

Brokenness and Faith (G. Kato)

The book of Ruth is one of my all-time favorite books of the Bible. This book has just so much to say that one could easily spend a month studying the book. So I won't even pretend to do it justice in this brief article. Instead let's look at three Hebrew words that weave a thread through the book of Ruth. **Bitter** (Hebrew: mā'ā) smoothed with **Kindness** (Hebrew: hesed) and healed with a **Redeemer** (Hebrew: gō'ēl).

As John Piper puts it, "One of the main messages of this little book is that God is at work in the worst of times. When you think he is farthest from you, or has even turned against you, the truth is that he is laying foundation stones of greater happiness in your life."

What is the context of this book?

We think back to the time Joshua entering the Promised Land. We are reminded of Joshua 1:6:

"Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them."

For 400 years after entering the Promised Land there would be cycles of sin and brokenness. In the days of Judges which is the time period of Naomi, things were rough. In the nation there was moral anarchy for we read in Judges 21:25:

"In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes."

These are words that could represent life here today. I have heard people justify their actions with comments such as, "I know God wants me to be happy, so in my case it was OK to leave my wife for someone else who would make me happier." If it felt right to him, it was justified. No truth here, just selfish motives and rationalizations.

It was in this kind of setting we meet Naomi. There was a famine in the land so Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons sojourn from the town of Bethlehem, which literally means "house of bread," to Moab. The Hebrew word for sojourn, "gûr" seems to indicate their intention was to go there just for a period of time, not permanently. Permanently or not they enter a land where they were not supposed to go, to a land of their enemies. Perhaps they viewed Moab like some today would view a casino – a place to run in quick, make large sums of money and get out. They may have justified their actions since their tenure there was intended to be for a short time. In the end it was not the life-saving, famine escaping situation they intended it to be. Things went from bad to worse.

When Naomi's husband Elimelech passed away, her two sons each took a Moabite wife, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After living there for ten years, both sons, Mahlon and Chilion, died leaving Naomi without her husband and children (Ruth 1:3-5).

For a Jewish widow in a Jewish community, to be left without husband and sons is a very serious situation. Now Naomi is left in a devastating position; she has no man or children to support her in a foreign land; she was left alone in Moab with no hope for the future. So where does she turn? Where does she go?

In Ruth 1:6-7 we read:

"Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the Lord had visited His people in giving them food. So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah."

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We see Naomi goes back to her people when things are hopeless. She may have initially gone to a place she was not supposed to go, perhaps out of obedience to her husband, but when things became dire, she knew where she had to go. Even though the road would be a dangerous one, especially for three women traveling alone, she headed home.

Sometimes that's the way things are with us isn't it? It takes being shaken to the core, losing everything and word comes to us that there is "food" at home. Food means survival. Sometimes going into survival mode is all we can do. Have you ever felt this way sitting in church in the Lord's house?

Feeling depression: "I'm totally broken, but I'll drag myself to the Lord's house to be with His people."

Feeling listless: "I'm too depressed to even cook, but maybe I can get something to eat food at the fellowship hour."

Or feeling ashamed: "I'll eat in the kitchen so don't have to smile and pretend that all is well."

Aside from the law of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10), the Law of Moses made no provision for the care of widows whose husband had no brothers. Yet for Naomi, the chances for survival were better among her people. God can reach you and I even hiding in the kitchen, and later we see that Naomi did not even try to hide her desperate condition (Ruth 1:20).

In her despair, Naomi did make some mistakes. She did not view her situation as a chance to minister to her daughter-in-laws. Instead she breaks the first commandment of the Law of Moses (Ex 20:3; Deut 5:7) by encouraging her daughter-in-laws to return to the Moabites and indirectly to their idolatry (Ruth 1:8). Perhaps she had never been taught in the chaotic times of Judges that she an Israelite was to be the path of redemption and blessing to even the Moabites (Ex 19:6). Instead she tells her daughter-in-laws in Ruth 1:8-9:

"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. 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."

If you think about it, how could Orpah and Ruth find true rest apart from the Lord, in the house of an unbelieving husband and in a pagan culture?

What happens at that point? Orpah gives Naomi a kiss goodbye. Ruth, on the other hand, makes a decision that translates into giving up hope of marriage, children and earthly security. Instead of leaving, she literally clings to Naomi and her God. The Hebrew word "dābaq", to cling, is the same word used for the Israelites being commanded to "dābaq" or "hold fast" to the Lord.

Ruth declares the words of ultimate kindness and sacrificial commitment to Naomi and her God. She declares and invokes the covenant name of God:

"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. 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 1:16-17)

Ruth's vow of loyalty is astounding. The Aramaic Targum, an ancient translation, captures the sense of Ruth's Moabite vow to her Jewish mother-in-law:

"Do not urge me to leave you, to go back from after you for I desire to be a proselyte."

Ruth views herself as a proselyte, a follower of Yahweh God and forsakes her family, culture, and people. She may never see her own mother and father again. At the same time she remains ethnically Moabite, showing us that our God transcends family, culture and race. A Moabite would become the grandmother of King David. Ruth's commitment went far beyond that to just Naomi; she was pledging to follow God even after Naomi died.

How genuine is your faith? Is it with the commitment and loyalty as the Moabite Ruth? Will it be there if your loved ones died or your world collapsed and disappeared?

In Ruth 1:19, Naomi and Ruth leave Moab and arrive in Bethlehem.

"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?'"

There was no welcome home party. The word "stirred" can be understood as "the town hummed with the news of their arrival." Perhaps it was the surprise of seeing Naomi's change in appearance and misfortune, and the gossip it generated. The town of Bethlehem sees Naomi accompanied by a foreigner Ruth. No husband. No sons. The woman they knew as Naomi, translated as "Pleasant," is broken.

Reflecting her change in circumstances, Naomi decides to change her name to "Mārā'," because she believed God now made her life very bitter.

"She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 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?'" (Ruth 1:20-21)

Here we see a reflection of Ruth's brutal honesty. Her heart is opened up because the pain was so great. For Naomi, the place to do this was appropriately in Bethlehem her home. For us it is in the local church, because this is home for the community of Believers. This is where we should be able to share most openly and honestly.

Did God really abandon Naomi? In attributing her misfortunes to God, Naomi sees herself as a defendant before a court of law (Ruth 1:21), which resulted in God's displeasure. But this was in error, because Naomi and Ruth arrive just in time for the barley and wheat harvest, which was incredible timing. Then Ruth meets Boaz and the rest is history.

In the remainder of the book we see how the miracle of redemption plays out. In redeeming Ruth, Boaz shows us a picture of our redeemer Jesus Christ.

Who would have guessed that Ruth would be the Grandmother of King David?

But do we see the glorious ending when we are suffering?

In summary, take a look around your church. Are there Mārā's in your midst whose character is so compelling that a widowed daughter-in-law would leave everything to follow her home and join with her faith? And if you are a Mārā', are you genuinely transparent so that we, your home community like Bethlehem can help? And for the church, can we be as faithful and obedient as Ruth or a Boaz to serve those around us in need?

Despite being a Gentile, Ruth's faith and obedience was the cause of her redemption by Naomi's kinsman redeemer Boaz, which resulted in the healing of Naomi's bitterness. In similar fashion, we can find resolution of our bitterness by having faith in and being obedient to our Redeemer and Healer Jesus Christ.