



A Gracious God and a Bitter Bethlehemite

Ruth 1:6-22

God is no stranger to tough love. Like a good parent, He is not afraid to make life miserable for rebellious children. But while a sinful parent might lash out in anger, God's discipline always flows out from His goodness and is designed to have a good purpose in our lives (Hebrews 12:5ff). Yet we need to be careful that we don't see God merely as disciplining machine, as if God is sitting back waiting to wail us for every mistake. Romans 2 makes an interesting observation: "the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Romans 2:4).¹ Often God chooses to be patient and to send good things into our lives instead of hard things to try to get our attention. This is what we see in God's dealing with Naomi throughout the book of Ruth.

Elimelech made a decision, a decision that brought tragedy to his family. He chose to leave the land that God had given to Elimelech and his people to head to a foreign land to escape God's chastening famine. While there, Elimelech's death inspired more compromise and tragedy when his two sons married and then died without having

¹ Some might argue that God's discipline is part of God's goodness. While this is true, this is not Paul's point in Romans 2. In context, Paul is discussing God's patience with people who know the right thing to do and judge others by that standard but fail to live up to it themselves. He asks them if they think they will escape God's judgment and warns them that God's goodness in not judging them immediately should lead to their repentance. If it doesn't lead to repentance and they continue in their sin Paul warns they are storing up wrath for the final day, or as one Puritan put it, "Mercy abused turns to fury."

any children. But we see a turn in this part of the chapter, where God starts to show undeserved kindness and goodness to Naomi.

How do you think God's discipline and His goodness relate together? Why does God sometimes bring strong consequences for sin and sometimes show mercy and withhold the full consequences which we deserve?

A Gracious God (1:6-7)

In many ways, the book of Ruth is the story of God the good Shepherd pursuing a wandering, bitter sheep. That pursuit starts in verse 6, where Naomi gets some good news for the first time in this story and continues throughout the chapter as God shows Naomi that He has not abandoned her. It was God's goodness that eventually motivated Naomi to get up from the place where she should not have been to go back to the place where she should have been. She did not repent or turn back to God, in fact we will see later that she is still quite bitter with God. But showered Naomi with kindness anyway, and that kindness began the process of restoring Naomi.

Before going through this section, ask your group what ways they can see God's goodness in this chapter. They might have more than those listed here!

God Visits His People with Food (1:6-7)

Finally, after all the bad news at the beginning of the story, we read that God visited His people. In the Old Testament, God can visit for either punishment (e.g. Exodus 20:5; Amos 3:2; Hosea 1:4²) or for blessing (e.g. Genesis 21:1; Exodus 4:31; 13:19). In other words, God's visiting you can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on why He is visiting! The story doesn't fill in for us whether there was

² Most English translations will use "punish" in Amos 3:2, Hosea 1:4, and similar passages, but the Hebrew word is *paqad*, the word for "visit."

repentance on the part of Judah or if God simply was moved with compassion and decided to end the famine. The only perspective we have is that of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah, and nothing that any of them have done seems to have “earned” this.

God Sends Naomi Home with Ruth (1:16-18)

Naomi’s bitter complaint that God had sent her home empty (1: might seem a little harsh to us considering Ruth was standing right there! But what Naomi no doubt was thinking about was the fact that she had no men to provide and care for her. In the culture in which Naomi and Ruth lived, having husbands and sons was essential to having a good life, in fact throughout the story being married and having “rest” are one in the same (1:9; 3:1). Naomi didn’t have a husband or a son, she had a Moabite daughter-in-law with little chance of marrying a respectable Hebrew who would simply be another mouth that Naomi couldn’t feed.

But God knew what He was doing. By the end of the story, Naomi and everyone else is going to see what God is doing and how important Ruth is (cf 4:14-15). Sometimes in life God gives us what we need, not what we want. Naomi needed Ruth, and God had a plan to bless Naomi through Ruth in ways she couldn’t have imagined.

Can you think of times in your life when God gave you needed rather than what you wanted?

God Times Their Return Trip Perfectly (1:22)

Barley was the first crop to be harvested. For Naomi and Ruth to return at the beginning of the barley harvest meant that they would have had maximum opportunity to harvest food and prepare for the dry season.³ The author of Ruth is dropping another little reminder of

³ “The timing is critical and providential, for it means that Naomi and Ruth arrive in “the house of bread” just when the grain for bread is ready to be cut, that is, in late April or early March by our calendars. Since barley was the first crop to be harvested each year, the timing of their arrival meant

the way in which God has providentially taken care of Naomi and now Ruth.

Why would God do all of this for Naomi, especially after her bitter comments about Him?

How has God shown Himself to be kind and patient in your life?

A Dedicated Daughter-in-Law (1:8-18)

By this point in the story, Ruth is only known by name. This section introduces us to the character of Ruth by showing us an impressive display of loyalty.

Naomi's Charge to Return (1:8-9)

Naomi's first speech of the book is a little startling. The first time she speaks she tells her daughters-in-law to return to their own homes, rather than go with her to Judah. Why would Naomi do this? Her logic becomes clear as the story progresses. Naomi felt that Ruth and Orpah had a better chance of marriage in Moab, and felt that they had nothing to gain by following her to Judah.

On a material level, Naomi wanted what was best for her daughters-in-law. To remarry would mean a much easier life than picking up the scraps after reapers and potentially getting harassed or worse. It would mean the chance of a family and having sons to take care of them in their old age. And the odds of Ruth and Orpah remarrying in Moab would have been much better than if they returned to Judah with Naomi.

On a spiritual level, Naomi's advice was disastrous. She encouraged them to return to a pagan land and go back to a pagan lifestyle. By the

that Naomi and Ruth could get settled at a time when food would be relatively plentiful and that they were around to lay up stores of each crop for the dry season." Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 650.

end of this back and forth, she actually goes so far as to tell Ruth to follow her sister-in-law's example and return to her people... and her gods! Naomi does care about Ruth and Orpah, but sadly her spiritual depression led her to see a life in Moab serving Chemosh as better than a life in Judah serving Yahweh.

How might Naomi have responded to this situation if she had responded in faith and humility to God's work in her life?

People today may find themselves in a situation similar to Naomi. Discouraged by life, disillusioned by God, they wonder if He can really help them, let alone anyone else. They say the right things about God, but deep down they aren't convinced that God is really the best path for everyone.

What would it look like for a believer to allow spiritual discouragement to keep them from seeing God as the solution for everyone?

Orpah's Decision to Return (1:10-14)

Both Ruth and Orpah initially reject Naomi's proposal. They proclaim that they will return with her to be part of her people. This is an impressive display of loyalty, and one that calls for a lengthy speech on the part of Naomi to attempt to persuade them to go back to their homes. At the end, Naomi even tells the women that she feels bad for them that the Lord's hand has been against her. Finally, Orpah decides that she will go back to her own people after all.

Why do you think Orpah change her mind? How do you think the author of Ruth wants us to think about Orpah's decision?

Naomi is doing what she thinks is best for Orpah and Ruth, and Orpah lets her. This isn't an easy decision for Orpah. She cares deeply for Naomi and initially intends to go with her at great personal cost. She weeps with Ruth and Naomi at the very thought of leaving (1:9), then weeps again when she decides to leave (1:14). This is an emotional scene, and if we picture Orpah as just casually turning around and

going back, secretly glad that it was all over and she could move on with her life, we've missed the point. This was a tough decision for Orpah, but in the end she went home.

From our perspective, Orpah made the wrong decision. Yet how might Christians be tempted to make similar choices as Orpah?

How can we avoid making the same mistakes she did?

Ruth's Stubborn Refusal to Leave (1:15-18)

In contrast to her sister, Ruth refuses to leave. She "clings" to her mother-in-law. She then resists Naomi's attempt to get her to return by asking her to stop trying to get Ruth to leave her. Instead, Ruth pledges her loyalty to Naomi, her people, and her God.

The only example that Ruth has seen of followers of the Lord is Naomi and her family, why do you think she was willing to throw her lot in with God and His people after the example of Naomi?

The statements that Ruth here makes are some of the most beautiful in all of Scripture. She expresses her loyalty to Naomi, by starting with a somewhat abrupt request that Naomi stop asking her to leave, pledging her faithfulness in a masterful six lines of poetry, and then concludes by taking an oath that God destroy her if she back out.

Ruth's loyalty to Naomi is incredible because it is above and beyond what is expected. For her and Orpah to have at least started the journey with Naomi, and then to have Ruth's conversion is on display at the end of this statement. She didn't just say "May God do so to me..." she specifically said "May the Lord [Yahweh] do so to me..." Her oath was not taken in the generic name of God or even in the name of Chemosh; Ruth is a Yahweh worshipper now and she takes the oath in His name.⁴

⁴ Although later Jesus would condemn the taking of any oath (cf Matthew 5:33ff; James 5:12), this was because He desired His followers to be such people of integrity that simply saying "Yes," or "No," carried the same

A Bitter Bethlehemite (1:19-22)

The end of chapter one is disappointing. Despite her terrible start, by the end things are looking up in some ways for Naomi. Up until this point, we've only had a passing glance at how Naomi is processing all of this when she states that "the hand of the Lord is gone out against me" (1:13). But now we get a chance to see what is really going on in Naomi's heart, and it isn't pretty.

Naomi had been kind and sweet when she was with her daughters-in-law. She had even offered them a blessing in the name of the Lord. But her real perspective on her life comes out when everyone in the town starts talking about her.

The women of the town ask themselves if this is really Naomi. Why do you think they would ask that? How might Naomi look different?

Naomi's name meant lovely, but now she wants a different name – Marah, which means bitter. The reason she gives is that "the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me." She then goes on and interprets her life situation as coming from the hand of the Lord. The term she uses for God is interesting – she calls Him "the Almighty." Naomi doesn't question whether these events were outside of God's control, she sees them as from Him directly. Believers who go through times of deep sorrow often have no trouble viewing God as all-powerful. They rarely sit there and wonder "Could God have stopped this or was it beyond His control?" Normally the question they have is "How could God have let this happen and still be good?" Naomi isn't questioning God's ability; she's questioning His heart.

When Naomi says that God has "testified against her" she's using court language to describe God "bringing her up on charges" as we

weight as swearing by God Himself. In Old Testament times, the rules were that oaths should be taken by Yahweh (and not some other deity, such as Chemosh cf Deuteronomy 6:13; Joshuah 23:7), and obviously that if you swore by Yahweh you had better perform what you swore (Zechariah 4:3-4).

might say. What reason might God have had for bringing this calamity into her life?

Why do you think it is that believers tend to doubt God's goodness ("Why did God allow this?") rather than His power ("Could God have stopped this?")?

Naomi demands to be called Marah, but it's interesting that no one calls her that, including the narrator. How fortunate for us that God does not remember us for our low points. Rather, God is going to continue working in the life of Naomi to restore to her what was taken. The story of Ruth is in many ways the story of God pouring out His goodness on a bitter Israelite who had given up. As one commentator noted, Ruth may be the heroine, but in many ways Naomi is the protagonist [i.e., the main character].⁵

Chapter 1 of Ruth introduces us to some very familiar characters. There is Orpah, the person who makes a good faith effort to do the right thing, until things get really tough and no one expects you to keep going, at which point she quietly returns to the easier path. There is Naomi, the Christian who hasn't completely given up on God, but who's life is a mangled mixture of faith and unbelief, and who reeks of a bitter spirit. Finally there's Ruth, the somewhat naïve but faithful person who does what's right even when it's hard and they don't have all (or any) of the answers. And behind it all is God, who is silently, graciously writing a story that weaves these characters together in a way that brings hope and restoration to one family, and one day through that family to the whole world.

⁵ Robert Holmstedt, *Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 66.