## A Return to Bethlehem

Lesson for Sunday, November 20, 2022

TEXT: Ruth 1

BACKGROUND:

* Last week we introduced the book of Ruth.
* Ruth is a story told from the perspective of Ruth’s mother-in-law, Naomi.
* Naomi’s life was a life of one tragedy after another. *Who can remember some of the tragedies her family endured?* 
  + Famine which forced the family to leave their homeland and be immigrants in a foreign, pagan land.
  + Her husband died, leaving Naomi a widow and single parent.
  + Her sons both married Moabite women.
  + Then her sons both died, leaving no children behind.
* In spite of her tragic life, we saw from Matthew 1 that God was still in control and still working, even through the tragic events of her life.
* This week, we pick up the story with Naomi planning to return to her homeland.

OUTLINE:

* + 1. A choice to make: Stay in Moab or go with Naomi? (vs. 7-18)

1. Naomi’s decision:
   1. Naomi considered her circumstances: her childbearing years had expired; she has no value as a wife; she is a widow and her family tree is about to come to an end. The best chance for their security was to return to Moab.
   2. Notice the phrase in verse 8, “the Lord deal kindly with you.” It appears (like Job) that Naomi believed she was experiencing God’s judgment. In her compassion, she didn’t want them to be a part of God’s (apparent) judgment anymore.
   3. In Naomi’s decision she is a realist. Given the circumstances, she seems to be making the compassionate decision in regards to these two ladies.
2. Orpah’s decision:
   1. It is important to note that Orpah plays a critical role in the story. In this setting we are forced to contrast her with Ruth.
   2. The key is that Orpah is being sensible – not selfish.
   3. Naomi praised her character in verse 8. Orpah even refused Naomi’s first instruction to return to Moab (vs. 10).
   4. Orpah does what most of us would do – she displays good common sense. She weighs the factors and submits to Naomi’s counsel. She is simply following the logical trajectory of the evidence before her.
   5. The author does provide one clue in verse 15 that the decision faced by these ladies also had theological implications. Orpah “returned to her gods.”
3. Ruth’s decision:
   1. Consider Ruth’s words, “Where you go, I will go.” She was committed.
   2. “Where you lodge, I will lodge.” She chose to identify with Naomi.
   3. “Your people will be my people.” She forsaking all others.
   4. “Thy God will be my God.” There’s the theological aspect!
   5. “Where you die, I will die.” Everything was put away. This was a commitment to the grave!
   6. Ruth reveals that this decision is not a choice about geography, family loyalty, or the future. The decision is about God.
   7. Ruth seems to have understood the implications and actually goes over Naomi’s head and appeals to God Himself (vs. 17).
   8. Some believe that Ruth made this decision as a testimony of fierce loyalty to Naomi. But the text doesn’t hint at that. At the end of verse 18, Naomi stops speaking to her. In verses 20-21 Naomi tells her friends that she has returned empty-handed – not very flattering to Ruth!
   9. This was more than a selfishly motivated decision. This was her decision to turn away from her life and the gods of her people, and to turn to the God of Israel. More than embracing Naomi, Ruth was embracing God.
      1. Naomi’s Frustration (vs. 19-22)
         1. Arriving back in Bethlehem, Naomi tells her old friends to no longer call her Naomi, which means “pleasant.”
         2. Now she wants to be called Mara, which means “bitter.”
         3. Why was she bitter? Did she have a right to be bitter? What did her bitterness contribute to improving her current status?
      2. God is still working (vs. 22)
         1. Naomi was frustrated and bitter.
         2. When you read verse 22, do you see anything that subtly points to the sovereignty of God? Anything that indicates that God might be working?
            1. Look at the last phrase of the verse, “they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.”
            2. We will begin to see in chapter two that the stage is set for God to work!
            3. What truths does this remind us of?

APPLICATIONS:

We all face trying times and important decisions in life. What do we learn from these three ladies and the decisions they made?

* ORPAH: She reminds us that sometimes the most logical decision is not the best decision. Certainly, we are to consider the circumstances, but we are also to trust in God who is Lord of those exact circumstances and to trust in His promises.
* NAOMI: She reminds us that in those long, bewildering phases of God’s silence, our struggles are real and we can be honest about the state of our hearts. She reminds us that even in the midst of our struggles, God is mysteriously at work in the mess.
* RUTH: She is a powerful example of a person whose faith in God emboldens her with stunning courage. She reminds us that the most important thing in life is to know God who made us and to walk through life as His child, no matter the cost.

How do we take these examples and apply them to the issues we are facing?

TO DO: Keep reading Ruth.