

Choice

We make decisions every day. Most are not life-changing. For example, those to do with clothing or food are usually everyday matters. Occasionally, though, an important issue arises. That happened with Ruth.

Ruth was from Moab, a country which once existed to the east of Judah. It occupied a mountainous plateau broken by grassy valleys, many of which ran into the Dead Sea.

Two nations

The Israelite and Moabite peoples shared a common ancestor, Terah the father of Abraham. However, by Ruth's day (around 1300 BC), the differences between them were

marked. They were two distinct nations. What is more important the people of Israel worshipped the God and Father of Jesus Christ. The Moabites did not. They served gods of their own making.

During a period of famine in Israel a couple from Bethlehem (*Elimelech and Naomi*) and their two sons (*Mahlon and Chilion*) relocated to Moab (*Ruth 1.1-3*). There they settled and, after the death of Elimelech, the boys married Moabite women (*Orpah and Ruth*) (*Ruth 1.4*).

Three widows

Some ten years later tragedy struck. Orpah and Ruth were widowed (*Ruth 1.5*). At or about that time Naomi decided to go back home to Bethlehem. It seems her return journey was triggered by two events. One, God was kind to Israel. The famine ended. And two, apart from Orpah and Ruth, Naomi had no family in Moab. All three women set out for Judah together (*Ruth 1.6f*).

A threefold plea

A short while later Naomi pleaded with her daughters-in-law. She

called upon each girl to return to her mother's house. This plea was accompanied by prayer (*Ruth 1.8*). Naomi's concern was that both women would know God being kind to them. However, they were determined to go with her.

Naomi pleaded with them a second time (*Ruth 1.11ff*). On that occasion Orpah decided to stay in Moab, but Ruth did not. She clung to Naomi (*Ruth 1.14*).

Naomi advised Ruth to return to Moab for a third time (*Ruth 1.15*). The call went unheeded. Ruth continued to travel westward with her mother-in-law. She, it seems, was determined to go to a land and a town she had never visited. Go there she did.

A sixfold commitment

It is worth noting what Ruth said to Naomi. She made a solemn commitment. It has no less than six strands. Taken together they represent a comprehensive and solemn under-taking by Ruth. First she said "Where you go, I shall go". Then Naomi heard added to the

promise the words "Where you lodge, I shall lodge". Thirdly and fourthly Ruth declared, "your people will be my people" and "your God shall be my God". The final part of her message comprises two closely related commitments: "where you die I shall die" and "where you are buried, I shall be buried" (*Ruth 1.16f*).

Why did Ruth make such a clear and full promise? What made her so determined to leave her homeland and settle in Judah? Why was she intent on staying so close to Naomi? We are not given a direct answer to these questions. However there are some clues which point us to the answer.

Two clues

The first clue is found at the end of Ruth's conversation with Naomi. Ruth chapter 1 verse 17 reads: "May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." These words are a solemn oath; an oath that confirms and seals the promises she has made. They begin with an ancient form of invoking punishment upon herself if she failed to do as promised.

Let us take a closer look.

There are two points to note about Ruth's oath. It starts with God. And, secondly, it uses the special name for God.

Ruth called upon God to witness what she promised. It is probable when Ruth uttered these words Naomi would have also observed her daughter-in-law use a gesture that indicated God should punish her if she failed to keep her word.

Ruth had known Naomi for ten years. Over those years she would have seen how her mother-in-law and husband served God. She would have known that God's name is not to be used wrongly, but always with proper respect. It was no small thing then for Ruth to call upon God as her witness. At the least it indicates she respected and revered him.

The special name for God used by Ruth is the name given by God in the days of Moses (I am who I am) (*Exodus 3.14*). It has been translated into English as Jehovah or Yahweh. The key point to note, though, is that

the title spoke to the people of God in ancient days of the fact that God is eternal (he has always been and always will). It also spoke of the fact that he looks after his people. He always has done and he always will.

What has this to do with Ruth? The fact she uses this special name for God indicates that she had more than a respect for God. There were other titles she could have used (such as Almighty One or God). But she chose this name, a name which only Israelites would use. It would not have been used by Moabites. Why? Surely it is because she had changed. She no longer followed the ways of the Moabites. She now loves the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and the God of Naomi.

Clue Two

The second clue is found in the prayer that Naomi prayed. You will recall that when Naomi tried to persuade both Orpah and Ruth to stay in Moab she called down God's blessing upon them:

"The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" (*Ruth 1.9*).

In those words Naomi likewise calls upon the God of the covenant. The God, that is, who has promised to be with and care for his people. As Ruth heard those words she would have been challenged to make sure her trust was in God. Perhaps she thought, 'The God in whom Naomi trusts is the God in whom I will trust. She is a widow as I am a widow. Instead of being without her in my homeland where others do not trust in God, I will go with her and find God looking after us both.'

One God

It is not beyond the realms of possibility that such thoughts went through Ruth's mind. The evidence clearly points to the fact that an outsider (a woman from Moab) changed. Ruth became a believer; one who came to love and serve the one and only living God.

In Judah Ruth experienced God's care. There she was richly blessed. But the key point to note is this. It is not where we are but whom we trust in or depend upon that matters most. In God's providence, Ruth found God was good to her in Judah. Yet her

faith in him was kindled in Moab. In her homeland she met believers (*Elimelech and Naomi*). She married one of their sons. And, by the grace of God, Naomi's God became her God.

The transformation Ruth experienced needs to experience by all. Jesus says, unless we are born again we shall not see or enter into the kingdom of God (*John 3.3 & 5*). Ruth was changed by God. As a result she made the right choice.