



Esther is quite unique in a number of ways, but the other Bible book named after a woman, Ruth, has some extraordinary parallels despite some obvious differences. While occupying very different stations in life, both women experience significant loss and face difficult choices. Even more importantly, their lives are continually marked by God's activity despite little explicit mention of him in Ruth and none in Esther. Their responses to this divine activity parallel each other as well.

While Esther's losses come early in life, Ruth loses her husband and father-in-law as an adult. Elimelek and Naomi had brought their family to Moab to escape famine, and with their sons married to Moabite women, they were well established as an extended family. But then the husbands die and Ruth and her sister-in-law, Orpah, face the difficult decision described in 1:6-18. They have lost the life they've established with their husbands, but they can return to their families and start over in relative security. At the same time, they have a meaningful connection to Naomi and her people, and if anyone can care for her well it is them.

The circumstances are different, but Ruth and Orpah face the same fundamental decision that Esther faces when she gets word of the Jews' impending destruction. Do they hold on to personal security or do they trust God and seek the benefit of others around them? Ruth and Orpah have limited prospects even in Moab, but they have family to support them amid familiar surroundings. Esther has great resources and authority, but Vashti's story indicates how quickly that can disappear. Power and resources, whether considerable or limited, don't alter the temptation of personal safety and comfort that all of them face.

Ruth, with what meager skills and resources she has, trusts God and goes with Naomi. Like Esther, her faith is demonstrated in exceptional behavior even though, unlike Esther, she has few resources at hand. News of her hard work (2:7), "what she has done for her mother-in-law" (2:11), and her "noble character" (3:11) has spread throughout town. Her presence in Bethlehem, care for others, hard work and the motives that drive her all reveal a God who sustains her and provides for others through her.

We don't know the rest of Orpah's story, but she certainly took the easier road. Even Naomi can't see past her own sorrow and shows little faith in God when she tells Orpah and Ruth to return to their people and their gods (1:15). But Ruth's faith, demonstrated in small but tangible actions, reveals a God who loves people and provides for them no matter the circumstances.

Discussion Questions

Esther had influence with the king, but was reluctant to use it because of the potential costs. What potential costs tempt us to avoid acting when we possess the means and opportunity to benefit others?

Mordecai and Ruth seemed to understand that inaction can potentially cost as much as acting. How can choosing safety and comfort end up costing us as much or more than working for the benefit of others?

Like Esther and Ruth, how can we get beyond the question of personal benefit to the matter of faith and make decisions on the basis of faith in God rather than momentary feelings or preferences?