

Ruth 1:19-22
November 20, 2016

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Hypothetical: Let's pretend that at 3pm this afternoon, a dear friend shows up at your house unannounced. You invite him/her in and you learn that they are struggling with deep pain and emotional distress while going through a dark chapter in their life. As you listen to your friend, you hear them say, "The Lord is afflicting me. He has brought misfortune on me. His hand is on me."

Q: How would you help your friend see their pain and suffering differently? What do you think you would say? [Let people engage this.]

This may not be a hypothetical. Perhaps you have found yourself in this situation before. Perhaps you can even identify with this person. We all like explanations.

Share my own thoughts: There's a difference between *wondering* if bad circumstances are happening because God initiated some form of discipline because of sin, or suffering in order to purify us vs *assuming* that bad circumstances are because the Lord's hand is upon us. As I've stated earlier, I don't bat 1000 or even close to it when trying to discern whether God is the causative agent intentionally bringing affliction per se. **BUT**, here's the thing. *It doesn't matter if God is causing it or allowing the natural consequences of behaviors or choices play out. It doesn't change the fact that God still loves us unconditionally and has every intention to keep showing His grace and mercy through the plans He has for each of us.*

Transition: Naomi is in a dark place. If you will recall from last week's lesson, she declared that the Lord's hand was against her. This mindset appears to be her default setting. Yet the Lord has every intention to take care of her through Ruth. He already had a plan in place, though Naomi was not able to see it at the time. She is just trying to cope and survive.

There will be times in our life when we encounter a "Naomi" who is in deep distress. We will meet a "Ruth" from time to time who is a foreigner. As we study this text, consider that **all of us can minister to the Naomis' in our lives by helping them experience God's love and care through you.** Let's begin by reading Ruth 1:19-22.

BOOK (NIV 1984):

V.19:

- So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

V.20:

- "Don't call me Naomi ("pleasant")," she told them. "Call me Mara ("bitter"), because the Almighty ("Shaddai") has made my life very bitter.

V.21:

- I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted (“testified against”) me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

V.22:

- So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q V.19: Apparently, you can’t just come into the town of Bethlehem and not be noticed! When Naomi and Ruth arrived, how many people noticed Naomi? [The whole town!]

Q: What was the buzz? [“Can this be Naomi?!”]

Q: Since the women of the town asked, “Can this be Naomi?” what was implied? [It suggests that Naomi looked different than when they last remembered her, which was probably worse than before. After all, it had been at least ten years since she had left Bethlehem.]

Q V.20-21: What does Naomi tell the women of Bethlehem? [“Don’t call me Naomi (“pleasant”),” she told them. “Call me Mara (“bitter”), because the Almighty (“Shaddai”) has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted (“testified against”) me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”]

Q: Do you think the women of Bethlehem understood what Naomi meant when she said, “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty?” [Perhaps. Maybe it was obvious.]

Q: Naomi chooses to interpret her circumstances as a reflection of the Lord afflicting her and bringing misfortune on her. Why do you think she assumed that? [The Lord had commanded the Israelites not to mix and intermarry with the Moabites. When her sons married Moabites, they had disobeyed the Lord’s command.]

LOOK:

Are you willing to be a channel of the Lord’s favor to those around us who are in a dark chapter of their lives? There may be a “Naomi” in our life that we need to minister to. Let’s embrace those who are in need and distress.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Pentecost, J. D. (1985). Daniel. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 1, p. 421). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

B. A bittersweet return (1:19–22)

1:19. The **two women** made the arduous journey to **Bethlehem**. The exclusively female character of this portion of chapter 1 continued, for **the whole town** of Bethlehem spoke through its **women**. Their question, **Can this be Naomi?** suggests that they remembered Naomi and that she had experienced an observable change, obviously for the worse.

1:20. Naomi's grief and depression, that had expressed itself toward God (v. 13), continued. She stated that her name **Naomi**, which means "sweetness or pleasantness," was improper for her in her condition. She said she should be called **Mara**, which means "bitter." Her reason was that **the Almighty** (*šadday*) had **made her life very bitter**. By speaking of God as "the Almighty" she emphasized His great power (or "provisions"; cf. comments on Gen. 17:1). This great God could not be resisted. The disaster He sent could not be averted. Naomi had such faith in God and His personal involvement in her life that she knew the bitter things she experienced were from Him. Her grief was real; obviously she took God seriously.

1:21. Naomi's complaint became specific. Years before she **went away** to Moab **full**, with a husband and two sons, but now she came **back empty**. Her grief and depression did not enable her to recognize her Moabite daughter-in-law as of any significant worth. Later, however, she experienced great benefit through Ruth (4:15). **Naomi** was sure her problem was all God's fault. Her return home had only intensified the depth of her grief. She saw nothing ahead but the loneliness, abandonment, and helplessness of widowhood. Her complaint began and ended with a reference to **the Almighty**, the name of the all-powerful God. But in the face of her deep tragedy God would soon proceed to act in gracious mercy.

1:22. This verse provides a transition toward hope for **Naomi**, as well as Ruth. God was not really her antagonist but would through His sovereign, superintending providence act with favor toward both widows.

Naomi had left Bethlehem because of a food famine. She **returned** with a famine in her soul. **The barley harvest in Bethlehem**, however, must have been a welcome sight. But Naomi in her depression might not have been impressed. (The barley harvest was in the month of Nisan [March–April]. See the chart "Calendar in Israel," near Ex. 12.)

Naomi thought she was returning empty-handed, but she had **Ruth the Moabite** with her. And the harvest was ripe; there was hope.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith (p. 400). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

1:20–21 Naomi correctly recognized that God did not necessarily bring only good situations into one's life but that He, at times, brought difficulties (cp. Job 1:21; 2:10). Elsewhere in Scripture such difficulties are understood to be for the purpose of testing or discipline (e.g., Pr 3:11–12; Heb 12:7–11), but Naomi has not attained that insight at this stage.

Prime, J. (2007). Opening up Ruth (pp. 41-44). Leominster: Day One Publications.

Emptiness from the Lord prepares the way for fullness from the Lord (vv. 19–22)

The arrival of Naomi back in Bethlehem caused a stir (v. 19). The exclamation of the women, ‘Can this be Naomi?’ indicates the change ten years had brought. Pain, sorrow, grief, regret, poverty and loneliness had taken their toll. Naomi had gone away prosperous and full, but returned empty (v. 21). Her husband, her sons and her prospects had all gone.

What is notable is Naomi’s recognition that the Lord was in control of all that had happened—‘Don’t call me Naomi,’ she told them. ‘Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but *the Lord has brought me back empty*. Why call me Naomi? *The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.*’ The question her words raise is, how did she say these things? Did she say them bitterly? Some would suggest that she did. However, the evidence would suggest otherwise, especially given the attractiveness of her faith to Ruth. There is a difference between experiencing bitterness and being bitter.

Hebrews 12:4–13 teaches that, in his love for his children, God uses hardships to discipline them. He does it for our good so that we may share in his holiness. ‘No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it’ (Hebrews 12:11). Hebrews 12:15 then warns, ‘See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.’ The way to avoid a bitter root is to recognize that the Lord’s loving discipline is always an act of grace.

Naomi’s use of the title ‘the Almighty’ in verses 20 and 21 is significant. It is a title used in Genesis at times when the Lord promises to bless abundantly beyond human imagining (e.g. Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11). Little did Naomi know that, despite the emptiness she felt, the Almighty was preparing the way for her to experience the fullness of his blessing. The narrator of the story hints at this with the final words of the chapter. ‘So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem *as the barley harvest was beginning*’ (v. 22). The place of famine was about to become the place of plenty. Although Naomi did not know it, the Almighty—who had sent the news that had prompted her return—was about to replace her emptiness with fullness.

For many, part of the process by which they are drawn to faith in the Lord Jesus is an awareness of the emptiness of life without God. This is often something God uses to prepare people for the discovery that the Lord Jesus came to give life to the full. Backsliders will often have a similar experience. Backsliding often happens when life is filled with things other than the Lord Jesus and the affairs of his kingdom, choking the Word and making it unfruitful. Sometimes the Lord has to bring the backslider to an awareness of the emptiness of such things, to prepare the way for a renewed experience of the fullness found only in the Lord Jesus.

Ruth 1:6–22 describes a journey. Our journey through life as Christians involves learning to trust the Lord’s loving providence in life’s changing scenes. We need to recognize that even the bitter experiences of life that leave us feeling empty are within his control and are designed for our good. John Berridge, an eighteenth-century Christian, wrote to a friend, ‘Sitting comfortably on the beach is very sweet after a stormy voyage; but I fancy you will find it more difficult to walk closely with Jesus in a calm than in a storm, in easy circumstances than in difficult ones. A Christian never falls asleep in the fire or in the water, but grows drowsy in the sunshine.’