



Lesson 2

Moving Out of Bethlehem (1: 1-5)

I. Scripture Reading:

Ruth 1:1-5

II. Synopsis:

1. The Background of the Judges' Era

The stories recorded in this book took place during the era of the Judges. This period lasted about three to four hundred years, from the time the Israelites first entered the land of Canaan until the time when Saul, the first king, ruled. During the era of the Judges Israel did not have a central government, but instead consisted of several inde-

pendent tribes with tribal alliances. At that time the people of Israel were not only bullied by their outside enemies, but they also had disputes amongst the tribes. The Israelites were not faithful to God, lived with poor morals, and turned away from God to worship other idols. When they could not stand the oppression of their foreign enemies, they would call for mercy and delivery. The LORD God of their ancestors heard them every time, and He would raise up a judge to rescue them from their suffering. However, even when a judge arose, there would only be a short-lived revival. Then the Israelites would then forget their God, fall into darkness, and forsake Him. They would follow the example of their neighboring peoples in worshiping idols, and would repeatedly rebel and sin against God. They followed this vicious cycle over and over again. As the author of Judges finally said at the end: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Jug 21: 25). In fact, the people of Israel forgot that they had a king, the one true God in heaven. The commandment of God is clear: “Be careful to obey all these words that I command you today, so that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever, because you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God” (Deu 12:28). However, the Israelites disobeyed God, “every man did what he wanted,” imitating the idol worship of

the Canaanites and failing to observe the teachings of the Torah.

2. The Famine at that Time

In the beginning of the first chapter of Ruth, the phrase “in the land” refers to the southern part of Israel where the tribe of Judah lived. This land was located to the west of the Dead Sea, which is part of the land of Canaan that God gave to the Israelites. The richness of the land of Canaan is described vividly in Deuteronomy: “For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey” (Deu 8:7-8). It is “a land that the LORD your God looks after. The eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.” (Deu 11:12).

The story of Ruth took place in Bethlehem, which is quite unusual. The city is located about 5 miles (8 kilometers) south of Jerusalem. Although Bethlehem is a small city, it occupies a very important position in human history and destiny because the Savior of all humanity, Jesus Christ, was born in Bethlehem. Centuries before the birth of the Savior Jesus Christ, the prophet Micah prophesied, “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the

little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” (Mic 5:2). In the Old Testament times of Micah, Bethlehem was called Ephrathah.

Bethlehem was very significant to the Israelites. It was the birthplace of Christ, the hometown of King David, and the burial site of Rachel, wife of Jacob, one of the three Patriarchs of Israel. The story of Ruth occurred in this historically significant location. While Ruth is a Moabite, the other main characters in the book are from Bethlehem. Bethlehem, in the Hebrew Old Testament, is: “Bat, Lehem,” “Bat” means “house,” and “Lehem” means “bread” or “grain.” Therefore, Bethlehem is the house of bread, or the house of grain, or a barn. Its geographical location made it abundant in rainfall and rich in grain, so it truly became a “warehouse.” However, in the days of the judges during which the story of Ruth takes place, there was a famine in the house of bread. The Ephrathites of Bethlehem moved out and went to the land of Moab to escape the famine.

We must not assume that the fact that having “a famine in the land” was a natural phenomenon. As we look at the biblical context, the famine in the land of Israel did not exist because of its geographical position, but was more likely due to the following factors:

a. The statement that “all the people did what was right in

their own eyes” means that they did everything according to their own liking, not caring about God’s laws and ways.

- b. According to Deuteronomy 7 and 28, God would bless the land abundantly, but if the people disobeyed God, He would bring famine upon them. As the Scripture says, “If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul— then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshiping them, for then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you.” (Deu 11:13-17). But throughout the era of the judges, the people of Israel continued to deviate from the correct path.

Moreover, according to Jewish rabbinical interpretation of the Scriptures, “In the days when the judges ruled” is in the passive voice. Therefore, the phrase can be trans-

lated as “in the time when the judges were judged,” meaning that when the judges did not fulfill their duties, they would be judged by God first. In the era of the Judges, the Israelites did not follow God’s commands. Everyone did as they saw fit. Therefore, they fell before the judgment of God, and the land of Judah suffered a famine.

3. Moab and the Moabites

Moab was a small kingdom located between the east bank of the Jordan River and the desert, where there was plenty of rain. The ancient region of Moab was in today’s Jordan and, due to the abundance in the land, it was called “the flower orchard of Palestine.”

Moabites were the incestuous descendants of Lot, who laid with his daughters after being made drunk by them (Gen 19:37). Since the Moabites were descendants of Abraham’s nephew Lot, they were related to the Israelites (Gen 19: 36-37). Although the Moabites were not explicitly forbidden to intermarry with Israelites, the Moabites believed in the god Chemosh. They were not only morally corrupt, but were also often enemies of Israel. During the exodus of Israel, Moab tried to curse the Israelites by bribing the greedy prophet Balaam in the wilderness. Therefore, the LORD God forbade the Moabites to enter the assembly of the LORD (Deu 23:3). Later, in the early days of the judges, Eglon, the king of Moab, de-

feated Israel, and the people of Israel served Eglon for 18 years (Jug 3: 12-14).

4. The Family of Elimelech

The name Elimelech means “my God and my Lord,” while the name of his wife, Naomi means “sweet.” The name of his older son, Mahlon, means “weak” and the name of his younger son, Chilion, means “haggard.” Elimelech might have only wanted to stay in Moab for a while and he did not expect to live there for 10 years. His two sons married local women in Moab, one named Orpah, meaning “stubbornness,” and the other named Ruth, meaning “companion.”

The family of Elimelech moved out of Bethlehem and went to the land of Moab hoping to seek refuge, but they ended up suffering from an even greater calamity. Elimelech died in the land of Moab, and soon afterwards both his sons also died shortly after they got married and before they even had any children. What had started out as a family of six quickly became a family of three widows, with no husbands or sons. What a difficult and grief-stricken life! The suffering of this family is really tragic. Not only did all the men in this family die in a foreign land and leave behind three grieving widows, but the women also had to face other hardships in life. At that time, women in general did not have the skills to make a living, instead

relying on their fathers when they were young, on their husbands after marriage, or on their sons when they grew old enough. We read about this tragic background in the beginning of the story. This family's experience makes us feel very empathetic towards them.

In our daily lives, we often hear and experience many kinds of difficulties, but the tragic experience of Elimelech still deeply touches our hearts. However, for this family, living with their grief was not the most challenging thing; another even more serious challenge was placed in front of the old widow Naomi. Since the Israelites attached great importance to the continuation of the family name, the law specifically stated that the living brother left behind must provide for the descendants of the dead in order to carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name would not be blotted out from Israel: "When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel" (Deu 25: 5-6). However, the circumstances of the family of Elimelech were more complicated. Elimelech had no brother, and both sons were dead. Naomi had no one she could marry;

moreover Naomi had passed childbearing age. In this case, according to the traditions of Israel, the greatest disaster that the family of Elimelech was facing was the fact that the family line may become be extinct, since no one was left to inherit the family land.

The Book of Ruth is named after a woman that is quite different from Esther, the other biblical book named after a female. Esther occurs in the palace of the Persian Empire, and involves kings, queens, and ministers. The actions of these characters took place on a grand historic stage and affected entire empires and even the entire nation of Israel. God prepared a special Jewish woman to become a queen and then used her to save the nation of Israel. Esther describes the history of Israel, like many other Old Testament books. This is a familiar perspective, however Ruth talks about the daily life of ordinary people during a time when God was punishing the people that had abandoned Him. We see the fate of ordinary people affected by this judgment, and the experience of the suffering in their life. God, who does not change, has a covenant with Israel. Even when His people betray Him, God's love and faithfulness never leave them. When they are repentant to God, He gracefully saves the nation of Israel. However, will God care about an ordinary individual when they fall into trouble or suffer personal difficulties? Ruth gives a positive answer to this question. God not

only rules over the history of all humanity, but He also has mercy and compassion over Elimelech's family. He saw their sufferings and knew their needs. His eyes were upon them and He listened to their prayers. Thus, this book has a unique perspective and uses ordinary people as the main characters to convey how God's love, faithfulness, and compassion for all Christians provides for our needs, including food, livelihood, marriage, and descendants. Most of us can relate to the characters in the book, so we are anxious to keep reading to learn what happens next. Praise the LORD! When God enters into their lives, their ordinary story has an extraordinary ending. The Book of Ruth deeply comforts us and reassures our faith in Him. This is another reason that readers love this book.

III. Video Viewing:

Play DVD session "2. Moving Out of Bethlehem".

IV. Study Questions:

1. Fill in the Blanks:

- (1) A certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of _____, he and his wife and two sons (1:1).

- (2) The name of the man was _____ and the name of his wife _____, and the names of his two sons were _____ and _____. They were _____ from Bethlehem in Judah (1:2).
- (3) These took _____ wives; the name of the one was _____ and the name of the other _____. When they had lived there about _____ years (1:4).

2. Scripture Study:

- (1) What is the meaning of Bethlehem in the original text? Please explain the special status of Bethlehem in the Bible.

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(2) What is the history of Moab, and what did they do against the will of God? What did the Law state about the relationship between the Israelites and the Moabites?

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(3) Why did Elimelech take his wife and children to the land of Moab? What was the outcome?

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3. Discussion and Sharing:

- (1) If you were Elimelech, would you choose to leave or stay in Bethlehem? What factors would determine your choice? Are we able to think about God's work and will from a spiritual point of view?

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- (2) How do we face suffering? What can our faith in Christ do for us?

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(3) How should we avoid the weakness of “the era of Judges” in church life, and how do we actively seek a revival?

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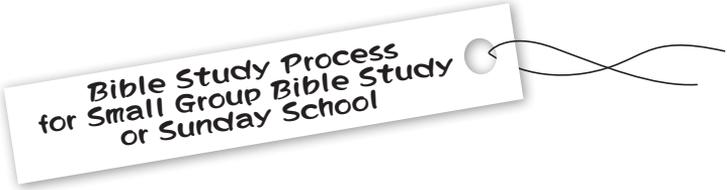
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**Bible Study Process
for Small Group Bible Study
or Sunday School**

This part supplies a reference for group leaders and Sunday school teachers. If needed, please refer to Appendix: “Instruction for Bible Study Group Leaders and Instructors”. Please feel free to adjust the process according to time limits.

A. Preparation (5-15 minutes)

1. Icebreaker/ Introduction:

- a. If there is anyone new joining the class, ask them to give a simple self-introduction.
Greet one another
- b. Game: Do you love your neighbor?
Playing Instructions
 - (1) Ask the students to sit in a circle, but take away one chair. The person without a chair will ask anyone sitting, “Do you love your neighbor?”
 - (2) If the answer is “no,” the people sitting on both sides of the responder will have

to exchange seats, while the person asking the question will try to steal one of their seats.

(3) If the answer is “yes,” everyone will have to stand up and change seats. Again, the person asking the question will try to find a seat.

(4) The person without a seat will start again, asking the question, “Do you love your neighbor?” Play it 4-5 times.

c. Introduction: The group leader explains the meaning of the game. When we are changing seats, we will inevitably worry about not being able to find a seat. This is like the family of Elimelech moving from Bethlehem to Moab. Is Moab a place where they can settle down for the long-term?

2. Opening Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, as we get together and study your words, please be with us and bless us. May the Holy Spirit prepare our hearts and help us to understand your words. May you open our ears so that we can know your will, follow your lead and be blessed by you. Please give us wisdom and strength through your

words, so that we can live a life that is pleasing to you. We also want to seek after your heart and be a blessing to the people around us. We pray all these in Jesus' name. Amen.

B. Development (40-90 minutes)

I. Scripture Reading:

Ruth 1:1-5

II. Synopsis:

1. The Background of the Judges' Era
2. The Famine at that Time
3. Moab and the Moabites
4. The Family of Elimelech

III. Video Viewing:

Play DVD session "2. Moving Out of Bethlehem."

IV. Study Questions:

1. Fill in the Blanks: Questions (1)-(3)
2. Scripture Study: Questions (1)-(3)
3. Discussion and Sharing: Questions (1)-(3)

C. Conclusion (5-15 minutes)

1. Summary:

In the beginning of the first chapter of Ruth, the word “in the land” refers to the southern part dwelled in by the tribe of Judah. This land was located to the west of the Dead Sea, which is part of the land of Canaan that God gave to the Israelites. It was called a land flowing with milk and honey. The story of Ruth begins in Bethlehem, the house of bread, but there was a famine in the land. An ordinary man, Elimelech, decided to bring his wife and two sons, leaving Bethlehem for the land of Moab to escape famine. Elimelech did not think that he and his two sons would die in Moab, leaving behind his wife and their two daughters-in-law.

2. Homework Assignment:

- a. Memory verse: “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (Rut 1:16b)
- b. Bible Study: Ruth Chapter 1

* **Closing Prayer:** *

Our glorious Father God, please teach us to always seek your will first, instead of merely looking at our circumstances. Let us be prayer warriors, always walking with you. I pray this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen!