

A Bitter Perspective Overcome by a Sweet Providence (Ruth 1:14-18)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on November 22, 2009

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The first few verses of Ruth have a number of tragic ironies:

- Elimelech (“my God is King” in Hebrew) leaves the land of the Hebrews and takes his family far away from the worship of the King of Israel, outside the promised land to a place named Moab, near Sodom and Gomorrah (God’s judgment is on their land so they go to the land where God’s judgment has historically come down even worse?)
- Bethlehem (“house of bread / food”) has a shortage on bread and food due to a famine – at least this part of the Promised Land doesn’t look so promising to them
- Elimelech and his grown sons move to Moab so they won’t die out, but all 3 of them die, while as we read later, the friends of Naomi are still alive back in Bethlehem (v. 20).
- Naomi’s name = “pleasant,” but her life sure hasn’t been

The Reformed Expository Commentary had the best explanation and title for this section: “Grace at the Bottom of the Barrel.” To set context it says that as Naomi journeys back to her Jewish homeland in v. 6-7, her words to her daughters in v. 8-13 should be read in light of the historical understanding that her son’s widows with her ‘were foreigners who would hardly be welcome in polite society in Bethlehem. They were Moabite women who by their very presence would be a constant reminder to Naomi and all those around her of her sin in abandoning the Promised Land and marrying her sons outside the covenant people. Every time she saw their foreign faces, she would be confronted with the heavy hand of God’s judgment upon her in the loss of her husband and her sons. It was in some ways similar to the situation of a young woman who has lived a rebellious life away from home and has a child outside of marriage. [Giving the child up for adoption] may be a hard choice, but if she keeps the child when she returns home, she (and everyone around her) may be constantly reminded of her sin by the child’s presence. Unless grace is powerfully present in the situation, the child could easily be viewed as an embarrassing intruder ... Orpah and Ruth, going with Naomi would be choosing the road to nowhere, embracing the path that led to emptiness ... Ruth was a nobody, an outsider, a Moabite of all things. There was nothing kosher about Ruth. She knew she would be about as welcome in Bethlehem as a ham sandwich at a bar mitzvah. Conventional wisdom shouted for Ruth to follow the way of Orpah, the most likely way of worldly security and significance.’¹

⁸ And 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 “May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each 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, but we will surely return with you to your people.”¹¹ But Naomi said, “Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?”¹² “Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons,¹³ would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is **harder [lit. “more bitter”]** for me than for you, for **the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.**”¹⁴ And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Orpah's kiss was a kiss goodbye as you see in the next verse, but there is tender and genuine love and affection Orpah the Moabitess has for her Jewish mother-in-law. Verse 9 says Orpah lifted up her voice and wept with great emotion and the phrase is repeated in verse 15. In verse 10 when Naomi first tries to persuade them to go back to their homeland where it will be better for them and where they can find a husband, Orpah *and* her sister say no, and they are determined to stay with their mother-in-law, which goes beyond ordinary expectations to extraordinary kindness (in fact, in verse 8 Naomi uses the rich Hebrew word *kesed* for the steadfast kindness her 2 daughters-in-law had shown her). There's no slight implied in the text toward Orpah; she has gone above and beyond normal natural love, but with Ruth something *supernatural* has taken place, I believe.

As Orpah is persuaded by the passionate logical plea of Naomi she kisses her goodbye and begins to turn back. But the end of v. 14 says "*Ruth **clung to her.***" Any Hebrew reader of the OT would immediately recognize that word from Genesis 2:24, speaking of the covenant love of marriage, where one leaves former family ties and cleaves / clings to a spouse, and the two become one till death.

In the days of the Judges / book of Ruth, the final Scriptures they had, used this same word "cling to / cleave to" especially for clinging to Yahweh as God exclusively, above all else, and it's commanded repeatedly in the context of love and service to the Lord in the land God gave His people, a covenant commitment to follow all one's life, renouncing all idols and false gods or false securities, because only Yahweh is.

Deuteronomy 10 ¹⁷"For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. ¹⁸"He executes justice for the orphan **and the widow** [as we'll see in Naomi], and shows His love for the alien [as we'll see in Ruth] by giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹"So show your love for the alien [as we'll see Israel do in chapter 2 to a foreign Moabite woman], for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²⁰"You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and **cling to Him**, and you shall swear by His name.

30:17 ¹⁷"But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land ...

¹⁹"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, ²⁰by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and **by holding fast to Him**; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

Orpah and Ruth are in the valley of decision, the crossroads of covenant commitment: old life vs. new life, Moabite religion and people vs. Israelite religion and people, natural logic and wisdom-which-made-a-lot-of-sense-practically vs. supernatural faith that's not by sight. When the going gets tough will I continue with God's people or go my own way? Orpah asks herself: "Should I stay or should I go?" God asks: "choose you this day who you will serve."

Those words in Deuteronomy were written to professing believers who had grown up in the faith, but God challenges them as church-going people must be challenged today: “*This day will you choose to commit to the Lord, to cling to the Lord no matter what, never let him go, love him, serve him, obey him, follow Him wherever He leads? I’m not just asking if you believe certain facts, are you willing to leave all for Him? Is your faith your family’s or yours?*”

Many writers believe both girls probably took on the same Jewish faith as their husbands, which was normal in that day. The man is covenant head of the home, and those in his household would have the same faith typically culturally, at least by profession. But when the authority’s no longer there, and when faith is tested, what will they choose? Every young person from a Christian home, every churchgoer, has to make this choice at some point, as to whether they just believe because that’s what their family was raised in or because that’s what they were taught growing up or if they truly believe for themselves. At the end of Joshua, right before the time of Judges / Ruth is a text very relevant to the historical background of Naomi’s family in Moab:

Joshua 23 ⁷*so that you will not associate with these nations [Canaanites], these which remain among you, or mention the name of **their gods**, or make anyone swear by them, or serve them, or bow down to them.* ⁸*“But you are to **cling to the LORD** your God*
 ... ¹¹*“So take diligent heed to yourselves to love the LORD your God.* ¹²*“For **if you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations**, these which remain among you, and **intermarry with them**, so that you associate with them and they with you ... [bad things happen if we cling to and love the wrong things]*

So in the context Ruth, those are the final words of the two great spokesmen for Yahweh in historical context. And Naomi is putting these girl’s faith to a test here, ancient Jewish writers said. Rabbis taught if a Gentile wanted to convert to the Jewish faith you should do everything you could to talk them out of it. I’m not sure if that’s what Naomi is doing here, but I do know that when most Christians today explain the gospel to a non-believer they usually try to make it as easy as possible. If you read the gospels, though, when people asked Jesus how to get to heaven, He usually made it as hard as possible, in fact He made conversion impossible humanly speaking; only a God-regenerated heart could follow Him

I believe that’s also the ultimate explanation for what we read next:

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵*Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to **her people and her gods**; return after your sister-in-law.”* ¹⁶*But Ruth ...*

Daniel Block writes: ‘The audience senses a decisive, dramatic turning point as attention again shifts to Ruth. One can imagine her loosening her embrace and looking Naomi directly in the eyes. With the ring of poetry, the now familiar words – her very first in the story – soar “on the wings of rhythm.” They still tower as a majestic monument of faithfulness above the biblical landscape ...

¹⁶*But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back 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.** [in the Heb. this phrase has much poetic emphasis, chiasm, no verbs]*

¹⁷*“Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may **the LORD** do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.”*

Ruth affirmed, “Wherever the future takes us, I will stay at your side.” ... She renounced her ethnic and religious roots and adopted the nationality and religion of Naomi. Henceforth, her [people] would be Israelites, her [G]od Yahweh. How surprising in view of Naomi’s bitter indictment of her God in v. 13! [But the bitter is followed by the sweet in this passage, some of the sweetest words in all of Scripture, supernaturally-produced words that are only explainable in a heart that has experienced the sweetness of sovereign kindness] ... she willingly abandoned her family, her family surroundings, and her religious traditions. She took on the uncertain future of a bitter widow in a land where she knew no one, enjoyed few legal rights, and – given the traditional Moabite-Israelite rivalry – faced possible ethnic prejudice.’’²

Ruth couldn’t see what the future held, but she had come to know who held the future in His hand. It’s noteworthy that she doesn’t say “Your God *will be* my God” (future tense verb as she does with every other phrase) she says emphatically ***your God my God***. God already *is* her God, but she wants Naomi to know it, her faith is her own and it is real, and no matter what Naomi says, no matter what happens, no matter what the future holds, Ruth has decided to follow Yahweh, though no one join her still, she will follow, no turning back, no turning back. These are words from a heart that already has true faith because it has been transformed by God.

John Piper writes: ‘The more you ponder these words the more amazing they become. Ruth’s commitment to her destitute mother-in-law is simply astonishing. First, it means leaving her own family and land. Second, it means, as far as she knows, a life of widowhood and childlessness, because Naomi has no man to give, and if she married a non-relative, her commitment to Naomi’s family would be lost. Third, it means going to an unknown land with a new people and new customs and new language. Fourth, it was a commitment even more radical than marriage: “Where you die I will die and there be buried” (v. 17). In other words, she will never return home, not even if Naomi dies [perhaps there’s even a trust that she will be with Naomi in the afterlife as well?]. But the most amazing commitment of all is this: “Your God ... my God” (v. 16). Naomi has just said in verse 13, “The hand of the Lord has gone forth against me.” Naomi’s experience of God was bitterness. But in spite of this, Ruth forsakes her religious heritage ... the God of Israel [is] her God. Perhaps she had made that commitment years before, when her husband told her of the great love of God for Israel and his power at the Red Sea and his glorious purpose of peace and righteousness. Somehow or other Ruth had come to trust in Naomi’s God in spite of Naomi’s bitter experiences. Here we have a picture of God’s ideal woman: Faith in God that sees beyond present bitter setbacks; Freedom from the securities and comforts of the world; Courage to venture into the unknown and the strange; Radical commitment in the relationships appointed by God. O, that Bethlehem might breed that kind of woman!’³

Ruth couldn’t see what Yahweh was doing but she’s committed (even using covenant language, OT faith language she must have learned from her Hebrew family from their OT). She is committed to walk by faith not by sight, and her immortal words are set to song memorably by a hymn-writer with no literal physical sight, Fanny Crosby:

ENTREAT ME NOT TO LEAVE THEE:

Entreat me not to leave thee, My heart goes with thee now;
Why turn my footsteps homeward? No friend so dear as thou!
Thy heart has borne my sorrow, And I have wept for thine;
And now how can I leave thee? Oh, let thy lot be mine.

I'll follow where thou ledest; My love will cling to thee;
 And where thy head is pillowed, My nightly rest shall be;
 Thy birthplace and thy kindred I'll cherish like my own;
 Thy God shall be my refuge, I'll worship at His throne.

Where death's cold hand shall find thee, There let my eyelids close,
 And, in the grave beside thee, This mortal frame repose:
 Oh, do not now entreat me; No friend so dear as thou;
 My heart would break in anguish If I should leave thee now.

Refrain: Entreat me not to leave thee (2x)
 Or to return from following after thee;
 For where thou goest I will go, And where thou lodgest I will lodge;
 Thy people shall be my people, And thy God my God,

Cowper's hymn says: *His purposes will ripen fast, Unfolding every hour;
 The bud may have a bitter taste, But sweet will be the flower*

A bitter perspective (v.13) is overcome by God's sweet providence that can bring a Moabite to Bethlehem if God needs her there (and that will bring another woman to Bethlehem 1,000 years later to birth the ultimate Redeemer)! The purposes of God aren't thwarted by geography or bitter theology, by circumstances, suffering, singleness, sorrow, sin (ours or others).

But a question remains and has been framed asking how did Ruth 'give up the security of her homeland, her friends, and everything she has ever known? What would cause her to do this knowing her father and mother [back in Moab] would never approve and indeed, would probably never speak to her again? There's only one answer. It's a one-word answer. *Grace* ... According to 2:11, her father and mother are still living, but Ruth willingly makes a costly choice. She is saying that something is more important to her than family honor and family tradition. She is choosing to turn away from what she's always known to something else, to Someone else. Yes, Ruth and Orpah both made a decision on that road ... Each of us today are faced with the same decision ... Are we going to go back to what we've always known, or are we going to move forward? Are we going to remain the same or go to the One who alone is the way, the truth, and the life? ... Ruth went forward, and as Ruth heads to Bethlehem she's heading into history.'⁴ And the first page of NT history records her name for all time and a distant descendant also born in Bethlehem after another young gal journeys there by the providence of God (Caesar's census) and this son of David (whose great-grandma Ruth 1 lays out) would say later in Matthew's gospel (10:37-38) "*He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.*

Ruth didn't know the name Jesus, of course, but her words and actions of faith were rightly understood as her seeking refuge in the wings of the LORD; Jews understood her words as conversion

Ruth 2 ¹¹Boaz replied to her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know.

¹²“*May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.*”

This is language used in Ps 91: God saves those who seek refuge in His wings (trusting), dwelling in the “shadow of the Almighty.” Spurgeon’s *Morning and Evening* explains both Orpah and Ruth ‘had an affection for Naomi, and therefore set out with her upon her return to the land of Judah. But the hour of test came; Naomi most unselfishly set before each of them the trials which awaited them, and bade them if they cared for ease and comfort to return to their Moabitish friends. At first both of them declared that they would cast in their lot with the Lord’s people; but upon still further consideration Orpah with much grief and a respectful kiss left her mother in law, and her people, and her God, and went back to her idolatrous friends, while Ruth with all her heart gave herself up to the God of her mother in law. It is one thing to love the ways of the Lord when all is fair, and quite another **to cleave to them under all discouragements and difficulties**. *The kiss of outward profession is very cheap and easy, but the practical cleaving to the Lord, which must show itself in holy decision for truth and holiness, is not so small a matter* ... O that this morning we may not be content with the [outward] form of devotion [even emotion], which may be no better than Orpah’s kiss, but may the Holy Spirit work in us **a cleaving of our whole heart to our Lord Jesus.**’

Notice Ruth didn’t leave it with “till death do we part” in v. 17 – this was not a temporary commitment while Naomi lived, and then after her death she would return to Moab and her people and seek a husband. Those were no longer her people or place, even after her mother-in-law dies, she’ll be with her. This is greater commitment than any wedding vow in some ways, not just “as long as we both shall live” (or as I’ve heard some modern vows “as long as we both shall love”)! Ruth says “even after you no longer live I will still be devoted and committed to you, Yahweh, and your people. And until I die I will be inseparably bound to your family and faith, and even in death, I want to be buried right next to you, no funeral in my old town with former family.” Where and how one was buried was hugely important to ancient societies, so this is no small statement that her old world is not her home, this is her new home, her new life, her new identity, she’s a whole new person.

This is extraordinary – this is no ordinary or natural response of a mere human heart, this is a supernatural work of God in a saved heart committed to follow the Lord wherever He takes her and whatever that means, no matter how hard the road is. This sounds again like what Jesus explained was part of what it means to follow Him and what marks those who are of the Kingdom of God in Lk. 9:61 “*I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home.*” But Jesus said to him, “*No one, after putting his hand to the plow and **looking back**, is fit for the kingdom of God.*”

If Lot’s wife is the classic OT negative example of faith in leaving one’s old land, Ruth is the classic positive example, fully forsaking her former life. Ruth’s faith is true, similar to the faith of the father of all true faith, Abraham. All who believe the Lord as he did are called his children, whether Jew or Gentile. Abraham in Genesis 12 also renounced his former land and people to follow Yahweh, not knowing where he was going or what the future would hold, but trusting the Lord even though the grass would look greener on the other side of the land his nephew Lot chose, and even though he was well beyond the physical possibility of having children.

There are some parallels between the two, and it's been pointed out that in some ways Ruth's leap of faith maybe even outdid his:

- She acted with no promise in hand, with no divine blessing pronounced, without spouse, possessions, or supporting retinue
- She gave up marriage to a man to devote herself to an old woman – and in a world dominated by men at that!
- As one writer, put it, “There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel.”
- To those who know how God worked in the past for Abraham, a sense of similar destiny hangs over Ruth's story. The audience wonder, may some larger plan emerge from it?⁵

In Lk 14 Jesus says unless one forsakes all former even familial ties and even hates his own life and forsakes all that he has, he cannot be the Lord's disciple (v.26, 33). There is a cost to discipleship, even the very term “disciple” itself is much better than the term Christian (3x in NT but “disciple” used about 300x) because the term disciple itself implies and includes following the Lord, not merely learning about the Lord. There is an attachment in the biblical word, not just an acceptance of facts or asking Jesus into a heart to be a part of our life. There is a counting of the cost in conversion, there is a covenant commitment involved in true saving faith. It's not a mere human decision; it is a supernatural regeneration and work of God making our commitment possible.

Mark 10:26-31 *They were even more astonished and said to Him, “Then **who can be saved?**” Looking at them, Jesus said, “**With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.**” Peter began to say to Him, “Behold, **we have left everything and followed You.**” Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father [Ruth may have left all the above] ... for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, **along with persecutions**; and in the age to come, eternal life.*

The bitterness of persecution and the pain of loss is overcome by the blessedness and sweetness of new family spiritually, blessings not only in eternity, but God's providence blesses in this life, too.

Naomi said in v. 13 that her life was hard (literally “more bitter”) and there's no question there was a bitter cup she had to drink. It's true that in God's Providence, God's hand *is involved* in hard and seemingly harsh circumstances, but that's not the entire picture. There is sweet sovereign kindness in God's dealings as well.

And sometimes the bitter comes before the sweet, as we read in *Pilgrim's Progress* Christiana was told after her husband died. For Naomi, the bitter came before the sweet. Bitter perspective in chapter 1 will be overcome later by sweet providence in chapters 2-4. But even in this chapter, the bitter-sweet pattern is there for those who have eyes to see it. Behind the seeming frowning Providence of God in the dark cloud of suffering, God's smiling face is there even when we can't see it and the rainbow of His faithful graceful mercy will shine more brightly after the storm, even though we can't see it before. And He is working all things together for good to those who love Him, even though we can't see it beforehand or behind the dreaded dark cloud overhead

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break with blessings on your head*

For Naomi, the cloud doesn't lift in chapter 1, and verse 18 doesn't even make clear whether she appreciated the bigness of the mercy she has already received from this extraordinary daughter-in-law...

¹⁸*When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.*

Daniel Block's commentary describes the closing of the scene this way: 'Naomi said nothing more to her. Though the phrase is slightly ambiguous, apparently Naomi withdrew into silence for the rest of the trip up into the Judean hills. The storyteller wants the audience to feel either slight alienation between the two women, or Naomi's preoccupation with her painful, uncertain future. Hence, like the pregnant pause between movements of a great symphony, the curtains falls on this dramatic scene.'⁶

The One who will come to the rescue, the ultimate Redeemer working behind the scenes, was One familiar with suffering and pain, and One who Himself drank a bitter cup from the Father that by grace overcomes human bitterness and sin with the sweet sovereign kindness of God.

¹ Daniel Doriani, 140-42.

² NICOT, 117-118.

³ www.desiringgod.org

⁴ *God of the Ordinary*, 41.

⁵ NICOT, 120-21

⁶ *Ibid.*