



When life turns bitter

Ruth 1

I. Introduction:

A. June 10, 2000 is a day that will be burned in my memory bank. It was the day that the Lord gave us a little baby girl, Ruth Deborah York. Born at 5 lbs. 5 oz, fully developed, yet she passed away 5 hours after her birth because she had not received enough blood due to a small, microscopic hole in the placenta. A .05% chance of something happening in a pregnancy happened to Jill & I. It was day that the harsh reality of living in a world of sin hit us between the eyes. Death to one of our kids had happened. It was one of those days that had more questions than it had answers & it was one of those days that life turned bitter.

1. I know many of you have experienced days like that. For some it was the sudden, unexpected death of a loved one; for others it was the death of a loved one who suffered for a long period of time; others it was a hard, difficult job loss or the end of a marriage, by sudden surprise.

2. Life, at times, turns bitter.

B. Well, friends, we are not alone. The Bible is full of stories just like this. The bible starts in the Paradise of God & it comes to a crashing halt when man falls to sin. The people of Israel flourish under Joseph in the land called Egypt & then they're enslaved for 400 years. King David is ruling a nation filled with wealth & is thriving & then one of his sons, rapes one of his daughters & his heir to the throne takes justice into his own hands & tries to steal the heart of the nation. Sometimes life turns bitter.

C. Over the next 5 weeks, we're going to study a story just like this. We're going to study the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth is one of the most widely read books because it's a love story. But it's a surprising love story. It's a love story birthed out of pain. It's about rescue, redemption & hope. But it begins with hardship. The story of Ruth is the story of unusual providence for ordinary people. It's the story of God redeeming his people out of our misery. It's the story of Christmas. When in our darkest time of the year, we celebrate the birth of the light of the world. So let's stand together & read Ruth 1.

II. Let's start with the story, as it pertains to the beginning of chapter 1 & see the bitterness that befalls on our main characters.

A. We are told in vs. 1 that this was in the days of the judges. The judges were a group of people who governed over Israel from the time they entered the Promised Land until their first king. So this is in between Joshua, their great conqueror, & Saul their first king.

1. To understand this timeframe of Israel's history, look back at the last verse of Judges. Judges 21:25 says, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

2. This was an unbelievably difficult time in Israel's history. They had been blessed by God with their new land & no sooner did Joshua die & they began to sin against God by being immoral & idolatrous. Then, because of their sin, God disciplined them with a foreign enemy, like the Midianites, Caananites & the Moabites. When the people would get sick of being ruled by a foreign enemy, they would repent of their sin, & turn to God. Then God, because he loved them & had made a promise to them, would send them a deliverer or a judge. Judges like Ehud, Gideon & Samson, to name a few, would sweep in with an overwhelming victory & save God's people. Then the cycle would start again. Deliverance, sin, discipline, repentance, & deliverance. Rinse, wash, & repeat. Over & over again.

3. And we're left at the end book of Judges with an overwhelming sense that when man does what's right in his own eyes, disaster is always close at hand. That's the timeframe of the book of Ruth.



- B. So it was during this time that famine had come to the land of Israel. This was more than likely due to one of the cycles that we've just addressed. This famine caused a man named Elimelech, a Jewish man, to move his family (wife, Naomi & their 2 sons) to the land of Moab, who were sworn enemies of Israel. In Moab, the unthinkable happens to Naomi: her husband dies & she's left to raise her boys. But then they marry 2 Moabite women: Orpah & Ruth, which seems innocent but was a sin against God because God had commanded the Jewish people to only marry Jewish people. But here these 2 sons marry Moabite women. And then her two sons die.
- C. Naomi's life has turned bitter.
1. Her husband is dead. Then her two sons die.
 2. She is left with nothing: no land, no sons, & 2 daughters-in-law to care for.
 3. Process what has happened Naomi in her life: she's taken from her hometown because of a famine; she's moved to a foreign land & started building a new life then her husband dies; her 2 boys find love in the arms of some Moabite girls & she starts finding her way again; then her boys die. It's like every time she starts standing on her own, life knocks her down a bit.
- D. Ever had this happen? Those moments in life when nothing seem to make sense. The moments when life turns bitter. Some of you know this bitterness: death, health, financial, or relationship bitterness hits & it leaves you grasping for answers. And the crazy thing is that all of us will know this bitterness, at one point or another.
1. These are the moments that make our head spin, our souls to ache & cause anxiety & stress.
 2. These are the moments that God seems distant. And to be honest, during this time of the year, these thoughts are exasperated. The holidays bring an unusual sense of loneliness to many because of loss like this. Life turns bitter sometimes.
- III. And it's those moments when we see the fruit of our faith by the way we respond. We see it in these women. Notice with me how they respond.
- A. Look with me at Naomi's response first.
1. It seems in vs. 6-7 that she does the right thing & decides to return to Judah because there's food there. But something happens in vs. 8. She encourages these women to turn back to their own families in Moab. When they tell her that they're coming with her in vs. 10, she begs them to go back because she doesn't see anyway that she can care for them.
 2. So Orpah decides to go back to Moab, but Ruth clings to Naomi. This is where we really see what's going on in Naomi's heart. Notice vs. 15: 'see your sister-in-law has gone back to her people & to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.'
 - a. Now, just think about this for a moment: here's a Jewish woman, who has 2 daughters-in-law for 10 years, on her way back to Israel, & she tells them to back & worship false gods? In a sense she tells them to go back & violate the 1st of the 10 commandments & tells them to put other gods before the One true God??
 - b. Why would Naomi not want these women to worship the one, true God of Israel? Why would she ever ask them to turn back?
 3. Well, the text tells us. Naomi believed that God was against her.
 - a. In vs. 13 she tells the girls that they shouldn't come with her because the hand of the Lord is against her.
 - b. And then notice what happens when she returns to Bethlehem in vs. 20-21: "Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara (which means bitter) for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I



went away full & the Lord brought me back empty. The Lord has testified against me & the Almighty has brought calamity on me?"

4. The reason that Naomi could tell her daughters-in-law to turn back to false gods is because she didn't believe that her God was good & that his plan was wise. She looked upon her circumstances with an eye towards how they affected her & her answer was: God is against me because things didn't turn out the way I had hoped.
 5. Ever felt this way? It's easy to do this isn't it? Where is God now? Why has this sickness, pain or sorrow come to me? Why me? Has God forgotten me? Has he forsaken me? Does he know that I'm a pretty good guy & I've served him most of my life? Can God really bring about good from this?? Ever had these questions? I know I have.
- B. But let's look at Ruth's response.
1. First, we have to go back & remind ourselves that Ruth was married to a Jewish man for 10 years. During this time in history & much like ours, when you married into a family, you took on the husband's family's name & culture. We have to believe that at some point over those 10 years that Ruth had heard about the Jewish heritage: the God of the Jews who had delivered the Promised Land into their hands & she had to have known, as a Moabite woman, that the Israelite God was different from the gods of her people. So she's well-acquainted with the Israelite God.
 2. And this is why she clings to Naomi at the end of vs. 14. She's not going anywhere. Vs. 16-17 show us why. Notice her statement (which is the 2nd most read statement at weddings behind 1 Cor. 13): "Where you go I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people & your God my God. Where you die I will die & there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me & more also if anything but death parts me from you."
 - a. Ruth had given herself to Naomi because Ruth had given herself to Naomi's God.
 - b. She had not just taken on the family's name, she had taken on the family's God.
 3. But her perspective is different: rather than God is against me, her response is God is for me. As Dean Ulrich put it in his commentary on Ruth, "Sixteen verses into the book, she modeled a mature faith & abandoned her security, her reputation, & her future not just to a nebulous higher power called god but to the self-revealing Lord, the covenant-making & covenant-keeping God of the past, present, & future."
 4. Now why was Ruth's perspective so different?
 - a. Well, it's no coincidence that she was an outsider who observed how the covenant-keeping God had conquered the Promised Land. No doubt she had heard & seen the God of the Israelites deliver his people, over & over again from the hands of their enemies.
 - b. She had firsthand experience of what the false gods of Moab had brought her & seen the hand of the Lord bringing her out of that idolatrous nation.
 - c. She would rather put her stake in the God who is there than the gods of Moab who were dead. She had seen, felt & experienced the saving grace of God by bringing her into Naomi's family & because of that she believed in God's sustaining grace through life's bitterness.
 - d. In other words, she knew that God was for her, not against her. She had tasted & seen that the Lord is good & there was no way she was going to turn her back on Naomi.
 5. Have you tasted & seen this of the Lord? Have you been forgiven of your sin & made right with God through Christ? If you have, you know this saving grace. And if you know this saving grace, you can rest in his sustaining grace when life turns bitter.



- IV. And that leads us to the last point of the day, which is the God who is there. See, here's the question we have to ask: who's right on this? Is Naomi correct in that God is against her or is Ruth correct in that God is for her? They've both experienced incredible tragedy yet one sees it one way & the other sees it another way. So let's see from the text some evidence that shows us that Ruth is correct.
- A. Notice vs. 6 tells us that Naomi had heard that the Lord had visited his people & had given them food. God was on the move to feed his people.
 - B. And then in vs. 22 when they returned to Bethlehem, it was the beginning of barley harvest. Just a coincidence that they return, right when things are becoming ripe? I think not. Aslan is on the move & you can feel it in the book.
 - C. Let's see this from Naomi's perspective:
 - 1. What originally stirred Elimilech to leave Bethlehem? Ironically, Bethlehem means, "house of bread". He left the house of bread, looking for bread...because of a famine. A difficult providence caused him to move his family to Moab, an enemy nation.
 - 2. What caused Naomi to move back to Bethlehem & take Ruth with her? A bitter combo of lack of food & the deaths of her husband & sons. Another difficult providence.
 - 3. So in Naomi's mind, God was against her because every time she turned around it was like something bad happened. But was God's hand against her?
 - D. Let's look from Ruth's perspective & what God in Ruth's life:
 - 1. How did she meet Naomi's family? They moved to Moab, her home land, because of the famine in Bethlehem. A bitter providence for Naomi was a beneficial providence for Ruth.
 - 2. What caused Ruth to move with Naomi? A belief that a bitter providence can become a beneficial one because the God of providence is good.
 - E. See, here's what Naomi missed & Ruth caught: the story of their lives wasn't primarily about their lives. It's about the activity & the glory of God. This is what we will miss in the book of Ruth if we're not careful. The book of Ruth is not primarily about Naomi & Ruth. It is about God.
 - 1. As this chapter has unfolded, we have seen God use a bitter providence for Naomi to help capture the heart of Ruth. We have seen God orchestrating the events of our lives (good & bad) for his purposes & according to his perfect wisdom. He's the God of his people (those who we know now to be his people & those we don't know now to be his people) & he will never leave them, he is never against them & he will pursue them to the ends of the earth, & might even find them in enemy territory. Naomi should've known this by looking at her own people, who despite their own sin, God continued to rescue them time & time again.
 - 2. This story is about God moving to rescue Ruth, by having her marry Naomi's son (which happened because of a bitter providence to Naomi), becoming a converted Moabite, then returning to Bethlehem because of the death of her husband (another bitter providence), meeting Boaz (a beneficial providence), & becoming the great grandmother of King David & the grandmother 17 generations removed from Jesus. How about that for using your life's difficulties for God's glory??? As Dr. Ulrich wrote, "He who knows all the details of our lives intimately delights to weave those details into a tapestry that, upon completion, manifests the consummate skill of the One who arranges all threads into a meaningful & glorious whole."
 - F. Now, here's where I want to draw our attentions really close: if you are in Christ, God...your God is never against you & is weaving all of your life's circumstances (good & bad) together for his glory, your good & the advancement of his gospel. We see that in Ruth 1, don't we?
 - 1. Your God is neither dead, nor distant. He is neither blind nor mute. He is not ignoring your cries nor is he an obedient servant to your demands.



2. No...he is taking all of your life's circumstances (from times you don't even remember to those tragic moments that you can never forget) & he is weaving all of them into your life for his glory, your good & the advancement of his gospel. All of your life matters to God & he has not left you alone for one moment.
 3. The proof of this is his son Jesus.
 - a. Jesus was forsaken by God so that God would never forsake us.
 - b. Jesus was cursed by God for our sin, so that God would never curse us for it.
 - c. Jesus was treated as guilty for our sin, so that God would never hold our sin against us.
 - d. For a moment, God was against Jesus, so that for all eternity, God would always be on our side.
 - e. Friends, if the book of Romans declares, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies," it means that God will not bring a charge against us & is never against us.
 - f. As Dr. Ulrich wrote, "God has not brought us this far in Christ to renege on his plan & promise."
 4. Naomi misunderstood her story in the story of God. She was busy looking down, not looking up. Ruth understood it clearly. But don't miss the point: the story isn't about Naomi or Ruth. It's the story of God. It's about the fact that when life turns bitter God is still good. The good God is weaving bitter providences into our lives for his glory, our good & the advancement of his gospel. Now that's a true love story!
- G. So where do you see yourself this morning?
1. Do you feel like God is against you? If you're not a believer in Jesus: right now, God is against you. He's weaving bitter providences in your life to turn you to him, to see your weakness & inadequacy. Turn to Christ today!
 2. But if you are a believer in Christ: you can sleep well. God is never against you & he is never accusing you. Every moment of your life is woven through his good hands, for your good & his glory. His Son is yours & you are his. He is your father & not your judge. Rest in him today.