

Reading: Ruth 1:1-22.

Theme: Focusing on the Family.

We are looking at this lovely little book of Ruth. Last time we considered 5 dark providences which emerged from v1-5 and then questioned how we made sense of dark providences in our lives. We are to realise that even in seemingly dark times to us, the Lord God of all Creation is working. His workings are often unknown, unrecognised by us, yet even in the darkest situations He is working His purposes out. To make sense of dark providences we are to remember God is always unfailingly good and we always look at dark providences through the lens of the cross of Jesus Christ.

We saw this book is set in the times of the Judges - a dark time morally and spiritually; also, hardship and suffering were occurring as God's judgement upon the nation of Israel – part which was there was a famine in the land and things were hard and difficult. Yet our attention is turned from the nation and focused upon a family. Today we will focus in more detail on this family and the events so starkly recorded for us to see what we can learn from them.

In v1 there is a contrast of ideas "*In the days when the judges ruled,*" - this sets the broad context, a wider picture to view events as the background; then our attention is taken off the background to concentrate on Elimelech and his family - the AV says "*a certain man of Bethlehem-Judah...*"

Realise God is not only interested in nations, empires and the events affecting them, but is interested in individual lives. He knows all about us, is concerned for and about us as individuals, as members of families, of nations also. This God is a personal God, the God who knows us and wants us to know Him, to know His love and His care. We can so often forget that - or may never have realised it, but this is one of the many truths the book of Ruth teaches us and teaches us from these words "*a certain man of Bethlehem-Judah...*" The God

the Bible presents to us is One who knows us in minute detail, so much so that even the hairs of our head are numbered - such is His detailed care and knowledge about us. I want us to reconsider v1-5 as we focus in more detail on this family and to see 3 things:

1. The Family Introduced.

Welcome to the family – dad, mum and two boys. These all encountered the famine along with many other families. They lived in Bethlehem Judah and are given the title of Ephrathites from Bethlehem Judah. The term Ephrathah was an early name for Bethlehem (*Genesis 35:16; 48:7*) and suggests these were descendants of earliest settlers there and maintained this title as an honorary title. One commentator (Leon Morris) says "*the use of the older name in such a connection may point us to the old established families, the local aristocracy.*" They appear to be a distinguished family and Naomi's return later causes much amazement as she and her family were so well-known and wealthy "*I went out full*" (1:21). In America in directories, in listings, often some names are followed by MF which signifies "Mayflower" and shows they are direct descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers and they are afforded this honour. Possibly this was the case with the term "Ephrathites".

This reminds us, that no matter our importance in this world's estimation, the same hardships can come upon us as upon other people. The Royal family with all their privileges, wealth, even power, are touched by sickness, death, trouble and pain as we commoners are!

Here is this distinguished family living in Bethlehem. The father's name is Elimelech which means "*God is my king*". His name was a profound statement by his parents and they must have hoped and prayed that he would show such in his life. Naomi means "*pleasant, lovely, delightful*". Their sons seem to have been weak and sickly children as their names indicate this: Mahlon "*weak or sickly*" and

Kilion means "*failing, pining, consumptive*". I mention the names, for as many of you know, names in OT and NT have significance, and often spoke of the character of the person, of their lives or what they were like. Sometimes names were changed when their character or roles changed e.g. Jacob to Israel.

I wonder if we know what our names mean. Whatever our names mean, do we realise that God wants to give us a new name? **Firstly:** He wants to change the name of our of allegiance. We are at present serving the Prince of the power of the darkness - the devil, whether we realise it or not, this is our natural state. He wants to change the name of our allegiance to be those who will serve Him, the King of Love. **Secondly:** He will change the name of our home destination and standing - no longer the city of destruction (*John Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress*), but the Celestial City. He will change the name of our standing - no longer children of wrath, but His dearly loved children. **Thirdly:** He will also personally give us a new name. I don't know what yours will be, nor what mine will be. For we will not have it in this life, but it is kept for us to know in heaven and He will give it personally to us - Revelation 2:17 "*... I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.*" (c.f. Isaiah 56:5; 62:2; 65:15.) Just as our parents named us at our birth, so too when we are born again of God's Spirit, it would seem we are given a new name and we will know it in heaven.

Has this happened to you? Has your allegiance, your home destination and standing been changed by God? Have you been given a new name because you've trusted Jesus as your Saviour? If not then realise that you are not part of God's family, but are part of the family living under spiritual judgement and famine and yet this God can change that. Let's move on and see:

2. The Final Destination.

This family is faced with a hard time. Famine came, they wondered if they will survive. If the boys' names show their poor health, then no doubt Elimelech and Naomi as loving parents must have been especially concerned for them in a time of famine. They felt they must do something and, on hearing things were fine in Moab, decide to head there for a while. AV uses the word "*sojourn*" which means to stay awhile; probably until things got better and then they'd go back to Bethlehem. We said last time, it was ironic that Moab had food, bread to eat and to spare, while those in Bethlehem had none and were in famine. Bethlehem means "*House of bread*" - it was a fertile area. It was amazing that Moab had no famine! Surely the Jews should have realised this situation was a punishment on them from the Lord. The evidence was before them - only 40-50 miles away there was no famine.

As Elimelech and Naomi hear this, they plan a course of action they thought was for the best, that would show their love and care for their boys - they get out of Israel and go to Moab. This decision was not based on faith but on pragmatism - that which seemed best, most convenient, that seemed the easiest and least painful way. Yet Elimelech was denying his name that God was his king, which acknowledged that God was in control. Here he seems to ignore God and His dealings with His people; side-lines God's Providence and God's faithfulness. Instead of turning back to God, they turned their backs on God. They just packed up and got out. From what I said earlier it would seem they weren't poor, destitute or even starving at that time and Naomi's own testimony confirms that they went out full. If they had been struggling, had been penniless, had need to sell their lands, or their house or themselves, then their relatives were under an obligation to help them.

Surely, he could realise this famine was of God, was a judgement for the sin of the nation. As a member of a distinguished family, rather than shipping out, he should have shaped up and called the people to

prayer and repentance and to seek God to restore the crops, to be favourable to the land in sending rain etc. Yet he doesn't, he ships out. Imagine if everyone had copied Elimelech; Bethlehem would have become a ghost town. I wonder if his actions disheartened others.

Those of us are Christians have to be careful that we to live up to our name and title - followers of Christ. We are to keep following and trusting even in the hard times. Christ never promised to anyone who trusts in Him an easy, cushy life. He said "*Take up your cross and follow me.*" Yes, the Christian life is a joyful life, but it is a joy even in the pain of present sufferings, by many trials and temptations we will reach the Celestial City. We are to be careful we don't behave as if there is no God; that no God was in control. We are not to be theoretical believers and practical atheists! Always keep God in the picture and realise He can overrule, provide and help in every situation.

We must be careful not to discourage others by our words, attitudes and actions - we may be full of woes, doubts and cannot imagine others could know any joy either and we could drag others down, cause our doubts to spread and affect others. This could be triggered off because we have ignored the Lord's provision and care; we are selfishly concerned only with how we feel and so others must know it! Yes, I know there are times and places to share such heartaches, griefs, sorrows, doubts and fears with fellow believers, but we do so only after we consider the evidence with the Lord in the frame, the picture and hopefully not every time we meet them.

Elimelech, Naomi and lads emigrate, ship out of Israel and go to Moab. To the Jewish readers, the very mention of Moab would have sent shudders down their spines - of all places to go, why would they go to Moab! Moab was a place of pagan religion and worship. The Lord was not worshipped there; it was given over to the worship of

not only idols, but the god Chemosh whose worship included the sacrifice of children! We can imagine people thinking or saying "*Elimelech, if you have to move, why are you going there?*" It seems to show the distrust of Elimelech and yet he, out of right motives to care for his family, to maintain their standard of living, heads out from God's people, God's land and goes to a godless, dark place.

We have to be careful in our lives not to end up in our own Moab's. We can think that we will only be doing something for a short time, do it just once, this is the exception, but we can end up staying in such situations. Elimelech and his sons expected to return back to Bethlehem, but they didn't!

I have found that Christians of whatever age can feel that parts of God's word do not apply to them, feel they are the exception for whatever reason and feel at liberty to indulge, to venture into, paddle or play about in something that God has said they should not do so. They insist it is so, can be very rational about it, present logical arguments to their own minds and even to others; but they are still breaking what God's Word says e.g. sex before marriage, sex outside of their own marriage, underhand dealings in business, fiddling expenses or tax returns, a common one with Christian young people is that it's ok to go out with non-Christians as they don't intend to marry them...! Others say it is not slander or backbiting its calling a spade a spade, saying the truth and if it hurts, then tough! (*But they'd be appalled if others spoke like that to them!*) That it is ok for them to be economical with the truth, or tell little white lies, or they are justified in hanging onto hurts and when the chance comes others can look out... So, the family's final destination was Moab and it was final for some, let's see:

3. The Nightmare Situation.

We are not told how long they were there before Elimelech died. How or why we don't know. His short stay in Moab becomes

permanent. The bad situation starts to become a nightmare as tragedy strikes the family in this way. Some have said it is a punishment; some say it should have acted as a prompt for the family to return to Israel, but they do not. It seems they settle down even more - *"Your father's grave is here, let's stay a while longer..."* Then the boys, now men marry and after 10 years (*we don't know whether that is after Elimelech's death or the total number of the years in Moab*) the boys die - childless. The nightmare is far worse than Naomi could ever have feared.

Poor Naomi is a widow and childless. She has no male descendant to keep the family name going - something so important to the Jews. She has her 2 foreign daughters-in-law, she appears to be penniless. Naomi is in a dark nightmare situation. Where was her God, where was His help and comfort now? What did her religion mean to her in this grief, loss, hurt and pain?

There is so much human emotion here. We're not just to leave it as a story, a narrative and forget the real anguish. Amazingly her God was right there with her in the trouble, in the nightmare situation. Whether she knew that or not, it was nevertheless true and He was there and working. Underneath her and all around her were His everlasting arms, although unseen and unfelt in her darkness and pain. He was working in her life, so much so there was not only a natural love and affection there between her and her daughters-in-law (*sometimes rare, so a true blessing*), but something of her faith shines through and impresses Ruth, so much so she wants Naomi's God to be her God, to be with her and her people.

I don't know how much Naomi understood of life after death; that those who trusted in the Lord would have eternal life. There are references to a growing awareness of this in OT and it shines clearly and brightly in NT, but God's people had a hope. Did this shine through in Naomi's life even in this nightmare situation? Was it seen

clearly by Ruth, perhaps even glimpsed by Orpah? The death of a loved one is a tragic thing, especially that of a life partner or a child. The death of such loved ones or of anyone is to act as a reminder to us all that time is passing on for every one of us; we are all mortal and will all die one day.

Whatever our stage in life, time will soon be gone for us. Will we be saved, and rescued by God? 10 years or more can pass so quickly. We make plans, perhaps to trust in the Lord Jesus one day, even one day soon, but we may never get there. I wonder where we will be on September 2nd 2028. 10 years can pass so quickly, but we can pass on sooner. We are only sojourning, staying awhile on this earth in our life and then eternity stretches before us. Eternity is a long, long time that goes on forever. We need to trust the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour to spend eternity in heaven. Without Him as our personal Saviour, eternity will be spent in hell - which Jesus came to save us from. Hell will be the worst nightmare situation, one we can only now imagine how horrible it will be - yet its reality will be far, far worse than our worst nightmares and imaginations.

We are to learn from Ruth, she, as a stranger, a foreigner, one who had never heard of the Lord, yet she came and trusted Him as her own God – as we'll see. I pray that as we have heard of the Lord Jesus and possibly seen Him in the lives of others because He has changed their lives, that we too would trust the Lord Jesus as our God and Saviour.