

# A Family Tragedy

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Preacher: Peter Grainger

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good evening everyone. Somebody out there, it's very bright, light's shining on me. It's great to be here with you in Brentsfield. Again, can I wish you a very happy new year and God's blessing, a year of change for you as a church.

I've been praying for you, for Graham, for the elders, the team that God's going to bless you richly in this coming year. Well, Christmas is over.

Remember, we now have grandchildren aged five and three, so we've been discovering the delights of children's toys, which are very different to the toys that we had when we were growing up, says he, having just had his 70th birthday.

Pause for gas of amazement there, thank you. So among all the presents, of course, the children want to know what you're going to buy them, and we got them one or two things, but my wife had the inspired idea that it was important for them to experience something a little more traditional. So we bought them, I do tell you this is not the only thing we bought them, but we did buy them a box set of traditional stories as well.

[ 1 : 12 ] Now you all know fairy stories. They always begin with the same words. So what do fairy stories begin with? Once upon a time. It's a story.

It begins once upon a time, and then that follows a story. Many twists and turns, and they always end with the same words, which are?

And they all lived happily ever after. Now this book, 66 books, makes up one book that is the story. It's the story of the Bible. And it begins not with a fictional statement, but with a factual statement, which you've got on your back wall in a variety of different languages.

It begins not with once upon a time. It says, in the beginning, God. The Bible is a story. It begins with God, a God who creates the world in all its perfection.

[ 2 : 20 ] Everything he makes is good. It's a perfect world. And when he's finished creating the crown of his creation, the man and the woman, he saw that everything was very good.

Unfortunately, did not remain very good, because Genesis 1 and 2 in the Bible are followed by Genesis 3. And sadly, our first parents rebelled against God, went their own way, with the result that a fallen world is the consequence.

With disastrous consequences for them, and for the created order. Now thankfully, the Bible does not end at Genesis 3. It would be a very short book, and we would have a very short history.

Because God, in his great love, determines to put things right, and to restore human beings to the relationship for which we are made to know and love God.

And this, of course, culminates in a redeemed world, focusing finally in the coming to earth of God's Son that we've just celebrated at Christmas time. the Son of God who lives the life we could never live, who dies the death that we deserved in our place, who is declared with power to be God's Son by raising him from the dead, is raised to life, he ascends into heaven, and the last book of the Bible, this is a very potted history of a long book, but at the very end of it, the very last book, the very last chapter, we have a wonderful picture of a restored world.

[ 3 : 55 ] And in a sense, they all lived happily ever after. Well, not all, sadly. And so the final book of the Bible looks forward to the return from heaven of Jesus, God's Son.

And then the curtain of human history will come down, and it ends in this way. It says, he who testifies to these things says, yes, I'm coming soon. Amen, come Lord Jesus.

And then there's a kind of little postscript, the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Now, we live our lives within this story. We actually live in the last chapter.

The last chapter of God's story of salvation. The last chapter is that period between the return of Jesus to heaven from earth, and the last chapter will finish with the return of Jesus from heaven to

earth.

And every part of the Bible, this wonderful book, God's book, his word, all the stories within it form part of that great story and contribute towards it.

[ 5 : 02 ] And all the characters in it play out their lives within that story. So what I've been trying to do is just set the context. You think, where is he going with this? I'm going to the book of Ruth, which is a wonderful little story.

The German poet Goethe described it as the loveliest complete work on a small scale ever written. What a commendation.

And it begins, as we begin our story today, it begins not with a happy story, but with a sad story. So our opening verses in Ruth begin with a family tragedy.

And that's what we're going to focus on this evening. So if you've got a Bible, and there are Bibles in the pews, it really will be helpful to have a Bible in front of you. We're just going to look at these opening five verses.

The words will come up on the screen as well, but it would be helpful to have your own Bible in front of you if you haven't got one there. So let's read this wonderful story, this beginning story.

[ 6 : 06 ] which sets the scene. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So 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 was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Marlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in 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, the other Ruth.

After they had lived there about ten years, both Marlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

It's God's word. Now, look with me at this introduction that sets the scene for this story. I want to focus, this is going to be really simple, and the points even begin with the same letter.

[ 7 : 17 ] All right? So you'll be able to remember them easily. They don't always work that way, but I think these do. And we're going to look at three aspects of the story which apply to the characters, these six named people here, but they also apply to your life and to my life.

All right? Here's the three. I'll tell you what they are before we begin, and then we'll look at each one in turn. First of all, circumstances, the setting in which the story takes place and their lives take place.

Secondly, choices, which the characters make. And finally, arising from those choices are consequences.

Those three things apply to you and me. We live in a context in circumstances. We make choices in our lives, and the choices we make determine certain consequences.

So look with me at each in turn. So let's start with consequences. And what did I do then? I forgot to put the words up on the screen. Sorry. That's me with PowerPoint.

[ 8 : 21 ] Circumstances. The setting is given right at the beginning. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. Now notice in this opening sentence, we have a general context, and then we have a specific situation.

A general context. It says, in the general context, in the days when the judges ruled. It's really simple because maybe you're getting to know the Bible.

Some of you are very familiar with it. Others maybe don't know it very well, so I'll be absolutely simple. So just excuse me if you know all this already, all right? In the days when the judges ruled. After the...

Here's a little chart. Can you see it? No, it's not too bad. I'm looking at that big thing up there. After the... You know the story of the Bible. After the exodus from Egypt, under the leadership of Moses, the people of Israel eventually, after a 40-year hiatus around the wilderness, finally arrive in the promised land.

Moses dies, succeeded by Joshua, and the book of Joshua tells us the story of the conquest of Canaan, a somewhat patchwork event. And this is followed by a period of around about three centuries.

[ 9 : 34 ] Think of that for a moment. 300 years. 300 years when Israel was ruled by a succession of leaders who had the title of judges. And the book which precedes you, if you've got your Bible open at Ruth, if you turn back the preceding book in our English Bibles, the experts will tell you that in the Hebrew Bible it's not the case.

But anyway, in the English Bibles the preceding book is the book of Judges. It's named after these Judges. And the last verse, if you look, just page over, if you look back it says, it's characterized by this, in those days Israel had no king, everyone did as they saw fit.

Literally, I think in Hebrew it's everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Am I right, David?

Thank you very much. David's got the Hebrew Bible there to keep me straight. Now, the little nation of Israel chosen in love by God, not because of any merit on their part, the Lord said to them in New Tionomy 7, 7, it's not because you were more in number or better than anyone else.

I loved you because I loved you. He chose this nation, delivered them from slavery in Egypt, brought them to their own land, and yet sadly they constantly turned against God and went their own way.

And the book of Judges describes how this terrible cycle took place. The people turned against God, God allowed neighboring tribes and nations to invade, to subjugate, to oppress them.

[ 11 : 00 ] The people then cried out to God for help. God raised up these leaders, these judges. The people turned back to God and yet within a generation the cycle is repeated as they turn against the Lord again.

And this is this kind of cycle where people are just doing what's right in their own eyes. It's a period of political uncertainty. Some of the judges are well known.

Most people know about Samson, Gideon, Samuel. Others are not so well known. Ophnil, Ehud, Deborah, Jephthah, Shamgar, Tola, Jair.

What is familiar is this repeated cycle over and over again. That was the general context in which this little family lived. But we're told they also faced a specific situation.

There was a famine in the land. This family did not live in one of the economic upturns that took place in the nation from time to time. They lived in a down time when a famine hit the land.

[ 12 : 01 ] Now we're not told where during the book of Judges this actually took place. It may have been the period if you know the book of Judges a little bit further back. There was a judge named Gideon who was raised up by God because a neighboring nation the Midianites kept invading the land on camels.

They were a camel what's the word I'm looking for? Camel seated. They sat on camels and invaded Israel for a period of seven years and they particularly did it when harvest came.

So they kind of looted the land and everyone was desolate. Maybe this exacerbated the situation. This is maybe the famine. Whatever the case this family lived in hard times at this specific point in history.

I think about it for a moment. If they'd lived 200 years before they'd have experienced crossing the river Jordan. They'd have experienced the mighty conquest under Joshua. If they'd lived a couple of hundred years later maybe they'd lived at the glorious time of King David and Solomon in the amazing temple that he erected.

But they didn't. They lived in the days when the judges ruled where there was a famine in the land. Now, 2017 AD.

[ 13 : 19 ] We live in history. Present history. We live in the days of Islamic State. Terrorist atrocities.

We live in the days of mass migration. Of Brexit. Economic uncertainties. People in boats trying to get to Europe. We live in the days of President-elect Trump.

And we live in this amazing celebrity culture where, can you believe it, all of this is superseded for 15 minutes on BBC by the death of a pop star.

kind of strange days we live in, don't we? For those of us who are Christians, we do not live, though we wish we did, and we hope we may, we do not live in days of spiritual revival.

I think, to be fair, in our nation, we live in days of spiritual decline. Says he now, having lived his allotted three-score years and ten. And we cannot escape the context in which we live.

[ 14 : 35 ] While we're drawing into our ghettos, wallowing in spiritual nostalgia. We are, Jesus reminded us, we are in the world, but we are not of the world.

You are, said Jesus to his followers, the salt of the earth. death. You are the light of the world. That is the context in which we live.

And we have no choice about that. We have no choice about the times in which we live. We do have a choice about how we respond to the times in which we live. So, here's my second point. Choices. What are Elimelech and his family to do? Living at this time of famine, in these uncertain days? Well, we're told in the text.

So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. They just hopped over into the neighboring nation of Moab.

[15:36] They did what many people are doing today, they became economic migrants. Now, the writer of this book, will you notice, he makes no comment about the wisdom or folly of what they did.

not everyone agrees with this, and I'll agree to disagree and live with you if you disagree, but I think there is no comment on this because it doesn't need any comment.

For anyone who knows the history of Israel will make the correct judgment. I was trying to think of a modern illustration. It is like saying, in 2012, when Rangers were demoted to the third division of Scottish football, a certain supporter decided to go to Celtic Park, you don't need to comment on the wisdom or folly of such a move.

Well, it depends who you support. So, for those who are not familiar with the Bible, there is a whole history behind this comment about going to Moab.

Let me give you again a brief summary of the origin and history of the nation of Moab, and what I think is the folly of moving to Moab. And, in Genesis 19, we read about the unsavoury origins of the nation of Moab.

[16:57] It's the story of how Lot, the nephew of Abraham, fleeing from the destruction that the God poured out upon Sodom, running away with his two daughters. His wife was the one who was turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back.

And at the end of the day, he and his two daughters, the two daughters get their father drunk, sleep with him in successive evenings. And the elder daughter gives birth to a son called Moab, which sounds like the Hebrew for from my father.

The other one gives birth to another nation called Ammon. Lot was a man who, because of his materialism, was dragged into idolatry and immorality, traits which soon became characteristic of the nation that emerged from him, as we see in later history.

We then meet them in Numbers 22 and 25. When the people of Israel are traveling from Egypt through to Canaan, they asked the king of Moab for permission to go through their land, not to do anything hostile.

He refuses. Instead, it's one of these stories in the Bible, if you went to Sunday school, you remember, he hired a prophet called Balaam to put a curse on the people of Israel.

[18:11] Balaam was prevented from doing this by talking donkey, and instead he pronounced a blessing on Israel, but even though that is not successful, the women of Moab enticed the men of Israel into pagan revelry and gross sexual immorality and 24,000 of them are struck dead.

In more recent times, in Judges 3, we read of recent oppression by Moab. Eglon, king of Moab, attacks and subjugates the nation of Israel for 18 years.

No wonder, then, that later prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Zephaniah, all utter judgment against Moab. And the law of Moses is very clear.

The law of Moses says, no Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation.

We will see gloriously there is an exception to this as we come to this series later. But can you see the irony of a man called Elimelech, whose name means my God is king, leaving Bethlehem, which means the house of bread, to emigrate to a place like Moab, even in times of famine.

[19:27] So why did he do it? What was his motivation in moving to Moab? Well, it's obvious. Famine in Israel, bread in Moab. It seems a no-brainer just across the border.

It is, I would say, the peril of pragmatism, where pragmatism overrules principle. And I simply say, how many people, how many Christians, how many of us, myself included, how many at times have allowed pragmatism, interest, self-interest to overrule principle, what is right?

How did he justify it? How do we justify it? Well, the answer lies in the little words. His intention is, it's for a little while. Notice what it says.

It says, So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in Moab.

To tide things over. It's a temporary expedient. I can imagine him saying, well, it's not the right thing. I realize that and it's not a good thing for his Israelites. But a man's got to live. We've got to eat.

[ 20 : 40 ] So let's do it. But listen, we'll be back soon. It's the peril of procrastination. See, every choice begins with the first step that you make.

And if the first step is a wrong step, someone said to me the other day, it's like a ship. If it's just two degrees off, a few miles out at sea, you're a long way off and your destination is a very different destination.

See, every choice begins with the first step. How many of Christians decides to stop going to church just for a while? You know, I just don't get on with those other Christians, you know.

It caused me a lot of hassle. How many Christians decide, just for a while I'm going to stop reading the Bible because I'm just not getting much out of it. Just for a while I'm going to stop praying. Just for a while I'll come to church but I'm not going to do anything.

I need to take a back seat for a while. See, what does a Christian do in times of crisis? What do you do in times of famine?

[ 21 : 41 ] Where do you look for a solution? You either continue to trust God, remaining within the security of his love and his people, or you look elsewhere to Moab for a solution.

Now, maybe you're there this evening. Maybe there's a crisis in your life and you look to the wrong place for a solution.

Or maybe you're tempted to look to the wrong place for a solution. See, the Christian is the only one who can make such a choice.

Before you become a Christian, the Bible says you're a slave to sin. You have to obey its whims and desires. But when you are set free by Christ, filled with his spirit, the prison door is flung open, but you have a choice.

You can walk out or you can walk back in. That's why the Bible and the epistles constantly says, you know, put off the old nature, put on the new nature.

[ 22 : 41 ] Don't yield the parts of your body to sin, but to righteousness. Make the right choices. Or you choose to go your own way.

Every choice has a consequence. It's put most succinctly in the letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in the Roman province of Galatia.

It talks about the law of cause and effect. Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh from the flesh will reap destruction.

Whoever sows to please the Spirit from the Spirit will reap eternal life. There are consequences that follow from our choices. So we come thirdly back to our story.

Consequences. Elimelech, head of the house, makes his choice. Probably his wife had little say in it in a patriarchal society.

[ 23 : 43 ] The husband said that sadly still happens today in our more egalitarian society that my experience pastoral is that often men set a lead and women are sometimes quite often the ones who suffer not always.

He went to Moab for a while. For a while became a long while. And the consequences for him and his family are enormous.

for a while became a long while. And for Elimelech there is no return. He dies in Moab.

I kind of think about him maybe saying every year to his family well we're going to go back home soon. Yep. This is going to be the year and then something just kind of puts it up you know.

We live under an illusion if we think we can set the agenda you know. Okay I'm not where I should be spiritually at the moment but believe me I'm going to put it right. Believe me the years go by year after year unless you make a clear and definite choice to return.

[ 24 : 52 ] What I want to say and I say with all seriousness you can be a believer and you can die in Moab. You can die in Moab. He dies there.

As always happens with families the children assimilate more quickly and easily into the prevailing culture than the parents the two sons Marlon and Kilion. Their names both probably mean something like weakness or frailness expressed in the fact that both of them both of them marry Moabite girls contrary again to the law of Moses and then great tragedy each of them in turn dies.

But notice the irony. Why did they go to Moab in the first place? To save their lives in time of famine. But Moab was never is an answer.

The promise of life always proves false in the end. The wise little writer of the Proverbs summarizes it so well in Proverbs 14 12 he says sorry I should put a picture on there sorry there's a family tree like the program who do you think you are and you look at it and you see died in Moab died in Moab died in Moab and there's Naomi left on her own a little writer of Proverbs puts it there is a way that seems right to a man but in the end it leads to death and the story of Elimelech and his family is a tragedy that is sadly repeated time and again in Christian homes and families for you can be a church member and live in Moab you can be a you can be here this evening physically here but spiritually you can be living in Moab how by making wrong choices oh you may have your excuses and you may be saying to yourself it's only for a little while

I'm not going to stay there I'm going to put this right eventually I'm going to return home to the Lord and his people but you may not it's a sobering message really you may die in Moab because life goes past so quickly doesn't the older we get we suddenly think you know where did 70 years go the older you get the more you begin to reflect on those things don't you and you begin to think about things like what legacy will you leave for your family Elimelech made the wrong choice and he left behind an embittered wife and two pagan daughters-in-law yes we're going to see in this book and in our series how God transformed the situation but it was in spite of Elimelech not because of him and God willing we'll see more about her and the choice she then made as the story unfolds God willing next week in the weeks that follow some kind of sobering message isn't it but maybe I think you might maybe at the beginning of a new year it's it's maybe a good message for us to pause and take stock and say where are you living where are you living today

[ 28 : 20 ] I don't mean are you living in Brentsville or Edmond I mean are you living in Moab are you living in Bethlehem are you living in Israel are you living among God's people are you rooted in God's people challenging daughter's name well looked at the sad story of a family tragedy a man who left home and went to a foreign country because of a famine and died there but I want to finish on a positive note because I want to remind you it need not happen you need not end up in Moab let me finish with another story a story Jesus told us I reflected on it I began to notice some interesting connections these are preachers connections not necessarily biblical connections but it may help us to think about these things so let me finish with a happy ending there's a story about a young man who like

Elimelech left his home country not because of a famine but because he was attracted by the bright lights of a distant far country which seemed to offer so much more than all the boring stuff at home restricted by family and father armed with his share of the family fortune he set out on his journey and for a time as is always the case his destination seemed to fulfill all he had hoped for as he squandered his wealth in wild living wine women and song but it didn't last as Jesus goes on to explain in this wonderful story let me read from the text after he'd spent everything now notice the connection there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need so he went and hired himself to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating but no one gave him anything what a place for a Jewish boy to end up in a pigsty eating pig swill but you see the story

Jesus tells us reminds us that he didn't end up he didn't die in the pigsty instead the famine God used the famine to remind him of what he left behind it was the famine in this case that was the means of his salvation we just sang a hymn by John Newton Amazing Grace John Newton of course lived in the 18th century he was this slave trader who lived a life of utter depravity was gloriously converted in a storm at sea and became a minister of the gospel and he wrote this wonderful hymn Amazing Grace but he wrote other hymns and maybe I'd be surprised if anyone here maybe one or two of you might know that he actually wrote a hymn about the parable of the prodigal son and as I was looking at it I thought it's a nice place to finish so I'm going to read the words of this hymn now the words are a little bit quaint and old fashioned but I think you'll get the meaning of them

Newton is a great great hymn writer so here's what Newton says writes listen carefully here's a big star picture afflictions though they seem severe in mercy oft are sent they stopped the prodigal's career and forced him to repent simple isn't it although he no relentings felt change your mind till he had spent his store his stubborn heart began to melt when famine pinched him sore what have I gained by sin he said by hunger shame and fear my father's house abounds with bread while I am

starving here I'll go and tell him all I've done and fall before his face unworthy to be called his son I'll seek a servant's place his father saw him coming back he saw and ran and smiled and threw his arms around the neck of his rebellious child father I've sinned but oh forgive I've heard enough he said rejoice my house my son's alive for whom I mourned as dead now let the fatted calf be slain and spread the news around my son was dead but lives again was lost but now is found and here's the lesson final bit it is thus the Lord his love reveals to call poor sinners home more than a father's love he feels and welcomes all that come maybe this evening you're that poor sinner living in a far country if truth are told in a pigsty life maybe you're not a Christian and you're living in that far country and I simply want to say to finish on a gospel note that God the father loves you his son invites you the Holy

[ 34 : 15 ] Spirit urges you and welcomes you home we come expecting nothing and we receive God's love and grace his arms around us of great assurance and maybe for you 2017 is the year when you return home for the first time back to the father's home the fellowship with God to restoration to forgiveness to peace to joy all the things you've longed for and prove that this world never satisfies but maybe there's someone here this evening and you're actually a Christian but you're far from God living in the peace time living in the far country living in Moab as it were and I simply want to urge you this evening don't die in Moab return home to your heavenly father let's pray and then I'll hand over to Carrie for a final song just pause for a moment just to reflect what God has said to us this evening for his word father we thank you for your amazing unconditional love here is love not that we loved you but that you loved us and gave your son to be the one to pay the price for our sin to restore us to yourself thank you for your great patience with us forgive us that so often we seek our satisfaction in things that never fulfill things that prove in the end worthless even degrading thank you thank you thank you that you welcome us home and as we bound your presence you know our hearts you're the one to whom all hearts are open from whom no secrets are hid and so knowing our hearts grant to us that repentant spirit that desire to return and as we turn we thank you that you welcome us home may this day be a day of rejoicing in heaven as Jesus said over one sinner who repents over one son who is restored who was dead and is alive again who was lost and is found and may this be a beginning a new year when we experience the joy of belonging to you and belonging to your people we ask it in Jesus name for your glory amen