

CHANGED PEOPLE #5

Peter Masters calls James Montgomery *The Prodigal Poet* in his book entitled *Men of Purpose*. James Montgomery was born in Ireland to parents who were dedicated Christians. It was just a few years after his birth that James' parents committed their lives to full-time missions work, serving the Lord as Moravian Missionaries to the West Indies. As was the practice at this time because there weren't schools available on the mission field, the Montgomery's left James along with his 2 brothers in a Moravian boarding school in Scotland. James was walking closely with the Lord at the age of 16 when he graduated from school. He was then placed as an apprentice to a baker in the nearby village of Mirfield. But before long, he became restless, longing to strike out on a more adventuresome life. He knew that he shouldn't do it - and he wrote a long apologetic note of thanks to the baker. But he did it anyway. James ran away from his kindly mentor - and it seemed like his life began to go downhill quickly. James had a knack for writing poetry and got a job with the Sheffield Register as a clerk and part-time writer. The French Revolution was at its peak and all of Great Britain was divided in opinion. James began to write some very controversial articles and soon found himself in trouble with the authorities. He became so politically involved and wrapped up with his new godless friends that he seldom went to church or read the bible or prayed anymore. Finally, he ended up in jail - convicted of treason against the government for writing his controversial editorials. Like the prodigal son, he found his friends to be fairweathered. It was about this time that he wrote: *I left the God of truth and light; I left the God who gave me breath, to wander in the wilds of night, and perish in the snares of death.*

Hearing that his parents had both died in their service to the Lord in the West Indies - his mother first and his father just a year later - James began to reevaluate his life. Finally, at the age of 43, he made the commitment to come back into fellowship with the Lord. For the first time in 26 years, he took communion in fellowship with God's people.

James Montgomery had become a very well known literary figure in England, but his Spiritual waywardness had made his soul a barren wilderness. The fact that his geographical writings were accepted as the standards for teaching in the schools, his volumes of poetry were best sellers and he was often in demand for articles in the leading British journals just accentuated his inner misery. But now, after returning to fellowship with the Lord, James Montgomery found the inner peace that he had lacked for so many years. And now, he would devote himself to using his gifts for the Lord.

James Montgomery would live to be 83. He would compose over 400 Christian hymns before his death - 100 of which are still in use today. In fact, our worship team sang one of Montgomery's songs to open our

time of worship this morning. One of the most popular of his songs is best known around the Christmas season. It is entitled *Angels from the Realms of Glory* and it expressed what James Montgomery learned to be true in his life as it invites the singer to *Come and worship, come and worship, Worship Christ the newborn King*.

History is filled with the stories of Christians who had godly training in their youth who for one reason or another strayed from the foundation of their upbringing to backslide sometimes for decades before returning to the God of their youth. There are probably as many reasons for their straying from the faith as there are prodigals themselves. But each shares in the common message that their backsliding only brought headaches and heartaches into their lives.

We come this morning to the story of one such backslider from the Bible. We have been looking at people whose names were changed during these past summer Sunday mornings. We have already looked at Abram-Abraham, Sarai- Sarah, Jacob- Israel, and Esau-Edom. We come now to the 5th person in our series, the second woman, Naomi who chose to change her own name to Mara. Notice the account of her change of name found in Ruth 1.

READ RUTH 1:1-22.

RU 1:1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

RU 1:3 Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

RU 1:6 When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷ With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

RU 1:8 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

RU 1:11 But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?"¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me--even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons--¹³ would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!"

RU 1:14 At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.

RU 1:15 "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

RU 1:16 But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

RU 1:19 So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

RU 1:20 "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter."²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

Naomi means pleasant. Mara means bitter. What a pitiful state Naomi finds herself in to want to change her name from pleasant to bitter. J. Vernon McGee writes in his commentary: *Of the 2 sexes, the woman is the weaker; of women, old women are the most feeble; of old women, widows are the most woeful; of widows, those who are poor, their plight the most pitiful; of poor widows, those who don't have children, their care the most doleful; of widows that don't have children, those that once had them, and after lost them, their state the most desolate; of widows that have had (and lost) children, those that are strangers in a foreign country, their condition the most comfortless. Yet all of these factors meet together in Naomi.*

Certainly, this presents to us a pitiful scene, doesn't it? Now what can we learn from Naomi's change of name this evening. NOTE WITH ME 3 LESSONS THAT NAOMI TEACHES US.

1. NAOMI PICTURES THE DANGERS OF TRANSGRESSING GOD'S COMMANDMENTS.

*Now we aren't given all of the details of Naomi's setting, but we are given enough to piece together a fairly complete picture.

*Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, were both Jewish people. They were Ephrathites, living near Bethlehem in Judah. Ephrathah was a name for the greater Metropolitan Bethlehem area. It is interesting that while Bethlehem means the house of bread, yet there was a famine there.

*They were quite wealthy as a family. Naomi would confess *I went away full*. Elimelech means *the God of the King*. It is likely that he was of a very prestigious class, perhaps even a ruling class.

*It was during the period of the Judges. This was a time of national backsliding in which God allowed a series of cycles where foreign powers would oppress the Israelites, God's people would confess their sins and cry out for deliverance, and God would raise up a judge to deliver them from their foreign oppressor.

*The land of Israel is suffering through a time of famine. We can't be dogmatic about the exact time, but it likely was during the time of Midianite oppression recorded in Judges 6, just before Gideon was called by God to be a judge. It is likely that this is the time because the Midianites were causing a famine by raiding the crops just before harvest time (recall Gideon's situation) and there isn't any natural disaster that is referred to here. Also, the Israelites are just recovering from their Moabite oppression (recorded in Judges 3), so Moab was a stable country with a good economy at this time - a good place to go to escape the famine.

*Elimelech has the means to make a move. He sees that the prospects in Israel are not good (famine, Midianite oppression, etc.) - so he decides to go to Moab where the conditions are obviously much better. Now we must emphasize the point here that what he was doing was wrong - a direct disobedience to God's clear and known commandment to the Jewish people. God had given portions of land to each Jewish family in the land that he had promised to them. They were to stay in the Promised Land through good times and bad trusting in him. During difficult times when God was chastening them for sin (as this obviously was), they were to confess their sin and repent. God had given clear instructions to his people in the law concerning this very situation.

But Elimelech moved anyway - and just look at what it cost him.

*He lost all of his wealth

*He died.

*His 2 sons married foreign women transgressing God's law (Deut. 7:3). But how could he say anything against them when he had disobeyed the law himself in moving to Moab?

*Both of his sons died in the foreign land

*His wife, Naomi, is left as a widow, penniless, with 2 foreign daughters-in-law to support.

*Now if we had time this morning, we could contrast Elimelech's decision with Boaz's decision to stay in the land that God had given to him and weather out the storm. It appears that both of these men were

roughly equal in social status and wealth at one time. They were close relatives. But Elimelech lost everything while Boaz kept himself in a position of God's blessing. Boaz was a man who made decisions based upon principle and conviction.

*So many people make the decisions of their lives by putting their fingers up in the wind. They are always trying to determine the trends and jump on the wagon just in time to make a killing instead of being concerned with following God's will and doing what is right and trusting in God to lead and bless them.

One ship sails east and another west by the selfsame winds that blow,

Tis the set of the sails, and not the gales that tells them the way to go.

Like the winds of the sea are the waves of Time as we voyage along thru life,

Tis the set of the soul that determines the goal and not the calm or the strife.

*Well, we don't want to be overly hard on Naomi here for she probably didn't make the ultimate decision to move the family. But she certainly suffered greatly because of the transgression that was made.

2. NAOMI TEACHES US THE LESSON THAT IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT.

*One might think that Naomi would have thrown in the towel and given up on life. After all, she had lost everything that had been precious to her. But such is not the case. At some point, Naomi realized her transgression against the Lord and God's chastening hand upon her life. It is possible that Naomi even knew this from the beginning of their decision to move to Moab and had an uneasiness in her conscience about the move.

But now she is in a position to make the decisions for the family. Her husband Elimelech is gone. Her 2 sons are dead as well. Naomi is now the head of the household. So she decides to return to the land of her birth where the only remaining family that she has lives. This was the right decision to make and God would bless her for it. And it is interesting that God begins to bless her by motivating one of her daughters-in-law to return with her. It was a most unusual decision for Ruth to accompany Naomi. But God was watching out for Naomi. And God would bless Ruth in ways beyond her imagination for her commitment to her mother-in-law.

One of the most important principles that we must all remember in life is *it's never too late to do what is right*. God's enemy and ours is called *the accuser of the brethren* in the Bible. Satan delights in throwing up mistakes and sins before our eyes and condemning us for our failures. Often he tries to convince us that we have blown it so badly that it is hopeless to try to undo what has been done. And it is true that we can never go back in life and reenact past failures. But we can choose to begin to do what is right now. And it is amazing how God can reconstruct our lives as we choose afresh to follow his paths.

The Bible is filled with the stories of people who turned their lives around by choosing to do what is right.

*One of the Lord's most popular parables was the prodigal son. This young man seemingly had hopelessly destroyed his life. He had cut himself off from his father by practically declaring him to be dead. He had squandered all of his resources so that he was left to feed pigs in the pigsty. There seemingly wasn't any hope for his future in life. But in the midst of his misery, the prodigal chose to do what was right. He chose to return to his father, confess his sin, and be willing to work as a humble servant. And we all know the story of how that decision to do what was right changed the life and future of the prodigal son.

*And it is interesting that the first and major leaders of both the O.T. and N.T. were those who failed miserably, but then chose to do what was right. The leader who banded the children of Abraham into the nation of Israel was a man named Moses. He failed miserably in the early portion of his life, committing the crime of murder and ruining his reputation with both the Egyptians and Israelites that he had to flee for his life and live as a fugitive for 40 years. As he was shepherding sheep on the backside of the desert, Moses certainly felt like he had completely ruined his life. But God came to him and gave him a second chance. And Moses though reluctantly chose to do what was right. Just look at how God changed around Moses' life. The major leader of the early church was Peter. Peter had a miserable failure at a critical time in his life. When his master needed him the most, Peter fell asleep during prayer and then within a few hours denied his Lord 3 times. Such a miserable failure certainly could have spiritually crippled this man for the rest of his life. But Jesus made a special resurrection appearance to Peter and Peter was restored back to fellowship with his Savior once again. Peter then became the main leader in the early church.

All of us have failed the Lord at one time or another in our lives. But just as he did with Naomi and Moses and Peter, God comes to us and gives us a second chance. He is giving you a second chance right now if you are not walking in fellowship with God. If you choose to do what is right, God will restore you to fellowship with himself and bless your life in ways that are beyond your imagination.

3. And that brings us to our 3rd and final lesson. NAOMI IS A TESTIMONY TO THE WONDERFUL GRACE OF GOD.

*We don't know who wrote this beautiful love story that we call the book of Ruth. It is interesting that there are only 2 books in the Bible who are named after women - and this is one of them. And of the 2, there is only 1 book in the Bible that is named after a Gentile woman - Ruth is that book. Jewish tradition says that Samuel wrote this book. But I feel that this is unlikely because one of the purposes of the book from its conclusion is obviously to list out the lineage of King David. I think it is more likely that David himself wrote

this book. But whoever wrote this book made an interesting decision. Certainly whoever wrote it did so not to honor Naomi's decision to change her name for he did not continue to call her Marah throughout the book. Naomi wanted to change her name to Marah - from pleasantness to bitterness. But the author knew something that Naomi didn't know at this time. The author knew the rest of the story. The author knew how God was going to bless Naomi in ways that were as yet unimaginable to her. So the author chose to stick with Naomi as a name because pleasantness would end up being a far better description of her life.

*Do you think that Naomi in her wildest dreams as she had lost her husband and both of her sons would have thought that she would contribute to the lineage of the greatest king that Israel would ever have. Do you think that Naomi in her wildest dreams would have thought that she would even contribute to the lineage of the Messiah, the son of God himself? How could she have ever even dreamed of that possibility. But that is exactly what happened.

*Ruth would end up marrying a man named Boaz in this book. Boaz was a close relative of Naomi and would marry Ruth as her kinsman-redeemer. This meant that Boaz married Ruth on behalf of her deceased husband, probably Kilion. Therefore, the children born of this union would carry Kilion's name with Naomi being recognized as their grandmother. Listen to the descendants that Naomi would have as recorded in the conclusion of this book.

READ RUTH 4:13-22

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. ¹⁴ The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! ¹⁵ He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. ¹⁷ The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

*God blesses those who follow him. And those who return to following him are blessed as well. What a change occurred in Naomi's life and in the history of the world because of her decision to do what is right.

*Are you walking with the Lord this morning? If so, learn the lesson that Naomi would teach each of us - that it is destructive to our lives to stray from God's commandments. No Christian ever willfully transgresses God's laws without suffering bitter consequences for that decision. But if you are not walking with the Lord this morning, learn the lesson from Naomi that it is never too late to do what is right. No Christian ever returns to fellowship with the Lord without enjoying the blessings of God in his or her life.