

“When Life Becomes Bitter”

Ruth 1:19-22

If you have your Bible with you, go ahead and turn with me to the first chapter of Ruth. Two weeks ago, I began a short series of sermons from the book of Ruth that I feel is so appropriate for this time of year. I've focused in on the word 'grace.' Ruth was a Gentile girl who found grace in a redeemer in Bethlehem. That is really what Christmas is all about when you stop to consider it.

All of us are familiar with Bethlehem as the place where Jesus was born. But as we have seen, the events of the book of Ruth happen right there in Bethlehem. Ruth goes out to glean in the very same fields that nearly 1,100 years later would be where the angels appear to some shepherds who were watching over their flocks by night.

Think of the words that the angel spoke to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem on the night that Christ was born:

Luke 2:10-11 — “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

The book of Ruth serves a very important role in the history of redemption, for it shows us how God keeps His promise even in the darkest of times. What we read in these four chapters involve ordinary people facing the ordinary challenges of life that we all face, issues such as providing for our family, dealing with loss and the pain that comes with it, and your relationship to your mother-in-law. Ruth shows us how God works through the ordinary experiences of life to perform His will. It confronts this wrong way of thinking that assumes ordinariness means the same thing as uselessness.

If we were to go back in time more than a thousand years before Christ was born, we'd encounter Naomi and Ruth as they both are on their way to Bethlehem. I want us to pick up where we left off last time...

Naomi had lost her husband and her two sons. She tells the two Moabite girls whom her sons had married to stay in Moab and go back to their former lives. We're told in verse 14 that Orpah kisses her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clings to her. Ruth makes the decision to turn her back on her former life in Moab and go to Bethlehem with Naomi.

Even though Naomi tries to talk Ruth out of the decision, there's no looking back for her. What she says to Naomi in this first chapter is one of the most powerful passages in the entire Bible. It is a conversion story. She says:

Ruth 1:16-17—“Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.”

The central words of Ruth's statement are these—“Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

What Ruth does here in the moment of decision becomes a hinge in redemption history. It is a little decision, but one that will greatly affect her future. Not only does it affect her history, but it would prove to be a decision that would alter the course of human history. Her words are more than an expression of devotion to Naomi. More than that, they serve as her confession of faith in the God of Naomi. It is one of the most powerful confessions of faith in all of the Bible.

Ruth shows us how God often works behind the scenes in a person's life. She is a living example of how the Lord works to bring people to Himself all by His grace. Long before she even realized it, God's gracious providence was moving and arranging the circumstances of her life to bring her face to face with her redeemer.

God is working through the circumstances of Naomi's life to bring her back to Bethlehem. In His providence, the Lord was working out His plan, but Naomi couldn't see it at the time. All she had known from the previous decade was the pain of hardship. Life for her had become bitter.

Before we look at her for a moment, I wonder if you have ever been there yourself? Has life ever taken a bitter turn for whatever reason? If it hasn't, then know that at some point it will. You don't have to go looking for pain and adversity in life. Instead, it knows right where to find you. One of the themes that emerge from the pages of the Bible is the reality of suffering.

Timothy Keller — *“The book of Genesis begins with an account of how evil and death came into the world. The book of Exodus recounts Israel's forty years in the wilderness, a time of intense testing and trial. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is largely dedicated to the problem of suffering. The book of Psalms provides a prayer for every possible situation in life, and so it is striking how filled it is with cries of pain and with blunt questions to God about the seeming randomness and injustice of suffering...The books of Job and Ecclesiastes are almost wholly dedicated to deep reflection that characterizes so much of life. The prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk give searing expression to the human complaint that evil seems to rule history. New Testament books such as Hebrews and 1 Peter are almost entirely devoted to helping people face relentless sorrows and troubles. And towering over all, the central figure of the whole of Scripture, Jesus Christ, is a man of sorrows. The Bible is about suffering as much as it is about anything.”*

Daniel's three friends found themselves in a literal fiery furnace, yet it is true that all of God's servants in Scripture were men and women who well knew the heat of adversity. Such is Naomi. She's been in the fire. She's traveled down a bitter road in life and from her perspective, things seem to have come to a dead end.

I want us to make three observations about her bitterness:

1—The EXPERIENCE of personal tragedy

"...it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me..."

The last glimpse we had of Naomi was her packing up and heading back home where she belonged. She had been in Moab for ten long years. And ten years really is a long time when you think about it. Go back a decade in your mind for a minute and think about where you were and you were doing ten years ago. It is astounding at what can happen in just a decade:

- children become teenagers
- teenagers become young adults

After ten years in Moab, Naomi had lost everything that was near and dear to her. Life had taken an unexpected turn. During those ten years in Moab, Naomi had found herself living in her own personal nightmare. To begin with, her husband Elimelech dies. Her sons Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite girls.

According to Deuteronomy 23, the law of Moses specified that the children born from a mixed marriage between an Israelite and a Moabite were not allowed into the assembly of the Lord for ten generations. If that seems harsh, keep in mind that everything about Moab spelled alienation from God and His promises. Its

worship involved the ‘gods’ of fertility. Moabite religion was an abomination to the Lord.

To compound Naomi’s pain, as if the grief of losing her husband were not enough, after they had lived in Moab for a decade, both Mahlon and Chilion die. In your mind, try to picture Naomi standing there beside three fresh graves. All that she has known and loved is gone. Her shoulders are stooped by the weight of loss. Her face is well-worn by grief. Her eyes are hollow and empty of expression. She is left in the position of someone experiencing one of the most painful experiences, something to which the Old Testament is very sensitive—there is no living fruit from her womb. She is widowed, childless, and all alone.

Andrew Fuller—*“Of the two sexes, the woman is the weaker; of women, old women are the feeblest; of old women, widows are the most woeful; of widows, those that are poor their plight is most pitiful; of poor widows, those who want children their case is most bitter; of widows who want children, those who had them and lost them their estate is most desolate; of widows that have had children, those who are strangers in a foreign country, their condition is most comfortless. Yet all these things met together in one woman—Naomi. In the center of sorrow, I conclude that many men have had affliction, but none like Job, and many women have had tribulation, but none like Naomi.”*

Fuller’s words really help put Naomi’s personal tragedies in perspective for us. Her pain is the kind that very few who have lived have ever experienced. If Longfellow was right when he said, “Into every life some rain must fall,” then it must have fell in Naomi’s life like a flood. She knew well the experience of personal tragedy. Then, notice:

2—The EXPRESSION of deep sorrow

“So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women

said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?'"

Verse 19 says that she and Ruth went on until they came to Bethlehem. Can you imagine what their conversation must have been like along the way? I wonder if perhaps Naomi explained to Ruth in more detail what the law of Moses involved, or what worship at the tabernacle looked like, or who the God of Israel was. Maybe they sought to comfort one another in the pain of loss. Maybe Naomi tries to describe for her what living in the Promised Land was like. Soon, they made their way to the town. When they finally arrived, notice a few things that happened:

The stir that Naomi caused

Once they reached the little village, the Bible says that the whole town was stirred because of them.

“Stirred” — *the Hebrews word means uproar or noisy*

It means that the town was buzzing and humming with the word of Naomi's return. It was an expression of excitement to see her. From what we can gather, she and Elimelech must have fairly well-to-do citizens of Bethlehem. For a small town, it was big news that she was back. Notice that the women say, “Is this Naomi?” Can you imagine how the conversation went? It is kind of like going back to your class reunion after ten or twenty years. Isn't it amazing at how we change over the years? Hair that was black turns silver, or loose! I can almost hear it now:

- “Is this Naomi? Surely not. Can’t be. I wonder where Elimelech is? Her sons must be grown by now. Where are they?”
- “Is this Naomi? It sure looks like her. Has she lost weight? The years don’t look like they’ve been very kind to her!”

The spirit that Naomi has

She says to the women, “Don’t call me Naomi.” In all of her losses, she must have felt that God had thrust His sword into her heart, twisted it, and then thrust it deeper. It is hardly surprising to us, then, to read her sorrowful words in verse 13 and then again in verses 20-21:

“It is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.”

She says, “Don’t call me Naomi; call me Mara. I’m not the Naomi you knew ten years ago, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” In other words, she is saying that she is no longer known as pleasant, but as bitter. Life had taken its toll out on her. God had dealt very bitterly with her. She wants to be known as ‘Mara.’ That word ought to sound familiar to you if you know your Old Testament history. Israel’s first ‘test’ involved:

Exodus 15:22-25—“And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. Now when they came to Mara, they could not drink the waters of Mara, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Mara. And the people complained against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’ So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet.”

Her words literally mean that her pathway in life has been a bitter one. Bitter experiences have characterized her life. Maybe she even regrets the day she left Bethlehem in the first place. She says, “I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.” The idea is that she went out full of her own plans, but now she has returned to Bethlehem empty handed, and it was all so very bitter.

The statements that Naomi makes

“Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

Don’t call me pleasant anymore! Call me bitter. Notice how at least two times in the chapter that Naomi says God is ‘against’ her. She said in verse 13, “The Lord’s hand has gone out against me.” She says in verse 21, “The Lord has testified against me. He’s brought calamity upon me.”

Some have suggested that this perhaps is her confession of sin and personal guilt. The fact that God has ‘testified’ against her is her way of saying that she chose a path in life that was outside of the will of God, and now God has allowed her to reap the bitter consequences.

Sinclair Ferguson—*“Would you dare say to her, ‘The explanation is simple: you left the Promised Land; you deserved everything you got?’ Is that an adequate explanation? Probably others had done the same thing without suffering such horrible consequences. Why is Naomi experiencing such a catalogue of grief? Yes, Naomi and her husband did sin, no matter who took the lead. But the significance of her experience is far more complex than simply being a punishment for sin. True, we really deserve nothing from God’s hand but punishment. But we cannot draw over-simplifications between the suffering of this woman and the sin in which her family engaged. Naomi’s suffering is not explicable merely in terms of her sin. If it were that simple, she might be able to cope with it. But God is too majestic, too infinitely wise in His providences, to be*

reduced to simple formulae when He brings His children into experiences of suffering. There must be a deeper analysis of these events.”

It reminds me of something that the disciples once asked Jesus upon passing by a blind man:

John 9:1-3—“As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

We can't reduce God to mere formula. His ways are not our ways. We're quick to think that painful circumstances are the result of God punishing us for some sin. When life takes a bitter turn, we are often tempted to think that God is working against us for whatever reason. We feel the pain of the knife and immediately assume He is wounding us. We say things under pressure that we later come to regret.

Think of this—a knife can be a lethal weapon in the hands of a murderer, but it can also be an instrument of healing in the hands of a surgeon. It all depends on the heart and the hands of the person who uses it. Though her experience had proved painful and heart-wrenching, God was using the bitter pain of Naomi's life to bring her to the place of blessing. What seems to be a hand that has gone out against her is actually a hand that is working in her favor.

Psalm 119:67—“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.”

Charles Spurgeon—“We have no more religion than what we have in times of trial.”

Bitter experiences may have been characteristic of Naomi's life up until this point, but out of these bitter experiences God is going to do something sweet.

3—The EXTENT of sovereign grace

“So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.”

As far as Naomi is concerned, the experience of personal tragedy has led to an expression of deep sorrow. But she is soon going to learn something of the extent of sovereign grace that is working for her good. Even though her words in this text reveal the depth of her pain, I can't help but also believe that they reveal the genuineness of her faith.

I believe this because of how she refers to the Lord here in chapter one. Her statements about God serve as a window into her faith. Notice how at least five times, Naomi uses the covenant name of God. And in verses 20-21, at least two times she refers to Him as the 'Almighty.'

“God Almighty” —*the Hebrew name is 'El Shaddai' and speaks of the all-powerful God*

The name 'El Shaddai' is a compound name that comes from the word 'El' which means 'God' and the word 'Shaddai' which means 'almighty' and 'sufficient.' The first time God reveals this name is Genesis 17 when Abraham is told that he and Sarah will give birth to a son. What was an impossibility with man was possible with 'El Shaddai.'

Psalm 9:10—“And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.”

When the name 'El Shaddai' is used, it is always used in connection with God's covenant promise. It reveals that the God who promises is also the God who performs. One has even said that it is God at His best when man is at his worst. It means that God is working out the details of His plan, right on time and according to schedule.

Has life become bitter for you, for whatever reason? Do you find yourself exhausted and discouraged? Have you wondered if God's hand has gone out against you in some way? If so, then be encouraged by the truth that our God is 'El Shaddai.' He is the faithful God who will perform what He has promised. He will not abandon you to the pain of affliction, but will use it in your life.

Psalm 91:1 — **“He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”**

Warren Wiersbe — *“When God permits His children to go through the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat.”*

Don't miss the significance of this last sentence in chapter one because it is all about God's gracious providence:

“And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.”

Naomi had left Bethlehem in a famine, but now she is coming back to a harvest. Every ounce of pain, struggle, and hardship in our lives is used by Him and accomplishes His will in some measure. He never wastes our hurts.

Tony Evans — *“A little bird was flying south for the winter, but the air became so cold that it began to freeze and couldn't make it to the warmer climate. After some time, the little bird finally collapsed in a large field where a herd of cows were grazing. Eventually, a cow came by and dropped manure on the freezing*

bird. At first the bird was upset, but then it felt how warm the manure was. Before long, it began to thaw out and became so excited that it started singing with joy. A cat happened to be passing by and heard the bird's joyful song. He followed it to the pile of manure and started digging until he discovered the little bird and promptly ate it. We can learn a number of lessons from this story. First, not everybody who drops manure on you is your enemy. Second, not everybody who digs you out is your friend. Finally, when you're in manure, it is best to keep your mouth shut."

Whether your situation feels like Naomi or the little bird, I don't know. But what I do know is that God Almighty, 'El Shaddai,' has a tree for the bitter waters of life —the cross of Jesus. Just as a certain tree that God led Moses to made the bitter water of 'Mara' sweet for Israel, and just as God's providence will soon be evident in Naomi's life with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, so also does my sin and my affliction find its answer in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.