



BREAD IN BETHLEHEM SERIES: Part 2
THE CHOICES THAT CONDEMN US
Kevin Presley

Greetings and welcome. Thank you so much for joining me for 'Let the Bible Speak.' It's a privilege to have your time and attention to look into the Word of God. Today, we return to the beloved book of Ruth in the Old Testament and our look at an ancient family who made some decisions that not only affected their own future, but even ours today. We began our series in Ruth last week, talking about the terrible famine that drove Elimelech and his family away from their home and to a foreign land. We learned of how their circumstances tested their faith in God, just as trials and perplexities will challenge our own faith today and call upon us to make some difficult decisions. Today, I want us to begin looking at the consequences of those choices.

Let's go back and re-read the first six verses of the Book of Ruth and the background of the story we are studying over these next few weeks. The record says beginning in Ruth chapter 1 and verse 1: *"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."*

The name of the little village Bethlehem, where this family lived, ironically means "House of Bread" but as the story begins, there is no bread to be found at that time. This crisis prompted Elimelech and Naomi to make a decision that would haunt their family for years to come. We're calling our series: "Bread in Bethlehem". Last week, we talked about The Times That Try Us; today, The Choices That Condemn us.

Life is a continual series of choices. Someone estimated that each one of us makes on average 35,000 decisions every day. Some of those decisions amount to very little and some of them can determine life and death. But every one of them has some consequence. It may not matter much whether you decide to get up and walk across the room for a glass of water, but it certainly matters if you walk across the street in front of a moving car. Minute by minute and even second by second, we are making calculations and choices that shape the course of not only a day but ultimately our life. Now, God has given us the power to make choices for ourselves, but He has not given us the ability to choose the consequences of our choice and every choice has some kind of consequence. That's especially true when we make moral and spiritual judgments pertaining to our lives. Joshua told the people of Israel as they moved settled in the Land of Canaan: *"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the (idol) gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house we will serve the Lord."* (Joshua 24:15). And Moses reminded the people in Deuteronomy 30:19-20, *"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."* This was same choice that confronted the family we read about in the opening scene of the Book of Ruth.

As we learned in our last study together, Elimelech and Naomi lived in Bethlehem-Judah and a terrible famine gripped their town. Times were hard and their faith was challenged. It's likely that the famine was a form of God's judgment upon that place for its sin and apostasy. This was the time of the judges and much of Israel was a spiritual wreck filled with anarchy, rebellion, and idolatry. Elimelech and Naomi, along with their two sons Mahlon and Chilion, may have been decent and God-fearing people but Elimelech made a choice that doomed his family. He should have stayed in the Promised Land and trusted God through the famine if he was indeed a righteous man. The Psalmist said he had *"never seen the righteous forsaken or his seed begging for bread,"* but instead of putting his faith in God, he took matters into his own hands and decided he needed to carry his family off to the land of Moab. Now, the bible doesn't specifically say that Elimelech sinned in doing this but if it wasn't a sin, it was certainly not a wise decision. He was taking his family away from the place where God dwelt among His people to a strange land. Not only was it a foreign country, but it was also the home of some of God's most despised enemies.

Just who were the Moabites anyway? Listen, for as corrupt as some of God's people were in Israel at that time and as far away from God as the many of the people had drifted, no place could have been more opposed to God than the land of Moab. It wasn't that far, geographically. As the crow would fly, it would be less than 50 miles or so, but spiritually, it was a world away. Not only that, in that day, 50 miles was a long distance to go. You didn't commute back and forth. You didn't go to Moab for the weekend. Elimelech MOVED his family there for a time. The record says, *"they went to dwell in Moab"* and it says, *"they remained there."* This was a move with tremendous consequences for Elimelech and his family. Now, today it may not make any difference what state or what country you live in if you're a Christian, but it mattered to God's covenant people at that time. God's covenant involved a land that He had given them. When they inherited that land, they were to drive out the pagans and they were to be unpolluted by the culture and the idolatry of the Canaanites. So, I can't imagine that God saw it as a good thing for this family to leave Bethlehem-Judah (the house of bread and praise) and go to this idolatrous and wicked land.

You may remember that Moabites were longtime enemies of God and His people. They came from the son born to Lot and his daughter in that incestuous relationship after they fled from Sodom. The Moabites were a wicked people and opposed the people of God down through the centuries. When the children of Israel came up from Egypt and needed to pass through what was called the King's Highway, the Moabite king refused to let them pass and that angered God and He cursed the Moabites. He said that no Moabite would enter the congregation of His people, even unto the 10th generation. In Psalm 60:8, God said *"Moab is my washpot."* That referred to a pot of dirty water in which one had washed the filth off their hands and feet. That's how God viewed the pagan Moabites.

Let me give you a snapshot of life in Moab. They were idolators. And like most idolators, they were polytheistic – that is, they worshipped many idol gods. The chief deity they worshipped – their national God – was an idol they named Chemosh. Chemosh was akin to the more familiar pagan god, Molech. In fact, many believe that Chemosh and Molech were just different national manifestations of the same pagan god. Molech was 'the fire god' to whom his worshippers would sacrifice their children. Not only the Moabite stone, but the bible itself, later tells us that this was how the Moabites worshipped Chemosh as well. He was a pot-bellied monster made of metal and a fire would be kindled in his belly until he glowed cherry-red. His arms were forged in such a way to form a cradle, which was the alter upon which sacrifices were laid. Those sacrifices were not lambs, or bulls, or goats but were human beings. And not only were they human beings – they were babies. Tradition has it that the priests would kindle and stock the fire until the arms of Chemosh glowed red-hot. They would beat on their drums as their child sacrifice was laid in the fiery arms of their god. They would beat on the drums louder and louder to drown out the screams of the infant sacrifice so their fathers would not hear them. Their sacrifices were often filled with orgies and other lustful acts. This was the dark world to which Elimelech thought he had to resort to because of the famine at home in Bethlehem.

I imagine Elimelech was like a lot of Christians today who compromise their faith and their values when they are put in a difficult spot or when temptation arises. He likely tried to rationalize and justify his choice. Perhaps he thought, "our going to Moab doesn't have anything to do with our relationship with God. We don't agree with their religion and their way of life over there. We can worship our God over there just like we do over here..." That may be what he thought, but when you compromise what is right and subject yourself and your family to a wicked environment, you'll pay a price for that. You will not come away unharmed and unaffected. Paul said, *"Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits.'" (1 Corinthians 15:33)* Solomon said in Proverbs 13:20, *"He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will be destroyed."* It's true that no matter where we go and what we do in life that we will live in the world, but we're not to be of it. When we choose to subject ourselves to the evil influences and temptations of the world, we are asking for trouble! You simply don't do that without consequence. We'll see in our study next week just what spiritual effect all of this had on Elimelech's family, particularly his wife Naomi.

And then, perhaps Elimelech said to his wife and sons, "now this isn't going to be for very long. We don't really WANT to go to Moab, but we just don't seem to have any choice. This is just to escape this famine. Surely, it won't last long, and we'll be right back here at home where we belong in no time." I remind you though, the bible not only says they went and dwelt in Moab, but it then says, *"they remained there"* and regardless of how long Elimelech had in mind, it turned into ten long years. The saying goes, "Sin will take you farther than you want to go. Sin will leave you longer than you want to stay. And sin will cost you far more than you want to pay." I must believe that his choice took Elimelech farther than he ever wanted to go, and it left him much longer than he ever intended to stay, and I know for a fact that it cost him far more than he wanted to pay – because his move to Moab led to ten long years of

sickness, sorrow, death, and heartache. It led to his own death. I don't know how it happened or how soon it happened, but sometime after they went to Moab, Elimelech died. Ruth 1:3 says, "*Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons.*" This alone would have created a terrible hardship for Naomi. She has now lost her husband in a dark land, far away from home. Life can be hard enough for a widow in today's world but imagine in that time! Women were viewed by the world of that day as second-class citizens. Their testimony was not accepted in a court. They were typically dependent upon their husbands for a home and for a living. And now, Naomi has lost her husband in another country, far from home and kin. Her only hope for survival was her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. When their father died, they stayed there in Moab and the bible then tells us that those two young men found and took wives from the land of Moab – two Moabite women: Orpah and Ruth.

Now I want to say a little bit about that. Orpah and Ruth were evidently good-hearted women and made good wives to Mahlon and Chilion. They were certainly good to their mother-in-law, Naomi but don't take that as a license to make the same decisions this family made. God can use bad situations and turn them around for the good of His people and for His purposes but that's not a license to go out and get yourself into a bad situation to begin with. I can't imagine that God would have smiled upon the decision of these two men. God specifically forbade His people from marrying the Canaanites when they entered the Land of Canaan. God warned His people at different times against marrying pagan people because, for one reason, their hearts would be polluted by the idolatry of the people they were marrying into. I believe that's what the bible means in Genesis 6:1-8 when it says the sons of God married the daughters of men and gave birth to the Nephilim which eventually precipitated the flood. Now, many speculate that the sons of God there refer to angels marrying human women, but I believe the sons of God refers to those of the godly seed line of Seth and the daughters of men refers to the descendants of his wicked brother Cain. The giants that were born to these unions merely refers to mighty and fierce men who continued to corrupt the earth. That's what happens when the righteous become unequally yoked with the unrighteous. Solomon married pagan women and they turned his heart away from God and, in fact, Solomon, if you can imagine, later built a shrine to this very idol Chemosh that the Moabites were worshipping. Now, you may point to cases where a child of God has converted their unbelieving spouse and praise God that's the case, but I'm telling you, that's the exception and not the rule.

So, look at the consequences of Elimelech's choice! He died! His sons married pagan women from a nation of people who were God's avowed enemies. And we're not through. The bible then says that Mahlon and Chilion died! I don't know what happened to them except that their names mean weak and sickly, so that's probably a good clue. Regardless, they both died. You talk about a tragedy. Imagine what this meant for Naomi. She goes from a difficult situation to a desperate situation! There was no social security to draw; no government safety net; no life insurance policy to cash out; and here she is with no husband and no sons in a strange land away from all her family. She is left with only her two daughters-in-law. And regardless of what we can say about her sons marrying heathen wives, thank God they were good enough women to care and remain with their mother-in-law.

Our story will take a dramatic turn next week. But as we leave for today, I want you to see this woman, Naomi, has lost everything and is left alone. Her name in Hebrew means 'pleasant' but Naomi is anything but pleasant to behold at this point in her life. A foolish choice has taken her far from home, into the depths of sorrow, and poverty, and loss, and heartache, and bitterness. That's where foolish decisions and where leaving the covenant of God will take you too. Our choices can condemn us to all kinds of unnecessary suffering and heartache. Maybe that's where you are today. Maybe sin and

spiritual neglect has carried you far off into a strange and dark place. Next week, good news came to Naomi. And God has some good news for you too. Next time, "THE DECISIONS THAT DESTINE US."

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