

From Bitterness to Blessing

Most Christians can recount moments when they have turned their backs on God. As painful as it is to remember such moments, it is helpful for us honestly to face them. In such times we may wonder if the Lord would ever take us back and, if He did, how He would treat us. The story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz gives us answers to these important questions. Ultimately the book of Ruth is not primarily about Ruth, or Naomi, or Boaz, but about God Himself, specifically His steadfast love, His mercy, His kindness, and His covenant faithfulness.

Notice there are three major paragraphs in Ruth 1, and they divide geographically: from Bethlehem to Moab (vv. 1-5), from Moab to Bethlehem (vv. 6-18), and back in Bethlehem (vv. 19-22). In these three sections there are also three important and practical doctrines that inform our lives as believers.

Ruth 1

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. **2** The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. **3** But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. **4** These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, **5** and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Ruth's Loyalty to Naomi

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. **7** So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. **8** But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. **9** The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. **10** And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." **11** But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? **12** Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, **13** would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." **14** Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. **15** And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." **16** But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. **17** Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." **18** And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

Naomi and Ruth Return

19 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?" **20** She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. **21** 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?" **22** 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.

I. God is faithful to afflict us when we turn our backs on Him (vv. 1-5)

Naomi is very bitter about the afflictions she has experienced. She clearly does not see the ultimate purposes of God. But one thing she knows: it is God who has afflicted her (see verses 13, 20, 21). We often have a hard time with this, but we see clearly in the Scriptures that God afflicts us for various reasons (see Job 1, 2; Isaiah 45:7; Lamentations 3:37-38; Hebrews 12:7-11). God sometimes afflicts us simply to display His glory in His faithful saints. Sometimes He afflicts us because we have turned our backs on Him. This is the case with Naomi. On one hand it looks perfectly practical that Naomi and Elimelech would leave Bethlehem in a time of famine to go to fertile fields in Moab. The Bible, however, has clearly taught that we are to wait upon the Lord in the place of His blessing (see Deuteronomy 27,28). Naomi and Elimelech leave the Promised Land to go to a place where other gods were worshipped and where their spiritual lives would not be encouraged. Their pragmatic decision led to disaster. Naomi lost her husband, her sons married unbelieving Moabite women, and then her two sons died. Naomi is completely devastated and afflicted. God sometimes does this, even though it seems harsh at the time. God loves widows (see Psalm 146:9), so why would He afflict Naomi?

II. God is faithful through our afflictions to work repentance in us (vv. 6-18)

The key word in this section is the word “shuv,” which means “to return” or “to turn.” This is the word for Old Testament conversion, and it is used over and over again in this long paragraph. Notice that Naomi arose to return from Moab because she had heard that the Lord had visited His people and given them food (v. 6). It is also true today that we repent with a view to the beauty, goodness, and truth of Jesus Christ. Along the way, however, Naomi makes powerful arguments as to why her daughters-in-law should not come with her (see verses 8-13). She explains that their lives will be empty in Judah and that they have much better hopes for “rest” (v. 9) if they return to their “mother’s house” to find a husband. Orpah is convinced (v. 14), but Ruth “clung to her.” This word “clung” is the same word used for marriage, in which a man “cleaves” unto his wife. In Ruth’s comments, we find why she clings to Naomi. She basically explains that she has been converted! Not only does she say that she will go where Naomi goes and lodge where Naomi lodges, but she also says that Naomi’s people will now become her people and Naomi’s God, Yahweh, will be her God. Where will this repentance lead her?

III. God is faithful, through afflictions that lead us to repentance, to bless us (vv. 19-22)

The whole town is stirred when Naomi returns and they ask “Is this Naomi?” Naomi has been gone so long and has become a withered old woman. Apparently, they barely recognized her. She explains that they should cease calling her “Naomi” (which means “pleasant”) and call her “Mara” (which means “bitter”). She explains that the almighty God has dealt bitterly with her. She is unable to see the kindness of God. She forgets two important things: 1) she is home! 2) she has standing next to her one who is more valuable than seven sons (4:15), Ruth. But most of all she is unable to see the smiling face of God beneath and behind His bitter providence in her life. As William Cowper put it, “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace. Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.” The key to God’s loving kindness is seen in verse 22 as Naomi and Ruth the Moabite have returned to the land of promise at “the beginning of barley harvest.” We know what happens during that harvest. Ruth is given food by Boaz for both her and her mother-in-law. Ultimately Boaz marries Ruth. They have a child named Obez, who turns out to be the grandfather of the future King David. This King David turns out to be the forerunner of the greatest king of all, the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, God blesses richly His repentant children who have turned their backs upon Him. What a God!

Discussion Questions

1. Naomi and Elimelech made a pragmatic decision to leave Bethlehem and go live in Moab. What similarly pragmatic and unwise decisions are believers making today?

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2. What are the arguments Naomi gives to her daughters-in-law as to why they should return to Moab? (vv. 8-15) Why do these arguments make sense to her and to Orpah? Why do they not convince Ruth?
 3. What is the price Ruth pays to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem? What is the price required for us to follow Jesus?
 4. In her bitterness, what is Naomi missing upon her arrival in Bethlehem? (vv. 19-21) Can you recall a time when you also failed to notice God's kindness to you?
 5. What is the significance of their arriving at the time of the barley harvest? (v. 22)

Going Deeper

1. Is there some way in which you have pulled back in your relationship with Christ or the Church because of your afflictions or your fear of being afflicted?
2. Are you bitter about anything right now? Why?