

God's Graciousness in Human Bitterness and Emptiness (Ruth 1:19-22)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on December 13, 2009

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R. C. Sproul has written a book called "The Prince's Poison Cup," a story for children that I have to confess I found moving as a bigger kid, a story of a King who had a golden cup that He gave to His child to drink from a fountain of bitter water, hurtful poison, a story that troubled Ella Ruth until she came to the end of the story and understood more what was taking place in that bitter cup the King's child drank from. There is power in stories, and I want you to turn to another story that has a Ruth in it, not Ella Ruth, but the book of Ruth, where we will continue a story that troubled its Ruth and her sister and mother-in-law Naomi who feels she has a bitter cup to drink from God and as His child she doesn't see why.

Our Heavenly Father tells us deep truths in stories, allegories, and parables, which are sometimes unforgettably etched on our souls and remain there long after we forget most of the things we learned in church. Jesus was the master illustrator, conveying rich truths by way of story, and what we have in the book of Ruth is a true story, not just about Ruth or even about Naomi (although Naomi's prominent in chapter 1), but primarily a story about the LORD and His Providence over both good and bad times, bitter and sweet.

Naomi's life in the story of chapter 1 has been a bitter cup to drink so far. Verses 1-5 tell how Elimelech had moved Naomi and their sons away from the Promised Land to Moab in the difficult days of the Judges, a low point spiritually in Israel and even physically by way of famine. In a tragic series of events, Naomi's husband died, but the bitter pain was at least alleviated by her two sons that men the world to her. Her boys had married two idolatrous women from Moab, bringing pain Naomi's heart, but the greatest pain comes when both her sons also die, it seems not that far apart; 3 funerals in a few years. Naomi is a widow, beyond marriageable child-bearing years, in a male-dominated world, her only family: 2 pagan daughter-in-laws whose very presence reminds of sin, suffering.

Everytime she hears them and others call her Naomi (meaning sweet or pleasant) it's as if the bitter pain stabs her again. But she hears in v. 6 that the Lord's providence has visited with kindness Israel's land again, providing food, and she decides to return and come back to her people, and her daughters travel part of the way, and as they near Bethlehem she urges them to turn back:

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

It says Orpah went back to her gods and her land but Ruth committed to Naomi and her people and land till death, even beyond Naomi's death, and above all, to the true God.

¹⁹ *So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?”*

Bethlehem is buzzing, and the Hebrew terms indicate it was with some excitement that Naomi is back after more than 10 years, her friends thought they would never see her again! She’s back, but the years have taken a toll on her, more than might be expected in that time frame. Her whole countenance looks different than the full and fun lady they knew, so it’s hard for some to recognize her as Naomi (the one whose very name means sweet or pleasant).

²⁰ *She [Naomi] said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.*

The Hebrew root word for “bitter” is repeated in the original with an ironic play on words. If we tried to bring that over into English it would be “call me Mara for the Lord has marred me.” Literally, “call me bitter, for Shaddai has dealt very bitterly with me.” It’s as if she’s saying, “everytime you call me sweet it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth again. Naomi isn’t my identity anymore, bitter is.”

Turn to Exodus 15. This is from Exodus/Passover language (*maror* was bitter herbs to remind them of bitter slavery), which every Jew would be familiar with, a bitter taste followed by sweet deliverance at the Red Sea which parted and then Israel was led on dry land by Charlton Heston to the other side and the Egyptian army perished.

15:23 *When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for **they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah.***

Any Jewish OT woman would remember sister Miriam leading the praise band a few verses earlier. Let’s look back at that context.

²⁰ *Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dancing. ²¹ Miriam answered them, “Sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; The horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea.” [what a sweet deliverance from their bitter slavery!]*

²² *Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for **they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah.** ²⁴ So **the people grumbled** at Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” ²⁵ Then he **cried out to the LORD**, and the LORD showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters, and **the waters became sweet.** There He made for them a statute and regulation, and there **He tested them.** ^{26b} **...I, the LORD, am your healer.**”*

God’s graciousness to human bitterness is the theme of this Exodus passage and the theme of this sermon. Naomi may not have been reflecting sufficiently on the very word she is using for her identity but God’s identity is One who specializes in turning bitter trials to a sweet taste in mouths who have tasted and seen the Lord is good.

God's goodness continued to His people despite their grumbling, but the key was when faith *cried out to* the Lord instead of *complaining about* the Lord. The Lord is the healer of His people, as the end of v. 26 says, and He is the shepherd who leads them beside sweet and still waters. His graciousness can heal even our bitterness, as we'll see in chapter 2.

I like how one writer draws God's graciousness out of even *Mara*, in OT not 'just the definitive place of grumbling bitterness, it was also the place where God's grace to grumblers was definitively displayed. If Naomi had pondered that truth from the history of the covenant people, it might have brought new hope in her life! In addition, if Naomi felt that she was presently located in her own personal *Marah*, she could have remembered that the next stop on the wilderness road for the people of the exodus was not more of the same, but *Elim*, the place of rest, with its 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees (Ex. 15:27) ... even along the road there were brief oases of comfort that God had provided in his goodness for his people. In the midst of her pain, though, Naomi had completely forgotten the history of God's faithfulness ...

Who left his Father's house to come and live with us, even to the point of death [trading the sweetness of heaven for a bitter cross]? 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 Naomi needs, and Jesus is the answer that we need ... He left the glories of heaven in order to say to us, "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and [my Father God your God and Father as well]"

... 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 [like Naomi] 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 have justly 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.¹

Back in Ruth 1, it's on the heels of the great graciousness and kindness by Ruth to Naomi in verses 16-17 that Naomi then says:

²¹ *"I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?"*

"I had everything, now I have nothing," she says to the ladies of the town, with Ruth standing right next to her. Not exactly a kind compliment after Ruth's tremendous pledge of self-sacrificial love to Naomi, one of the high points of the OT and what would later prove to be one of the high points in redemptive history before this book is done. Ironically in self-pity Naomi thought it was so great before, like the Israelites who grumbled "we had it so much better in Egypt before, great food, etc.?" What?!! *Discontentment causes amnesia and blindness to good.* In Ruth 1:21, the word "empty" is in the emphatic position, but God's purposes will be opposite of her perspective in an emphatic way. Naomi thought she was full before and God brought her back empty, but in reality she was empty before and God has brought her back to make her full!

God's graciousness to human bitterness and emptiness, is one of God's sweetest specialties. Hymn-writer William Cowper wrote:

*His purposes will ripen fast, Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a **bitter** taste, But **sweet** will be the flower ...
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.*

And behind the dark cloud Naomi so much dreads there is big mercy that will break with blessings on her head. God has a big smile right behind it all as He looks at Naomi: "you have no idea, my child" :) *Look at ch. 4.* Even though Naomi feels like life is empty because she doesn't have a man or any son anymore, she's not empty. If she opens her eyes she'll see the blessing God has for her right next to her as she walks into Bethlehem! The other ladies see it in **4:15b** ... *your daughter-in-law, who loves you ... is **better to you than seven sons** ...* i.e., Naomi is more full and blessed than any Hebrew woman, though her eyes of bitterness can't see it.

The blessings of family and church family, spiritual family should fill us with joy.

Eric Kress asks: 'Isn't Naomi's perspective typical of us? We get easily preoccupied with what the Lord *hasn't* given us that we miss the treasure of what He *has* given us. "If only I had a [spouse]!" "If only I had better parents!" "If only I had a better job!" "My life is so empty. Why doesn't God do something to fill this void?" But He has. He has given us so much already, far more than we deserve. He's given us Christ. He's given us everything we need for life and godliness in Christ (2 Pet 1:3). A better plea would be, "Oh, Lord! Give me eyes to see what You've already given me!"²

It certainly seems in v. 20-21 that Naomi is far more focused on past bitterness than sweet blessedness she's received from Ruth. Ella Ruth, in the story of the bitter cup we started with, as a young child struggled to understand why her father gave her something to drink that tasted so bitter at the time, but it was actually the sweet and tender love of her father that drove him to do so. Father knows best, and she needed to trust him, and he did it even though he knew his child's little mind would not fully understand. But he also knew she could understand it a little more if she heard a story. And as children of a heavenly father, we need to trust Him. Father knows best. Medicine doesn't always taste good but it's for good that He dispenses it, to help not hurt, not more than we can take. We may not know why we are given bitter doses at times, and God knows our little minds could not fully understand it even if He did fully explain it, but we can understand it a little more at least if we hear it explained in a story. That's one thing this book is

After Grandpa finished reading the story to Ella of the Prince's Poison Cup, he leaned over to her and said, "Ella, I want you to remember, that we get sick because of sin. That's why the medicine that makes us well usually looks and tastes bad. But the Prince had to drink something far more terrible so that His people might be healed ... so each time you have to take bitter medicine, I want you to remember the story of the Prince's Poison Cup."

"Oh, I will Grandpa," Ella promised. "And you know what? I know another prince who died for His people?"

"Do you?" Grandpa asked, with a twinkle in his eye.

The cup of wrath that our Lord had to drink from His Father was so bitter that even Jesus in His full humanity as He contemplated it, prayed: *“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not as I will but as you will.”* But because Jesus drank the full bitter cup from His Father, there is sweet salvation for all who have the same faith as Ruth. 2 Corinthians 2:15 (KJV) *For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved ...”*

And our sweet Savior’s grace calls us to remove all our bitterness:

Ephesians 4 (KJV) ³¹*Let all **bitterness**, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice...5:1 Be ye therefore followers of God, **as dear children**;* ²*And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a **sweet-smelling savour**.*

In v. 21 Naomi felt that Shaddai, the Almighty sovereign God, was against her, but God is for His dear children, not their enemy. If God is for us, who can be against us? As Naomi should remember from the story of Joseph, even sinful free actions of sinful people are not only used by God, but are intended by God for our good.

Her statement in v. 21 that the Almighty had afflicted her was not wrong. It is right theology to recognize that in death or disaster, the Lord takes away, but the other half is *“the Lord gives...blessed be.”* The Lord gives in v. 6, though He had taken away in v. 1-5, and the Lord has not stopped giving to Naomi and keeps on giving even when she or we can’t see how He is giving to His children:

Ruth 2:20 (NASB95) ²⁰*Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed of the LORD who has not withdrawn his kindness ...”* (NIV: *He has not stopped showing his kindness ...*)

And even when our eyes can’t see God’s kindness when He gives us trials, He is kind and He is giving, if we have eyes of faith to see.

One poet wrote: I stood a child of God, before His royal throne,
And begged Him for one priceless gift for me to call my own
I took the gift from out His hand, and as I would depart
I cried, "But Father, this is a thorn, and it has pierced my heart.
"This is a strange and hurtful gift which Thou hast given me!"
He said, "I love to give good gifts, I gave my BEST to thee."
I took the gift, and tho at first, the cruel thorn hurt me sore,
As long years passed, I grew at last to love it more and more.
You see God never gives a thorn, without this added grace,
He takes the thorn, to pin aside the veil which hides His face.

Paul’s thorn *was* given to him by God--he didn’t ultimately blame Satan, even though the text says in some sense it was a “messenger of Satan”—in an ultimate sense it was from God. And though God could have taken it away, He wanted Paul to see divine grace was sufficient. Naomi will see that and we need to see that as well. He who has eyes to see let him see the sovereign kindness of Shaddai.

We can appreciate Naomi's honesty and transparency here. She is not a fake Christian with a fixated smile who pretends things are fine, when they're not. Naomi should be an encouragement to others who struggle with emotions at times but might not admit to others. Naomi opens her heart to the godly ladies of Bethlehem and is in essence inviting their counsel and comfort and care. We need to weep with those who weep, be compassionate and caring and not just correcting theology without the sympathy of our sovereign.

John Angell James, lived a couple hundred years ago, and wrote a book for people like Naomi and Ruth, *The Widow Directed to the Widow's God*. Listen to the intentionally-ordered table of contents: Sympathy – Submission – Instruction – Consolation - Confidence in God - Benefits of affliction - Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah

The last chapter is a model letter to one who lost her husband:

'Yes, dear friend, our hearts have bled. The wound inflicted has been deep. We have felt that the stroke was full of anguish, that it went to our very souls. We will not deny that this is all true. We will not please ourselves with the delusion that the deep, deep wound which the hand of God has inflicted, can ever cease to bleed. But, O my friend! 'is there not balm in Gilead? is there not a physician there?' Is not that physician our Savior; wise to discern, prudent to manage, strong to save? Has not the kind hand which smote so deeply, accompanied the stroke with many softening, mitigating circumstances? Oh yes; I trust we both feel that it is so. It is God who has afflicted us, the infinitely wise, compassionate, and faithful Jehovah, the Lord our God. And does it not argue great lack of confidence in him, if we sink into despondency when he chastises us? Does it not show, either that we think we could manage things better than he can, or that there is something which we have not cordially submitted to his disposal?

And now, O God, you are the potter, and we the clay. O how this quells the murmurings of self-will; how it settles the restlessness of the troubled spirit; how it plucks the sting from the rod of affliction! God knows best! Precious truth! It is an anchor to the soul, sure and steadfast, which keeps it from shipwreck, amid all the storms and tempests of the troubled sea of life. Oh, for a firm, unwavering faith! ... But, ah! this, a firm unwavering faith, is too often lacking. We miss our dear friend ... the arm which supported us, is withdrawn. It is a chilling thought. Cherished alone, we feel its freezing, benumbing influence fastening upon all the springs of comfort and hope, and turning every stream of joy into one wilderness of cold and motionless despair.

But, my dear friend, we must not view our trials thus. We must think much and often of the blessedness of those whose removal we lament, of the perfection of the divine government, of the certainty of the promise, that 'all things shall work together for good to those who love God,' of the rapid approach of that hour which will unite us eternally to those in Christ whom we love, of the danger of creature-comforts, and of the suffering life on earth of our glorious High-priest and head, and his assurance that it is through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom. Oh, my dear friend, if we are Christians, there is a glorious prospect before us—as much of the good things of this life as an infinitely wise and kind Father sees to be best for us ...'³

I sympathize with Naomi and appreciate her frankness and faith. She has been hurt and feels empty but she has come back to God and His people and the place of His grace and the means of grace rather than keeping herself isolated in Moab and she knows she is in need of grace and makes no pretense of any self-sufficiency.

Her feelings are wounded but her faith remains, and there's a little hint of it in the grammar of v. 21 – literally she says the Lord has *caused her to return*. God is the One who has brought her back, though God had brought suffering as well. His grace brings back.

Hosea 6 ¹“Come, **let us return [same root word Naomi used] to the LORD. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us.** ²“He will revive us ...

⁶For I delight in **loyalty** [or “mercy,” Heb. *kesed*] rather than sacrifice, And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. ⁷But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant [the covenant in Eden, death for disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit but covenant grace is still offered] ... ¹¹Also, O Judah, there is a harvest appointed for you, When I restore the fortunes of My people [terms from Ruth 1:1, my people, Judah, return, harvest]

I mentioned before that the word “return” is the key word in chap. 1, 12x it's used, a Hebrew root used for return/reverse direction, coming back or going back, sometimes with a restoration nuance:

Ruth **4:14** *the women said to Naomi, “Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel.* ¹⁵“May he also be to you a **restorer of life ...**”

The God who caused difficult things in her life is also the God who would cause her life to be restored as God causes her to return.

In Acts 3:19, the word used in the Greek OT translation of Ruth, is used by Peter to tell his spiritually wandering Jewish brethren: **repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that *times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord***

In Ruth 4:16, Naomi's empty hands are filled by God with a baby boy that refreshed her soul and the tears that then flowed were joy. The one who wanted a name change to bitter has a sweet blessing! ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. [no grandma was ever happier!] ¹⁷The neighbor women gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi!” So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David [at this point in my studies, I had goosebumps, tears, and great joy]

It moved me to read afresh the most famous words this David would ever write, using key terms from this story that I must think he had learned from hearing great-grandma tell the old old story.

The LORD is my shepherd ... He causes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters [*menucha* – used in Ruth 1:9 where she wishes her daughters will find rest].

³**He restores my soul** [same Heb. phrase as Ruth 4:15]; **He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.**

⁴**Yea, though I walk** [same Heb. word in Ruth 1:21, “I went out”] **through the valley of the shadow of death** [same word used in Ruth 1:8 of the death in Naomi's family],

I will fear no evil [same root at end of Ruth 1:21 “afflicted me” or ESV: “the Almighty has brought calamity upon me”];

For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me [a truth David’s great-great grandma will understand more but even in chap 1, her hands were never empty, Jesus is holding them]

... **My cup runs over** [compare Ruth 1:21 vs. 4:15b].

‘Surely goodness and mercy [kesed –the key term in Ruth 1] shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.

**Follow is a word that’s almost always translated “pursue,” even in the sense of “hunting or chasing down”—the pursuing providence of the Lord will bring us back, even if He has to pick us “prone to wander” sheep and put us on His shoulders and carry us.

²² *So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*

And as Naomi and Ruth walked into town past one of its stables they had no idea that they would one of their descendants to come would be born in that very stable, the ultimate descendant of Ruth’s future David, the Son of David, Jesus Christ. The good news is the Good Shepherd’s sheep hear His voice and will never be lost utterly but will repent and be brought back.

- *We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us turned to his own way but the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.* (Isa. 53:6)

- *For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.* (1 Pet 2:25)

- Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep

- When one out of 100 is lost He goes after that one and personally brings it back on His shoulders to the tune of great joy in heaven

- Jesus seeks and saves the lost and His sheep He has the power to keep and none of His elect precious sheep will ever be lost, He said

What a wonderful Savior we have! What a wonderful Shepherd He is!

¹ Iain Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, Reformed Expository Commentary, p. 150-51.

² Eric Kress, *God in Everyday Life*, p. 42.

³ John Angell James, *The Widow Directed to the Widow’s God*, available at www.gracegems.org