



BREAD IN BETHLEHEM SERIES: Part 3
THE DECISIONS THAT DESTINE US
Kevin Presley

Welcome to you on this Lord's Day. Thanks so much for joining me. It's a privilege to have a few moments of your time to talk about your soul and your relationship with God. We're in the middle of a series on the Book of Ruth, one of the most touching and inspiring stories ever told.

The book of Ruth is only four chapters long, but it is packed with practical as well as theological truth. It is mostly a positive and uplifting story of love, but it begins with darkness and tragedy. It was during the time when the judges ruled Israel and those were chaotic and evil times. To make matters even worse, the book opens by telling us that a famine had struck the little farming village of Bethlehem and caused families to have to look elsewhere for food.

The story focuses on one family who decided to leave their home and go to the land of Moab – an enemy nation to the east of the Dead Sea. That decision didn't end well for the family of Elimelech and Naomi. As we studied the past two weeks, their choice condemned them to even greater hardship and ultimately death. Perhaps they intended to only go for a short while, but they ended up putting down roots in that country and when it was all said and done, Naomi is the only one left who went to Moab. Ten long and hard years after leaving home, she finally returns leaving three graves behind in Moab – those of her husband and her two sons.

A penniless and heartbroken widow, she finally receives word that the famine is over. Though this bitter woman will bear the scars of her years in Moab, her life is finally about to turn around – and one of the most wonderful stories of human redemption begins to unfold. Let's pick up the story in Ruth 1, verse 6. The record says: *"Then she (Naomi) 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. Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go, return each to her mother's house. The LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with*

the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!" Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her." (Ruth 1:6-14) Along a dusty road somewhere between Moab and Bethlehem, two young women's lives were forever changed, and their destinies sealed.

The last time we looked at Naomi, we saw a tired, grieving, and near-hopeless woman. Life has left her wrung out. She's far away from home; her husband has died, and then her only two sons died. Her little family has now fallen apart, and she is left all alone in this dark and pagan land with no way of supporting herself. If we could see her face, I would imagine it looked wrinkled and prematurely old. The tears have stained her cheeks and left her empty, and I believe she must have played it all over and over again in her memory and thought "if I could just turn back the hands of time and never have come to this place..." Her family has paid the price for their choice to leave the Promised Land and go to the land of God's enemies and despite a trail of disappointing decisions, the only good thing it seems that has come out of all of this is the two young women her sons had married. They may have been Moabites and they may have been idol worshippers, but they had apparently loved and cared for their mother-in-law. They had suffered loss together; had grieved together; and these three widows had stayed together and somehow held things together after the deaths of their husbands.

Perhaps by this time it seemed to Naomi that she too would die in this place, away from her home in Bethlehem, which by this time, must have seemed to her a distant dream of long ago. But one day, a message came. The Targum suggests, I'm told, that an angel visited Naomi and brought her news that she had longed to hear. Ruth 1:6 says, "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." (Ruth 1:6) I don't think there was any deliberation or hesitancy on her part; the bible simply says "then she arose...that she might return from Moab... for she had heard" that the famine had ended. That's all she needed to know. She likely had no idea what her future would be, but whatever it would hold, at least she would be home. And so, probably, with little explanation, she walked out of the house she had lived in, and without looking back, she and her daughters-in-law started down the road for Bethlehem.

It was good enough for Naomi to leave the heartache of Moab behind and turn her eyes to home, but to the two girls walking behind her, it was a different story. Naomi was leaving a strange land to go home but these young women were leaving home to go to a strange land. Orpah and Ruth were their names and Moab may have been a foreign country to Naomi, but it was these women's homes. Their mothers were there. Their relatives were there. It was all they had known and now on the whim of some message that came to Naomi, they are leaving that behind and headed to a place they know very little about other than what Naomi and their husbands may have told them. I'm sure they were worried about their mother-in-law and her safety. That would have been a hard and dangerous trip for her to make. I'm sure they all wondered what would await Naomi over there because, after all, it has been TEN years since she left. And so, they go with her.

I doubt if Orpah, at least, gave a great deal of thought to the implications of all of this when in haste they left but as they walked, Naomi does begin to think all of it through. She knows that life won't be easy for her daughters-in-law there in Judah. They would be strangers, and Moabites at that! They would be widows with no family but her. They would be away from their families and the security of home and of the life they had known, and by Naomi's way of reckoning, they would have an uphill climb if they went back to live with her in Bethlehem. So, somewhere along the road, maybe over near the border country, she stops, and she has a serious talk with her beloved daughters-in-law. She reasons with them about how hard life is going to be for them. It's one thing for HER to go home but it's something entirely different for these young women in the prime of their lives to try to assimilate to Jewish life. She tells them, go back home where you can find peace and prosperity for yourselves. She kissed them and tried to say goodbye but they both refused and insisted they were going with her. Naomi tries to reason with them though, saying, "you don't have husbands to work and provide for you and to give you children. You won't find husbands over there and if, somehow, I could have more sons now, you can't wait for them to grow up and marry you. So, it's just best for everybody here if you turn around and go home. Go back to your mothers. Go back to your families. Go back to your homes and the lives you've known."

Now, you may disagree, but I think that this reveals what the last ten or more years has done to Naomi spiritually. She still believes in her God, but she has a lot of questions **about** Him and about everything that has happened to her. The world has done a number on her and her family, and she's a shell of the robust and vibrant woman she used to be. Now, you think about this, she not only tells these girls to go back home, but she also tried to tell Ruth in verse 15 to go back to her gods. Imagine it! 'Go back to Chemosh and the sacrifice of your babies. Go back to that world of ignorance and sin and darkness!' It is a weak and compromised faith that sees so little difference between the kingdom of God and the world around us that we think people are as well off in one as the other. There are so-called Christians today who look at the world that way. They don't shun the world; they accept the world. There is very little separation in their heart spiritually between the things of God and the things of the world. That's what compromise and worldliness will do to you over time.

Naomi is prepared to say goodbye to these two young women forever but one of the most tender and touching scenes in the word of God unfolds right here. See them now. These three women standing along this dusty country road with their handkerchiefs out and they are hugging and weeping with Naomi pointing toward Moab where they came from telling them to go but Ruth pointing forward to where Naomi is headed. There will be a parting of the ways here on this roadside, but it won't be Ruth and Orpah leaving Naomi; it will be Ruth and Naomi leaving Orpah. After Naomi's speech, Orpah gets to thinking about these things and she must have thought, "she's right, you know. If I keep going, I'll probably never see my mother again. I don't know what's waiting for me over there and she hasn't painted a very promising picture. I just can't give up everything I have and know to go to a place I know nothing about!"

Maybe Orpah thought "why do I have to go to Bethlehem with her anyway? I can love Naomi and I can worship her God over here in Moab just as well as I can over there." And that's the way some carnally minded church members think today. They think "well, I can love Jesus and still have my sin. I can serve Jesus and drink my beer and go to the bars and clubs. I can love the Lord and still run around with my friends and have my fun and live like I want to..." Listen to me now: NO, YOU CAN NOT. *"Therefore COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM AND BE SEPARATE, SAYS THE LORD. DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN, AND I WILL RECEIVE YOU."* (2 Corinthians 6:17) If you're going to follow Jesus, you've got to get up and get out of Moab. You can't live for Christ and live for the flesh and for the world at the same time. You have a choice to make! It's one or the other and it's as simple as that.

The bible says in Ruth 1:14, *"Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her."* Orpah kissed her mother-in-law. That was a kiss of sentimentality. It was a kiss of affection. It was a kiss of wishing her well and telling her how much she cared about her. But listen to me friend: it was a kiss without conviction! And many, many people are willing to place the kiss of sentimentality on the cheek of Jesus. They will tell you how much they love Jesus and how much they care about Jesus – but they will only travel so far with Him. They will only follow Him so long as it doesn't cause them too much trouble or until they must give people and things up that they don't want to give up. Jesus said that if you're not willing to deny yourself and even turn your back upon mother and father to follow Him, you're not worthy to be His disciple.

And so, with a kiss on the cheek, Orpah turns, and she walks away, and we watch her slowly disappear over the horizon and back into the obscurity and darkness out of which she came. And we never hear one more word about Orpah in the divine record. She vanishes from the pages of history. But Ruth! Ruth followed. Ruth would not turn back. She cared not for what she had to leave behind. By faith, she reached out to the future and this obscure, idol-worshipping, gentile Moabitess becomes one of the most significant women in all the word of God. I want you to listen to her vow she now makes to Naomi. It's one of the most famous and beautiful statements in the bible. Verses 14-18 now: *"Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 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. 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."* When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her."

Have you ever read that and really thought about what all Ruth was saying to Naomi? This was not some shallow statement made while caught up in an emotional moment. It is not a poem or a platitude; it is the most quintessential and concise statements of discipleship in all the word of God. Listen to her! *"Entreat me not to leave you..."* Don't try to turn me around, I've made up my mind. *"For wherever you go, I will go"* I don't exactly know where I'm headed but where you are that's where I'm going. That's the nature of simple faith. You don't decide to become a Christian knowing everything there is to know about the bible and about the Christian life. All it takes it simple, trusting, yielding, obedient faith that says what Jesus tells me to do, I will do. That's it. She then says, *"Wherever you lodge, there I will lodge."* She is depending, in other words, on Naomi and placing her welfare in the hands of this woman. Again, that's faith. *"Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God."* When you become a Christian you not only have a new Father, but you also get a new family. And listen to this! *"Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried..."* This wasn't some experiment. This was not a trial run. Ruth does not say, I'll try this God thing out and if it's not to my liking, I can always turn around and go home to Moab. No sir, no ma'am. She is making a commitment of her very life! Her destiny is to be with Ruth's God and with Ruth's people for eternity! Friend, that's what it means to follow Jesus and if you have never made such a decision and such a commitment, you're not following Jesus. You're not really a Christian. You're not His disciple. But Ruth made that decision and she followed, and she went all the way.

Finally, the gates of home appeared to Naomi. That little town she had left ten years before... As she and Ruth come walking through the gates, heads must have turned. It was probably only a town of a few hundred people at that time but many of them had probably forgotten about Naomi. She certainly

didn't like the same as she did when she left. It had been a long time and life had made an old woman out of her. But if Naomi was a stranger in her own city, what was Ruth? Who is this and what is she doing here? It's a thought that gives me a chill from the crown of my head to the sole of my feet: as they looked upon this young maiden from Moab and wondered who she was and why she was there, little did they know that they were looking at the grandmother of the Creator of the Universe. She didn't even know it. God would make her famous in Bethlehem and in Israel. He had great plans for her and used her in one of the most incredible ways all because of the simple and trusting faith she showed when she made that decision on the road from Moab. And you simply have no idea what the Lord can make out of your life if you'll bring Him your heart and life with that same kind of obedient, trusting faith. And Lord willing, I'm going to bring you a little closer next week to what this woman became and what her decision meant, not only for her, but for you and me.

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