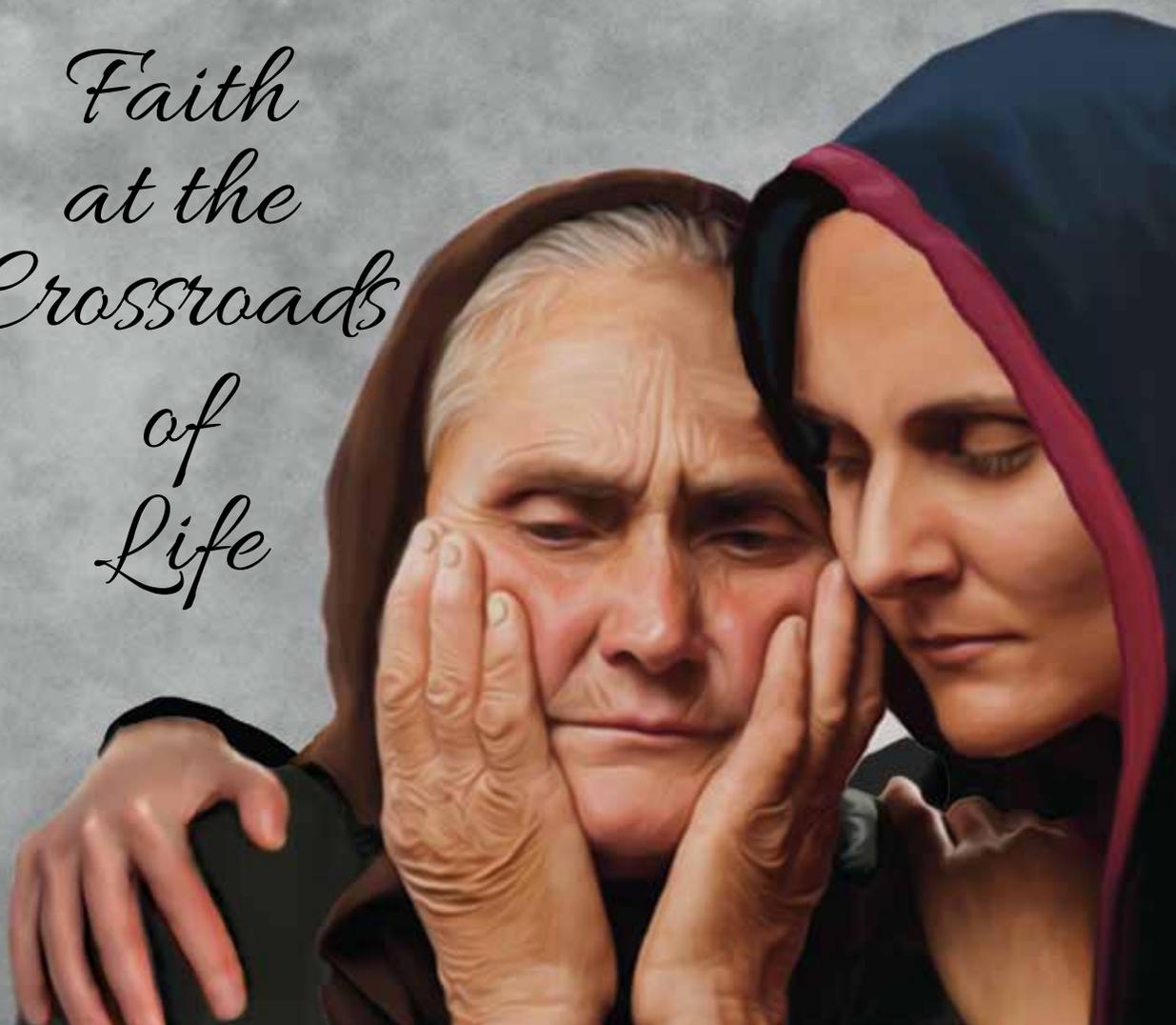


Faith at the Crossroads of Life



The story of Ruth is a very heart-warming, touching one, complete with human drama and heartfelt emotions, as well as being interspersed with good sense, dignity and nobility of character. Hers was an enlivening, refreshing true-life account that will not fail to touch a responsive chord in the Bible-reader's soul.

The story was set “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1), i.e. during the Judges period of Israel, a most turbulent and troubled period in the nation's history. No established

government existed in those days, where “there was no king in Israel”, so “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). In other words, society had degenerated into a state of anarchy where every man is a law unto himself. The people would engage in idolatry and apostasy, and God would chasten them by allowing surrounding nations to oppress them. They would then repent and God would subsequently raise up a “judge” to deliver them. Upon the judge's death, they would shamelessly turn back to idolatry and apostasy again. This depressing cycle of “oppression

and deliverance” attested to the Judges period.

Ordinary People of Faith Matter to God!

Now, the book of Judges tells of war and battle (on a national scale). The book of Ruth, however, forms a contrast by passing from national strife to the quiet domestic life of a family. It talks about ordinary affairs of ordinary and seemingly unimportant people. It shows God’s interest in individual families who, though ordinary enough, were not unimportant to Him as long as faith was manifested. In fact, He works out His purposes through individual families. God, being a sovereign God who governs history, is able to weave those ordinary lives into the unfolding drama of the history of His chosen nation Israel, and ultimately to form an integral part of His grand overarching redemptive plan for mankind. Those who have read the entire book would know that Ruth went on to become the great-grandmother of Israel’s most well-loved king [David] (cf. Ruth 4:13, 17), and so became included in the lineage of the Messiah. But that’s getting ahead of our story ...

Beware of Miscalculation in Life’s Decisions

Interestingly, Ruth the Moabitess would not have come into the picture had it not been for a Jewish family who made a peculiar decision – a tragic one culminating in “bitter” outcomes, according to the wife of the head of that family (cf. Ruth 1:20-21) – and had it not been for that wife’s subsequent stirring to “reverse” that fateful

decision (cf. Ruth 1:6). Elimelech (together with his wife Naomi and two sons) had earlier decided “to sojourn in the country of Moab” (Ruth 1:1b) in the face of a famine in the land of Judah. The Hebrew word translated as “country” literally means “fields”. Elimelech, like all Israelites, knew that their blessings were closely tied to the Promised Land. His original intent was only a temporary short stay in the “fields” – not in any of the cities – of Moab, just to tide over this severest part of the famine. He must have remembered and deliberately avoided the folly of Lot (his ancestor Abraham’s nephew), who “pitched his tent toward Sodom” as he “dwelled in the cities of the plain” (Genesis 13:12). Apparently, his sincere intent was to move back to Judah once things got better and the economic picture became rosier back home.

In putting economic considerations above spiritual discretions, Elimelech erred in not looking to the LORD (the faithful God of Israel) for deliverance from their plight. He failed to realise (and even if he did, chose not to take seriously) God’s promise and warning: “If ye walk in my statutes, ... Then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase ... But if ye will not hearken unto me ... but that ye break my covenant: I also will do this unto you; I will even appoint over you terror ... and ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it” (Leviticus 26:3-4, 14-16). And this phenomenon would have been what was recurring during the chaotic “oppression and deliverance” cycle of the Judges period. Elimelech must have been living in one of Israel’s

“oppressed” times. The solution was national repentance, or (on a personal level) to abide and pray for God’s promised deliverance. But Elimelech had other ideas.

Elimelech thought he had it all figured out by taking temporary refuge in nearby peaceful Moab (unaffected by war and strife), but it was a miscalculation that would backfire. His earlier cautious intention to merely “sojourn” gave way to him “continuing” (i.e. remaining) in Moab (cf. Ruth 1:2b) for pragmatic reasons, and later to his family literally “dwelling” (i.e. permanently living) there for about 10 years (cf. Ruth 1:4b). In the process, his sons (after his death) ended up marrying pagan wives, for “they took them wives of the women of Moab” (Ruth 1:4a). Oh, what a mess Elimelech made of his family’s spiritual heritage! His premature death and both his sons’ subsequent deaths soon after their marriages in Moab could have been expressions of God’s chastisement upon his ill-advised decision. His family “went out full” but ended up “empty” (cf. Ruth 1:21), with only one “survivor” – a destitute widow and twice-bereaved mother! Bitter indeed are the outcomes of a wrong turn made at a crucial crossroads in life, due to lack of faith.

The Stirring to Turn Back

Nevertheless, the merciful God, whose “compassions fail not” (Lamentations 3:22), is faithful to the faithful. News had reached Naomi that the famine in the land of Judah was over, which caused a stirring (no doubt by the

Holy Spirit’s moving) in her heart to return to her homeland, which she should not have left in the first place. God had given her people the land of Canaan (which He had promised long before to Abraham) “for an everlasting possession” (Genesis 17:8), and would ensure the fruitfulness of the land if they keep and do His commandments (cf. Leviticus 26:3-4). She must have recognised the dealing of God’s Hand in her predicament, for she perceived that “the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me”, “seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me” (Ruth 1:20-21). She also understood that it was “the LORD (who) had visited his people in giving them bread” (Ruth 1:6b), which probably coincided with God raising up a “judge” to deliver the Israelites from their enemies (cf. Judges 2:16). The pious Naomi saw God’s Hand in all of human affairs and realised (at this crossroads of her life, with her irreparable past) that there was only one option left for her. Hence, “she arose ... that she might return” (Ruth 1:6a) unto the Promised Land – the land of her people’s spiritual heritage.

But Naomi had an added burden: she had two dependent, widowed Moabitish daughters-in-law to take into account. Her initial thought was for them to return to their Moabitish relatives as she was not able to look after their welfare. She knew full well the implications of such a “turning back”. While the physical reality was that they would be able to re-marry and thereby “may find rest” (Ruth 1:9a), the spiritual reality was that they would be going “back unto (their

people, and unto (their) gods” (Ruth 1:15) and thus forfeit the inheritance of the LORD. Deep down in her spiritual heart, she would love for both to follow her to embrace the God of Israel. But she needed to be sure that they knew what they would be in for – three destitute widows facing an uncertain future in the land of Judah, with no hope of re-marriage (she being too old and they being Moabitish). Yet at the same time, she was fully aware of the far-reaching repercussions of any decision to follow her back to the Promised Land. It would be back to God’s people and their customs, back to God’s Law and His covenant, which come with responsibilities and ultimately, God’s blessings. But it would be a life of poverty and hardship ahead – no easy road at all! Hence, her apparent discouragement of her daughters-in-law to follow her (cf. Ruth 1:11-13).

Need for Stedfast-Mindedness at Turning Point

Here’s where Ruth’s nobility of character stood out. While Orpah’s true intent of her heart was revealed by her taking heed to Naomi’s “advice” and bidding an irreversible farewell, Ruth showed her resolute refusal to cut off her hitherto loving relationship with her mother-in-law. Evidently, a loving, kind atmosphere had prevailed in Naomi’s household, judging from Naomi’s intimation that the daughters-in-law had dealt “kindly” and been loyal to their husbands (while they were alive) and to her (cf. Ruth 1:8b). The Hebrew word (*chesed*) translated as “kindly” has the idea of “kindness shown in doing favours”. This would

reflect the loving kindness that had been displayed by Naomi’s family in the first place. Ruth would have realised that such “*chesed*” stemmed from their worship of the LORD and their keeping of the statutes of the LORD. She would have been further struck by God’s holiness as reflected by God’s perfect Law, which Naomi would have shared with her daughters-in-law from time to time. Doubtless, Naomi’s pious testimony and the attitude of “*chesed*” prevailing in the home, with “all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be(ing) put away ... with all malice” (Ephesians 4:31), would have impressed Ruth no end. An important thought-provoking question to note: Is such “*chesed*” displayed in our Christian home? If our home (supposedly a sanctuary away from the hostile world) be truly God-centred, then cutting criticism, retaliation (verbal and physical) and all forms of destructive conduct should be excluded!

God’s irresistible grace must have been working in Ruth’s heart over the years as she observed and experienced Naomi’s kind treatment of her daughters-in-law, though they hailed not from her own people. If the people of Judah were like Naomi, worshipping the living and true God and governed by His holy Law, she would be glad to belong to such a people – by virtue of her marriage into a Jewish family. Hence her amazing declaration of allegiance and faith: “thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16b). Her sealing of her declaration with a solemn oath was most telling: “the LORD do so to me, and more also”

(Ruth 1:17b). She invoked the name of “Yahweh”, and not Chemosh, “the abomination (i.e. detestable idol) of Moab” (1 Kings 11:7). By embracing the covenantal God of Israel, she disdained to call upon any other god – for she would have known the first commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). It was a momentous decision-time for Ruth; in actual fact, her solemn vow had the effect of strengthening her resolve, come what may.

Naomi noted it and “saw that she was stedfastly minded” (Ruth 1:18a). This indicates that Ruth was firmly settled in her heart and mentally full of fortitude to go with her through thick and thin, just so as to identify with “Yahweh”. Seeing that Ruth was fully persuaded of her godly choice, “she left speaking unto her” (Ruth 1:18b) and ceased from dissuading her. Ruth may not be able to see beyond the “bend” of that defining “turning point” in her life, but she had faith in the pre-existent, eternal God who can see the end from the beginning. Ruth’s determination to set her affection on spiritual over economic or marital considerations, coupled with her stedfast devotion to her godly mother-in-law, caused her to take the plunge. And that set in motion a chain of events which, under God’s providential care, would subsequently bring her into a blessed, privileged position (Ruth 4:9-10, 13, 17b).

Much May Hinge on Just One Step!

Dear believers, while we sojourn here on earth, living our Christian lives and running the Christian race that is set before us, life in the meantime will not

be a bed of roses. We will experience ups and downs. We will face external pressures due to unexpected events at every crossroads of life, where there will be decisions to make (some minor, some far-reaching or even life-changing). While we may plan and foresee somewhat ahead, we cannot see exactly what lies “around the corner”. All these can scare us, and squeeze and press us into making some hasty, regrettable “turn” without regard for God’s Word. Sometimes in life, one step or misstep is all it takes to change the whole course of one’s life! The repercussions of such a misstep cannot be underestimated.

Dear Christians, do you desire a life of God’s blessing and unerring guidance? Remember, God does not show favouritism. Regardless of one’s lineage, social status or station in life, the prerequisite (as was the case for Ruth) is: a stedfast heart of faith, demonstrated by some decisive step in faith. Indeed, the only safeguard against falling into the pitfall of missteps resulting in deep regrets is to be “stedfastly minded” (literally to be of good courage) in trusting God’s Word in every aspect of life, just as Moses had exhorted in Deuteronomy 31:6: “Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid ... for the LORD thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”

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