

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE WISE GO TO GOD

(A Mother's Day Message from the Book of Ruth)

If I were to ask you which **man** in the OT suffered through the most difficulties, my guess is a number of you would pick "Job" and I would agree. If I were to ask which **man** in the NT—excluding Jesus—suffered the most difficulties, many of you would suggest "Paul" and I would again agree.

But if I were to ask you which **women** suffered the most in the Bible, I think it would be a little more difficult to find a unanimous choice. In the OT, think about what it would have been like to be Eve—holy, sin-free (for a while)—then disobey God and watch your whole world unravel! Adam and Eve suffered banishment from the garden of Eden and tree of life, but then had the joy of bringing children into the world. That joy was shattered, too, when Cain the eldest killed his younger brother Abel. In the NT, is difficult to imagine anyone suffering more than Mary, the mother of Jesus. From the whispers behind her back for "being with child" while still claiming to be a virgin...to the challenges of raising a sin-free child...to the horror of watching her son die a brutal death on the cross...it is hard to imagine a woman suffering more than she did.

A woman we often forget about is Naomi, the mother-in-law of Ruth. Ruth and Boaz get most of the attention because they are the main characters in the book of Ruth, but much can also be learned from Naomi. She had a difficult life—probably as difficult as any woman ever had—yet she stubbornly hung onto hope and did things God's way even though she didn't always **feel** God's love.

Please turn to Ruth 1:1-9. So why talk about a woman who experienced extreme difficulty on Mother's Day? Because regardless of the age you are as a mother—like my youngest daughter who is a mother-to-be for the first time or Bev whose "baby" is closer to 60 than he is to 50—motherhood (and wife-hood) is not easy. And difficulties of life are not restricted to just **mothers**, are they—we **all** experience them. The question, then, is not how to avoid the tough times in life; rather, it is what you do when they come.

1. Realities of Life

A. Life is hard

--V 1 "Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land." Times were tough in a number of ways. If you know anything about the book of Judges, you probably know these two things: 1) every man did that which was right in his own eyes; and 2) as a nation, God's people were in a vicious cycle of disobedience, followed by chastening, followed by repentance and crying out to God, followed by deliverance by a "judge," followed by another round of disobedience to God. On top of the political and social unrest, there was also "a famine in the land." Food was scarce and some suggest that this might have been during the time of Gideon in Judges 6. The children of Israel would do their planting and just before harvest, the Midianites would invade the land and destroy all their crops.

--In verse 2 we see that a man, his wife, and two sons decided to leave Bethlehem of Judah and go to the country of Moab. The meanings of their names are both interesting and significant. The man's name—Elimelech—means "my God is King." Naomi means "pleasant, lovely, my sweetness, and delight." Mahlon probably meant something like "weakly" or "sickly;" Chilion meant something like "pining" or "wasting away." You certainly don't get the impression that they were "strapping" young men!

--V 3 "And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons." Imagine being Naomi. Famine comes, you leave your homeland and your relatives, then your husband dies and your only source of support is now your two sons whose names mean "weakly" and "wasting away." Doesn't sound like much of a promising future, does it? How old were the boys when they left Bethlehem? We don't know because we are not told. How old were the boys when their father died? We don't know that either.

We also don't know how much time transpired between her husband's death and the marriage of her two sons. But we do know they stayed in Moab and we do know that her two sons became young men and we do know they married. Notice verse 4: "And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years."

Let's not hurry past the "ten years." I can't help but think that hope is once again springing in the heart of Naomi. No longer does she have to provide for her sons—they can start providing for her! On top of that, there is the wonderful possibility of grandchildren!

And then—BAM—comes verse 5: "And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them..." How or why they died—and how far apart they died—are obviously not important because God didn't see fit to give us those details. What is important is this: "and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband."

Hope once again is shattered. Her source of financial support was gone, her source of family comfort was gone, and her source of future joy—grandchildren—was also gone. If that wasn't bad enough, she now had two daughters-in-law that she felt somewhat responsible for. Why would God do this? We don't know, do we? What we don't see here, though, is any mention of Naomi sinning against God. Losses and trials are sometimes chastening from God—but not always. There is no hint of chastening here; only God's molding of her character in much the way He did to Job and Paul.

Life can be just as hard for us, can't it? We don't need to lose loved ones for life to be hard. It might be the loss of health...or a job...or it might be the inability to do what you like to do and used to do. It might be the loss of finances and the feeling that every time you turn around there is another surprise bill. Or, like Naomi, it might be the harsh reality that how we imagined things to be ten years *ago* are very different from what they are **now**.

Not only is life hard,

B. Solutions seem scarce

For Naomi, in her mind she had but one choice—"return from the country of Moab" and go back home to her people. She had no family here—and no means of support. Besides, she had heard that the famine was over and "the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread" (v 6).

For Orpah and Ruth, they had options. **One** is in verse 8—"And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house..." In other words, go back to your families because they can take care of you better than I can. **Another** option is seen in verse 9 "The Lord grant you that ye may find rest—financial security—in the house of her husband;" meaning a new husband. 'You need to go home until you are remarried and you have a new husband to care for you.'

The "option that wasn't an option" was to **wait** for Naomi to have two more sons! Notice verse 11-13. 'Even if I got married tonight and bore two sons, would you wait until they were of age?!'

What sometimes happen when life gets hard and solutions seem scarce?

C. Faith can falter

We have before us another wonderful reminder that God knows how we **feel** and God knows that we sometimes struggle and He let's us **know** that He knows because He had it recorded in His Word! Notice again the end of verse 13: "...nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me." Naomi didn't stop there.

Look at verses 19 and 20 (read). ‘Don’t call me *Naomi* which means “pleasant;” instead call me *Mara* which means “bitter.” Why did she want to be called that? V 20 “...the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.” V 21: “...the Lord hath testified against me and the Almighty hath afflicted me?”

In spite of all this, however—in spite of her losses and her inability to fix things and her faltering faith, there was still a... **2. Reliance on the Lord**

How do we know that? First, she...

A. Acknowledged God’s ability to bless

--V 6 (middle) “...for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread.” She knew that if the famine was gone, it was because God made it go away.

--V 8 (middle) “...the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.” God knows that you were kind wives—and kind daughters-in-law—and I want God to repay you with that same kindness.

--V 9 “The Lord grant you that ye may find rest...”

--2:20 “And Naomi said unto her daughter in law, Blessed be he [Boaz] of the Lord, who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead.” Naomi was thankful to God for the kindness of Boaz—and also desired that Boaz be blessed by God for his kindness.

What about you and I? Do we believe God has the ability to bless—even if right now it seems He isn’t? God is in the “blessing” business, isn’t He? The flip side, of course, is that we are being presumptuous to think God will bless us when we are **knowingly** doing wrong. Sometimes God blesses us *in spite* of us, but God is too gracious and loving to reward us when we are doing wrong. He does not want us to stay on a path that will harm us and often uses chastening to wake us up. I don’t believe Naomi was being chastened, though.

Naomi’s reliance on God is seen in her belief that God has the ability to bless. It is also seen in that she...

B. Attempted to do things God’s way

--V 6 “Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return...” Not only was there no financial stability in this foreign land, there was no **spiritual** stability either. Notice verse 1:15 “And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods...” The worship of Jehovah—the true God—was not practiced in Moab—another reason, I believe, that Naomi wanted to go back to Bethlehem.

Another evidence of Naomi doing things God’s way is in arranging for Boaz to marry Ruth. Jump ahead to Chapter 3:1-3. I found it interesting to learn that in verse 3 where it says “Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee” quite likely refers to putting off the mourning clothes of a widow to make it known that she was seeking marriage.

--V 4 The custom of uncovering the feet referred to in verse 4 was something the Jews practiced—not the Moabites—and was done by Ruth because Naomi told her to. What does it mean to “uncover his feet?” Are you ready for this? It means to uncover his feet! He is laying down, covered with a blanket. After he falls asleep, she lays down at the bottom of his feet and uncovers them. His feet get cold, he wakes up, goes to cover up his feet again, and finds a woman laying at his feet. And that is exactly what happened!

Look at 3:8-9. Boaz wakes up, asks who she is, and Ruth says to him “spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman.” To “spread thy skirt” over her means to pledge to marry her. Boaz was all for this arrangement, but there was one small problem—there was a *closer* relative to Naomi than him. Now notice 3:11-13. We must not forget that all this happened because Naomi instructed Ruth in God’s way of doing things. We see that in verses 5-6. Did Ruth understand all thy “why’s” behind it? If she did it was because Naomi taught her! Naomi was concerned for her daughter-in-law and sought rest for her (3:1). Rest would come in the form of marriage and marriage would come by letting the near kinsman know that there was a woman who wanted to be married.

In addition to wanting to be cared for herself, Ruth also wanted the name of her husband to continue. Notice 4:10. To keep the name alive—and the land in the family—it had to be passed down to Elimelech’s children. Since both his sons had died without children, the firstborn of Boaz and Ruth would inherit Elimelech’s and Naomi’s land—not the land of Boaz. Again, Ruth would not have known of any of this if Naomi had not taught her God’s ways.

We saw first the realities of life—that life is hard and that solutions can be difficult to find and that faith can falter. In spite of these things, though, we saw Naomi’s reliance on the Lord—she believed God was in the “blessing business” and that blessing comes from doing things God’s way. And what did she gain from all of this? How was she benefitted? What was her reward?

After all was said and done, she enjoyed...

3. The Realization of God’s Love

Notice three different ways Naomi experienced God’s love

A. Undeniable providence

1:22 (last part) “...and they came to Bethlehem in the **beginning** of the barley harvest.” Why is that significant? Because one of the laws for God’s people is that the poor are allowed to pick in the field after the reapers go through. Now look at **2:23** “So she kept fast by the maidens of Boaz to glean unto the end of barley harvest **and wheat harvest**; and dwelt with her mother in law.” Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem just as the barley harvest begins. After the barley harvest comes the wheat harvest, meaning if you want the maximum amount of time to glean in the fields, you have to be there when the barley harvest starts and that is exactly when they arrived. God planned that, didn’t He?

2:2-3 “and her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech.” Of all the fields she could have went to, she just “happened” to end up on that of Boaz. Coincidence? Not hardly; God most certainly planned that too!

Notice 4:5 where we see the nearest kinsman turning down the opportunity to buy Elimelech’s field. Why? “...lest I mar mine own inheritance.” He maybe already had a family and buying more farmland was appealing, but taking on another wife was not! The inheritance he now had would have to be divided with the firstborn of Ruth and he didn’t want to do that. Boaz, however, was wealthy so that didn’t matter.

B. Unexpected provision

Did Naomi know all this was going to happen when she set out for Bethlehem from Moab? Were her words to Ruth, ‘Leave your family and your home land and come with me. I have a rich relative for you to marry.’ Is that what we saw in Chapter 1? No, instead we see Naomi trying to talk Ruth into NOT going with her. These blessings were totally unexpected when Naomi arrived in Bethlehem.

In 4:13, we see Ruth was cared for “So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife”

In 4:15, we see Naomi was cared for “And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age”

And in 4:16, we unexpected blessing of Naomi caring for her little grandson!

C. Unknowing participation in the Big Picture

Look at 4:21 and 22. “Boaz begat Obed, and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.” Did Naomi know that the little boy she was holding would become the grandfather of King David—and in the ancestral **line of Christ**? Obviously not. But God did—and God orchestrated it all!

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

So, what can we learn—all of us—as we look at the life of Naomi?

1. Life is hard—and trials come—but God does not leave us in the midst of trials.
2. God is involved and working in our lives—we must believe that and trust in Him even if we don't see His hand or feel His love.
3. There is a need for persistence in well-doing—and patience in waiting—before the reward comes.

Galatians 6:9 “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season **we shall reap, if we faint not.**”

Hebrews 10:36 “For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.”

4. None of us really knows now how God is using **us** in the Big Picture; that is something we will find out later. We are looking at the bottom side of tapestry—the rug—where all the knots and loose ends are, but God sees the beauty of the finished product. God is molding His masterpiece—you—and is using you in the molding of others.

In light of all this, what does God want us to **do**? Bring faith...and faithfulness...and obedience to God...and patience... into everything you do. Bring it into your workplace, bring it into your marriage, bring it your parenting...and bring it into your grand-parenting.