

COURAGEOUS CHOICES

All of the world was inspired by the courage shown by a group of Chinese students that dared to challenge the rulers of China in order to get them to consider democracy as a choice for China. The courage is perhaps epitomized in the scene where a single student stood in front of a column of tanks and stopped the procession. We have seen that many paid with their lives for their choice and many more have opted to leave their country to continue the fight for democracy. Such choices are not easy to make. Most of our choices that we face on a day-to-day basis are not a dramatic nor do they have such far-reaching consequences; however, many options take courage to make the right choice since the right choice will usually require some sacrifice of our personal conveniences, preferences and desires. Sometimes the choices are forced upon us because of circumstances beyond our control. We see examples of this in the account recorded in the Book of Ruth.

RUTH 1:1-2 We have really been blessed in our lifetime to not have personally experienced a condition of famine. It is easy to see how such a condition could develop. All we need do is to recall the drought conditions that we experienced during the last several years and then extend that to about ten consecutive years and you can see how severe food shortages could develop especially if people had no means to rapidly transport food from area to another. Famine striking an area would be like a major factory closing in a small town today. The means of support would disappear and in our own country many people have found themselves in such a situation over the past 10 years. There was a period of adjustment that took place as measures were implemented to stem the rising trend of inflation. Fortunately, the adjustment was successful and unemployment is at a very low point. When the factory closes, people are faced with the decision of what to do. Many decide to stay in their hometown and try to ride out the difficult time, hoping that something will change. Others look elsewhere and move away to areas that have jobs. Elimelech was like those that decide to move away and find opportunity in other places. In primitive times such as then and in such a small country as Israel, he found it difficult to go very far and in spite of not going far he still had to leave his own country and live in a foreign land. He took his wife and two sons to the country of Moab which was not very far away – maybe a hundred miles at the most. Apparently, this was adequate to find food and work. This was a courageous choice. The prospects of living in a foreign country carried with it some uncertainty. However, as we shall see, the problems that this family was to face were not over.

RUTH 1:3-5 We hear so much today about women's rights. There is no reason women should not have the same standing under the law and in the work place as men and in most situations this is true. However, this has not always been the case. It wasn't too many years ago that women did not have the right to vote in this "land of the free and home of the brave." In the time of the judges in the Middle East (and in most of the Middle East today) women's rights were almost non-existent. Naomi was fortunate to have two sons of her own which she could depend on. Apparently, this family was making the best of a bad situation as they tried to lead normal lives as displaced citizens in the land of Moab. The sons married women of Moab which was not an ideal situation because in doing so they were not maintaining purity in race and religion which was very important to the Israelites. Nevertheless, they were going about life as if they were not going to return to Israel. They lived there about ten years and then both the young men died. There were

no children born to either of the sons and their wives so the family unit become Naomi and the two daughters-in-law. Without a man in the family, Naomi began to check out other options for herself and the two younger women. In that general society, men conducted the business and women were at a definite disadvantage. One of Naomi's options was to go back to Israel where she might find relatives that could act in her behalf.

RUTH 1:6-8 Naomi felt some responsibility for her two daughters-in-law. In that culture, the main family ties were with the husband's side of the family. Young women that married were more close to her in-laws than to her own mother and father. This explains why when Naomi left for Israel the two younger women prepared to go with her. Before they had gone very far, Naomi realized that the younger women might have a better chance if they returned to their parents' home and she insisted that they go. She wanted them to go back, find husbands, have children and be happy. They were likely still quite young, probably less than thirty. Both Orpah and Ruth had grown to love Naomi and they did not want to leave. Finally, she convinced Orpah to return but Ruth would not be convinced.

RUTH 1:16-18 This passage is one of the most beautiful expressions of devotion of one person toward another that has ever been written. It is quite possible to be associated with a person over a period of years that the love and care that you feel for him or her is deeper than you felt toward your parents. Ruth felt that way toward Naomi. Here we see relationship transcending nationalism. Ruth was not concerned that she would have to move from her native land to the land of Israel. She said, "Whither thou goest, I will go." We see a relationship that transcends all previous friendships and relations. She said, "Your people will be my people." This is even a relationship that transcended religious affiliation. Ruth said, "Your God will be my God." The witness of Naomi's life must have been terrifically positive. We could assume that Ruth saw qualities in Naomi that would cause her to abandon her country, her former friends and relatives, and even the idols she was taught to worship.

We started out talking about making courageous choices and how Elimelech had to make such choices to leave Israel to find food for his family, Now we see Naomi making a courageous choice in going back to the home land. This is followed by the equally courageous choice of Ruth to not go back to her parents' family but to become part of the family of her mother-in-law. All of us should hope that our lives could have such influence on others that they would choose to accept Jesus, to be a part of the kingdom of God and to associate themselves with God's people.

The fact that Ruth made the right choices secured for her a place in history as the grandmother of David the king of Israel and a person in the direct line of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.