

Choices (Ruth 1:1-6)

1. Setting (v.1-4)

- This story occurred during the time of Judges (1200-1020B.C.), which was after Joshua's death (Judg.1:1) but prior to the coronation of Saul (1 Sam. 10).
- It happened during an era of intense political, moral, and religious chaos.
- The period of the judges were days that were characterized by violence and lawlessness (Judg. 21:25). The first judge, Othniel, was an upright judge. By the conclusion of the book, they descend into moral and spiritual darkness. The last judge, Samson, was called to be a Nazirite from birth. He was to commit himself towards God, abstaining from defiling influences. Instead, he systematically broke every vow that he made (Judg.14:1-2, 9, 10).

Famine:

- Meant droughts (Gen. 41:27; 1 Kgs 18:2; Acts 11:28), disease and locust invasions (Amos 4:9-10), loss of livestock (1 Kgs. 18:5) and warfare (Isa. 1:7), and judgment (Deut. 28:28; 2 Kgs. 8:1; Isa. 3:1; Jer. 14:13-18; Amos 4:6).
- Usually when a famine is mentioned in the Old Testament, it is the judgment of God. Interestingly, no famine is specifically mentioned during the time of judges.
- A famine occurs in Bethlehem. Ironically, the city which means "House of Bread" is now without bread (v.1). The land that is flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:8, 17) is now running dry.

Family:

- Elimelech ("my God is my King), Naomi ("pleasant"), Mahlon ("sickly") and Chilion ("frail") left Bethlehem and settled in Moab. The author notes Elimelech's specific clan. They are Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. Whoever the author was, the specific detail and origin of his clan is important. Their origin is from Ephrath, the wife of Caleb, whose descendants are credited with settling in Bethlehem (1 Chron. 2:19; 4:4).
- While in Moab, Mahlon and Chilion took for themselves Moabite wives.
- Moabites had a contemptible origin: Moab was one of the sons of the incestuous relationships between Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38). Moabites resisted Israelite passage through the territory after the Exodus from Egypt (Numb. 22-24). Moabite women also seduced Israelites and were punished (Num. 25:1-9). The family of Elimelech left the house of bread for the land that had refused their ancestors bread and water (Deut. 23:4).
- According to the Torah, Moabites and Ammonites were prohibited from entering the "assembly of the LORD" (Deut. 23:3). Marriage was forbidden with people's who were dispossessed from the land (Hittites, Gergashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizites, Hivites, and Jebusites). It is questioned whether they were permitted to marry other foreigners. Ezra and Nehemiah will later forbid marriages with any foreigner and sought to expel all of them out of the land (Ez. 9:1-10:44; Neh. 13:1-3, 23-27).
- On the other side, the Mosaic prohibition to marry pagans (Deut. 7:3-4) makes their marriage ethically suspect. The Moabites are not listed with the Canaanite nations, but they were the people of Chemosh (Numb. 21:29; Jer. 48:46). They worshiped a foreign god, so the spirit of the law may have included them in this prohibition. Additionally, marriages to foreigners in the land of exile is considered part of the judgment of God (Deut. 28:32).

2. Sorrow and Suffering (v.5)

- While Elimelech was in Moab, he died (v.3). The author does not inform us of how he died, how old he was, the place, circumstance, or any other detail.
- Mahlon and Chilion both die in Moab as well. The author, as with Elimelech, provides no details, explanations, or reasons on how or why they died.
- In v.2, the sons are called "his sons" and now, in v.5, they are called "her sons."
- As she is mourning over the loss of her husband, in a short while, she will be in greater pain from the death of her only two children (her sons).
- The narrator calls her "the woman" and not Naomi. This is because Naomi's identity shifts (v.1, 3, 5). She is also given the center stage in chapter 1.
- No children are born to Mahlon and Chilion after they took for themselves Moabite wives (Deut.7:14; 28:1-4, 15-18). Naomi changes from wife to widow, from mother to no mother. She has no security of husband or children in a foreign land with no laws that protect widows. The line of Elimelech stands on the brink of annihilation. She is beyond the years of bearing children (v.12).

3. Sovereignty (v.6)

- There is a motif in the opening chapter of Ruth (v.1-6):
 - Famines, despite their tragic appearance, often advance God's plan for his people (1:1, 6; Gen. 12:10; 26:1; 41:54, 56; 42:5)
 - A family is endangered because of a mother's childlessness (1:5; Gen. 16-17, 25:21; 29:31; 30)
- The narrator indicates that the family of Elimelech never planned on returning to Bethlehem. There is progression from "a man went" (v.1b) through "they were there" (2b) to "they settled there" (v.4b). The family is becoming more ingrained in Moab culture. They settled in the country, or fields. This progression alludes to Lot's separation with Abraham (Gen. 13): Lot "lifted up his eyes" (v.10), "saw that the Jordan Valley was well-watered" (v.10), he "chose for himself all the Jordan valley" (v.11) and "separated from one another" (v.11). Will the line of Elimelech suffer the same fate as Lot?
- For the first time in Ruth, the covenantal name of God is used: Yahweh (LORD). The LORD has visited his people in Bethlehem, and He has given them food (v.6).
- Will the LORD provide for Naomi her three greatest needs (food, marriage, and children)? How will He redirect this motherless widow?

Application:

- A. God will chastise his people because of their sin (Hebrews 13). That chastisement is always redemptive, serving a purpose in God's overall redemptive plan (Psalm 119:71; Romans 8:28).
- B. We will experience pain, suffering, and loss irrespective of our own sin. We will often ask the "why" of the suffering, instead of the "what." There is a peculiar glory that is wrought through suffering and trials if we persevere (James 1:2-4).
- C. We cannot understand God's sovereignty unless we submit to His precepts revealed in His word.
- D. God is present with us, even though we do not see Him. While actions have consequences, those actions and consequences fit within the framework of God's providence. God's sovereignty never gives us free reign to deliberately disobey His prescriptive will.