

## **“The Valley of Decision”**

Ruth 1:6-18

If you have your Bible with you, let me invite you to open it with me to the first chapter of Ruth. Though it is very small and consists of only four chapters and 85 verses, the book of Ruth is one of the most beautiful stories ever written. It is a love story. It is a story of redemption and grace. It is a story that takes place against the dark backdrop of the days of the judges, but it ends with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. And in this way, Ruth is the story of Christmas centuries ahead of time. It prepares us for the truth that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son who was born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger.

The small book of Ruth shows us in miniature form but in great detail how wise the providential plan of God really is. God’s hand of providence works behind the scenes of our lives, arranging the circumstances of life according to His purpose. The great hymnwriter William Cowper said, “God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.” One of the problems with looking for footprints in the sea is that they’re invisible. You can’t trace them.

**Sinclair Ferguson** — *“God moves in mysterious ways; we do not have immediate access to His blueprints; we cannot second guess His purposes. We must learn to trust and obey Him on the basis of His word of promise to us. One of the reasons we can do so is because of the evidence given to us in the Scriptures of His wise providence.”*

The providence of God means that He is always working out the details of His sovereign plan even when we can’t see it. This is one of the lessons we learn from the little book of Ruth. What God would accomplish in the lives of Naomi,

Ruth, and Boaz wasn't clear to them at the time. His footprints were not easy for them to trace, but His promise was sure and everlasting.

There are a series of unfortunate decisions here at the beginning of the book that eventually lead to great blessing as God's providence and grace overrules. The first chapter of Ruth is full of decisions. We're told about Elimelech and his decision to uproot his family from Bethlehem and move to Moab. We read about the decisions of his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to marry Moabite girls. Naomi and her daughters-in-law are faced with their own decisions. It is almost as if everyone in this chapter finds themselves standing in the valley of decision. The decisions that they make have consequences that go on to affect their lives.

It is certainly not an overstatement to say that life is full of decisions. Isn't it amazing when you stop to consider the number of decisions that we're faced with on any given day of the week? I read where some sources estimate that an adult makes about 17,000 remotely conscious decisions each day. Can you imagine that? This number may sound absurd, but we make 226.7 decisions each day on just food alone according to researchers at Cornell University.

As your level of responsibility in life increases, so does the wide range of choices you are faced with. We're faced with physical decisions such as:

- what to eat and what not to eat
- what to wear and what not to wear

We're faced with financial decisions that involve:

- what to purchase and how to spend our money
- what jobs and vocational path we will pursue

- how to vote for leaders in government

We face relational decisions and family decisions, such as:

- who to spend our time with
- who we will date and marry
- what we say and how we say it
- how to raise our children

On and on it goes. Life is full of decisions, and what may seem like an insignificant decision at the time it is made can be one that has life-altering consequences. Such was the case with something that happened in the life of Teddy Roosevelt, the 26th president of the U.S...

On the evening of October 14, 1912, outside of a hotel in Milwaukee, WI, Roosevelt folded a 50-page manuscript in half and slipped it into the breast pocket of the overcoat he was wearing. He was headed to a nearby auditorium to deliver a speech. As he stood to wave at the crowd, a man shot him in the chest at pointblank range with a .38 revolver. Fortunately, the gun was aimed at the side of his chest protected by the thick papers of the speech. The padding of paper slowed the bullet enough to keep it from piercing him, and he went on to deliver the 84 minute long speech. It was a split second decision, but one that had life-changing consequences.

Life is full of decisions, and the most important decisions are those decisions that involve what we believe and who we place our faith in. I want us to notice three decisions made by Naomi and her daughters-in-law, each of which illustrate how the decisions we make in life often impact our future.

## 1—The decision to turn AROUND

*“Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited His people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.”*

Noami had lost everything during her decade long stay in Moab. Her husband and provider had died. Things went from bad to worse when her sons die. There is nothing left for Naomi in Moab. If there was any hope for her at all, it was to be found at home where she belonged. Now, I don't know how she heard the news, but somehow word came to where she was that the Lord had visited His people and had given them bread. The fields of Moab offered nothing but pain and hardship, but bread awaited her in Bethlehem. So Naomi decides to go home.

(illus. of Prodigal Son in Luke 15)

The Lord God had visited His people in Bethlehem. What more was there for Naomi to do but to repent and go home? That's what verse 6 says she does.

**“Return”**—*word is ‘shub’ which means repent*

The word is used multiple times in chapter one—verses 6, 7, 8, 10, 16, and 22. It means to return, to turn back, to go back, to do an about face. The constant repetition of this verb is significant because it is not only the Hebrew word for ‘return,’ but it is the main word in the Old Testament to describe the turning back of a person to God's covenant grace and mercy.

**Deuteronomy 4:29-31**—**“But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find Him, if you search after Him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you**

**in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey His voice. For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that He swore to them.”**

The word ‘return’ runs like a melody line throughout the whole story. When we read it over and over again, we can’t miss what the story is all about. Ruth is about turning back to God. It is about returning to His grace. It is about returning to the place of His provision.

Repentance is doing an about face and turning around.

Repentance is not simply a one time decision. Did you know that?

Repentance is a way of living. It is not simply for unbelievers who come to faith in Christ. It is an attitude that characterizes the life of believers. If you’ve gotten out of the will of God, the first step back involves repenting. It is what Jesus said to the church at Ephesus:

**Revelation 2:5—“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lamp stand from its place—unless you repent.”**

Jesus told the church at Ephesus to remember what He had done in their lives, to repent and turn around, and then return to the first works. That is the prescription for every backslidden believer.

That’s exactly what Naomi does. She remembers God in His grace. He is the God who keeps His covenant promise and will not go back on His word. He is the One who visits His people with bread. Then, she repents and does a 180. She turns back from where she had been living. And then she returns to the place where she belonged.

## 2—The decision to turn BACK

*“But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May 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 of you in the house of her husband!’ Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’ But Naomi said, ‘Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake 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.”*

Naomi makes a decision to turn around. Well, her two daughters-in-law that are with her also have some choices to make. Orpah and Ruth are both faced with their own decisions. Orpah makes a decision to turn back.

Notice a few things:

### The counsel that Naomi gives

Let’s be honest, Naomi doesn’t give the best counsel here. Remember that following the wisdom of the times is what got this family in trouble in the first place. In her mind, she is doing her daughters-in-law a favor by telling them that they ought to stay in Moab. But what she tells them to do would actually be the worst thing that they could do. Moab had nothing to offer them but death.

A person who is living in a backslidden condition is usually in no place to give counsel to others. The witness of a backslidden Christian is often very detrimental. Think about how we see this illustrated in the life of Jonah. He is a man who was running from the will of God for his life. He gets on board a ship headed in the opposite direction of where God wanted him to go. Think we can run from God?

**Jonah 2:4-5—“But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, ‘What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.’”**

The one man on board who knew the only True and Living God was asleep while everyone around him was in a panic. In a similar way, Naomi may well have been the only one for miles in Moab who knew God. And yet she is telling her daughters-in-law to stay behind, to return to their family and idols. We’re not able to witness with conviction to those who ask us about our faith when there is little to nothing in our own lives to authenticate what we say.

What kind of witness do you have? Notice also:

The outlook that Naomi had adopted

Naomi felt like God’s hand had gone out against her. Look at what she says in verse 13—“It is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.” She is looking at her circumstances through the lens

of her pain. She's lost everything that was near and dear to her in Moab. Elimelech died. Mahon died. Chilion died. The past ten years of her life had been a personal nightmare. In her mind, nothing else remains for her. Life for Naomi had become very bitter. She says:

**Ruth 1:20-21 — “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”**

Her words literally mean that her pathway in life has been a bitter one. She's not blaming the Lord, but is simply saying that bitter experiences have characterized her life. Maybe she even regrets the day she left Bethlehem in the first place. She went out full, but is coming back empty. The idea is that she went out full of her own plans, but now she is returning to Bethlehem empty handed.

Think of this—a sharp blade can be a lethal weapon in the hands of a murderer, but it can also be an instrument of healing in the hands of a surgeon. It all depends on the hands of the person who uses it. Though her experience had proved painful and heart-wrenching, God was using the pain of Naomi's life to bring her to the place of repentance. What seems to be a hand that has gone out against her is actually a hand that is working in her favor.

**Psalms 119:67 — “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.”**

The decision that Orpah makes

When faced with a crossroads, Orpah makes the decision to go back. Notice that the verse says she kissed Naomi, as in 'goodbye.' Rather than going to

Bethlehem with Naomi, Orpah decides to remain in Moab and go back to her former life. What does she go back to? Look at what we're told in verse 15:

*“And [Naomi] said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods.’”*

- Orpah goes back to her relatives

In going back to her old way of living, Orpah goes back to family. When faced with the decision to leave or stay, she stays with what she knows. Moab was the place of her birth and her relatives were Moabites. It is amazing to me at how influential a person's family is on the formation of their life, both in good ways and not so good ways.

Jesus often warned people against the danger of allowing family to come between us and our relationship with God. For instance, He once said:

**Matthew 10:37—“Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.”**

**Luke 14:26—“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’”**

**John Stott**—“Jesus never concealed the fact that His religion included a demand as well as an offer. Indeed, the demand was as total as the offer was free. If He offered men His salvation, He also demanded their submission. He gave no encouragement whatever to thoughtless applicants for discipleship. He brought no pressure to bear on any inquirer. He sent irresponsible enthusiasts away empty. Luke 9 tells of three men who either volunteered, or were invited, to follow Jesus; but no one passed the Lord’s test. The rich young ruler, too, moral, earnest and attractive, who wanted eternal life on his own terms, went away sorrowful, with his riches intact but with neither life nor Christ as his possession...The Christian landscape is strewn with the wreckage of derelict, half built towers—the ruins of those who began to build and were unable to finish. For thousands of people still ignore Christ’s warning and undertake to follow Him without first pausing to reflect on the cost of doing so. The result is the great scandal of Christendom today, so called “nominal Christianity.” In countries to which Christian civilization has spread, large numbers of people have covered themselves with a decent, but thin, veneer of Christianity. They have allowed themselves to become somewhat involved, enough to be respectable but not enough to be uncomfortable. Their religion is a great, soft cushion. It protects them from the hard unpleasantness of life, while changing its place and shape to suit their convenience. No wonder the cynics speak of hypocrites in the church and dismiss religion as escapism...The message of Jesus was very different. He never lowered His standards or modified his conditions to make His call more readily acceptable. He asked His first disciples, and He has asked every disciple since, to give Him their thoughtful and total commitment. Nothing less than this will do.”

- Orpah goes back to her religion

Orpah goes back to family in Moab. Most tragic of all is the fact that Orpah goes back to the gods of Moab. These gods were nothing more than dead idols. They offered her no legitimate salvation. They could not atone for her sins. When faced with the decision, she goes back to Moab and all of its false religion. We

never hear of her again. Orpah disappears from the pages of the biblical narrative never to be mentioned again.

It is a picture of a person who has rejected the truth. It is heartbreaking to think that many of us have friends and family, people we work with and live beside who have rejected the truth for a lie. Even more disturbing is the fact that there are untold millions upon millions of people who have never heard the gospel. This makes what we do as the church all the more pressing and urgent.

How many of you know that when God blesses a person, it is always in spite of that person and never because of that person? God blesses Naomi in spite of Naomi.

### **3—The decision to turn FORWARD**

*“And she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ But Ruth said, ‘Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where 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. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.’ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.”*

Naomi makes a decision to turn around. Orpah makes a decision to turn back. Orpah chooses what is familiar, temporal, and visible. She opts for the wisdom of Moab and turns away from the wisdom of God. But not Ruth! She makes a decision to turn and go forward.

Even though Naomi tries to talk her out of the decision, there's no looking back for her. I'm telling you, this is one of the most powerful passages in the entire Bible. It is a conversion story. Listen to how she responds to Naomi:

*“Don't urge me to leave you or to return from following you.”*

She's saying, “Don't try to talk me out of following you to Bethlehem. Don't try to convince me to go back to my former way of living!”

I love how this passage read in the King James:

**Ruth 1:16-17—“Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.”**

The words at the center of Ruth's statement are the jewel in the crown of verses 16-17 and of the whole chapter—“Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

**Leviticus 26:12—“I will be your God, and you shall be My people.”**

What Ruth does here in the moment of decision becomes a hinge in redemption history. It is a little decision, but one that will greatly affect her future. Not only does it affect her history, but it would prove to be a decision that would alter the course of human history. Her words are more than an expression of human devotion. While it is true that they reflect a deep devotion and determination to go with Naomi to Bethlehem, beyond that is her confession of faith in the God of Naomi. It is a testimony of conversion. It is one of the most powerful confessions of faith in all of the Bible.

Ruth shows us how God often works behind the scenes in a person's life. She is a living example of how the Lord works to bring people to Himself all by His grace. Long before she even realized it, God's gracious providence was moving and arranging the circumstances of her life to bring her face to face with her redeemer.

- He used a famine
- He used a family
- He used a funeral

Ruth comes to believe that God plus nothing in Bethlehem is worth far more than everything minus God in Moab. What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his soul? You can have this world, but give me Jesus!

**Luke 18:29-30—“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”**

Little decisions that seem so minor at the time can have eternal significance. Some of you are at a crossroads right now. Will you walk by faith and repentance and commit your way to Christ, or will you turn back to what is familiar?