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DHW

BIBLE STUDY CLASS

LESSON 1

RUTH

INTRODUCTION

Ruth is a wonderful book. It is loved by everyone who would read it. The theme of love, commitment, kindness, loyalty and integrity fill in the book. These themes are timeless. Ruth is one of two books in the Bible that bears the name of a woman. The other is the book of Esther. The inspired writer of the book is unknown. Jewish tradition named Samuel as the writer. The date is around 1050 B.C. and the historical background of the events in the book was during the period of the Judges.

Although it is a small book containing only four chapters, it is not lacking in the knowledge and understanding of God, and the marvellous and gracious way He deals with people who trust and honour Him. The first chapter of the book describes the tragedy experienced by Naomi and her return to Bethlehem with Ruth, her daughter-in-law, who expressed commitment to remain with her. The next chapter features the providential meeting between Ruth and Boaz who treated her with great kindness. The third chapter relates how Naomi devised a plan to inform Boaz of his right as her kinsman-redeemer to take Ruth as his wife. Boaz responded favourably. The

final chapter records how Boaz became the kinsman-redeemer and married Ruth. A son was born who was the grandfather of David.

Patterns and principles showing the ways which God relates with His people can be learned by any conscientious and careful reader. These patterns and principles about life are still relevant and applicable today. The focus of the book is on family and relationships, and the main characters are Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. Each of them faced a crisis of some kind, and the decisions they made indicate their priorities. Its message of love, hope, integrity and faithfulness during the dark years of the time of the judges will touch our conscience and convictions. In addition, two underlying concepts prevail in this historical account. It is expressed by the Hebrew word, *hesed*.¹ There is not one English word that conveys the full meaning of the word. It is expressive of relationships for the term connotes altogether the notions of covenantal loyalty, faithfulness, kindness, goodness, mercy, love and compassion. It refers to an act of kindness performed by a more powerful person for the benefit of a weaker person who is in real and desperate need. This is most clearly illustrated in God's acts of *hesed* for His people.² The other is the concept of a kinsman-redeemer and

¹ The phrase "deal kindly" is the Hebrew *hesed* (pronounce, khehsed) in Ruth 1:8 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.

² K. Lawson Younger Jr, *Judges /Ruth*, p.394.

it is expressed by the Hebrew word *go'el*. So, the bigger purpose of the book in the context of the Bible is to illustrate the redemptive work of God in Christ Jesus through Israel to save His chosen people, and also the rest of the Gentile world. Naomi is a type of Israel, Ruth, a type of the Gentile world, and Boaz a type of Christ.

The present study, chapter one contains the following scenes:

- (1) Elimelech decides to leave Bethlehem (1:1-5),
- (2) Naomi experiences emptiness (1:6-13),
- (3) Ruth expresses her faith and commitment (1:14-18)
- (4) Naomi is bitter (1:19-22)

STUDY OF THE WORD

Elimelech Decides to Leave Bethlehem

The opening words of this chapter clearly indicate that the events in the book happened in the period of the judges, and therefore it follows logically after the book of Judges. It is in marked contrast to the period of the judges when the nation of Israel was experiencing spiritual emptiness and chaos because “every man did that which was right in his own eyes”, the account in the book of Ruth gives a spark of hope, commitment, faith and friendship in some families among the children of Israel. The family of Elimelech was such a family.

There was famine in Israel, and Elimelech (*my God is king*) led his wife, Naomi (*pleasant, beautiful*), and two sons—one named Mahlon (*sick*) and the

other Chillion (*pinning*)—to settle in Moab. The Moabites were descendants of Lot, who was the nephew of Abraham (Genesis 11:27).³ Elimelech and his family were Ephrathites of the tribe of Ephraim, but lived in Bethlehem-judah. They plausibly could be the aristocracy of Bethlehem-judah. They moved to Moab which was on the eastern banks of the river Jordan and the Dead Sea, south of the river Arnon (Numbers 21:13).⁴ This was the shortest route to a place where they thought “the grass was greener.” It would also be possible that they wanted to move there temporarily. Elimelech’s decision to settle in Moab might not be a wise decision. But we should not judge him too harshly. Israel at this time was not politically stable. They had been continually under oppression by the Canaanites and Philistines. Socially the place might not be safe because every man did what was right in his own eyes. Economic hardship was one reason why they would re-locate for there was famine, and in an agricultural country this was devastating. Moreover, if they were economically on top of the heap, it would take some time for them to hit down to the bottom. So, re-locating to the nearest neighbouring region where the grass was greener was the best thing to do. But seeing that the grass is greener on the other side may not

³ Genesis 11:27 Now these *are* the generations of Terah: Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot.

⁴ Numbers 21:13 From thence they removed, and pitched on the other side of Arnon, which *is* in the wilderness that cometh out of the coasts of the Amorites: for Arnon *is* the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.

necessarily be true because the grass could turn out to be useless weed. However, the fact that the name of God is not mentioned in this section only intimates that Elimelech did not seek the counsel of the LORD. This could be understood as a lack of faith in God and this may hold the key to an understanding of the events that happened in 1:3-5.

Tragedy struck this ordinary family. They lived in Moab for ten years, and in that period of time, Elimelech died. It is not mentioned how long later he died. Considering the text, his death could be not long after they lived there and before the marriage of their two sons. Mahlon and Chilion married two Moabite girls, namely, Orpah (*firmness of neck*) and Ruth (*friendship or refreshment*) respectively. Nothing is said about their home life or about their worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel, or Chemosh, the god of Moab. These marriages were in direct violation of God's Law.⁵ Naomi suffered another tragedy. Both her two sons died leaving her with two daughters-in-law who were both childless. This indicates that the two boys died quite soon after their marriage. We do not know why three of them died. Nothing is said about it. This is indeed ironical because they left Bethlehem in order to escape death yet death came upon them leaving Naomi and the two daughters-in-law. It was a

⁵ Deuteronomy 7:3 Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. 4 For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly.

very sad and sorrowful experience for the women, especially Naomi.

Naomi Experiences Emptiness

Naomi consulted with Orpah and Ruth that she might decide to go back to her hometown Bethlehem-judah because she heard in Moab that the famine was over and the LORD had given "them bread" (1:6). She marshalled all her faculties to persuade Orpah and Ruth to leave her and return to their natural families (vv.6-9). They were on the way to Bethlehem, when Naomi stopped them. She told them to return to their natural families in Moab. She expressed appreciation that the LORD had dealt kindly with them and also to her and to her deceased husband and sons. She prayed that the LORD would grant them "rest" (security and comfort), and that they might each find a husband and home. Orpah and Ruth were still of marriageable age. Naomi showed remarkable unselfishness on her part. She was alone without a family, and we can understand if she had insisted Orpah and Ruth to go with her to Bethlehem. Naomi must have considered very carefully all the odds. Orpah and Ruth would be among strangers now who were not Moabites. Naomi, in spite of her present plight still trusted the LORD for she prayed that the LORD would bless her daughters-in-law.

The initial response of Orpah and Ruth was that they would stick to her. But Naomi was determined that they should return to their families. She reasoned that she would not have any more sons because she was already old. Hypothetically, she continued that if she

could have a husband even on that very night, and conceived and bore children, would the girls wait for her sons to grow up and not marry before that! Naomi gave an emphatic “nay” to Orpah and Ruth and said that the LORD had dealt with her adversely (v.13). We may further conjecture sensibly that Naomi might have thought that Orpah and Ruth would be strangers to the people of Bethlehem-judah, if they went with her. How would the people treat them! The future for her two daughters-in-law was uncertain and insecure. Naomi knew what would be best for her two daughters-in-law. Moreover, their presence would frequently remind Naomi of her family’s foolishness in leaving Bethlehem-judah for greener pastures in Moab. And now all that she could show to the Bethlehemites was only Ruth, a Moabite daughter-in-law. It would add to her embarrassment and affliction.

Ruth Expresses Her Faith and Commitment

Having heard their mother-in-law’s passionate appeal to them to return home to their natural families, and not to follow her because she had nothing to offer them and there was little or no hope for them to remarry and start a new home, Orpah and Ruth loudly cried again. They had been walking out of Moab. How far they had gone before Naomi made the last appeal, we are not told. Anyway, Orpah was persuaded by Naomi. She kissed the hand of her mother-in-law and returned to Moab. She made a sensible choice. She chose the possibility of a normal life in Moab and a possibility of remarriage and

starting a new home. She would be among familiar people and back to the god of her people. The alternative to be with Naomi would promise her nothing. She would be a stranger to the Israelites and they might not accept her and moreover she was not kosher. There was nothing but uncertainty and insecurity. Should she be blamed or criticized? She should not. There is no adverse remark written about her decision by the divine writer. Orpah humbly obeyed Naomi, who had strongly and reasonably persuaded the two women to go back to their natural families to start a new life.

But Ruth was not like Orpah. She “clave unto her” (v.14). The word “clave” (to cling) is a strong verb. It is used in reference to a man who leaves his parents and “cleaves” to his wife.⁶ It is also used in the context of a believer to fear God, serve Him and “cleave” onto His name.⁷ It expresses a permanent relationship with deep love and affection. Ruth would rather cling to her aged, hopeless, and poor mother-in-law than to a brighter prospect in Moab. Naomi made another attempt to persuade her to go back to Moab. She said to Ruth: “Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and to her gods: go back, Ruth, with your sister-in-law” (v.15, paraphrased). At this juncture, Ruth responded by making a

⁶ Genesis 2:24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

⁷ Deuteronomy 10:20 Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name.

declaration that would change the rest of her life completely.

Her declaration which is inscribed in Ruth 1:16, 17 becomes the most cherished and celebrated statement. Ruth said to Naomi: *Intreat 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: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.*

She respectfully and firmly told her mother-in-law to stop pressuring her to leave her and “to return from following after her” (16a). Interestingly, note that the second part she did not say, “to return to Moab and to her people.” Ruth was determinedly inclined to accompany Naomi, just as Naomi stubbornly wanted her to return to her people and country. She continued that wherever Naomi would go, she would go, and where Naomi would stay, she would stay. Ruth was declaring that she would always be by Naomi’s side, no matter where she would be geographically. No question about it, period! Then she declared: *thy people my people, and thy God my God* (the phrase-*shall be*-is not in the original Hebrew manuscript)—dynamic, decisive, and devoted! Ruth remembered what Naomi had said to her earlier that Orpah went back to *her people and to her gods* (v.15). This was her uncompromising commitment. With this brisk phrase, Ruth renounced her ethnic and religious roots and embraced the nationality and religion of Naomi.

Her kinfolk would be Israelites, her God would be YAHWEH. Note that the statement she made increasingly committed her devotion to Naomi, and it climaxed with the promise, *where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried* (17b). In short, she would be with Naomi until the end—a lifelong commitment and devotion. Her pledge was serious and it was for life. In order to confirm that she was serious about her declaration, she swore an oath in the name of the LORD (YAHWEH) that if she did not keep her commitment, let the LORD judge her severely, and only death could part between them (v.17c).

Ruth would not let Naomi return alone to an empty future. She was willing to turn down the apparently sensible argument of Naomi and venture into unknown territory. Debra Reid aptly points out: “Her heart rules her head, but we don’t criticize her for it. Her own tragedy has established a faith and a loyalty which are motivated by love and conviction. She keeps faith with Naomi and this in turn reflects her deep faith in God. In her difficult times, Ruth has become not bitter but better.”⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was firmly fixed in her mind to go with her, she did not try to dissuade her anymore. Both women were on their way to Bethlehem-judah.

Naomi Is Bitter

They journeyed together until they arrived at Bethlehem. It was about 80 kilometres between Moab and Bethlehem. Their presence stirred up

⁸ Debra Reid, *Ruth and Esther*, p. 37.

the whole city. They were the centre of attraction buzzing from one to another, “Is this Naomi” (v.19)? Naomi must have been a prominent and well-known family in Bethlehem before. But she was now impoverished. And so the sight of her present condition must have surprised or shocked the Bethlehemites. And did they not notice Ruth, who accompanied Naomi, and who was with her? The divine writer highlighted this omission. Was there a silent conspiracy against her in the community? They knew that Naomi had no daughters and so Ruth was not her daughter. She was a stranger and a Moabitess. The Moabites had not been kind to the children of Israel in the past.⁹ Anyway, their question, *Is this Naomi* was not meant to boost one’s ego. It was actually to the contrary. Naomi had left Bethlehem for greener pastures while the others had stayed on during the famine, but now she returned as a prodigal daughter with nothing.

Naomi was well aware of the change of her estate, her face, and her family. She responded (angrily?): *Call me not Naomi, call me Mara* (v.20a). Naomi means “pleasant or beautiful” whereas Mara means “bitter.” Naomi was feeling bitter (feeling of dislike, pain and sadness); hence she desired to be called Mara. And she gave the cause

⁹ Deuteronomy 23:3 An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever: 4 Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee.

of her bitter condition. She attributed her present dire conditions to the Almighty, who had dealt very bitterly with her. The name, “the Almighty” (*Shaddai*), portrays God as the Ruler of the Universe, and who has the power to assign the destinies of the wicked and the righteous, and who dispenses blessings, promises and metes out punishments to the godless. Naomi used the name of God, *the Almighty*, correctly in her context. Then she flashed back that she went “full”, and the LORD (YAHWEH) had brought her back “empty” (v.21a). In the same speech, she now addressed God as the LORD (YAHWEH). It is the covenant name of God which He made with Israel. The LORD promised to bless, protect, and exalt Israel. Naomi was bitter and probably angry with the LORD. She further asserted that the LORD had taken her to account (*the LORD testified against me*) in His courtroom,

In all that she had said, Naomi did not return home with a broken spirit and a contrite heart. She attributed to the LORD God Almighty for her present bitterness and afflictions. She did not blame herself for in the first place she went to Moab without seeking the counsel of the LORD God Almighty, to whom she declared was the cause. Naomi was right that she pictured the LORD God Almighty as sovereign; He had brought her back empty. But she failed to see that coming back was at a time when the barley harvest was about to take place. There would be ample food and blessings for the people. Her bitterness had blurred her vision to see beyond and rejoice in the providence of

God. She was so able and logical to persuade her two daughters-in-law not to follow her, but here all logic was thrown to the wind in an emotional outburst. The divine writer closed the chapter intimating that better things would happen—*So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.*

PRACTICAL VALUE

Life is not altogether a bed of roses, and that every day is a sunny day. There are good days and there are days which are really bad. Naomi's experience in Moab was really bad. In a period of ten years, her husband died, and her two only sons also died. She was left with two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. It was a very painful and sorrowful experience for Naomi. Many a woman would have cursed God, like Job's wife. But Naomi did exemplify herself as a resolute woman, who did not collapse under such intense adversity. She was reduced to nothing and when she heard that things were better in Bethlehem, she resolved to return to her homeland. In the midst of her impoverishment, she showed exceptional concern and care for the welfare of Orpah and Ruth. She told them to return to their own country so that they could remarry and start anew. And she would go back to Bethlehem so that she could also be among her own kind and start anew. Although she openly acknowledged that the LORD God Almighty brought the bitter experiences upon her and completely impoverished her, she was also

acknowledging that her God was sovereign and He would have mercy as He wills. She did not curse the LORD God Almighty. We should learn this precious lesson from her. Unlike her, we should see that the LORD indeed was providentially directing her return journey. She was blessed with Ruth, a wonderful, faithful, loyal, obedient, and committed daughter-in-law, and when she arrived in Bethlehem it was barley harvest time. This providential and promising hand of God would be more evident later in their lives. Be bitter if one cannot help it, but only for a while, and move on in life trusting and fearing God, and walking in His ways.

Orpah and Ruth too had to make a life-defining decision when Naomi told them to go back to their natural families in Moab. Their decision was crucial for it would change the destiny of their life. We can choose the way which promises our security, our career, our family, our health and wealth, as Orpah did. Alternatively, we can choose the way of Ruth.

After leaving Naomi, we do not know what happened to Orpah when she returned to her mother's house. Perhaps she remarried, had sons and daughters, and lived happily ever after in Moab. But Orpah missed one true value in life, and that was, a living relationship with the LORD (YAHWEH), the one true God. To her, seeing was believing. She chose with her eyes and not with her faith, and faith in the LORD (YAHWEH) the God of Israel, the only one there is. Whether she made good in Moab or not, it did not matter. What

really counted most was that she missed the *pearl of great price*.

But we can choose the path taken by Ruth. Her path was marked with insecurity, emptiness, and uncertainty. Yet she opted for it because she was determined to trust Naomi's God—*your God my God*. She had to “die to self.” To her own kind, the Moabites, she would be called a traitor and be despised. For the rest of her life, she would face such stumbling-blocks and adversities. She must therefore resolve to live a life of self-denial and serve the needs of others first. If we take the same path as Ruth, choosing the gospel of Christ and the Cross, we will face similar difficulties and challenges in the midst of a crooked and troubled world. It means offering our bodies a living sacrifice and pouring out our life for God and for others even if it results in *mara*. What shall it be, Orpah or Ruth?
AMEN