

# Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

## The Tragedy of Elimelech

### Ruth Introduction

The book of Ruth is a fascinating little book in the Old Testament. It provides us with a look at the life of the common person in Israel more than we often get in the historical books of the Old Testament. The record often revolves around kings, rulers, judges, and high priests. Yet this book is about just common, ordinary people living out their lives in the land of Israel in the time of the judges. This is a unique and interesting picture.

The book of Ruth immediately follows on Judges in our Bibles, as it takes place during the days of the judges. When the books of the Bible were printed on scrolls, Ruth was often included on the end of the book of Judges, being so small that a separate scroll to hold it seemed unnecessary. However, the book is categorized in the Hebrew Bible not with the book of Judges, but rather with the *Megilloth*, the books to be read on the feast days.

The original Hebrew Bible was not divided into Law, History, Poetry, and Prophecy, like our modern Bibles are, and even most of our modern Hebrew texts. Rather, there were just three divisions in the Old Testament: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. This last category was often called the "Psalms," since that was the first book in that category. The Lord Himself summarizes the Old Testament in these three categories in Luke 24:44.

**44. Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me."**

This book of Ruth is in the last or Psalms category listed here. There are eleven books in this category in all, and the middle five are the short books that were typically read during the feasts. The book of Ruth is the second of these, and was typically read during the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. This information is all set forth in *The Companion Bible*. The structure of these five *Megilloth* or feast books is as follows.

- A. The Song of songs. Read at Passover, celebrating deliverance from Pharaoh/Egypt.
- B. Ruth. Read at the Feast of Weeks, celebrating God's goodness in the harvest.
- C. Lamentations. Read at the Fast, commemorating Israel's woes.
- B. Ecclesiastes. Read at the Feast of Tabernacles, celebrating God's goodness in the wilderness.
- A. Esther. Read at the Feast of Purim, celebrating deliverance from Haman/Persia.

Thus we see how this book fits into the celebration of Israel's feasts. It gives a story which fits well with the Feast of Weeks and harvest time, showing God's goodness upon His people in the land, how they are cut off from that when they leave it, and how God can restore that goodness when they come back to Him.

The book of Ruth is important as it introduces us to the other Gentile woman (besides Rahab) who is included in the lineage of the Lord Jesus Christ. This woman Ruth was a very special young lady, and we can learn many lessons from examining her life. Her attitude was a Godly one indeed, and though

she was a foreigner to Israel, her life was such as could have been a good example to any of God's people, both then and now.

So let us take up an examination of this book, and see what lesson the Lord has for us to learn from this little Old Testament book.

## Ruth 1

*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.*

First we learn that something came to pass. This phrase is usually used in the Scriptures when a time of trouble is at hand, but when blessings are to follow. Thus there was something that was coming, and yet would blessedly pass.

Then we read that this story takes place during the days of the judges. That is all that is said, and so we do not know exactly when during this period this took place. Since according to Matthew 1:5, **“Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab,”** this would seem to place this earlier in the period of the judges. However, we cannot be sure of this, for it seems likely that some generations are skipped over in the genealogy.

From Acts 13:20, we know that the time of the judges lasted about 450 years. Rahab was there at the time the Israelites conquered Jericho. We have four generations from Salmon and Rahab to David, who was king after Saul. To be very rough and to divide four hundred and fifty years by four (although it is unlikely that Salmon was an infant while Rahab was helping the Israelites conquer Jericho,) we would get each father in the lineage having his son when he was about 112 years old, on the average. While the ages still might have been somewhat longer at that time, they were not so much longer that it is likely that these men would still be having children at that great an age.

Yet this is not really a problem, for it is quite common in Biblical lineages to leave generations out. After all, a grandfather is just as necessary for a person's existence as a father, for if there were no grandfather, there could be no father. Thus a grandfather could be spoken of as having “begotten” his grandchildren, even though it might be indirectly. If some in the line of David were idolaters or ungodly, they could be counted as unworthy and cut out of the line. That is apparently what has taken place. Yet we have no real clue as to which generations are cut out. Therefore, we do not really know if this was early or late in the period of the judges, or even somewhere in the middle.

So we find ourselves beginning this story some undetermined time during the period of the judges. Now at this time there is a famine. In those days, without the means to preserve and to store food like we have them, people were very dependent upon the crops that were grown year-to-year. Famine was always just a season away for them, and so it was a very real danger.

Also, we know that during the book of Judges, there were times when Israel obeyed and served the LORD as they were supposed to, and other times when they turned away after other gods. The fact that there was a famine going on at this time tells us that Israel was not following the LORD at this point. We can clearly see this from the LORD's words in Deuteronomy 28, the passage where the LORD through Moses promises Israel blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. First comes the promise for blessing.

**1. “Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. 2 And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God:**

Yet this is offset by the warning regarding cursing.

**15. “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:**

The blessings for obedience are related to their crops in verses 4-5.

**4 “Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.**

**5 “Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.**

The curses for disobedience are also related to their crops in verses 17-18.

**17. “Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.**

**18. “Cursed shall be the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.**

The blessing of plenty is further fleshed out in verses 11-12.

**11. And the LORD will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. 12. The LORD will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.**

The curse of famine is further fleshed out in verses 38-42.

**38. “You shall carry much seed out to the field but gather little in, for the locust shall consume it. 39. You shall plant vineyards and tend them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them. 40. You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil; for your olives shall drop off. 41. You shall beget sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours; for they shall go into captivity. 42. Locusts shall consume all your trees and the produce of your land.**

Thus the words of the LORD were clear. Obedience would mean blessing, while disobedience would mean famine. So the converse is true. We know that if this was a time of famine, then Israel must have been being disobedient at this time.

Now we are introduced to a certain man from the town of Bethlehem in Judah. The fact that this was “Bethlehem Judah” is spelled out for us because there was another town with the same name in the land of Zebulun. “Bethlehem” means “House of Bread.” “Judah” means “Praise.” So this man lived in the House of Bread in the Land of Praise.

Yet when this famine arises, he leaves to go to Moab with his family. Probably the famine had not reached Moab, and this man heard that there was food there. Thus he trusts in this report, rather than in God, and leaves God’s country to go and seek the blessings that should have been his from the LORD. “Moab” means “From a Father.” So this family leaves the House of Bread in the Land of Praise to go From a Father and enter the territory of another nation of people who do not worship the LORD. This was neither wise nor good. Yet how often in times of trouble do God’s people even today seem to do the same thing! They look to the power of men to save them, rather than resting in the good place the LORD has brought them to. We could learn a lesson from this indeed.

Moab was a nation descended from the man Lot, Abraham’s nephew. Moab was not a Canaanite nation, therefore, but one related to Israel, and so it was possible for them to be friends with the nation of God’s people. Sometimes they were friendly with Israel, but more often they were at enmity with them. At the best of times, their land was not the land God had given His people, while Israel was that land. It was not good for this family therefore to leave God’s land for the land of a foreign nation.

Yet as we said, the fact that there was a famine in the first place tells us that Israel was not following the LORD as they should have been, and this man's attitude probably reflects that of many of them. They just were not trusting in their God, as they should have been.

*2. 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.*

Now we learn that the man's name is Elimelech. Elimelech means "My God is King." While this may have been true, it does not seem that he was living up to his name when he left the land of his King and went to the foreign land of Moab. His wife's name is Naomi, which means "My Delight" or "My Pleasant One." She may certainly have been a delightful woman, first to her parents, and now to her husband.

When we get to the children, however, we see a very different thing. The name of their first son is Mahlon, which means "Sick." The name of their second is Chilion, which means "Pining." This is not a very common word in English today. A good way to illustrate it would be a woman whose lover is a sailor, and whose ship failed to come in on time. She waits for him as weeks, months, or even years pass, hoping against hope that something has just delayed him, that he is not lost at sea, and that somehow, someday he will still turn up at her door. Yet she knows deep down that her hope likely is in vain, and her patient watching wears away at her as her hope slowly and terribly dwindles and dies. This could be described as her "pining." She is waiting for something that probably will never happen, and is wasting away under the burden of it.

How is it that the man whose King is God and the woman who is a Delight have two children who are Sick and Pining? We cannot know for sure, but the names in this family certainly have gone downhill from one generation to the next. It could well be that these two boys were born after the famine had already begun. One thing that always follows famine is illness, for where there is lack of food there will be disease. Therefore, Mahlon was doubtless born in a time of pestilence, and Chilion in a time when men pined away waiting for the famine to end, and their hopes were not coming true. Yet certainly for Elimelech and Naomi to name their children these names is not a sign that they were trusting in their God in this hardship. These names do not seem to reflect an attitude of confidence or faith. Now, on top of whatever ills they faced in Judah, they have left the nation of the LORD, and are sojourners in a foreign land. And this is true: when we leave the place God has for us, we will be sick and pining.

We should not mix up the name "Ephrathites" with "Ephraimites." Ephrath has nothing to do with the tribe of Ephraim. Ephrath, meaning "Ashiness" or "Fruitfulness," was the ancient name of Bethlehem in Judah. It is where Rachel was buried in Genesis 35:19. **"So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)."** Bethlehem in Judah is sometimes referred to by its old name. This helps distinguish it from the other Bethlehem in Zebulun. So this adds to what we said in the previous verse: they were inhabitants of Fruitfulness, yet they left the House of Bread in the Land of Praise to go From a Father.

*3. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons.*

If Elimelech's family hoped to escape death by moving to Moab, they were unsuccessful. It followed them there, as Elimelech, Naomi's husband, dies. What he died of we are not told, but it seems likely that the famine followed them east into Moab. The thing they feared and sought to flee from followed after them, and found them in a strange land.

*4. 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.*

Now Mahlon and Chilion come of age, and the time for them to marry comes. Living in a foreign land, however, they take foreign wives. This was never something Israelites were encouraged to do. We know that they were strictly forbidden from marrying Canaanite women. However, Moabites were not

Canaanites, but were related to Israel through Abraham's nephew Lot, as we saw. An Israelite could marry a Moabite, but a Moabite could not join the *kahal* of Israel, as we see from Deuteronomy 23:3.

**3. “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his *descendants* shall enter the assembly of the LORD forever,**

The word “assembly” here is the Hebrew word *kahal*, which was the out-positioned or ruling assembly in Israel. This was true up to the tenth generation, which is a long time. However, this word is “Moabite” is masculine, and only applies to the men. No such prohibition is on Moabite women. Thus, Ruth's descendant David, though nowhere near ten generations from her, not only did enter the LORD's *kahal*, but became the ruler of it under God Himself. Yet these Moabites, even the women, were not exactly under the LORD's favor. The Israelites were not forbidden from marrying them, yet to marry a Moabite woman was hardly the ideal thing to do. It was always better for an Israelite to marry one of their own nation.

Yet Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women. Chilion marries a woman named Orpah. Orpah means “Gazelle” or “Fawn.” A gazelle is a type of antelope, a swift and beautiful creature. No doubt Orpah's appearance lived up to her name. Mahlon marries a woman named Ruth. Ruth means “Friendship” or “Beauty.” Ruth definitely lived up to her name, as we will see. She was a beautiful woman, not just in appearance, but also in character. Not only so, but she would also prove to be a true friend indeed!

We are told that they dwelt there about ten years. I do not believe that this means after the marriage of the two sons, but rather in total. During the ten years, Elimelech died, and Mahlon and Chilion came of age and married. Yet the marriages were likely towards the end of the ten years. If they had really been married for ten years, it is very likely that one of them would have had children, which was not the case. The boys were probably young when they moved, and married towards the close of the ten years.

*5. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.*

Now tragedy strikes once again, and both Sick and Pining follow their father in death. It would seem they died close together. Again, we would suggest that the famine they fled from probably followed them to Moab, and these two young men died in the sickness that often goes with famine. So their sickness and pining come to an end. Now, this poor woman Naomi is left without her two sons or her husband. A sad decision now indeed it appears for them to have left their home and their God and gone to the land of foreigners who worship idols!

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