

Ruth 1:1-5 – A Downward Spiral – Lesson Summary

Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which everything just seems to be falling apart? No matter what you do it seems like you've been sucked into a whirlpool of chaos. The other day we planned a family birthday dinner. Due to schedules, we had a specific block of time and were determined to protect it. Unfortunately, life doesn't work that way. A frantic attempt at preparing the meal was punctuated by a bottle of sparkling grapefruit juice exploding all over the ceiling, walls, window, and our dinners. When the chaos subsided, I sat down to our meal only to have some remaining grapefruit juice splashed all over me as my daughter blew bubbles and played with the straw in her cup. In that moment the condition of my sinful heart certainly didn't aid in the calming of the whirlpool. In fact, it intensified the physical chaos around me as my personal actions caused relational carnage as well. By the time it was all said and done, nothing went right. The birthday girl was not celebrated like we had hoped. The dinner cooled and tempers heated. More importantly, the Lord was not glorified. The beginning 5 verses of the Book of Ruth are not that different. In fact, they are much worse. We'll see a family's life unravel as they engage a disaster with disobedience, death will be followed by more disobedience, only to find that this decision leads to more death and ends in despair.

The first verse of the Book of Ruth informs us that the following story took place in the days of the Judges. This is significant because of all that is happening during this period of time. Israel is in a downward spiral as they continually walk away from God and His provision and protection. The phrase "Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," occurs seven times in the first 13 chapters of Judges. The book ends with the sad conclusion that "everyone did what was right in their own eyes". As a result of their wickedness and wandering, God fulfills His promise in Deut. 28 to send a famine on the land. We may consider the famine as the true disaster, but the greater disaster is the state of Israel's wicked heart.

As the story continues, a husband and father by the name of Elimelech must respond to the disaster around him. His response to sojourn to Moab makes perfect sense. There's no food in Bethlehem but there's food in Moab. It would seem natural that one would travel to where there is food. The real problem with His decision lies in Elimelech's disobedience toward God. God had explicitly told His people not to go to Moab. God knew that the Moabite influences on His people had been problematic. Rather than prayerfully reflecting on God's Word and command, Elimelech pursues a practical need for food as He leads His family away from the land that the Lord had promised to Israel. Elimelech, who's name means, "God is King," packs up his family for a brief trip to Moab in search of food. Sadly, we will see their sojourn become a settling down, and the downward spiral continues as Elimelech walks away from his King.

Elimelech's decision only worsens when he dies. Soon after his death, disobedience continues as his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, decide to marry two Moabite women. According to Old Testament law, the penalty for such behavior was that their family wouldn't be welcomed back to Israel for 10 generations. Their decision to marry Moabite woman effectively severed their opportunity to return home. They surrendered their relationship with the Lord in order to pursue the desires of their flesh. In doing so, they stayed in Moab with little thought of returning to God's provision and presence.

Once again, death enters the scene as both Mahlon and Chilion pass away leaving Naomi without a husband or sons. Despair sets in as Naomi finds herself alone in a foreign land, worthless in society's eyes, and far from the presence of God. But praise God that the story's not over. These first five verses simply set the scene for the story that's about to unfold. A story about a return to the Lord which will bring redemption and restoration to all involved.

Discussion:

- 1) What do you think you would have done if your family faced a famine?
- 2) Do you pray about decisions you make in life? Have you ever made a decision that you realized later you should have prayed about? How did that decision work out?
- 3) Can you think of a time that you felt great despair and hopelessness? How did you respond to God in these times?