



BREAD IN BETHLEHEM SERIES: Part 1
THE TIMES THAT TRY US
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Tough times not only try our patience, but they also test our faith. Next, on Let the Bible Speak: A new series on the beloved book of Ruth. Welcome to the program today. It's always good to be with you to talk about the word of God. A new start is a wonderful thing. Especially, when what you are leaving behind is a trail of failure, tears, and heartache. Today, we begin a new series of lessons about a family who experienced all those things. It is not only one of the most beloved stories in the bible, but also one of the most wonderful pieces of literature of all time: the book of Ruth. It's only four chapters long and is tucked away in the books of the history of Israel but the things that take place in this story are central to the theme and the unfolding of God's story of salvation.

Some think of the book of Ruth as a love story, or a story of family devotion and loyalty. It certainly contains those themes but that's not really the purpose of the book of Ruth. It serves an important theological purpose and there are many necessary lessons we need to learn from it if we wish to be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, for the next five weeks or so, I want us to learn the lessons of the book of Ruth.

To lay the foundation, let's read together from Ruth chapter 1, beginning in verse 1. The record says: *"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 dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. Now they took 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. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so, the woman survived her two sons and her husband. 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 that the LORD had visited His people by giving*

them bread.” Our series will be called “Bread in Bethlehem” and today, we want to talk about “The Times That Try Us”. Stay with me for our study from this wonderful story. But first a song from the congregation.

There are some tender and touching scenes in the book of Ruth and that is what we generally remember when we think about the story of this wonderful woman. We think of the redemptive romance between this young maid from Moab and this wealthy bachelor from Bethlehem. Or perhaps we think of the endearing scene of Ruth and Naomi on the side of a dusty road as Ruth pledges her heart and her loyalty to her mother-in-law and to the God of Israel. But there is nothing sweet nor tender about the opening scenes of the book of Ruth. It begins in dark and difficult times for not only a family, but an entire city. It takes place in the little village of Bethlehem in Judah, just a few miles south of Jerusalem between 1100 and 1200 BC.

You perhaps have a romanticized picture of the town of Bethlehem. True: it is where our Savior was born nearly 12-hundred years later, but Bethlehem has a notorious history. This was in the Days of the Judges before Israel had a human monarchy and those were troubled times for the nation spiritually AND physically. Read through the book of Judges and you’ll see a snapshot of what was going on in that time and it wasn’t good. The religious life of Israel was in a state of confusion and the people were caught up in all kinds of idolatry and immorality.

We, of course, know the story of Samson and how sin and his love of strange women got him into such trouble. We also read a rather bizarre story in Judges 17 and 18 about a Jewish family with all kinds of sin taking place within it. You had a young man named Micah who stole money from his own mother and when she found out and pronounced a curse upon the thief, he brought the money back to her and she turned right around and used it to have an idol made to give to her thief of a son. As if that wasn’t strange enough, a young priest from Bethlehem -the hometown of Elimelech and Naomi – who just sold out to Micah, gave up whatever convictions he had, if he had any to begin with, and agreed to hire on and serve as a priest over Micah’s new idolatrous religion. It’s not only a story of stealing, treachery, deceit, and idolatry, but if you read on, it involved an entire tribe of God’s people who went in and plundered a city that wasn’t supposed to be theirs and it became a hotbed of idolatry and evil.

And then, you merely turn the page to chapter 19, and you have one of the most terrible stories in all the word of God. It’s about a woman from Bethlehem who is married to a Levite, but she leaves her husband and commits adultery – he later goes to get her and woos her into going back home with him. They got as far as the town of Gibeah, and absolute horror ensues as the whole thing turns into another Sodom and Gomorrah situation. You can read the story in Judges 19 of how the wicked men in that city tried to sexually abuse him and instead, he throws his wife out into the mob where they assaulted her and left her for dead. He carried her home and cut up her remains and had them sent all over the land to show what had happened to her. Now, friend, that all was going on in the days of the Judges and much of it came right out of the city of Bethlehem. What I’m saying is, it was not an easy environment for a godly person to live in and raise a family in. There was much wickedness and corruption in that time even though it was the Promised Land and supposedly the people of God living there.

But it was not only a bad time in Bethlehem spiritually but physically. To make matters worse, a terrible famine had settled over the land and, in particular, the city of Bethlehem. It’s quite possible that the famine was an act of God’s judgment upon them for how they were living. At least, we know that God sometimes did punish His people with famines and such famines were

severe and deadly. Today, most of us get our food from the grocery store and most of that comes from some other part of the country or even the world. In our first-world culture, famines and droughts don't affect us too much but it was different in bible days. It was agrarian society. They raised their food; a crop failure could mean starvation. In fact, we read in bible times of famines or when people in a city were cut off from the fields and from their food supply and starvation set in and even caused women to resorting to killing and eating their own children.

So, what I'm saying is, it was not easy living in Bethlehem, especially if you were raising a family and trying to do what is right. But in that day, you see, God was particular about where His people lived. The nation was divided into tribes and when they took the land of Canaan their inheritance was divided up and apportioned to the tribes and to the families within those tribes. That's not even to mention that they were dwelling in the Land that God had given them to conquer and to settle. Jews belonged in Canaan because it was the land God had given them and Elimelech and his wife Naomi belonged with their people in Bethlehem-Judah. Well, that may sound good except it wasn't easy to live in Bethlehem-Judah at that time. The name Bethlehem means "House of Bread" and the name Judah means "praise". But there wasn't much bread to be found at that time in Bethlehem and I don't imagine the people of Judah felt like offering up praise while they were suffering and wondering where their next meal would come from.

Friend, those are the very times that test our faith and reveal our true character. Elimelech and Naomi were probably good people who found themselves in a dark and difficult time and it put their faith to the test. What they should have done was trust God. Now, trusting God doesn't necessarily mean that we just sit on our hands and do nothing and wait for God to miraculously provide. But when God has commanded something or when God has revealed His will for us in some matter, faith means that we believe God and do what He says to do even when the circumstances tell us we should do something else. It's when we get into those tight places in serving the Lord that our faith is shown for what it is. Elimelech didn't do that. Instead the Book of Ruth opens by telling us in chapter 1, verse 1: "that there was a famine in the land. And (Elimelech) went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons."

Now, as hard as times may have been, of all places for him to decide to go, Moab was about as faithless and terrible of a decision as he could have made. We'll get into this more in our lesson next week, but let it just suffice to say for now that Moab was a spiritually dark and desolate place where a family from Bethlehem had no business living. There may have been bread in Moab but there was no spiritual sustenance in that wicked place and Elimelech and Naomi paid a terrible price, as we shall see, for moving their family there. They failed this test of faith. Instead of trying times driving them to their knees, they drove them to compromise and go to a wicked place that all but destroyed their family and caused them to lose everything and it would be years later that Naomi would return to Bethlehem without her husband or her sons, a bitter and penniless woman.

Friend, when you live your life based on any determination besides the will of God, you are inviting trouble. You'll pay for that. It will cost you spiritually much more than you ever imagined. Jesus said, "Seek FIRST the kingdom of God and let everything else then fall into its place. It takes faith to do that. It takes a resolve and determination to be faithful to the word of God to be able to do that because the world, the flesh, and the devil will put you in all kinds of

positions that will try your faith and test your ability to remain true to God's word. Sometimes God Himself will put you in such a position to test whether your faith is what you think it is.

I want you to know today that being true and faithful to God is not easy. It is never convenient to be a Christian and to do the will of God. In fact, the course of least resistance will carry you **away** from God, not toward Him. Christians are often put in places and circumstances in life where we are called upon to make difficult decisions. And sometimes the right decision is not the decision that people of the world tell us we should make. For example, the world would say that we are foolish if we turn down a job offering good money and the prospect of promotion because such a job would interfere with our church life or such a job would demand that we make some compromises in our morals or our beliefs. I have time and again seen fathers and mothers who follow a job or a career path to some city or some environment that ended up being detrimental to their spiritual lives and to the spiritual wellbeing of their children. They put money, advancement, opportunity before the spiritual welfare of their family and they ended up paying a terrible price. Just what kind of price tag do you put on the souls of your children? How large of a salary are you willing to sell them to the devil for? Do you think about those things when you make decisions for you and your family? When you decide to take or turn down a job, do you think what will this move, or this lifestyle do to them spiritually? Or what will it do the local church that I'm already a member of? Does that cross your mind? Now, someone will say: "but desperate times call for desperate measures!" "A man has to feed his family, you know." Or someone will say: "a man has to live!" but that's not true. You don't have to live. You DO have to die though and face God in judgment and so will your family and how will the decisions you are making impact where you and they stand in the Day of Judgment. That's the question that ought to come first, you see. As I cited a moment ago, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount not to be like the Gentiles who fret and worry over material things but rather "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and THEN all of those other things will be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33).

Sometimes we are confronted by plagues and famines, so to speak, well, because plagues and famines just happen. We live in a fallen and corrupted world because of sin and as a result the world is filled with difficulty and obstacles to happiness and success. When Adam sinned, God said the ground would bring forth thorns and thistles and that man would have to work hard to make the ground fruitful and to be able to eat and survive.

Sometimes the famines come as a consequence of our own personal sin. That is, we make foolish decisions and live in such a way that we make life harder than it has to be. And then sometimes, somebody else's sin puts us or our family in a hard place. The alcoholism of a father or the drug addiction of a mother or one of the children in a family makes it much harder for a family to survive.

And then sometimes, God **sends** the famine to discipline and chasten us. He allows the times of famine to test us and to mold us and to correct us. The writer of Hebrews said in Hebrews 12 that God chastens those whom He loves and that He allows suffering and difficulty to provide discipline in our lives and consequently, he warned them not allow a "root of bitterness" to be planted as a reaction to the Lord's chastening. In other words, don't let suffering and persecution drive you away from the Lord. You see, when those times come, they put our faith to the test. They challenge us as to whether we'll be true to God or not. They force us to make decisions that reveal whether we're as dedicated to God as we think we are or claim to be. Elimelech failed that test. He made a foolish and tragic decision based upon

nothing more than feeding his family and doing what he thought he had to do to survive. But instead of surviving, he lost everything. Whatever faith he may have had, faltered when it became hard to live a godly life and be do the will of God.

Now, Elimelech's faithlessness cause him to make a detrimental choice. And that will be the subject of our study next week. As we continue our series in the book of Ruth, we have not only looked at the **TIMES THAT TRY US**, but we'll learn about the **CHOICES THAT CONDEMN US**. But then, I want you to see that there are **DECISIONS THAT CAN DESTINE US**. And there is also **LOVE THAT LIFTS US** and **PROVIDENCE THAT PROVIDES FOR US**. All these important and relevant themes are woven throughout this wonderful story that is the Book of Ruth and I hope you will join me for each and every study and that you'll not only be challenged to make the right decisions in your life but that you'll see the prophetic portrait of our Savior, the Lord Jesus in the pages of this famous story.

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