

Ruth 1

Intro January 6, 2008 A Bitter Faith

For the next four weeks we will walk through one of the most beautiful stories found in all of literature, the Book of Ruth. This short narrative pictures for us what we long to experience, a hope we cling to, to feel God's loving-kindness. Listen as I read God's Word, the first chapter of Ruth. (p223 in pew Bibles)

I called this story beautiful, but if what I just read is new to you, you may question my idea of beauty, for this chapter is filled with enough heartache and pain to last a lifetime. Here we meet a bitter woman. What she expresses is felt by many of us here. From where does bitterness come? What does bitterness do? How is bitterness softened? Let's walk through this story where we will see the clues that help us deal with our bitterness.

BITTERNESS BEGINS SUBTLY 1:1-5

The opening lines set the scene – *In the days when the judges ruled*

If you were with us last year as we walked through the Book of Judges you may well remember what kind of dark days those were. The constant pattern of disobedience, discipline, deliverance cycles downward, so that the concluding thought of that dark time 3000 years ago speaks to our age as well, when Judges 21:25 coldly says, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

That setting tells us that there is an understanding by the reader that troubles come in various forms, but God is at work trying to get the attention of his stubborn people.

So when the next line reads: "there was a famine in the land" we are given not just an agriculture report, not just an unfortunate meteorological occurrence. This famine was assured in Leviticus 26:18-20 (read). There is correlation between events in the world and our relationship with God. The trouble though, is that we can't always see the one to one correlation.

Then we are introduced to the characters, but we need to read closely, as the author gets our attention. What is about to unfold should not entirely surprise us. The passage drips with irony.

A man from Bethlehem in Judah...They were Ephrathites (v2)...

That there is a famine in Bethlehem, in the region of Ephraim should alarm you. Bethlehem means house of bread, Ephraim means fruitful. This is not the place where that kind of trouble should happen. Murder in Philadelphia! So much for brotherly love, the irony is arresting.

...went to sojourn in the country of Moab

About now the alarms should be sounding. Moab was the land filled with inbred pagans, Israel's cousins descended from Lot and his daughter. These people sought their destruction by paying Balaam to call down God's destruction and whose women were whores. They were clearly excluded by God from worship in Israel and during this time of the Judges it was Eglon, the portly king of Moab that tormented Israel.

Moab is about a fifty-mile journey, an area more arid than Bethlehem, but obviously more blessed by God at this time.

Now we are told their names, which tells us much.

- The father is Elimelech, which means: "My God is King". That strong name proudly proclaims God's power over all creation. While some like to make much of his abandoning Israel for Moab, the text comments little, but lets the events speak for themselves. Still it is odd that for a man whose name extols the sovereignty of God ends up running away to hostile territory.
- His wife is Naomi, whose name evokes the sweetest thoughts, for she is *pleasant*.
- Their kids are another story. A number of you here are expecting and some of you love biblical names, but don't use these. Mahlon and Chilion, two brothers with serious self-esteem issues. Mahlon means sickly, Chilion means frail, consumption, dying. Hey, here are my kids Asian Bird Flu and Typhoid.

They escape the famine, but as their sojourn, their temporary journey becomes a new lifestyle – there is death. Elimelech went to Moab to stay alive, but God had other plans.

The Elimelech's choices come back to haunt him. He had the best for his family in mind, but in leaving God's people he is left alone. He relocated for financial stability, but gave no thought to the spiritual well being of the home.

Elimelech dies. Not all is hopeless...yet, for Naomi has two sons (but their names foreshadow what is next). So Brain Tumor and Tuberculosis get themselves wives. Since they won't make the trip back to God's people, they settle for what are available – Moabite women.

Still all seems fine. For ten years the five of them go along with hardly a care, when both men die, leaving us wondering at God dark providence – no heirs. A horror greater than famine was the annihilation of one's family through the lack of offspring. This household is in trouble.

The subtly of bitterness is seen in seed form.

How does it feel when God is harsh with you, but kind to someone who clearly does not deserve it? What goes through your mind as you try to do what is best, provide for your family, even though it means long hours, having to relocate and your kids don't turn out the way you thought they would? Have you ever felt like you live in a house of bread but are starving?

Let me make it clearer: are you tempted to find solace among non-Christians because believers are just too obnoxious to be around?

There are consequences to choices that we often do not see, choices that leave us bitter.

Bitterness is a frozen form of latent anger and resentment. Bitterness grows out of our refusal, to let go when someone or something is taken from us. Bitterness is being constantly hurt by a memory and is holding onto a hurt until it has a hold on you.

When you are offended or disappointed by others and allow the hurt to germinate in your heart, bitterness and resentment will take root. Bitterness is coupled with an unforgiving heart and negative, critical attitudes. Perhaps it grows from the literal loss of a loved one or of a job, or income, or relationship. Sometimes it might be subtler and grow from the loss of a reputation, or social position in a group, or control.

Normally bitter people have an amazing memory for the tiniest detail, and they wallow in self-pity and resentment. They record every offense and are always ready to show others how much they have been hurt. Bitter people defend their grudges constantly: they feel that they have been hurt too deeply and too often, and that this exempts them from the need to forgive.¹

No one wakes up one morning and decides to be bitter. But as expectations are dashed, as hopes are squashed, we become hardened from the inside out. We are short with others and hard on ourselves. But it never ends there, for what is the root of that bitterness is that we blame God.

BITTERNESS BLAMES GOD 1:6-14, 19-23

Naomi's husband and sons are dead. She is in a foreign land without any hope of help. Then she hears the news; God has visited his people and given them food.

This is God's gracious hand moving Naomi back to God's people, but she does not jump up for joy. Her bitterness may have been so deep that she grumbled at the blessing back in Judah and the troubles she has endured. As Naomi and the two daughters-in-law are heading west to Bethlehem, Naomi asks them to go back to their home in Moab. Here we see just how bitter Naomi really is.

Her language betrays her faith. She is not without faith, just bitter toward God (8)

She prays for the women, using a central theme to this book. Although the word is used only four times in the four chapters, it is the grid by which we should see what is happening. Naomi calls for the LORD (she uses the name of the covenant, the name by which God is known to his own people) to deal *kindly* with them.

Hesed: that important term so hard to translate into English, involves the ideas of mercy, lovingkindness, graciousness, and, compassion. It is kindness flowing from a relationship, not just as an emotion, but an action above and beyond duty. It is not just a nice favor, but it seeks to relieve the troubles of another.

They did this for her, her husband and her sons. So it is her prayer to Yahweh that he give them the security they need in finding a husband. She does not wish the life for them that she is now faces.

But in this embittered state, notice what she is saying to these women who protest and do not wish to leave their adoptive mother.

She sends them back to Moab, to worship Chemosh, the deity of death. She has nothing to offer. Even if she were pregnant at that point, it would be twenty years before they

could marry the new son and they would be beyond childbearing years. She is too old. She is hopeless. They need a man, not a bitter, old dried up hag, like her.

She reveals her bitterness to them in v13

She blames God for her troubles. He has it in for her. Yes, she is bitter, because He is cruel. God is her enemy, not her friend.

She applies to these women the term used of God, *hesed*, but will not use it of God. God is not kind, not good. He only is out to get me and has made me bitter.

Naomi's bitterness is spelled out in vv19-22. She returns home with Ruth in tow, Orpah returning to Moab. As they enter Bethlehem, the town is abuzz. The women of the town are unsure who this is who is walking through their village. "Is it Naomi?" The resentful withered woman responds:
Don't call me that, I am not pleasant. Instead call me Mara...bitter.

Her response begins and ends not so much with a name of God, but a title. I am bitter because the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. The Almighty has brought this calamity upon me! But in the center we have the heart of her complaint. She uses the personal name Yahweh.

I went away full (during the famine...but had a husband and sons) and Yahweh brought me back empty. It is His fault that I have nothing. (How'd you like to be Ruth? I'm nothing?)

The Lord has testified against me

She uses legal language. God has brought a case against me, he is out to do me harm.

Naomi's bitter faith is one in which she knows the truth of who God is, but experiences no warmth. For our faith to be flexible, alive and joyous, we must embrace the two aspects of our God. To short change one is to lose any vitality of the other. If God is not both sovereign or good, then our faith will be bitter.

- God is sovereign, in control. If not, then this emasculated deity is powerless to guide and protect. We become bitter because we worship an impotent God.
- God is also good. He is both willing and able to do that which is right, just and merciful. In the times of His dark providence we will not know, see or feel his goodness, but we trust, have firm confidence in the fact that He is good and will do good.

How many *Naomis* are here this morning? How many of you profess faith, can even tell others about God, but you struggle telling it to yourself. The gospel, in theory is good news, but the daily grind has left you bitter. God is nothing more than one who squashes your life?

You are bitter and angry. But what is worse, where you and Naomi part ways is that you walk into Bethlehem with a plastered smile on your face and a Bible under your arm.

She went back to God's people openly expressing her pain. In the coming weeks we'll see what happens next. She does not reject God, but she is honest in her appraisal of her life.

But we, what do we say? "I'm fine. Thank you very much. I have my support group in my medicine cabinet. My triad? Yea, I meet regularly with Jack and Johnnie...Jack Daniels and Johnnie Walker. Me bitter? Of course not, that would not be *Christian*."

I know all too well what bitterness does. I see it in your faces. I hear it in your words.

You may not have the clarity to speak like Naomi and declare to all God's people that you are bitter, but you are. You smile and try to be nice, but you are lying.

I like Naomi for her honesty. As spiritually sick as she is, we know where to apply the medicine.

The chapter ends with hope: it's the beginning of the barley harvest. God's *hesed*, his loving-kindness, unmerited favor begins to flow. Does this bitter old hag deserve God's grace? Not at all. But guess what, she'll get it in ways she would never imagine.

BITTERNESS IS ABSORBED BY THE GOSPEL 1:15-18

How does the gospel touch our bitterness? How does it absorb it? Ruth is not the answer, but she points to it. She is the most unlikely person to preach the gospel to this bitter old woman, this young Moabitess, hopeless, orphaned widow who will be hated by the inhabitants of Bethlehem.

Her words to Naomi in vv16-17 give us the context to understand how we should deal with bitter people and our own bitterness. The *hesed* which she showed to Naomi is lived out here.

She rejects Naomi's bitterness, withstands her tired frustration, rebuffs the command to leave. She will stay (v16a) even to death (v17b). She calls down a curse on herself if she were to leave. What is more, she will be there in life and death (v16b and 17a). But the key is in 16c.

She uses the covenantal language of God. Just as God repeatedly says to his people: "I shall be your God and you shall be my people" so she says in turn: "Your people shall be my people and your God my God."

A radical self sacrifice whereby she adopts not just the God of Naomi, but also her people. Despite Naomi's bitter faith, Ruth attaches to that faith and commits herself to God.

But Ruth is not the answer. God is. He is the hero of the text. Ruth points us to Christ.

The answer to bitterness is found in God's loving-kindness toward us. Her words are not a simple expression of personal determination. She frames her speech as a covenant promise complete with a curse. What is more, her vow is an incarnation of God's presence, using the words God spoke to His people, that His presence will be with them wherever they go.

She casts her decision in the form of a covenant promise. The invocation of a curse upon herself, should she break her word, is characteristic of such covenants in the ancient world. 'May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.' Such a form of words in the ancient world had the uncompromising force of a legal contract, rather similar to the words of a marriage vow today. Ruth echoes God's promise, for her vow is bigger than she can ever fulfill. But she serves the God who keeps His word.

In the same way, Paul, in Ephesians 4:30-32 not only tells us that bitterness should be set aside, but points us to the answer...and His name is Jesus.

We forgive not just in the same manner as Christ forgave us, for that is asking the impossible, but we forgive by the power of God's forgiving love toward us. The mercy God has shown to us is the means, the power, by which we set aside bitterness and embrace compassion.

Who left His Father's house to come and live with us, even to the point of death? Against whom did the Almighty's hand truly go out in bitter judgment, even though he had no sin of his own that would have deserved such punishment? Jesus is the answer to Naomi-needs, and Jesus is the answer that we need. Even death was not shirked in his identification with us; he died and was buried, just as we are. In his grace, he has clung to us, uniting our souls with his.

As a result of that covenantal bond of union between Jesus and his people no one and nothing – not even death – can now separate us from Christ. Jesus died on the cross both as the ultimate demonstration of God's love for his people and as the ultimate means by which God would bring all of his prodigal sons and daughters back to the true Promised Land, heaven itself. Though we have each gone astray like Naomi in search of bread that does not satisfy, God has not simply cut us off in his anger and wrath as we deserved.

Though the Lord could justly have dealt bitterly with us, he instead poured that wrath out on Christ on the cross so that we – rebellious insiders and alien outsiders alike – might be invited in. In Christ, we are welcomed to feast at the banquet we had by our disobedience forfeited, pursuing instead the empty tables of this world.²

Let Cornerstone be your Bethlehem, a house of bread.

Here be nurtured and loved, even though famine and pain has left you bitter. You may want to run and search in Moab for something better, rejecting God's kindness.

But come here to this table and eat together the bread that is Christ's body. Enjoy the sweet, pleasant wine that is His blood. He drank the bitter cup so you don't have to. Come, be feed, refreshed...and taste how much God loves you.

¹ Taken from <http://www.charminghealth.com/applicability/bitterness.htm>

² Iain Duguid, Ester & Ruth: Reformed Expository Commentary, 151.