)?

After more tears, Orpah made her decision. She kissed Naomi good-bye and turned back. Naomi’s advice sounded sensible; if she ever wanted to remarry, this was apparently the way to achieve it. Having been forced to examine her values, Orpah decided that becoming a wife again was more important than remaining a daughter-in-law to Naomi.

Ruth, however, cleaved to her mother-in-law. She had counted the cost no less than Orpah and had reached an opposite conclusion. Her life would henceforth be with Naomi, whatever the sacrifice. Ruth, we will learn, has additional motivation, and that is given in the final words of today’s lesson text.

11. How deeply was Ruth committed to Naomi (vs. 15,16)? Explain.

One last time Naomi tried to dissuade Ruth (v. 15). She reminded her that Orpah had returned to her people and gods, and she urged Ruth to do likewise. This was bad spiritual advice, but Naomi was thinking only of the earthly happiness Ruth would gain.

Ruth was adamant, however. She begged Naomi to stop entreating her to return. She declared that she would go where Naomi went and lodge where she lodged. This was her declaration of personal loyalty to her both along the way and back in Judah, she would share the circumstances of Naomi’s life.

But she went even further: “Thy people shall be my people” (Ruth 1:16). Ruth would cease being a Moabite and would identify with a new society with new customs and laws. This inevitably entailed a new spiritual identity—“and thy God my God.” Ruth had seen a spiritual dimension in this Israelite family that she wanted for herself.

The determination of Ruth is especially revealed in verse 17, which is not part of today's lesson text. There Ruth makes a pledge that only death will separate her from Naomi. Ruth binds the statement with an oath that a judgment from God on her should result if she goes back on what she has just said. This is what proves beyond all doubt that Ruth really means what she says. Naomi no longer protests the decision of this devoted young woman. They will make their sojourn to Bethlehem together. They do not know the future, but they will have each other and God to strengthen them.

12. In what ways does Ruth's break with her past life parallel the decision we make when we accept Christ as Savior and Lord?

Such changes involve not only going *to* something, but also leaving something behind. Both are absolute commitments, a matter of personal will, based on faith that life can be better. Both involve taking on (being adopted into) new families. Ruth joined Naomi's family in Bethlehem; we join the family of God in Christ. Both involve an element of trust. Naomi had credibility, so Ruth trusted her to lead them to a better life. Our witness in leading others to Christ is effective when we demonstrate ourselves to be trustworthy.

Practical Points

- 1.** God's people are not automatically exempt from the difficulties of life (Ruth 1:1-2).
- 2.** Sometimes God chooses to allow circumstances that leave Him as our only hope (vs. 3-5).
- 3.** The wise man recognizes that every good thing is from God (Ruth 1:6; Matthew 5:45; James 1:17).
- 4.** No matter how difficult or how uncertain the outcome, take the next biblical step (Ruth 1:7).
- 5.** Our own difficulties should never preclude our desire for God's blessing on others (vs. 8,9).
- 6.** Following God involves sacrifice but also the hope of His sure provision (vs. 14, 16).

Conclusion

Someone Is Watching

A college student said that when he was young, his grandmother often influenced him to do what was right. After she died, he had the idea that she was in Heaven watching him from that vantage point. He did not want to disappoint his grandmother, so he tried to do the right thing.

It is a certainty that the lives of Christians are under scrutiny. In some cases this is a good thing, for others want to know if a person's faith is genuine. They want to know if the Christian's example will show how to handle the tough situations or special trials that are a part of life.

Sometimes, however, there are those who actually want the believer to do what is wrong. This provides an opportunity to throw the hypocrite label at all Christians, or it is interpreted that the claims of Christ are of no real significance in the person's life. In this lesson, Ruth is one who makes a right decision for the right reasons after observing her mother-in-law for a length of time.

How then shall we live? The answer is obvious: in a way that pleases God and sets good examples for others! Both He and they are watching.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the example of faith in the choices of Ruth. May her example help us in the choices that we make today as we walk in the way that leads to eternal life. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Thought to Remember

Faith will be tested. We must pass the test.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

In our lesson next week, we explore how we can find "Acceptance In Community." Study Ruth 2:5-12; 3:9-11.

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