

Riverview Baptist Church
Sunday School Lesson Guide
June 28, 2015
“Ruth and Naomi: Two Views of Life and God”

Memory Verse:

“But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” Ruth 1:16

The Book of Ruth is not just a cute little love story to add flavor to a bloody and often miserable part of the Jewish history of the Old Testament. It’s also not just the story of one individual’s faith. Like all histories, there is a cultural, political and historical context. What happens is a direct result of the events that have come before and the events of the story have a huge effect on what is to come.

According to the Bible, a time of famine descends upon the nation of Israel. It does not say if it is due to natural reasons (droughts, insects, etc.) or if it is due to human factors (war, oppression, etc.) Now there are non-Biblical, Jewish historical sources that say that this was the same time as Eglon, the King of Moab, attacked the Israelites and took over Jericho, the great city God had given to Joshua. This is recorded in the book of Judges (3:12), and it says God allowed it because Israel had done evil in the sight of the Lord. Jewish (non-Biblical) historians believe that this war and the oppression that happened afterwards is what led to the famine in Israel. Either way, the famine is why Naomi and her husband, Elimelek, and their sons, Mahlon and Kilion moved out of Israel and into Moab where they could escape the famine.

While they were in Moab, Elimelek died. Naomi’s two sons married Moabite women, but then her sons both died as well. Because the sons both died around the same time, some historians believe that it was perhaps due to the war of rebellion started by Ehud when he killed King Eglon of Moab (recorded also in Judges 3:15-30.) However they died, they both died around the same time and Naomi was left with only her two Moabite daughters-in-law as family.

The rest of the story is familiar in scripture: Naomi moves to return to Judah, where the famine has been lifted by the Lord. She tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their mother’s home and try to begin a new life and she blesses them for showing kindness. At first neither wants to leave, but eventually Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye and leaves, but Ruth stays. Ruth shows real love, faith and courage to stay with Naomi, vowing to separate herself from the Moab people and their pagan gods to follow Naomi and the True God.

Contrast in Characters

In this first chapter, we see a real difference between the attitudes of Ruth and Naomi. In Naomi, we see a figure who has been bent low by cruel circumstances. She was forced to leave her homeland to survive and go make her way with her family in a foreign land. There she loses her husband and after a time, both her sons. She has no real family, now, only relations by marriage of her sons, and so we see that she has become sad and tired and bitter, and really who can blame her?

In verses 12 and 13, she mourns being too old to remarry and even believes there is no more hope for her. She sees her time as mostly spent and believes that “the Lord’s hand has turned against me!” We don’t know if she believes it is for personal sins, for leaving Judah or for living in Moab, or something else, but we see clearly that she has lost almost all her hope. Her last remaining hope is to return to her homeland, to her people and perhaps find some charity and generosity among them in their new time of prosperity. When she and Ruth finally get to Bethlehem, just in time for the barley harvest, she is met and recognized by the women in town, but even then Naomi doesn’t rejoice. She asks the people to call her “Mara” which

means “bitter” because, the Lord has “afflicted” her, “brought misfortune” upon her, “made life very bitter”, and caused her to leave full but return empty. At least four different descriptions of her outlook in only two verses (20 and 21).

In contrast, we have Ruth, an example of courage in the face of adversity. We don’t know how far Ruth came in her conversion to believe in the True God while her husband was alive, but we can know for sure that living with his family had influenced her to be a godly woman, and that she fully converts to follow Jehovah by the time she departs with Naomi. While Ruth is younger than Naomi, she has shared a lot of the same losses and yet she is able to find the hope and strength to renew her dedication to Naomi, who she sees as her real family and to Naomi’s God. While it would have been much easier for Ruth to go back to her own family, her own people and her old ways doing things, Ruth has obviously seen and understood something of the significance of loyalty to one’s family, but also of God’s loyalty to His people.

So to stand them side by side, Ruth was a Moabite, a member of a pagan race, and yet she showed godliness and loyalty. Naomi, however, was a member of God’s chosen people and not only that, a member of the tribe of Judah the promised tribe of the Messiah (Genesis 49:10 says “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.” Like we said before, this story has a context and the Hebrew people were WELL aware of the promises of God to their forefathers.) Naomi was returning home to her own people but Ruth was venturing into a strange land that she’d never been to. And yet Naomi is the one who is showing signs of losing hope and faith while Ruth is growing stronger and more determined.

We should be careful about how we judge anyone, Bible characters or not, but we can definitely see pieces of ourselves in these two women. One is just starting out on her faith journey. She’s seen some tough times, and she’s young and inexperienced, but she’s got the strength and conviction of youth and the zeal of a newly converted person. The other one has seen just a little too much. She’s let the weariness of all the tragedy she’s endured sink in and it has blurred or blocked her vision of the Lord. Rather than fully trusting the Lord as a provider and helper (and focusing on His provision and blessing) she has let the trials of her life paint a negative picture of God in her mind.

I imagine that most of us are more like Naomi than Ruth. I’m not saying we’re all full of self-pity and bitterness, but if we’re honest, we’ve all let ourselves become a little more jaded and weary than we ought to be. Whether it’s by working ourselves too hard or not working hard enough, whether it’s by being a busybody or by being apathetic, we each are guilty of not taking time to find joy and peace in God’s presence. Psalm 34:8 says “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.” God’s love and comfort are there at all times, and free for the asking. We just have to take refuge in him and seek the joy only he can bring. Joy, comfort, peace and assurance are not just things that grow on trees, though. We have to be disciplined enough to actively “TAKE SHELTER” in the Lord through prayer and reading his Word and finding that love and kinship with our Father.

And if we find ourselves now in Naomi’s place, tired, sad and bitter, for lack of seeking God. Let’s seek him now! Cry out to God like David in Psalm 51, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”(v.10) and only then can we ask him to “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit.” (v.12).

If we want to be steadfast, strong and zealous, we will have to be renewed. As we follow Ruth and Naomi over the next couple weeks, take note of their attitudes as they experience the provision of the Lord.