

THE WIDOW ... WHO MADE UP HER MIND

And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. (Ruth 1:16-17)

Along time ago three women quietly wept in a cemetery; each looked at the grave of her husband. Naomi had her memories, Orpah, her misery, and Ruth, her musing. They were about to make their greatest decision. Naomi was determined, Orpah was doubtful, Ruth was deciding, and God was waiting and watching.

Naomi with Her Memories

For years circumstances had been difficult, and they were getting worse. Recurring famines in Bethlehem had destroyed the faith of Elimelech, and hoping to prosper in Moab, he took his family from their homeland to reside in an alien land. The struggle had been long and grim, and eventually Naomi's husband died and was buried in Moab.

Orpah with Her Misery

This young woman married Naomi's son, Mahlon. It must have been love at first sight, for intermarriage between the two nations was not encouraged. Her dreams of happiness were shattered when she became a widow. Her world became empty, and she was troubled by the news of Naomi's intention to return to Bethlehem. Of course, she would accompany her—but!

Ruth with Her Musing

She also lost her husband, but a new faith was beginning to fill her soul. Chilion had died, but his mother remained. Life as a widow would be difficult, but without her mother-in-law it would be impossible. The three women shared their sorrows but then, taking a last look at the graves, commenced their journey to Bethlehem.

Somewhere close to the border of Moab, Naomi paused to counsel her companions. She was elderly; the girls were young, attractive, and desirable. They were loyal, but had no future in Israel: Girls, go home. Return to your families; maybe you will find new husbands and raise families. Unfortunately, I am unable to help you. They wept together on the dusty road before Orpah returned to her people. Ruth refused to accept Naomi's advice; her thrilling reply may be considered under six headings.

A Resolute Decision... "I will go"

Ruth was a stranger who belonged to an accursed race. She had never been in Israel, had never listened to a prophet, and had not entered God's sanctuary. Yet she had met a radiant believer whose influence had changed her life. Her only knowledge of Jehovah had been derived from her mother-in-law; the only echo of His word had been heard in the counsel of the older woman. Ruth had not attended any religious crusade, had not listened to the inspiring psalms of a Levitical choir. She had been changed by the irresistible charm of a godly woman. Ruth met her husband-to-be and consented to become his wife. Did she obtain the consent of her parents? Perhaps the marriage was arranged, but during the years that followed she remained childless. Did she visit her parents and meet her old companions? Could she forsake the friends of her childhood? Her sister-in-law had already commenced her homeward journey; would it not be wise to follow her? She resembled Rebekah, who, having heard of an awaiting bridegroom, responded to the invitation of Eleazer saying, "I will go" (see Gen. 24:58). The servant of Abraham assured the young woman that a husband awaited

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her, but no such promise was ever made to Ruth. She looked ahead, and without any encouragement, made her commitment to Naomi.

Many years later the Savior invited a man to become one of His disciples, but the fellow responded saying, "Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father" (Luke 9:59). It was the responsibility of the eldest son to attend to the burial of his parent, but in this case the father was not dead. The man desired to postpone his decision until a future date. Had he been sincere the Lord would have waited, for funerals took place immediately after death. Jesus also said, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). Evidently Ruth's heart was with

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Naomi. All people are given the opportunity of journeying toward the Land of Promise, but each person must decide whether or not to do so.

A Renewed Determination ... "I will lodge. .. abide"

The young lady from Moab was prepared to share her life with Naomi. She said, "Where thou lodgest, I will lodge." They were to share their problems, sorrows, danger, and hope. Ruth seemed to say "Nothing shall ever separate us. There can never be a return; my choice is for ever." It is important to remember how Jesus also said, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37-38). Discipleship means hardship, and this fact was understood by the delightful young widow from Moab. She did not seek prosperity nor an easy journey into the future, but desired the continuing friendship of her partner. When Naomi tried to change the intentions of her daughter-in-law, it became evident no argument would alter her decision. Ruth was determined that nothing would separate them.

The story has often been told of the hen and the hog walking near a church. They paused to read the title of the pastor's forthcoming sermon: "How can we help the poor?" The chicken said, "I know how we can help. Let us supply a ham and egg breakfast." Instantly, the hog protested saying, "That meal would only be an offering for you, but for me it would mean total commitment." The modern church is filled with people who give love offerings but very few make a total commitment. When the missionary James Calbert was about to land in the Philippine Islands, the captain of the ship said, "You risk your life and the lives of all who go with you if you go among those savages." Calbert answered, "We died before we came here."

A Remarkable Desire ... "I will change"

"Thy people shall be my people." Did that delightful woman ever consider what she was saying? What if some unforeseen circumstance deprived her of the company of her mother-in-law? If Naomi died, Ruth would be alone in an alien land. Without money and food she would be destitute. What would the strangers say to a woman apparently abandoned; how would she earn money to buy food? All kinds of grim possibilities might lie ahead, but Ruth remained unperturbed. Naomi's friends would become her closest associates. She would change her habits, speech, and clothing, and renounce everything she possessed to become a Jewess. If the Hebrews welcomed her, she would become a member of a new society. "Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). New brothers and sisters would replace the old family as she entered into a new fellowship and commenced a new life.

It is impossible to understand Ruth without knowledge of her upbringing. The Moabites were idolaters who feared the reactions of their gods. Natural disasters were believed to be evidence of anger; to displease any of the idols led to unending peril. Even after many years of Christian work in Africa, similar fears exist. Natives are afraid to displease the witch doctor lest he should punish them. Missionaries tell

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strange stories of the uncanny power of these men who resent interference. Ruth was in a similar position. She was renouncing the faith of her ancestors and the result could be catastrophic. Did Paul think of her when he wrote to the Ephesian church saying, "That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. But ... (Eph. 2:12).

A Regenerative Devotion... "I will worship"

"Thy God [shall be] my God." The Moabites worshipped many idols. Ashtarte, the goddess of fertility, was esteemed above most, but there were also the god of war and innumerable household deities that influenced the nation. Childless women prayed to the goddess hoping for the birth of a baby, and soldiers prayed to their god hoping to be preserved from danger in forthcoming conflicts. All the residents of Moab sought protection against evil spirits, which they believed surrounded their homes. To what extent these ideas influenced Ruth is not known. Probably her marriage to a Hebrew husband and her association with Naomi undermined the effect of the pagan religion. The statement that she was willing to abandon her faith was indicative of the transformation within her soul. It cannot be overemphasized this change was accomplished by the sanctity in the life of her mother-in-law. Ruth was changed more by what she saw than by anything heard. The life of Naomi had been an "epistle.., known and read of all men" (see 2 Cor. 3:2). If the language of the hymn writer may be used, then the woman from Moab was saying, "The dearest idol I have known, whate'er that idol be, Help me to tear it from its throne, and worship only Thee." She remained a faithful convert. There were disappointing people in Israel who did not live according to their doctrines; their

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conduct did not enhance their testimony. Ruth looked at God and did not criticize any objectionable people. Wise are they who emulate her example.

A Remaining Daughter... "I will be faithful"

Where thou diest, will I die." Ruth never anticipated leaving her friend. Whatever the future held, prosperity or poverty, joy or disappointment, nothing would ever separate the two women; they would remain together. If Naomi should die, Ruth would be present to arrange the burial. With the assistance of Jehovah she vowed to remain faithful through every eventuality of life. Her sincerity was evident when, at a later date, she went to work in the harvest fields of Bethlehem to glean enough food to supply their mutual need. From the time she embraced the faith of Naomi until the day she died, Ruth never regretted her decision; she earned an abiding place in the records of the Almighty, and set an example that all people should follow.

The Bible supplies examples of people who remained faithful for a short period of time, but finally succumbed to various temptations. Some disciples liked miracles, others the food that Jesus freely offered. Yet when faced by adversity they returned to their homes. The rich young ruler might have been a great preacher, but his love of money hindered him. Demas, the young man who assisted Paul during the apostle's imprisonment, might have been a famous disciple, but worldly attractions terminated his faithfulness. Paul wrote, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). The woman from Moab stood tall among the people of her generation; she was one of the greatest women who ever lived.

A Reuniting Death ... "I will never leave thee"

It must be assumed that Ruth knew little about the theology of Israel; she was only a convert, had not graduated from a seminary, entered the house of God, nor heard a sermon! Her understanding of immortality

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was limited; perhaps death was considered the end of existence. However, under the tuition of her mother-in-law, she might have heard of heaven and Naomi's desire to become one of its citizens. Yet Ruth was determined to share with her mother-in-law whatever awaited them. She seemed to say, "Whatever may be beyond the grave, we will still be together; where you are buried, there will I also be buried. We have been with each other in life; we shall be together in death. Nothing will separate us." If that delightful woman had been acquainted with the

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writings of Paul, she might have used his words: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

Ruth became the great-grandmother of David and an ancestress of the Messiah. Such faith cannot go unrewarded. When later she looked into the face of her baby, she knew all things had worked together for her good because she trusted in God (see Rom. 8:28).

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