

INTRODUCTION

The story of Ruth has often been called the greatest piece of literature ever written and the Cinderella story of the Bible. I'm calling our study, "The Romance of Redemption," a title I borrowed from Ray Stedman.

How many of you have already read the story of Ruth? Those of you who haven't are Ruthless, but you won't be for long. Over the next seven weeks I'm going to give you the Ruth, the whole Ruth, and nothing but the Ruth!

In order to appreciate the details of the story, you must have a feel for the full story. So I want to give you a brief overview of the full story. I call it my "two-minute trailer."

The story of Ruth begins with a terrible famine. An Israelite family left Bethlehem and traveled to the pagan land of Moab in search of food. The mother's name was Naomi, and her husband's name was Elimelech. In time, their two sons married Moabite women. But life was bitter for Naomi. Her husband, and then her sons died. After three funerals, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. She urged the two younger widows to stay in Moab and find new husbands. Orpah stayed, but Ruth refused to leave Naomi and traveled with her back to Bethlehem.

They arrived with nothing and had to beg for food. Ruth went into the field of a farmer named Boaz to pick up leftover wheat from the harvest. Boaz was impressed with young Ruth and instructed his workers to leave plenty of wheat for her to gather each day.

To her delight, Naomi realized Boaz was a distant relative of her dead husband, which qualified him to be a Kinsman-Redeemer. If Ruth married Boaz, they could legally reclaim the land formerly belonging to Naomi's husband.

So Naomi used her matchmaking skills. Following Naomi's advice, Ruth humbly asked Boaz to accept the role as her kinsman redeemer. In other words, Ruth basically asked him to marry her! And Boaz said, "Absolutely, yes!"

But there was a problem: Another man was a closer relative and he had the first right of refusal to the land. When Boaz explained the terms to him, he wanted the property. But when he heard that a bride came with the deal, he quickly backed out! This opened the door for Boaz to marry Ruth and redeem the family's land and reputation.

First came love, then came marriage, then came Boaz with a baby carriage. God gave the couple a son named Obed, who turned out to be the grandfather of none other than King David himself! In fact, in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, Ruth is listed as one of the human ancestors of Jesus!

God redeemed Ruth's life from being a destitute, immigrant widow into a woman of honor with her own book in the Bible. It's also a model story about how God lovingly redeems each of us.

Ruth 1:1-7. "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah... 'Can this be 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. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.'"

Most Texans are familiar with Willie Nelson's classic song, "On the Road Again, just can't wait to get on the road again." I'm calling this message, "On the Road Again: Going the Wrong Way." Have you seen those highway signs that say, "Wrong Way"? If you ignore them it can lead to disaster. It's also dangerous to go the wrong way spiritually.

The Children of Israel had been on the road for over 40 years traveling toward the Promised Land. They finally crossed the Jordan River and gradually claimed the land God had promised them. But it was only a generation later that Elimelech left the Promised Land and retraced their steps back to Moab.

When I taught through the book of Joshua I reminded you that the Exodus story is really a metaphor of the Christian life. Egypt is a picture of a lost person who lives in slavery to sin. When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, it symbolized the miracle of salvation. The wilderness symbolized a carnal Christian wandering around in defeat. Crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised Land is a picture of the Victorious Christian life—living in the Spirit. So when Elimelech turned back and traveled to Moab, he became a sad but powerful metaphor of a child of God who turns away from God's promise and lives in the land of misery.

Elimelech is a picture of a backslidden Christian. The Bible says, "The backslider in heart will be filled with his own ways, but a good man will be satisfied from above." (Proverbs 14:14 NKJV)

In the 21st century you don't hear many preachers talking about hell, or about the blood and you also don't hear much about backsliding. Someone asked me what I was preaching on this Sunday and I said, "Backsliding." They said, "Is that like bootscootin'?" I ask someone else if they knew what backsliding was and they said, "Sure, I used to suffer from it, but I had surgery and fixed it up." Backsliding isn't the Texas two-step or a medical problem. Backsliding happens when a Christian stops advancing in their walk with God; instead they are sliding back into their old sins and habits. In our first lesson from Ruth I want to make four observations about a backslidden Christian.

1. IT'S EASY TO TURN FROM GOD DURING A TIME OF GENERAL WICKEDNESS

The historical setting of this story is important. The Bible says, "...in the days when the judges ruled" (1:1) The period of the Judges was one of the most wicked in Israel's history. Joshua and Caleb were dead, so the Israelites didn't have any spiritual leaders. The people turned to idolatry and immorality. A series of judges came on the scene to call them back to repentance, but few of them were great leaders. This entire period can be summarized by the last verse in Judges: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." (Judges 21:25 KJV)

That was written 3,300 years ago, but I think it is a perfect description of the American culture in 2010. I'm not a prophet of gloom, but anyone can see that America is more wicked and corrupt than ever before. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes. It's because our nation has uprooted the bedrock truth of the Bible that has served as our moral foundation for 250 years. For the first 200 years of our nation, we didn't argue about what constitutes a marriage because the Bible says a marriage is a union between one man and one woman. We didn't have to debate about whether you could have a cross in a public place, or pray before a football game. There were no lawsuits removing students from access to school because they wanted to pray and study the Bible.

We live in an age of moral relativity where we're told there are no absolute moral standards. The term "everyone did what was right in their own eyes" is the definition of moral relativity. Christians are being told today, "Don't tell me what is right or wrong. If it's right to me, then it can't be wrong."

So because of the wickedness of our culture, it's easier than ever before to slip away from God and dive into the corrupt culture around us. And millions of so-called Christians are living in the land of spiritual Moab, they are backslidden.

I believe the majority of members of Green Acres are backslidden Christians. That may sound harsh, but numbers don't lie. We have over 15,000 people, who hold membership in this church, but more than half of them haven't darkened the doors of this church or given one penny to the ministry of this church in years. In fact, according to a recent Barna Report only one out of five Americans who claim to be a Christian even attend church regularly.

Just because you're here doesn't mean you're immune from backsliding. God warned about religious people who draw close to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. You may sing the hymns and say the prayers, but like Shrek, your heart is in the Kingdom of Far Far Away Instead of focusing on Jesus you're thinking about lunch, your job, or your hobby, or what you're going to do this week. Physically you're here, but mentally you're in Moab.

2. YOU START TURNING FROM GOD WHEN YOU STOP TRUSTING HIM

"...There was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live in the country of Moab." (1:1) The journey from Bethlehem to Moab was only about 100 miles, but it was downhill the whole way, geographically and spiritually.

When a famine came, he was faced with a choice. Do I stay here and pray and seek God's face and then trust Him to provide for us? Or will I go back across the Jordan River, back into the land of the pagan Moabites because I hear they have some food?

He should have stayed and trusted God. The God of Israel is the same God about whom David said, "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." (Psalm 37:25) But instead of trusting God, Elimelech loaded up his family and moved to Moab. HE didn't have a food shortage, he had a faith shortage. Elimelech's name meant 'My God is King.' But he decided to be his own king.

Here's what God said about Moab, "Judah is my scepter (that means a royal symbol); Moab is my wash-pot (a G-rated translation of that is garbage can)." (Psalm 108:8-9) God was disrespectful of Moab because they were disrespectful of Him. A few generations earlier when the Israelites were moving toward the Promised Land, the King of Moab had cursed the Israelites. In response, God ordered the Israelites not to intermingle or intermarry with the Moabites because they were cursed for ten generations.

So Elimelech moved from a Bethlehem, which means "House of Bread" to a place called "Garbage Can." That's a big step backward spiritually speaking!

A backsliding Christian is someone who has left the land of blessing and moved to the state of misery. The road away from God begins when you face a crisis, and instead of crying out to God or trusting Him, you decide to try to fix your problem on your own. You start looking to your own resources. After all doesn't the Bible say, "God helps those who help themselves?" Nope—but Elimelech thought it did.

We live in a DIY world. When I was growing up, there were a few building supply stores, but they sold only to professional builders. Today, you can go into Lowe's or Home Depot and buy the materials to do it yourself. The first bookcase I tried building in seminary was a disaster. When I loaded it with books, it started leaning to the side and in a few minutes it totally collapsed. I hope you're better than me at do it yourself projects. When it comes to building a bookshelf, you can do it yourself, but when it comes to running your life, you can try, but you'll only make a mess—it will collapse like my bookcase.

What is the famine in your life right now? What shortage or crisis is beyond your ability to meet? You're faced with the same choices that Elimelech had. Are you going to hang in there and seek God's face and trust Him to carry you through this famine? Or are you going to turn away from God and come up with your own plan and launch your own do it yourself project to fix your life? Don't be surprised when you find yourself in a mess in Moab.

3. TURNING FROM GOD RESULTS IN HEARTACHE AND BITTERNESS

The sad result of their life in Moab is reported with these words, "Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband died...after they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband." (1:3, 5) Life in Moab seemed to be fine for awhile. The boys found wives. Even though, God's Word expressly prohibited them from

marrying Moabite women, they were living in that culture, so what was the harm? But after a few years, life turned bitter. All three men died leaving three grieving widows. If you were making a movie based on Ruth 1 it would be called, "Two Weddings and Three Funerals.

In verse 20 Naomi described her bitterness. "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara because the Lord has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty." (1:20) Naomi's name meant, "Pleasant" but she was so full of pain she said, "Don't call me 'Pleasant,' call me 'Bitter.'"

When you drift away from God, you may think everything will be fine, and it may seem to be so for a while, but sin always leads to suffering. Sin seems fun for awhile, but there is always a high price to pay. When the devil dangles the alluring bait of sin in front of a Christian, there's always a sharp hook. Rebellion from God always leads to heartache, pain and bitterness.

Are you a backslidden Christian? Here's a simple way to answer that: Are you miserable? Or is your life full of joy unspeakable, full of glory? Is attending worship, prayer, service, and fellowship a chore for you? Or is it something that thrills your heart and is a wonderful, pleasant experience? If you're a Christian, you can't lose your salvation, but you can lose the JOY of your salvation. After David stumbled into two terrible sins, He lost his joy before the Lord. He was bitter and miserable. But as he repented he prayed, "Restore to me the JOY of your salvation." (Psalm 51:12) Have you lost your joy?

Some of you are messing around with a little sin right now and you're thinking it won't hurt you. And when you start backsliding, it doesn't happen suddenly, it happens gradually. Automobile mechanics will tell you that more tires go flat from a slow leak than from a blowout. Not many people have spiritual blowouts and run away from God. Backsliding is a gradual process. It is a gradual decline takes you away from intimacy with God and His people. It might begin with a little sin that you think is harmless. But sin is a poison that has a delayed effect. There is no such thing as a harmless sin to God. Sin killed His precious Son Jesus, so God hates all sin, and so should we.

We all know the story of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. For decades the theory was that the iceberg tore a 300-foot gash in the side of the Titanic's 900-foot hull. In 1995, using high tech cameras, scientists finally photographed the entire wreckage. What they discovered was shocking. Instead of a 300-foot gash, they only found only about 13 square feet of damage to the hull (about the size of two sidewalk squares). They discovered that six small punctures across the six watertight holds was all it took to sink the massive ship that some said that "even God couldn't sink." You may think if you avoid the "big" sins you'll be okay spiritually—but look out of the little sins, any of them can sink you.

There's an old saying about sin I've never forgotten: Sin will take you further than you ever wanted to go. It will keep you longer than you ever wanted to stay, and it will cost you more than you ever wanted to pay. Elimelech is not living proof of that—he's dead proof.

4. NO MATTER HOW FAR YOU ROAM, GOD INVITES YOU TO COME HOME

This is the turning point of the story "When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there." (1:6). After she lost everything, Naomi decided to turn back to God and that meant returning to God's land and to God's people.

Have you drifted away from God? Maybe there was a time in your life when you were more faithful to God, you were living in the House of Bread and God was blessing you on a regular basis. Get still and quiet and listen to your heart. Do you hear the still small voice of your Father speaking this invitation to you? "Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love." (Joel 2:12-13) Do you hear your Father saying, "Come home, my child. I've missed you? I can't bless you in the land of Moab, so come back to Me. Come back to My People. Come back to my land of blessing." Don't let the devil tell you you have gone too far away from God. You can return to God today.

CONCLUSION

Elimelech is a sad example of someone who missed out on his potential. Go with me in your mind to the bed in Moab where Elimelech is lying as he realizes his life is slipping away. I wonder if he thought, "If only I'd trusted God and stayed in Bethlehem. If only I'd lived up to my name and shown everyone that God is my King."

History is filled with people who missed out on great opportunities. They spent the rest of their lives saying, "If only." You know the name Alexander Graham Bell but have you heard of Elisha Gray? If only Elisha Gray had submitted his patent for the telephone two hours earlier there would have been a huge company called Gray Telephone instead of Bell Telephone. If only.

Jacob Davis was a Nevada tailor who first sewed pants made of denim. But he didn't think there would be much demand so another tailor, Levi Strauss, applied for the patent. If only Jacob had seen the potential you'd be wearing Jacob's Jeans instead of Levi's. If only.

We all know John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln, but have you heard of John F. Parker? If only John F. Parker had remained on his post as the President's bodyguard that evening instead of slipping out to a saloon, we might remember him as an American hero. But he missed his chance to save a life. If only.

If Elimelech had stayed in Bethlehem and challenged the people to repent of their sin and turn to God, he might have been remembered as one of the famous judges like Deborah, or Gideon. We name our children Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, Deborah and Gideon—but nobody names their son Elimelech. His name is a forgotten footnote. His life is a sad reminder of what might have been.

I'm reminded of those haunting words written by the American poet, John Greenleaf Whittier: "For all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: "It might have been!"

Elimelech didn't live up to his name. Are you living up to your name? I'm not talking about the name your parents gave you; I'm talking about the name "Christian." It literally means "little Christ." Elimelech is dead, but you still have time to live up to the name Christian.

Ruth 1 closes with the gloomy scene of two sad, poor widows. But that isn't the end of the story. All you have to do is fast forward to Chapter 4 and Naomi is no longer saying, "Call me bitterness." She's smiling and laughing as she rocks little Obed. She says, "Now, call me Blessed. Call me Granny!"

God has great plans for you, too. He says, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11) So if you're going the wrong way, make a u-turn on that road and seek God with your whole heart!

OUTLINE

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"...in the days when the judges ruled" *Ruth 1:1*

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David O. Dykes
Pastor, Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes