

MESSAGE TITLE: The Sweetness of Jesus in the Bitterness of Life

SCRIPTURE: Ruth 1

KEY TRUTH

As we begin Ruth, we find Naomi wrecked by life, and she concludes that God is against her. In the midst her bitterness, God shows kindness to her through Ruth, beginning a beautiful story of Redemption.

GETTING STARTED

We have all experienced difficulties and afflictions in life and we are all faced with determining how those past experiences will affect us in the present. If anyone had reason to let their past hinder them, it was Naomi. However, as we begin the story of Ruth, we will see how God continued to love Naomi in the face of her bitterness, redeemed her past, and secured her future.

OBSERVATION

Read Ruth 1:1-5.

Make a list of the events in these five verses. Who are the characters? Where are they from? Where did they go? What happened to them?

Why might Naomi's situation be even more difficult than a similar situation would be for a woman today?

Because of a famine in Israel, the family was living on Moab. In the course of ten years, Naomi lost her husband and two sons. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law were now widows. In ancient Israel, however, women did not have the rights and opportunities that they have today. In Naomi's time, when a woman lost her husband, it was the responsibility of the sons to provide for her. With both of her sons deceased, Naomi was in a terrifying predicament.

Read Ruth 1:6-14.

After losing their husbands, what did Naomi tell her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to do (vv. 8-9)? Why do you think she did this?

What is significant about Naomi weeping with Orpah and Ruth (v. 10, 14)? What does this tell us about Naomi's relationship with her daughters-in-law?

Read John 11:32-37. Why did Jesus weep with Mary?

The Bible calls us to "rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). Naomi demonstrated her love for Ruth and Orpah by weeping with them in the aftermath of a personal tragedy. Jesus did something similar with Mary when she lost her brother, Lazarus. In John 11, Jesus had told His disciples (v. 4) and Mary (v. 23) that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead so that they would believe. But instead of going directly to the tomb and raising Lazarus from the dead, however, Jesus

chose to seek out Mary and weep with her. This tells us something very important about Jesus and His mission. In weeping with Mary, Jesus demonstrated personal care for her. More importantly, He communicated to her that He too hates death and came to do something about it.

Naomi said “the Lord’s hand has turned against me” (v. 13). What does this reveal about her belief in God? Why was she incorrect to believe that God was against her?

Naomi was correct in seeing God’s hand in the events that had transpired. First Samuel 2:6 says, “The Lord brings death and gives life; He sends some to Sheol, and He raises others up.” While God is sovereign over life and death, His allowance of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah to lose their husbands does not mean that He was against her.

Read Ruth 1:15-18.

What did Ruth’s commitment to go with Naomi mean to her? What did Ruth give up to go with Naomi to Bethlehem? Has anyone ever given up something significant to be committed to you?

How does Ruth’s statement in verses 16-17 mirror what happens when we receive and begin to follow Christ?

Naomi referred to Orpah and Ruth as her daughters three times in these verses. The affection Naomi felt for these women was very real. She came to love them and wanted what was best for them. Since Naomi had no other sons for them to marry, she encouraged them to return to their mothers so they might be cared for. While Orpah accepted this kindness, Ruth remained with Naomi and expressed belief and confidence in the God of Israel when Naomi appeared to have very little. Naomi believed that her lot in life was evidence of God’s judgment, but the rest of the story demonstrates that this was not the case. Ruth’s commitment to Naomi was more than a vow of friendship, but rather a decision that had far-reaching spiritual significance. Ruth was denying the idols of her Moabite background and clinging to the one true God.

Read Ruth 1:19-22.

Verse 22 mentions that they came back at the beginning of the barley harvest. Why is this significant? How does this show God’s amazing providence?

Did Elimelech’s sin ultimately stop God from working in the lives of his family? How have you experienced this in your life?

Naomi and Ruth finally made it to Bethlehem. The people in town stirred because Naomi returned, but without her husband and sons. Instead, she brought a Moabite woman in their place. The names Naomi used for God reflected her belief that He was powerful and able to help her, but her tone showed that she didn’t believe He would. The sin in Naomi’s life caused her grief. However, the narrator of the story points out that they had returned at the time of harvest. The famine was over, and God was

providing for the needs of His people as He always had. Naomi's bitterness kept her from seeing the providence of God. Despite her bitterness, God made provisions for Naomi, much like Christ who died for us while we were still sinners (see Rom. 5:8).

APPLICATION

What's one truth about God you can take away from this story?

Why should times of struggle be times to turn to God rather than away from Him?

When we are bitter, why is it important to surround ourselves with people who will let us know how much God cares for us? Who are you willing to share your hurts with? Is there something you need to share now?

In what area of your life do you need to trust in God's providence? What is one step you can take this week to help you trust Him more?

What are some practical ways we as a group might demonstrate our commitment to one another in times of difficulty?

PRAYER

As you close, thank God for His provision. Ask that even when our lives are difficult He would allow us to see His faithful love for us and protection over us. Pray for those around you who are struggling and thank God for His ultimate provision in Jesus Christ.

COMMENTARY NOTES

1:1. During the time of the judges identifies the events of this story as taking place during a time when "everyone did whatever he wanted" (lit "what was right in his own eyes"), when "there was no king in Israel" (Judg. 21:25). During the time of the judges, a famine in the land probably would have been part of God's judgment on His people for their apostasy from Him, pursuing the Baals and Ashtoreth's (Judg. 2:11-15). This famine even affected Bethlehem, whose Hebrew name means "house of bread." As a result, one family from that city did what was right in their own eyes and left the promised land, going to live in the pagan land of Moab, where economic prospects seemed brighter. Somewhere along the way, that temporary move turned into a permanent stay.

1:2. Elimelech means "My God is king," which heightens the irony of his behavior in doing "whatever he wanted" because in those days "there was no king in Israel" (Judg. 21:25). His wife's name, Naomi, means "Pleasant," which evokes Ps. 16:6: "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places." In contrast, she and her husband were dissatisfied with the boundary lines assigned them by God. The names of their sons, Mahlon and Chilion, seem related to words for sickness and mortality.

1:3-5. In the land of Moab, Naomi's husband died and she was left with her two sons. The Hebrew verb left is related to the word remnant and often describes those who

survive an outpouring of God's wrath. Her sons then took Moabite women as their wives. There was no formal prohibition against marrying Moabites. However, marriage to Moabites was discouraged because of their commitment to other gods as evidenced by the Balaam debacle, Israel's debauchery with Moabite women in the wilderness, the 10 generation Moabite male exclusion from the assembly of the Lord (Numbers 22-25, Deut. 23:3-7, Ezra 9:2, 12; 10:44 and Neh. 13:25).

1:6-9. Naomi had little choice but to leave Moab and return home, a move encouraged by the news that the Lord was providing food there. This points to repentance on the part of the Hebrews and their restoration. Naomi asked the Lord's blessing upon her daughters-in-law in the form of His faithful love. This is a covenantal term that combines love and faithfulness, mercy and grace—all the positive aspects of committed relationship. It is a remarkable request that the Lord's favor should be shown in this way to covenant outsiders like these foreign women. The women were sad to part. They wept loudly as they embraced.

1:10-14. Orpah and Ruth repeated their desire to return to Israel with Naomi. Once again, however, Naomi pressed them both to return, because the best prospect of remarriage lay among their own people. Naomi assumed that no other family in Bethlehem would be interested in marrying Moabite women, and she emphasized the certainty of there being no other children from her own line. She was probably at least 50 years old now. Even if she were to have more children at once, by the time they grew up Orpah and Ruth would be too old to have children. Besides, Naomi argued, she was herself under a curse: The Lord's hand had turned against her. There is no hint of Naomi taking any personal responsibility or expressing repentance for her own actions in leaving the promised land. Convinced by Naomi's arguments, Orpah took her leave of Naomi, but Ruth clung to her—the same word used in Gen. 2:24 to describe the marriage bond.

1:15-18. The intensity of Naomi's attempts to dissuade her Moabite daughters-in-law from accompanying her back to Bethlehem suggests that she was not completely motivated by concern for their well-being. Their presence would have been a constant and embarrassing reminder of her tragic sojourn in Moab. Yet Ruth was not so easily dissuaded. In a crescendo of commitment, she bound herself to go with Naomi and to live with her. In fact, she would even die and be buried where Naomi was—the greatest possible commitment in the ancient world. She sealed her commitment with a self-imprecatory oath, taken in the personal name of Naomi's God, Yahweh. Naomi's response to this moving speech was remarkably curt. Literally, the Hebrew in verse 18 says, "She stopped talking to her."

1:19-22. The townswomen's question, can this be Naomi? pointedly and deliberately ignored Ruth's presence. In response, Naomi urged them to rename her Mara since the Lord had made her bitter rather than "pleasant." It was at Marah that the Israelites found only bitter water to drink on their way out of Egypt, and so they grumbled against the Lord (Ex. 15:23-24). Naomi's heart was similarly turned against the Lord,

yet the connection also raised hope that the Lord would heal her bitterness and bring her to a place of rest, just as He did for Israel. Naomi had returned physically to Bethlehem from Moab, but would she similarly return to the Lord in repentance?

SOURCES CONSULTED

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