

Message #2  
Ruth: A Woman for All Seasons

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## GOING OUT OF THE WAY RUTH 1:1-5

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

According to a group called Wallet Hub (2019) Nevada is the most sinful state in the country. This group used 43 measurements including things like violent crime, alcoholism, gambling, sex offenses, and hate crimes to come up with their determination. A few years before that the Association of American Geographers held their annual convention in Las Vegas (2009). In preparation for that meeting, geography professors at Kansas State University used statistical methods to look at Nevada through the lens of the traditional seven deadly sins described in the Bible.

The geography professors used the categories of envy, gluttony, greed, lust, sloth, wrath, and pride. With envy they looked at the number of thefts per capita in the state. For gluttony they calculated the total number of limited-service eateries per capita. For greed they used poverty data, and so on. Their conclusion was that Clark County is the most sinful county in Nevada. If we give any credence to these calculations, we therefore live in the most sinful county in the most sinful state in the country.

I suspect that the geographers themselves didn't take all of this too seriously. They weren't too worried about having their convention in Sin City. Perhaps they thought that the data just added to the mystique of Las Vegas. But as Christian people, we might take this information a little more seriously. Sin always has consequences. We can see that in the world around us. We can see it in the Bible before us. We shall begin to see it in the passage which we are about to consider.

Last week we began a study of the little Old Testament Book of Ruth. We saw that the setting for the book was the period described in the Book of Judges, which stretched from the 1300s BC to about 1000 BC. This was the period in the Bible between the entrance of the Hebrews into the Promised Land of Canaan until the establishment of the kingdom of Israel under Saul and then David.

We saw that this period was marked by a repeated cycle whereby the Hebrews fell away from worshiping the true God and turned to worship of Canaanite Gods. The Lord would then cause hard times to come upon the people, especially at the hands of enemy countries. The people would then cry out to the true God. Then He would raise up a deliverer--- a judge--- who would help them to get rid of their enemies. The spiritual and moral climate of those days was summarized by the last verse of the book of Judges (PROJECTOR ON--- JUDGES 21:25): **“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”**

I then drew some comparisons with the moral climate of our own day--- a day in which it seems that too many people do what is right in their own eyes. In the Biblical story we

began to focus on this one seemingly insignificant family from Bethlehem (BETHLEHEM MAP 1). Elimelech and Naomi had sons Mahlon and Chilion. They were confronted with a situation of famine. We saw that in the Old Testament period the Lord often used famines as a judgment upon His people for turning away from Him and from His law. Today we are going to see how this family responds to this national judgment.

I.

First of all, we are going to look again this morning at vv. 1 & 2 of Ruth #1 (p. 222) as we consider **THE MELECH FAMILY AND THE DANGER OF GOING WHERE WE SHOULD NOT**. (I. THE MELECH FAMILY AND THE...) The head of the family is Elimelech, which is a combination of the Hebrew words “Eli,” “my God,” and “Melech,” “king,” or “my God is king.” So I have just decided to dub this family as the Melech family.

Verse 1 reads, **“In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.”** The narrator of this story makes no commentary on the wisdom of this move by the Melech family. He is providing straight reporting. But when we put all of the Biblical data together, there is evidence that there are two problems with this move.

The first has to do with the move out of the land of Israel. When God first called Abram, or Abraham, to move to the land of Canaan, He promised to give this land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants. Soon after Abraham entered the land, he encountered a test. There was a famine in the land. Abraham moved to Egypt. That proved to be an unwise move. For he got into trouble in Egypt. The Lord intervened and brought him back to Canaan.

The Lord then made a covenant with Abraham. It was an unconditional covenant, meaning that the Lord was going to carry it out no matter what. (GENESIS 15:18) According to Genesis #15 v. 18) the Lord promised Abraham, **“To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates...”** When Abraham’s wife died, he bought a piece of land with a cave to serve as the family graveyard. In doing this, he was staking a claim on the land of Canaan.

When Abraham’s grandson Jacob had his twelve sons, they began getting too close to the Canaanites. (PROJECTOR OFF) They started to intermarry with them, and the temptation became strong to worship their gods. So the Lord arranged to have them transplanted to Egypt where they grew into a nation. But when the patriarch Jacob died, he made it clear that he was to be buried in Canaan. That was to be the home of this growing nation. The story of the Exodus happened after that. Joshua led them into the Promised Land. The territory was divided up, and each family received a piece of land to occupy and cultivate.

Now this famine came along. Each family faced a decision about how to respond. Some stayed. Others chose to leave. Leaving meant the possibility of losing one’s claim on the

land. It also would make it more difficult to fulfill their responsibility to show up at the tabernacle and to worship God at the appropriate times. The Mulch family chose to leave the land.

The second problem that their decision involved was going to the land of Moab. The text literally says that they moved to “the fields of Moab.” (BETHLEHEM TO MOAB MAP) This involved a trip of about eighty or a hundred miles to the plateau that ran through the middle of Moab east of the Dead Sea. Still today rain clouds will sometimes bypass the region of Bethlehem but drop rain on the Moab plateau when they arrive there from the west.

The history of Moab goes back to Genesis #19. There we encounter the story where Abraham’s nephew Lot chose to live in the region of Sodom. God destroyed the city, but the angel of the Lord delivered Lot and his family. Lot’s wife looked back at the city and was turned into a pillar of salt. So Lot was left only with his two daughters. They got their father drunk and had sex with him. They both became pregnant. One child was Ammon, and the other was Moab. The descendants of Moab settled in the region east of the Dead Sea.

According to Numbers #22, as the children of Israel were headed to the Promised Land, they passed through the territory of the Moabites. The leaders of Moab hired the prophet Balaam to curse the Hebrews. That did not work out. So then the Moabites sought to corrupt them. (NUMBERS 25:1) We read in Numbers #25 vv. 1 & 2, **“While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. (NUMBERS 25:2) These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.”** The Lord had to intervene to get the Hebrews out of this mess.

Then in the Judges period the Moabites became one of the foreign oppressors who bullied the Hebrews. (JUDGES 3:12) Thus we are told in Judges #3 v. 12, **“And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”** Thus the Moabites were historically enemies of Israel. These are the people among whom Elimelech and his family chose to live.

Verse 1 notes that the Melech family “went to sojourn” in Moab. The particular Hebrew verb which the author chose is significant. It is *gur*. (GUR) It means “to stay for a while,” or “to live as a foreigner.” The same Hebrew word is used in Deuteronomy #10 v. 19 (DEUTERONOMY 10:19). There the Law of Moses says: **“Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”** You were temporary residents there. You lived there for over 400 years, but that was not really your home.

Earlier we were told about the two sons whom Moses had. (EXODUS 18:3) In Exodus #18 v. 3 the Bible says, **“The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, ‘I have been a sojourner in a foreign land’)...”** The name Gershom (GUR GERSHOM) is

based upon that word for “sojourner.” The son was an alien. Even though he was born in Egypt, the family did not regard Egypt as his real home.

Now look carefully at v. 2 in our passage (PROJECTOR OFF): **“The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.”** The Melech family went to Moab as temporary residents. In a situation that was very challenging, they decided to move to Moab for immediate relief. They went there intending to stay for just a little while. But their move became permanent. They stayed

Therein lies the spiritual danger. There is nothing in the Bible that says you can’t sit down at a video poker machine and put in a quarter or a dollar. The danger lies in staying there. There is nothing in the Bible that says that you can’t go into a bar and have a drink. The danger lies in staying there. The problem with temptation is that what begins with an initial flirtation with danger, with no intention of becoming serious, can become an addiction.

The pandemic required that all of us stay away from church for a time. We had to learn how to do live streaming and recording. It was kind of nice to stay in our pajamas on Sunday morning and watch church on our computer screen. But the danger lies in staying there. We can get comfortable in maybe reading the Sunday paper while the church service is on in the background. Maybe we just switch to watching Fox News or something else on TV.

Statisticians have been tracking church attendance since the waning of the Covid pandemic, and they say about a third of regular church goers have not come back to church services and may not ever return. I have a friend who is a pastor in India, and he says that the same thing has happened over there.

John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in the 1600s. It tells the allegorical story about how the pilgrim named Christian undertakes a journey to get to the Celestial City. Along the way he encounters temptations that get him off of the road to the Celestial City. (PROJECTOR ON--- BUNYAN QUOTATION) After one of these difficult experiences Christian utters this famous line, **“It is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out.”** (REPEAT) Such is the lesson from the Melech family about going where we should not.

II.

From vv. 3 & 4 in our passage we learn about THE MELECH FAMILY AND THE DANGER OF PARTNERING WITH WHOM WE SHOULD NOT. (II. THE MELECH FAMILY AND THE DANGER...) According to v. 3, **“But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.”** Tragedy strikes, and Elimelech dies. They have no money to take his body back to the land of promise. So it seems quite likely that he is buried in this foreign land. Fortunately Naomi has two sons who are obligated to care for their mother.

But then we find out in v. 4: **“These took Moabite wives, the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years.”** Normally the custom was that parents, especially the father, would be involved in arranging mates for their children. But Elimelech is gone. So the sons choose wives for themselves.

The verb which the narrator chooses to use for these marriages is worthy of note. It is a word that literally means “to lift up,” or “carry.” In the Hebrew Bible it usually has a negative connotation. That verb appears in Judges #21. The chapter has a sad story there about how the tribe of Benjamin defends a city which has been guilty of murder and rape. The other tribes largely wipe out the Benjamites. They are allowed to survive by taking wives from a city which did not help out the good guys. Then the remaining Benjamites without wives are allowed to raid a festival which occurs near the town of Shiloh (JUDGES 21:23) Verse 23 of #21 says, **“And the people of Benjamin did so and took their wives, according to their number, from the dancers whom they carried off. Then they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and lived in them.”**

In Nehemiah #13 the verb appears twice. (NEHEMIAH 13:23) In v. 23 of Nehemiah 13 the text says, **“In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.”** Notice that Moabites are involved. Nehemiah is clearly disapproving of these marriages. In v. 25 of the same chapter the same word is used again (NEHEMIAH 13:25): **“... I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, ‘You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take--- that’s the word--- their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.’”** Thus this verb, not the typical word for “marry,” has a connotation that there is something not quite right about the marriage.

The point in our passage is that the sons of Naomi are marrying the wrong women. The Moabites are distant relatives of the Hebrews. But they have become enemies of them. They worship false gods. Deuteronomy #7 contains a warning originally conveyed about marrying the inhabitants of Canaan. (DEUTERONOMY 7:3-4A) In vv. 3 & 4 of Deuteronomy #7 the children of Israel are told, **“You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods.”** The Moabites live outside of the land of Canaan. But they pose the same danger to the Hebrews.

Thus in Deuteronomy #23 vv. 3 & 4 (DEUTERONOMY 23:3) Moses warns, **“No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever, (DEUTERONOMY 23:4) because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.”**

It is this intermarriage with foreigners, including Moabites, that later gets King Solomon in trouble. (1 KINGS 11:1) First Kings #11 vv. 1 & 2 tell us, **“Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, (1 KINGS 11:2) from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, ‘You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.’ Solomon clung to these in love.”** So the problem was not so much marrying Gentiles because of their ethnic background, it was a problem of buying into their religion. The Moabites worshiped a god called Chemosh.  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

The Moabite wives which the sons of Elimelech and Naomi married were Orpah and Ruth. We find out later that Ruth was married to Mahlon, and Orpah was married to Chilion. The meanings of their names are uncertain. Some scholars think that “Orpah” comes from a word that means “back of the neck.” Some think that “Ruth” comes from a word that means “companion,” or “friend.”

Our text indicates that the Melech family was in Moab for ten years. The passage could alternatively be understood to mean that they were in the land for ten years after the marriages of the two sons. No mention of children appears. The wives do not bear children. Barrenness was one of the curses included in the Mosaic Law for failure of the nation to follow God.

The narrator provides us with straight reporting. He does not editorialize. But when we put the Biblical data together it would appear that the Melech family was not going where it should go. They were also not partnering with whom they should be partnering. They were marrying foreigners who worship other gods. How could they expect to enjoy the blessing of the true God when they were straying away from God’s word?

The New Testament version of the problem of partnering with whom we should not partner is found in 2 Corinthians #6 v. 14. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 CORINTHIANS 6:14) There the Apostle Paul says, **“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?”** Certainly that principle would apply to marriages, as it does to the situation in our passage. Christians should not marry those who are not Christians. There may be applications beyond that. We should not expect the blessing of God when we move away from God’s word. There are natural consequences that may come from that. Sometimes the direct hand of God may be involved. In our story it would certainly seem to be unusual that we have two marriages which produce no children in ten years.

(DEUTERONOMY 28:18) Moses warned the nation about the consequences of turning away from God in Deuteronomy #28. In v. 18 he said, **“Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock.”** That warning was directed to the nation as a whole. But it had application also to the decisions of individual families. There were some families who

stayed in Bethlehem in spite of the famine. The Melech family seemingly suffered negative consequences because of their decision to go to Moab.

III.

Thus in v. 5 we learn about THE MELECH FAMILY AND THE RESULTS OF DOING WHAT IS RIGHT IN OUR OWN EYES. (III. THE MELECH FAMILY AND THE...) Verse 5 tells us, “...and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.” This is complete disaster. First, Naomi’s husband dies. At least she has her two sons left. They get married, and there is hope for grandchildren. But there are no grandchildren. Now her two sons are dead.

This is the worst possible outcome. She has no visible means of support. There is no Social Security system. She is a foreigner. The Moabite Relief Society is not likely to intervene to help these resident aliens. There is also no one to carry on the family name. That was a very important thing in that culture. It is disaster.

The Melech family sought to avoid death from famine. They did not trust God to provide for them by staying in the land. They sought immediate relief by moving from the land. A temporary move became permanent. The sons intermarried with pagans. They got death. Verse 5 speaks of “the woman” who remains. The text does not even call her by name. It is as if Naomi has lost her identity.

The New Testament describes the consequences of straying from God’s Word. (ROMANS 6:23) The Apostle Paul in Romans #6 v. 23 simply says, “**For the wages of sin is death...**” Such has been the result for this sad family.

One of the big topics in the news recently has been the overturning of the Roe vs. Wade decision by the Supreme Court. There has been a significant negative reaction to that by some, and a positive reaction to that by others. The failure to value all human life, including life in the womb, has had significant negative results. It has meant death. Since the Roe vs. Wade decision the CDC says that 63,460,000 abortions have occurred in the US. In what sense can this be regarded as good? This is a result that some want to fight for? The abortion rate for black mothers is four times greater than that for white mothers. (Breakpoint, 7/1/2022) Where is the concern for racial justice?

In some places, like India and China, abortion is used to produce more boys than girls. The World Health Organization estimates that there are 80 million more males than females in those two countries because women have killed off so many more females in the womb. Where is the concern for women’s rights in this? The result has been death. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Another big topic in the news in recent days is the whole transgender movement. It is an example of people doing what is right in their own eyes. A study called the Amsterdam Cohort of Gender Dysphoria (PubMed Central, 2020) found that the “**suicide risk in trans people is higher than the general population and seems to occur during every stage of transitioning.**”

There was also a thirty year study which was done in Sweden of trans people. Sweden is notable in that the culture there has been very supportive of people who are transitioning. The study found that ten to fifteen years after surgical reassignment surgery took place the suicide rate among trans patients rose to twenty times that of the general population. (Heritage Foundation, 3/19/2018) On top of that there are the physical risks that come along with surgery and transitioning. Men who have undergone hormone therapy to transition have a five times greater risk of strokes, according to one study. Women transitioning to become men have a four times greater risk of strokes. (Reuters, 7/9/2018)

Dr. Paul McHugh, former chief of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University Hospital, and head of their transgender clinic, shut the clinic down after he failed to see improvement in patients who underwent transitioning. He concluded, **“Transgendered men do not become women, nor do transgendered women become men. All become feminized men or masculinized women, counterfeits or impersonators of the sex with which they ‘identify.’ In that lies their problematic future.”** (*Public Discourse*, 6/10/2015)

In the face of the challenges and temptations of life, it is tempting to take what appears to be the quickest way to relief. For the young couple living in the midst of soaring rents and rising gas prices who believe that they are in love, the easiest solution is to move in together and think about marriage down the road. For the student faced with an important test, the temptation is to cheat. For the employee who handles finances, but who is faced with a deadline to pay his bills, the temptation is take money from the company, fully intending to pay it back. The temptation to stray from the path which the Bible lays out promises immediate benefits. But departing from God’s Word always has negative consequences. Sometimes it leads to death.

The outlook for Naomi in our story is grim. All that she can see is disaster. Sometimes that is what we encounter in life. If we are honest with ourselves, we can see how bad decisions have produced that disaster. But this is not the end of the story for the Melech family. And our difficult, apparent disaster does not need to be the end of the story for us. For the promise of the Bible is that we also have a God of grace who provides providential care for us. In coming weeks we will see how that providential, gracious hand of God provides deliverance for Naomi. But the lesson of our text today is that **“it is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out.”**