

Ruth

Lesson One – Ruth's Noble Choice

"I Will Go" (1:1-22)

INTRODUCTION:

- I. Over the next four weeks, we're going to take a brief interlude from our studies in the life and teachings of Jesus, to take a look at one of the most beautiful stories in the Old Testament.
 - A. This story is set in a time of Israel's history that was marked by immorality, idolatry and war – it was the time when the judges ruled Israel.
 1. In fact, twice in the book of Judges we find these words: **Judges 17:6; 21:25** – *“in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”*
 2. This was a period of time in Israel's history when there was no central government and when each of the twelve tribes of Israel governed themselves.
 - a. This kind of isolation led each tribe greedily looked out for their own interests.
 - b. Having little interaction with the other tribes of Israel often resulted in them falling victim to all kinds of immorality associated with the idolatry that was commonly practiced by the neighboring inhabitants of the land.
 - c. In fact, the tribes of Israel were so self-centered that they even cared little about protecting their fellow tribes from the neighboring inhabitants of the land who occasionally rose up

in war against those tribes they considered weak and vulnerable.

3. Amid all this chaos, God called certain men – and on one occasion, a woman by the name of Deborah – to become Judges among the people of Israel.

a. Their purpose was to call the people of Israel to repentance, and to justice, and then to mobilize the tribes to defend one another against their enemies and defeat them with the help of God.

B. But in the midst of all this turmoil, immorality and idolatry we are introduced to one of the most beautiful love stories found anywhere in the entire Bible.

1. It's the heartwarming story of the devotion and faithfulness of a Moabite woman by the name of Ruth who leaves her homeland in Moab after the death of her husband and goes to live in the land of Israel with her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi.

2. As this beautiful story unfolds, we will see that God blesses Ruth for her commitment to her mother-in-law by leading this young Moabite woman to become the wife of a wealthy landowner named Boaz, and eventually to become one of the women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

II. The book Ruth is tucked away in the HISTORY portion of the Old Testament between the books of Judges and 1st Samuel.

A. It consists of only four chapters.

1. But this book is one of the best examples of how God rewards those who make wise spiritual choices and who show genuine steadfast loyalty to their family.

2. While the book's brevity and beauty makes it easy to read in one sitting, we're going to let it serve as the basis for four sermons – one lesson for each chapter.
3. And so, from the first lesson taken from chapter one, we learn about "**Ruth's Noble Choice.**"

BODY:

- I. The story of Ruth begins with tragedy and loss.
 - A. In the opening verses of chapter one, we're told that in the days when the judges ruled the land of Israel there was a famine in the land.
 1. God often allowed famines as a means of punishing the people of the land for their immorality and willful disobedience.
 - a. We're not told the reason for this particular famine, but there are at least two reasons for believing it was God-sent.
 - (1). First, as we've already mentioned, this was a time in Israel's history when, according to the book of Judges, "*everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" (**Judges 17:6; 21:25**) – a time characterized by immorality and idolatry.
 - (2). And second, the famine doesn't appear to have affected the surrounding peoples of Ammon and Moab – because four of the characters mentioned in this story leave Israel during the time of famine and go to Moab.
 - b. It was not at all uncommon during times of severe famine for families to leave their homeland and move to nearby lands that were not being affected as severely by famine.
 - (1). Abraham is an example of doing this – leaving the land of Canaan during a famine and journeying to Egypt.
 - (2). Isaac is another example.

- B. In the opening verses of the book of Ruth we're also introduced to a man by the name of Elimelech and his wife Naomi.
1. We're told they move, along with their two sons, to the land of Moab – a country located in the lush hills and plateau land east of the Dead Sea.
 2. The inhabitants of Moab and neighboring Ammon were the descendants of Abraham's nephew, Lot, and were a people who came about as the result of an incestuous relationship.
 3. Even though the Moabites never attacked Israel, or sided with the enemies of Israel during war, the Israelites never completely trusted the people of Moab – and they had good reason.
 - a. In the days of Moses, when the children of Israel were temporarily camped in the land of Moab, Balak, the king of Moab sought the intervention of Balaam to protect his people against the Israelites.
 - (1). Eventually, Balaam urged Balak to send Moabite women into the camp of Israel to commit sexual immorality with the men of Israel – an act that caused Israel to lose favor with God until they repented of their evil.
 - b. And as the children of Israel approached the land of Canaan, the Moabites sided with the people of Edom in refusing to allow the children of Israel to cross through their territory.
 - c. So at the very least, there had always been a strained relationship between Israel and Moab.
- C. But as the story continues, we're told that in time, Elimelech died, leaving his widow Naomi alone with their two sons.
1. We're not told the cause of Elimelech death, but according to Rabbinic tradition, his death was punishment for having forsaken

- his homeland to live among an idolatrous people. (Expositor's Bible Commentary)
2. Following the death of Elimelech, we learn that the two sons of Elimelech and Naomi married Moabite women – one married a woman by the name of Orpah, and the other married a woman by the name of Ruth.
 - a. According to Jewish tradition, Orpah and Ruth were not only sisters, Ruth is said (according to Jewish tradition) to have been the daughter of Eglon, the king of Moab.
 - b. However, the Scriptures say nothing about Orpah and Ruth being sisters, OR of Ruth being the daughter of a king.
 3. While the marriage of Israelite men to Moabite women does not seem to be **expressly** forbidden by the Law of Moses during the days of the Judges (as was the marriage to the women of Canaan), it was certainly forbidden by the time of Solomon.
 - a. **1 Kings 11:1-2** – *But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites — 2 from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, "You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods."*
 4. It is sometime after the marriage of Naomi's two sons to Moabite women that we read they also died.
 - a. Some have suggested their death was at the hand of God for having married women who were not from among the Israelites.

- (1). If they had truly wanted to marry women from among their own people, the sons of Naomi could have easily traveled back to Israel to find wives.
 - (2). But the fact that they deliberately chose to marry from among a people characterized by the worship of idols is a clear indication that they cared little about the spiritual consequences of their choices.
- b. So, there could be some merit to the suggestion that the death of Naomi's two sons was also, either directly or indirectly, by the hand of God.
5. After suffering the loss of her husband and her two sons, Naomi came to the conclusion (right or wrong) that the hand of the Lord was against her also.
- D. Finally, when word came that the famine in Israel had ended, Naomi decided to return to her homeland in Bethlehem of Judah and was accompanied by her two daughters-in-law.
1. Along the way, Naomi urged the two young women to return to their own land to find husbands again from among their own people.
 2. We're told that Orpah returned to her people and to her gods.
 3. But Ruth refused to leave her mother-in-law, whom she had come to love so deeply.
 4. **Ruth 1:16-17** – *But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. 17 Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me."*

- E. Ruth's choice was certainly a **noble one**.
1. She would go wherever Naomi goes, live wherever Naomi lives, make the people of Naomi her own people, make the God of Naomi her God, and when she died, she would be buried where Naomi was buried.
 2. Nothing but death would come between them.
 3. In making this choice, Ruth would become converted to Judaism – she would become a proselyte Jew.
- II. The first chapter of this beautiful story ends when Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem.
- A. But the joy and excitement of seeing old friends again soon turns to a somber mood.
1. **Ruth 1:19-21** – *Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" 20 But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi [meaning "sweetness"]; call me Mara [a word meaning "bitterness"], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"*
 2. Some have suggested that Naomi may have believed if she had returned to her homeland rather than stay in Moab, her two sons might still be alive.
 3. Whatever her reasoning may have been, she clearly felt the Lord had afflicted her for some wrong she had done.
 4. She left Judah full, but now she has returned empty.

- B. Perhaps there was some truth to Naomi's belief.
1. In the book of Deuteronomy, the Lord promised blessings upon His people for their obedience, but He also promised cursing upon the people of Israel if they choose rather to be disobedient.
 - a. **Deut 28:15-20** – *"But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: 16 "Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. 17 "Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 18 "Cursed shall be the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks. 19 "Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. 20 "The LORD will send on you cursing, confusion, and rebuke in all that you set your hand to do, until you are destroyed and until you perish quickly, because of the wickedness of your doings in which you have forsaken Me."*
 2. And centuries later, during the days of Isaiah, the prophet prophesied against the Babylonians saying that the day will come when they lose their children and their women will become widows as punishment by God for their own sins.
 - a. **Isa 47:8-9** – *"Therefore hear this now, you who are given to pleasures, who dwell securely, who say in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one else besides me; I shall not sit as a widow, nor shall I know the loss of children'; 9 But these two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day: The loss of children, and widowhood. They shall come upon you in their*

fullness because of the multitude of your sorceries, for the great abundance of your enchantments."

3. The famine that has struck the land of Israel ten years earlier would have been seen by the Israelites as God punishing them for their rebellion – for all their immorality, idolatry and covetousness.
 4. No doubt, Naomi felt the loss of her husband and her two sons was also God's punishment for her failing to completely trust in God to provide for her – choosing rather to remain in the land of Moab than to return to Israel.
- C. And so, the chapter ends with Naomi and Ruth in the land of Israel – Naomi a lonely widow, and Ruth a devoted daughter-in-law, but also a lonely stranger in a foreign land.
1. But there is something in the last verse of chapter one that gives a hint of good things to come.
 - a. **Ruth 1:22** – *So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*
 2. The return of the two women at the beginning of barley harvest sets the stage for the next series of events that we will look at in greater detail in our next lesson.
 3. But the closing verse of chapter one also suggests something we might overlook.
 - a. It suggests a new beginning for Naomi and Ruth.
 4. And so, the chapter that began with tragedy and loss ends with a hint of good things to come.

III. As we look back over the first chapter of Ruth, the question we want to ask is what lessons can we learn from these events?

A. Probably the most important lesson we can learn here is the importance of making right choices.

1. From the beginning of time in the garden of Eden to the present day, God has given us the freedom to choose for ourselves – to choose whether or not we will trust in Him and obey Him, or whether we will trust in ourselves and do what seems right in our own eyes.
2. But along with the choices we make in life also come their own set of consequences – the consequences we experience as a result of the choices we make.
 - a. The consequences we experience are sometimes good, and sometimes bad.
 - b. And sometimes even the wrong choices we make bring consequences that initially may seem good, but in the end we eventually suffer the bad consequences for the wrong choices we made.
 - c. Every choice we make has consequences.

B. So as we look back over the first chapter of Ruth let's carefully look at the choices each of the main characters made and see the resulting consequences of those choices.

1. First, consider the choices made by Elimelech, the husband of Naomi.
 - a. On the surface, Elimelech's choice may have appeared to be the best way to provide for his family during a time of famine.

- b. But if you remember, Abraham made a similar choice during a time of famine – he took his wife Sarah to Egypt where a whole series of troubling events occurred.
- c. This was a time in Abraham’s life when he clearly lacked faith that God would provide for him in the land of Canaan, and so he journeyed to Egypt with his wife Sarah.
- d. Because Sarah was a beautiful woman, Abraham feared that the Egyptians might kill him in order to take his wife.
- e. And so, passing Sarah off as his sister only led to even more problems for Abraham – Pharaoh took her because he thought she was an unmarried woman.
- f. That’s when God had to intervene. And in the process, Abraham’s lie was exposed.
- g. Just think about this: If Abraham had never gone to Egypt, Sarah would have never had her Egyptian handmaiden Hagar, Ishmael, the forefather of the Arab nations, would have never been born.
 - (1). There would have never been a Mohammed. The religion of Islam would not exist, spreading its beliefs throughout the world. There would be no conflict between Jews and Arabs where each claim right to the land of Israel because they are both descendents of Abraham. There would be no Koran, and there would be no Islamic terrorists.
 - (2). The history of the growth and development of Islam and the conflict that threatens world peace today are all the result of one choice Abraham made in a moment when

he failed to completely trust in God to provide during a time of famine in the land of Canaan.

- h. Even in the days of Elimelech, Abraham's decision to leave the land of Canaan for Egypt during a famine was seen as a lack of complete faith in God's provisions.
 - i. Elimelech appears to have also lacked faith in God's provisions and decided to take matters in his own hands, leaving Israel to live in a land characterized by idolatry and immorality.
 - j. It's been said that those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat the same mistakes. That was certainly true in the case of Elimelech.
2. Elimelech's two sons also made choices that may have been directly responsible for them losing their lives.
- a. They simply followed the lead of their father – seeing no harm in remaining in Moab after their father died, nor did they see any harm in marrying Moabite women.
 - b. The danger of marrying foreign women was clearly understood by every Israelite man.
 - (1). From the time of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and throughout the history of humankind, the power that women can have over their husbands has become an established fact.
 - (2). History has shown that even the most physically and spiritually strongest men can become putty in the hands of a woman who uses her charm to get her way.

- (3). It not only happened to Adam, it happened to the men of Israel who were enticed by the women of Moab, it also happened to Samson, to David, to Solomon, etc.
- (4). God knew that wives taken from among the idolatrous nations around Israel could easily influence on their husbands away from following Jehovah and turn to follow other gods.
- c. Perhaps the sons of Elimelech didn't consider the danger of possibly losing their faith – or perhaps they didn't really care.
- d. Whatever the reasoning may have been, these two young men may have lost their lives by making the same kind of selfish, self-center choices their father had made a few years earlier when he moved his family to Moab.
- e. Parents – never forget that our children will, for the most part, follow our example, whether it's good or bad.
- f. And young people – always remember this. Never follow the example of a father or a mother who do NOT choose to live a godly life and faithfully follow the Lord.
- (1). God warned the children of Israel against following the ungodly and unfaithful example of their fathers – **2 Chron 30:7-8** *And do not be like your fathers and your brethren, who trespassed against the LORD God of their fathers, so that He gave them up to desolation, as you see. 8 Now do not be stiff-necked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the LORD; and enter His sanctuary, which He has sanctified forever, and serve the LORD your God, that the fierceness of His wrath may turn away from you.*

- e. And, as we said, even though Ruth MAY HAVE BEEN the daughter of the king of Moab, she would become the great-grandmother of a king of Israel, David, and in the course of time, become an ancestor of the lord of Lords and King of kings – Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.
- f. Ruth's choice to leave her own family in Moab to stay with Naomi and eventually to serve the God of heaven is not unlike the choice Jesus said He requires of those who would be His disciples.
 - (1). **Matt 10:34-39** – *"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. 35 For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; 36 and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' 37 He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 38 And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39 He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.*
 - (2). **Mark 10:29-31** – *So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, 30 who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time — houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions — and in the age to come, eternal life.*

- g. This will certainly prove true in the case of Ruth – she will receive a hundredfold in her time, and in the age to come, eternal life.

CONCLUSION:

- I. And so, it's clear to see that we all have choices to make, but with those choices also come consequences.
 - A. But how can we be sure we're making the right choice.
 - 1. There are many examples in the teachings of Jesus that give us a hint about how we can make wise choices. But let me suggest just two examples:
 - 2. We can be absolutely certain that any choice we make will be the right one if we make it with these words of Jesus in mind:
 - a. **Matt 6:33** – *"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."*
 - (1). In other words, seek to truly make the Lord the King of our life, and always seek to live by His standard of righteousness.
 - b. **John 12:48** – *He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him — the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.*
 - (1). Or to put it simply, let all our decisions be based on the words of Jesus Christ found in the teachings of Jesus and those of the inspired apostles of Christ – the word by which we will be judged in the last day.
 - 3. It comes down to a question of whether or not we KNOW the right thing to do, and whether or not we have the COURAGE and FAITH to do the right thing by ALWAYS seeking to do the LORD'S will rather than doing what the people of Israel were doing in the

days of the Judges – making our decisions based on what seems right in our own eyes.

- B. What choices are you making about doing the Lord's will?
 - 1. Are you living every day knowing that the choices you make not only impact your eternal destiny, but could very well impact the eternal destiny of your family as well?
 - 2. Are you setting the right kind of example for those around you – for your family, and for your brothers and sisters in Christ?
 - 3. Is your greatest desire to make certain you are doing the Lord's will in everything?
- C. The answer to these questions is either "YES" or "NO" – there's no other possible answer.
 - 1. Your answer can be "YES" if you have given your life to Christ in complete obedience to the gospel of Christ, and if you are living it in your life every day to the best of your ability.
 - 2. But if you've never committed your life to Christ, or if there are things in your life as a Christian that shouldn't be there, then your answer can only be "NO"
 - a. Just remember this: not only are you putting your soul in jeopardy, you're also putting in jeopardy the souls of those who look to you as a leader and an example.
- D. If there are changes you need to make in your life, this is why we offer this opportunity – an opportunity to make the RIGHT choices.
 - 1. You can do this today by simply stop doing what is right in YOUR eyes, and start doing what is right in GOD'S eyes.