

Today we're starting a short series in the book of Ruth – a short and delightful book in the Old Testament.

It's an intimate story of two women – mainly Ruth, but also her mother-in-law, Naomi, and their struggle for a place in society and family security in their desperate circumstances.

It's a story, in which God's incredible loving kindness on those who trust in him shines out.

It has a very happy ending – in fact, one with stunning consequences for the whole of humanity, as God uses the lives and faith of these two women to bring about his saving plan for mankind.

(I won't spoil the story now though, you'll just have to discover that over the next few weeks!)

But like so many stories with a happy ending, it has a dark and desperate beginning.

The writer sets the scene with these foreboding words, v1:

"In the days that the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land"

You see, in the days of the judges' rule there was much godlessness ... and therefore a time of much judgement and suffering.

If you just glance to the left, and the very last verse in the book of judges, it says:

"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

God's people, the Israelites, were living in the land God had given them. But without a godly king to lead them, they had become a corrupt and desperately evil people.

When they abandoned God and fell into sin, God punished them.

Judgement came from within the land, in the form of famine, and it would come from outside, in the form of enemy nations attacking and oppressing them.

In their acute suffering, the people would realise the stupidity of abandoning God.

They would turn back to him, and plead for help, and God would send a judge to rule them and rescue them.

While the judge lived, there would be a degree of peace and prosperity.

But as soon as the judge died, the people would go off into their sin again, despising and forgetting their God.

So the judgement would come again, and again.

But the sin just got worse, and worse ... and worse.

And so the last few chapters of the book of Judges make some very painful reading indeed – we read of utter lawlessness, horrific gang rape, civil war, and grotesque abuses of religious power.

This is the time in which the true story of Ruth happens.

We may not live in Old Testament Israel, and life may not be quite as disturbing for us, here in KL, as it was there and then. But we all do suffer in this life. We all encounter pain and despair, to greater or lesser degrees.

This story is based in the real world of suffering and pain.

But, we also have the same God who works powerfully. And we approach him by the same faith.

We see either this faith, or a complete lack of it, epitomised in the three main characters in chapter one of Ruth, which we're looking at today. They are: Elimelech, Naomi, and Ruth.

We'll look at each of these characters in turn, and see what we can learn from them. What examples to follow, and which attitudes and actions to carefully avoid.

1.0 Elimelech

So we start with Elimelech, and we learn that fleeing from God ends in destruction. Fleeing from God ends in destruction.

Imagine yourself in Elimelech's shoes. You're an Israelite, you're living in the time of the judges, and there is a famine in the land. Your nation is being terribly judged by God for the evil that abounds in it, and you and your family face starvation.

What do *you* do? What *would you* do?

Well, I'm sure most of us would have a lot of sympathy for Elimelech and the decision he makes. He's in a terrible situation. They live in Bethlehem, which means house of bread, and yet there is not bread! As the famine bites, so too does the cruel irony. His family could starve!

So he leaves Bethlehem of Judah and flees to Moab.

Would you or I do any different? Who wouldn't want to feed his family?!

But the problem is, going to Moab isn't only fleeing famine in Bethlehem ... it's also fleeing God.

Becoming a refugee or choosing to migrate for economic reasons is not sinful. The problem is that he's chosen to leave the land of God's promise. The land God had given his people and where they could have a relationship with him.

And another problem is the choice of the place to which he flees.

Moab was not just any old neighbouring country – they were a people of deep evil, who particularly hated the Israelites, and were especially cut off from God. In years past, they tried to have the Israelites destroyed by witchcraft, then they led them into sexual immorality and idolatry.

Part of the reason God gave the Israelites a land was so that they could worship the LORD without the corrupting influence of the pagan nations.

And yet it is to the most corrupting of these nations that Elimelech takes his family! He shows utter contempt for God by abandoning him and his people to join himself to these enemies of God, and inevitably, to their sin.

I know it's all too easy for me to say this now, detached as I am from the situation. But nevertheless the sensible, as well as the righteous, thing to do would be to remain in the land and repent. To turn back to God – ask his forgiveness and seek to live his way.

The whole point of the famine in Bethlehem was to drive people to repentance. To force the people to wake up to their sin and their need to turn back to God.

But in the face of God's judgement, Elimelech turns away from God instead of back to him. What a tragedy!!

In Moab they may have found physical food. But in going there, Elimelech was committing Spiritual suicide.

Just look at what happens to him.

In verse 3, Elimelech dies. It doesn't say how old he is, but given the fact he is significantly outlived by his wife, and given her lament in verses 20-21, we can assume he died reasonably young.

Fleeing God did not pay for Elimelech – God’s judgement caught up with him – and he died.

And the consequences are not only limited to him. By moving to Moab, Elimelech’s sons end up marrying outside the faith, v4 ... and in v5 they die too.

If Elimelech’s death was likely to be an act of judgement, how much more his sons’ who are both outlived by their mother?

Abandoning God did not benefit for Elimelech’s sons either.

But the real tragedy is the destitution of Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

The grief and despair of loosing a husband is bad enough at any time or place, but in that world at that time, they would have lost everything – their home, security, income – everything.

The future for these poor women is very, very bleak.

Meanwhile, Naomi hears that, back in Bethlehem, v6:

“the LORD had visited his people and given them food.”

The people had turned back to God, and he’d given them relief. They had food again.

If only they had stayed in the land! If only they had been faithful! Maybe Elimelech and his sons would still be alive!

The tragedy is shown by the irony of his name.

For Elimelech means “My God is King”.

But he doesn’t live up to his name, does he?

He does not treat God like King, as he should. He treats God like dirt. God sent the famine to turn his people back to him. But instead of turning back to God, Elimelech turns away.

He demonstrates his faithlessness by abandoning his God to solve his problems his own way. But going against God’s way only resulted in death and destruction for him and his sons, and despair and destitution for their widows.

I wonder if anyone here today is tempted to abandon God? Or maybe you’ve even started to drift away from him already.

Maybe it's a certain sin you're tempted to go back to and indulge in. Maybe you just think you've got better things to do with your time on Sundays than spend it with God's people.

It could be a relationship with a non-Christian that's not going to be any good for either of you, spiritually. Or maybe you are even thinking of openly and completely giving up being a Christian.

Don't!! Learn from Elimelech's error. It's really not worth it, to say the least

We can either stay trusting God and remain in his love, or we can abandon our allegiance to him. But if we do abandon him, judgement will catch up with us one day. And it will be too late to do anything about it then.

2.0 Naomi

Well, thankfully, the story doesn't end there! In our second character, Naomi, we start to see the hope that comes through so brilliantly in the book of Ruth!

And from Naomi, we learn that we should always return to God, who will welcome us with open arms. Return to God, who will welcome us with open arms.

We don't know exactly how much Naomi was complicit in the family's decision to go to Moab. Although in those days it's unlikely she would have had much say in it, and the author of Ruth certainly portrays Elimelech as the main guilty party – he's the active one in verse 1 and 2.

However, even after Elimelech dies, Naomi stays in Moab with her sons rather than returning to her God and his people.

In our New Testament reading, Luke 15:11-32, the prodigal son returns to his father when he realises his desperate situation and remembers the benefits he could have if his father accepted him back home again.

And it's a similar situation with Naomi – somehow she hears of the LORD visiting his people and bringing them food again.

She is reminded of God's faithful covenant love. She is reminded that those who turn back to God are accepted and loved and blessed by him.

Elimelech demonstrated his faithlessness by abandoning God.

Naomi demonstrates her faith and her repentance by fleeing back to him! In verse 7:

“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.”

Naomi returns to God and to his people. She lives out her faith.

Now if you are wandering from God ... or if you ever do ... please, please, please do not wait until the situation is so desperate until you turn back to him. Don't wait that little bit longer.

Because you're not only suffering unnecessarily, but also there is no guarantee that you will have the opportunity to turn back him next week, or tomorrow, or even in a couple of hours time.

Elimelech and his sons didn't have the chance. Death took them too soon. And the longer we tarry in sin, the harder our hearts become ... and we may not be able to bring ourselves to turn back to God.

But, if you do want to turn back to God, no matter how far you are from him – do so! Turn back to him and just like the father of the prodigal son, he will welcome you back with open arms!

But ... look at Naomi's words in verses 20 and 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?”

Naomi means 'pleasant'. Elimelech's name had irony attached to it, but the irony of her name is far too great for Naomi to bear. Her life is not pleasant! She is bereaved of husband and sons. She's returning in poverty to her homeland, and given the laws of the land, she will have even lost her inheritance there.

No, for her, Naomi is an inappropriate name – a sick joke. *“Call me Mara”* she says – for Mara means bitter. Her life is a life of bitterness, so she might as well be called bitter.

Has God really welcomed her back with open arms?

Well, by the end of chapter four when we see God's amazing loving kindness upon Naomi and Ruth, we will be able to answer that with an emphatic “yes!”.

But for now we see a glimmer of hope. Because Naomi, as much as she has suffered, is wrong to say, in verse 21, that she is 'empty'. I don't want to be too

harsh on her – I’m sure I would have said the same – but the fact is she *does* have Ruth.

Ruth has abandoned *everything*, as we shall see, to remain with Naomi and look after her. And in the coming chapters we shall see what an amazing blessing Ruth will turn out to be!

But one more thing on Naomi. We see in verses 20 and 21 that her life is bitter and that she is full of self-pity. Some people think her words show that she is angry with God; I believe they simply demonstrate her grief and that she accepts that God has brought it about. But either way, these are the words of a believer!

Suffering has not destroyed Naomi’s faith – it has tested it and proven it genuine! And it shows in her words.

So often people give up on god because the god of their imagination is a god who wouldn’t let them suffer. But not so for Naomi.

She knows the LORD and she knows that whatever happens, he’s in control and loves his children even if she doesn’t understand why he’s allowed this all to happen.

Naomi doesn’t abandon God by explaining her suffering as just ‘misfortune’, bad luck – “that’s just life”, as we might say today.

No. She says:

“The LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me”.

God was in control of her suffering. Naomi knows that. She doesn’t deny it. God exists, he is still her LORD, she still honours him as the Almighty. Her faith is strong!

And also, Naomi makes no attempt to justify herself at all. There’s no “I don’t deserve to be treated this way!” Not even a “It was Elimelech’s decision to go to Moab, why do I have to suffer?”

No. True repentance doesn’t make any excuses. When people truly turn back to God, they don’t say “Please forgive me God, I know I did some bad things, but it’s wasn’t completely my fault. There were extenuating circumstances!”

True repentance says “Father God, I’ve sinned against you and deserve no good thing from you. Have mercy upon me, a sinner. Have mercy upon me, a sinner!”

And the sinner who really means that is justified, forgiven before God.

Naomi is a great example to us: turn back to God. Don't make excuses. Return to his people, his ways. Cast yourself on his mercy, and he will welcome you back with loving, open arms, just like the father of the prodigal son.

Turn back to God!

3.0 Ruth

And finally we have our main heroine of the story – Ruth.

Ruth teaches us to forsake everything to follow God. Forsake everything to follow God.

Ruth has an inauspicious entrance to our story: she's a pagan Moabite woman married by one of Elimelech's sons - a marriage which is hardly a good thing!

Moabite women enticed the Israelite men into unfaithfulness in the book of Numbers, into sexual immorality and idolatry. And 24,000 people died in a plague of God's judgement as a result.

So, we don't expect much from Ruth!

But what an amazing faith *this* woman has! Over the years, presumably through the Israelite family into which she has married, she hears of Yahweh, the LORD, the God of Israel. And she puts her trust in him.

When Ruth and Orpah, Naomi's two daughters-in-law start back with her to Bethlehem, Naomi tries to get them to wake up and face the facts: they won't be accepted in Bethlehem of Judah! They are Moabites! It's far better for them to turn back to Moab. Verse 11:

"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?"

Well, the facts are true. The outlook is bleak for these two younger widows. The prospects are dire. From their point of view, Bethlehem of Judah has nothing for them. Why not go back to Moab and find happiness and security in marriage there?

On a human, physical level, the argument is pretty flawless. Orpah sees this; she understands. And just like Elimelech, her father-in-law, she decides to live by sight and not faith. She returns to Moab. And as Naomi says in verse 15, Orpah returns to "her gods".

But not Ruth! She has put her trust in Yahweh, the LORD, the God of Israel. She stays with Naomi, abandons Moab and flees to Bethlehem and the LORD

When Naomi once more urges Ruth to go back to Moab in v 15, Ruth replies in verse 16 with some of the most loving and kind words anyone can say to another:

“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 I will be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.”

Wonderfully compassionate words to Naomi, but words of great faith, great dedication to the LORD, the God of Israel.

What amazing faith! What incredible trust in the LORD!

Ruth has grown up a Moabite. She grew up worshipping Chemosh, a hideous pagan god to whom the Moabites would sacrifice their children. She’s heard of the LORD, but all she has experienced is his judgement through the death of her husband. Her sister-in-law has done the only sensible thing (in human terms) and forsaken this LORD to return to Moab.

Yet ... Ruth trusts in him.

Would you trust in God if all you knew of him was that? Would any of us? Ruth does!

She counts her own pagan religion, her own gods and even her own family as nothing compared with the treasure of having Yahweh, the God of Israel as her God.

Even if it means a life in Bethlehem of hardship, rejection, singleness and poverty.

She forsakes Moab and all the happiness and security she could have there, so she can be one of the LORD’s people ... she throws herself on him in trust and dependence.

The LORD is a wonderful and powerful God! True faith in him ... even if based on a little, *true* knowledge of him ... has astounding power and affect in people’s lives.

And so the two women arrive back in Bethlehem, and at the end of verse 22 we see it is “at the beginning of the barley harvest”.

The episode started with famine, and that problem has been solved – the people have repented and they have food again.

But what about these two women at the centre of our story? They may have food, but apart from each other they have nothing – no husband, no money, no land, no security. Naomi calls herself bitter, and Ruth is known as the Moabitess – a title to ensure your rejection if ever there was one! The next 3 chapters show how the merciful and powerful, loving and sovereign God meets their needs, for they trust in him.

4.0 Conclusion/application

But in chapter one, we have much to learn from.

Elimelech has been a lesson to us in the folly of running away from God, even when he's severely judging us. Fleeing God will only lead to our destruction, and suffering for others.

Having a godly name or a heritage of a believing family is just not enough – personal, wholehearted faith is essential! Faith that trusts and obeys God, through times of famine as well as times of plenty.

Naomi has taught us what repentance is really like. When you find yourself wandering from God, never think you've gone too far. Return to him, making no excuses for yourself and God will welcome you back lovingly.

Naomi has also taught us about faith in the face of suffering. Being angry with God is wrong. But if you are, admit it, confess it to him ... and be comforted that your faith is being proved true – believers do get angry at God!

Don't give up on God when trouble comes your way – know God has allowed it, even caused it, but cling to him nonetheless. It's always, somehow, for our good, even if we don't understand how. In returning to him can we find our rest.

So, may I encourage you, prepare yourself now for when suffering might come. It can be easy to talk about suffering, but as most of you will know better than me, it's horrific to go through. It's a powerful test of our faith, so prepare yourself *now*!

First, pray your faith would be strong enough to stand the test.

But also, train yourself!

If you want to run a marathon, you can't expect to do so if you can't do a 20 km run fairly easily first ... and it's similar with suffering. You can't expect your faith to survive devastation and bereavement if you get angry and bitter with God in the small things.

When you miss your train or get caught in a traffic jam when you're in a hurry – do you curse and swear, or do you trust God, thanking him for what he's teaching you in it, as pointless as it may seem?

If you are unjustly overlooked for a promotion at work, or a relationship is brought to a sudden end, unexpectedly and inexplicably – are you angry and God, or will you, hard as it may be, keep faithful to God, do the right thing even though it's tempting to break his rules to get what you want? Will you even bless his name even though life may seem bitter?

It's not easy. No one can ever claim that. But by God's grace, it *is* possible. Make sure you're always trusting God and keeping to his ways even though you don't understand why he's put you through a trial. Even in the small things like a stubbed toe or a stolen handphone. Train yourself to respond in humility and trust ... and combined with prayer, your faith will be strong to survive the day of calamity.

But most of all, we have learned from Ruth the beauty of true faith in God! She may have come from a background of hatred of God, from a people alienated from God. But Ruth didn't let that stop her! She didn't follow the example of Orpah. She knew that the LORD was merciful, and she threw herself completely on his mercy.

True believers come from every background. No friend of yours is beyond the saving power of Christ. No matter what race or religious background! No matter what their family might say, or the expectations of their culture. If a Moabite could become part of God's people, the modern day Buddhist from Tibet, Shintoist from Japan, Hindu from India, Catholic from Rome, Muslim from Saudi Arabia or Atheist from the West can come to know Jesus Christ.

For us today, following Jesus may mean we have to abandon the security and prosperity the world offers. But Ruth shows that is worth nothing compared to the unfailing, abundant love of the LORD.

How does your faith match up to Ruth's?

She didn't have the background. Her knowledge of God was pretty scanty. Enough to truly trust him, of course, but she certainly hadn't benefited from week after week of Biblical sermons, or a PTC module, or home group Bible studies and Explore Bible notes!

But even more importantly, unlike us, Ruth did not know the complete depths of God's love, as demonstrated in the death of Jesus on the Cross, for people like you and me, when we were still sinners.

We do. We have had far more spiritual benefits than Ruth!

Those to whom much is given, much will be required.

Are you willing to give up everything, as Ruth did, to follow God? Do you count the ways of the world as rubbish compared to knowing and following Jesus? Or have you begun to compromise, indulging in the world's ways, even just a little, rather than clinging wholly to God?

Yes, I'm certainly put to shame by Ruth's faith too! We all mess up, we all go astray and wander time after time – that's why Jesus died for us, that's why we confess our sins week by week.

But be encouraged by Ruth's amazing faith! Follow her example by throwing yourself on the love and mercy of God! And when you fail, know that like Naomi, you can return to God.

God is God of great, incredible loving kindness. Let's follow the example of those who turn to him and trust him! Let's pray.