

Things Don't Just Happen

Ruth 1: *Decisions*

Things don't just happen. Do you believe that? Sometimes, it seems as if they do – just happen. But, even among those who would not profess that they believe in God, I hear people say about something that has happened to them, “I think this took place for a reason.” Of course, we who believe in the God of the Bible know that God constantly says that he is at work in all things to make his creation right. Of course, we can hardly imagine how this all plays out because we know we all make decisions – and it boggles our minds to try to consider someone actually coordinating all things – even our bad or foolish decisions – to bring about good.

But, for the next four weeks, we are going to see a real-life story of how it is true that “things don't just happen” as we come to the Book of Ruth. The opening chapter we come to today will show us how our daily decisions are real decisions – but that God is still at work in them.

Let's start with **some preliminary matters**:

The Literature: The Book of Ruth is perhaps the first short story ever written, at least the first one we know of. The story itself was written probably just after King David took the throne – right around 1,000 BC. The events it describes took place in the times of the Judges (1:1), several hundred years before King David. And, Ruth is a well-told story. I envision the author being a woman (though we don't know for sure) who would get an A+ in a writing class. She was especially strong at concise characterization, i.e., she enables us in few words to get to know quite well the people involved. And, as we will see, just like many stories written in our day, each chapter ends with a cliffhanger -- and the conclusion is a shocker!

The Setting: Ruth opens by telling us that the events took place in the days when the judges ruled. You can read about those days in the Book of Judges that is located just before Ruth in the Bible. The main characteristic of those days was that “everyone did what seemed right in his own eyes.” And, that kind of self-centered culture led to violence, oppression and all manner of evil. But, two characters in our story will show us a better way to live. In short, they will show us what life looks like when we do what is right in God's eyes.

But, just like now, for them to live a God-centered life in a self-centered world life was not easy. To begin today, I've chosen to have us look at the decisions that the characters make in Ruth's opening chapter.

Decision 1: A Questionable Decision – Elimelek -- *A man from Bethlehem, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab (1:1).*”

In this story in which the title character is a woman, I must tell you that the time of the judges was one in which all the people groups in Bible times were male-dominated cultures. That comes out in vv.1-2: Elimelek is the one who leaves the town in God's Promised Land. He goes to the country of Moab. And, he chooses to live there. His wife and teenage boys simply had to go with him. Women and children had little voice in that world. So, Naomi, his wife, is mentioned only secondarily in these opening two verses – because that's the kind of world into which this story is written. But, that will be completely turned around very, very soon in the story. God's Word will be showing us in a powerful and moving way that women's lives matter.

Bible scholars differ about whether Elimelek made a God-honoring decision when he went to Moab. On one side, we have here a father who is concerned about his family starving. Bethlehem, his home town, means “house of bread”. But, ironically, there was no bread in the “House of Bread”. And, somehow, Elimelek had heard that there was food less than 100 miles away in Moab.

Elimelek's decision reminds me of a man from Guatemala who migrated here to our city because he couldn't find a job to support his family – and he has a wife and two little boys just like Elimelek. He's a strong believer in Jesus who was seeking to honor God. So, I simply said, “Jorge, you must really miss your family.” He said, “Pastor, I love them and think of them every minute of every day. But, my choice was either to leave my family or to have them starve. What would you do?”, he asked me. That relationship with my brother has led me not to be too hard on Elimelek today. The decision he had to make was heart-wrenching, I'm sure.

On the other hand, everything seems wrong about this father taking a young family to Moab. Moab was known for a number of things – none of them good. 1) The Moabites' origin comes out of the incestuous relationship of a man named Lot and his daughter (Gen 19:30-38). 2) The Moabites were known for sexual immorality, something the Israelites had given into in Num 25:1-9. 3) In these times of the judges, for 18 years,

Israel had been under the power of Moab's evil king, Eglon (Jud 3)! All this together helps us understand why Elimelek only planned to go to Moab "for a short while" (1:1). However, the short while became a long while, 10 years. And his sons then married Moabite women. So, let me just say this: This may not have been a wise decision. Moab was the place to which no God-fearing Jew would ever have taken his family.

Of the many things I could say about this as your Sr. Pastor, the main one I want to address is that I think many of us gathered here can relate fully to Elimelek in the sense that **we often have made decisions that we look back on and either know that they were wrong or, at least, we wonder whether they were wise.** I cannot tell you how many times I have prayed with church members who wonder whether God has written them off because of things they've done in the past. You might even think that the point of the story here is that that Elimelek and his sons died in Moab as divine punishment for Elimelek's decision.

But that is not the point of this story. The Bible makes no claim that they died because of Elimelek's decision. Death comes to us all in this world – for a whole host of reasons. No, the point of the story of Ruth as it relates to Elimelek comes out in ch. 4: The Israelites knew that death comes to all. Their deep concern was that their property and offspring would be retained together. We see near the end of Ruth that God did not abandon Elimelek's family because of his decision to go to Moab. To the contrary, in **Ruth 4:10**, God guides all these events so that *"the name of Elimelek will be maintained with his property and thus his name will not disappear from among his family and hometown."* God does not reject us because of an unwise decision.

I do believe that Elimelek should have sought God's guidance more fully. I think that is implied in the story. He did what seemed right in his own eyes. Perhaps, if he had sought God's guidance, he may not have gone to Moab with his wife and boys. But, when he (and you and I like him) made the kind of decision that now seems unwise, God does not write him or us off. God is gracious, merciful and forgiving. He is the God of second chances. Please take this home with you today: **God does not write you off forever because of a decision you have made in your life.** He loves you and he finds ways to make things new for those who return to him.

Decision 2: A Decision Made When Angry – Naomi -- *"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty (1:20-21)."*

There are times in our lives when there seem to be no good options open to us. We find ourselves on a path we never would have chosen for ourselves and must make big decision there. That's how it was for Naomi. By the end of v. 5, all the men in her life are gone. That's a big point in Ruth 1, i.e., the men are gone.

If you can put yourself into the shoes of the women who will now take over this story, you must know that when women in their culture met, their main identities and concerns were about their roles as wives and mothers. Being a single woman was not hardly an option for them. Moreover, if you were a woman without children, and particularly, without sons, you would be ostracized, even scorned – by the other women. Remember that this was a male-dominant culture. That reality that permeates this story. I know you may say, "That's wrong." But, like a fish swims in water if it will survive, male-centeredness was "the water in which they swam every day of their lives." The thoroughgoing nature of this comes out in Naomi's words to her daughters-in-law in **v. 9**: *"May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."*

This does not mean that this is the way God intends for things to be. And, the impact of this patriarchal dominance came out in horrible ways, like the terrible abuse of women that you find in the book of Judges, e.g., Jud 19. And, this effect of sin has certainly not been eradicated in our world as is evident by the growing stories of the abuse of women that is flooding into the open in our day -- in the entertainment industry, the political world, the corporate world and even the religious world. It is what the current #metoo movement is seeking to expose.

This kind of disrespect for women is not the way God intended the world to be. What God intends for our human relationships was set forth in the beginning in **Gen 1:26-27** where God says definitively that male and female together are made in his image. And, this is what the Apostle Paul declares is a part of what Jesus came to transform and make right in **Gal 3:28**: *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

I point this cultural trait out because it is the only way you will make sense of what Naomi said in **1:21**, *"I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty."* She meant that, when she went away from

Bethlehem, she had been married to a prestigious man who owned property -- and she had two sons to boot. But, when she had to make the decision to return to Bethlehem, her life was empty, i.e., her men were all dead. And, she was angry, angry about everything -- but especially angry with God.

It's in that context that, from 1:6-18, Naomi, Orpah and Ruth wrestle with decisions about how they will survive and where they will find a place of belonging. How do you make decision when you are angry? That question is worthy of an entire sermon itself. So, let me make a few simple points for you to reflect on in case you are where Naomi was, i.e., angry about what is happening in your life:

- **When angry, make the decision closest to what you think would honor God.** Naomi had few choices, and none of them seemed good to her. But, she could have given up altogether. She could have lashed out at Ruth and Orpah. She could have even taken her life. But, she decided to return to the people and place of God. And, as we will see, God honored and blessed her decision.
- **When angry, don't deny the anger. Take it to God. Act in anger as God acts in anger.** All anger is not bad. Far from it. Sometimes, anger is the right response to what's happening in the world. God repeatedly says that he is angry about evil and injustice in this world. God's anger always leads him to make right what is wrong in his creation. If your anger leads you in that direction, it is consistent with the ways of God. Of course, remember that God's anger about our sin led him send Jesus to bring about justice by Jesus bearing the punishment for our sins. You see, **the anger of God is always blended with an offer of mercy.** Be guided by that. And, when you are angry with God, tell him. Read Ps 73 or Jer 19-20. This is what people of God always did when they have been angry: They prayed – honest, raw, and unfiltered prayer. God will not be blown away by your anger. Only in relationship to him can your anger find guidance and resolution.
- **Don't sin when you are angry.** The Apostle Paul referred to Ps 4:4 when he wrote in **Eph 4:26**, "*In your anger do not sin*". I think this command is repeated in the Bible because it's so hard for us to obey it. When we are angry, our emotions are often out of control. We want to hurt the other person. When we're angry, we feel tempted to do the same unjust things that others are doing and that we're angry about! "Don't do it!" the Bible says. When you're angry, be careful not to do what is wrong.
- **Don't get stuck in your anger** – Also in **Eph 4:26-27**, Paul wrote, "*Don't let the sun go down on your anger or you will give the Devil a foothold.*" By this, the Bible means that you should not let anger become a way of life. It will eat you up like a cancer. It will ruin your life and all those around you. It will be the way the Devil gets a foothold in your life. So, don't ignore anger when you feel it. Don't deny it. But, don't wallow in it – or remain in it long.

Here's the point: **When you are angry and must make a decision, make the wisest decision you can.** Naomi portrays what some of this looks like. Naomi is bitter and angry. She does not bottle it up but expresses it. But, at the same time, she makes the best decision she can in her difficult situation.

Decision 3: A Decision that Seeks to Reflect God's Heart – Ruth -- *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 (4:16).*

The decision that Ruth makes is the hinge upon which the entire story will turn. Indeed, we will see that the decision she makes is one upon which all of salvation history turns. And, note this: In the eyes of the people in her world, she is the most marginalized and insignificant person imaginable: She is a single woman in a married man's world, a widow, an immigrant, a Moabite! All these identities intersect in this one young woman. Yet, **her decision sets into motion what would be the line through which the Savior of the world will come.**

So, all three women set off for Bethlehem in v.7 but, abruptly and firmly, Naomi urges both Orpah and Naomi to go back home to Moab. Read Naomi's reasoning and ask what you would do. Naomi says, "If you go with me, there will be no hope for you. I cannot have other children for you to marry – and even if I could, you would be too old for them when they get to marrying age. If you go with me to Bethlehem, you will be hated and no one will marry you!"

Eventually, Orpah goes back to her home country – and the Bible does not criticize her for it. It's would seem, from a human perspective, to be the best decision in a situation in which no decision seemed to be ideal.

But, Ruth insisted on staying with Naomi. We dare not forget that the decision that Ruth makes is one that, in human eyes, would almost certainly lead to a future for her of isolation, poverty and misery. The Bible points us here to the key to making the kind of decision Ruth made. You see it in what Naomi said in **1:8**: “*May the LORD show you kindness (hesed), as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me.*”

This word translated kindness is one of the most important words in the Bible. In Hebrew, it is “hesed”. It is the term that sums up in one word all the positive attributes of God: his love, faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness and loyalty. This one word sums up the qualities that we who are made in the image of God are supposed to reflect in all our decisions – in all our actions. Showing hesed is what the Bible means in **1 Cor. 10:31**: “*Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*” To glorify God is to live a life of “hesed”.

Ruth’s decision to stay with Naomi is how a person glorifies God in everyday decisions in life. In a very practical way, Ruth chose to be faithful, kind and loving to Naomi just as God is. Let me tell you this: When you read about the life of Jesus, you will see that what Ruth does is the way that Jesus made his decisions. It’s the way Jesus lived his life. And, still, this is how Jesus deals with us: Jesus loves us before we ever love him. When we have sinned and return to him, Jesus forgives us. And, Jesus promises never to leave us or forsake us. Wherever we go, he will go.

If you will glorify God, what Ruth did is a guide to how you should make decisions your life. You should forgive people because you love to act justly and to show mercy. You should not give up on others even when they are as bitter and unpleasant as Naomi was. You should love to walk humbly with people because you daily walk with God.

This story shouts out to us that one person’s decision – yes, the decision of the most marginalized person imaginable in the eyes of the people of her world – can make an eternal difference in this world for the kingdom of God.

Ruth 1 draws to a conclusion with such a sense of despair. Naomi, who had left Bethlehem so full returns an empty embittered old woman with... with a Moabitess. Did you see v.19? The women in Bethlehem didn’t even acknowledge Ruth. It’s as if she isn’t even there. It’s as if this immigrant woman doesn’t matter at all. But, is God at work in her life? Well, let’s see how the chapter ends **v.22** -- *So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.*

So, there is bread again in the “house of bread”. And... well, well, well. When do the people start reaping again? Just as Ruth arrives. What a coincidence!

I’ll end as I began by reminding you that when we believe in the kind of God we believe in, we discover that he is present and at work in all things. In other words, things don’t just happen. Whatever happens will ultimately be – to God’s glory.