

WELCOME 14th June 2020 – 2 Pentecost '20 A

Ruth 1

Good morning! Welcome back to the On-line well of Living Water! It's great we can be together in this way...in this time when we can't be together. I'm glad you're here AND I pray that when we **ARE** back together...if you've never been with us before except on livestream...you'll pop in & hang out with us in person. Please check our website for our weekly Zoom Bible Study catch-ups. Those are a great way to stay in touch & experience God's Word together!

As we move into this week...We're engaging one of the shortest & most exciting books of the Bible: Ruth
Sometimes every hope is destroyed, every dream is shattered & every plan is crushed.

Sometimes life goes to ruin in an instant.

But in those moments, when you have to wonder if God has forgotten you or even intentionally stepped on your heart, you discover God has not left you to crumble on your own. He is still holding you, still leading you, & still working in you for his glory. In the very worst of times, God's demonstrates the mystery of His mercy at work to bring fullness from our desolation and blessing from our bitterness.

We'll explore that today...in fact over the next 4 weeks as we experience the '**SWEETNESS OF REDEMPTION**' from the book of Ruth as God leads us from **BITTERNESS TO BLESSING**.

Let's pray...and then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Holy God, your power fills the universe with light & love. Your tender hand caresses those who are suffering and wounded. You welcome strangers and care for the lonely. We are awed by the amazing extent of your compassion.

Meet us where we are. Speak to us in ways we understand. Come to us, O God, & open our hearts and minds. Prepare us as only you can for the gift of our lives to your service. Renew our spirits and fill us with the life that only you can offer so we may share it with the world! In Jesus' Name...Amen!

FAITH CHAT:

1. When life gets tough, what's your first reaction?
2. In this season of isolation/lockdown, what have you done most frequently?
3. When you feel like you are in a "no win" situation, how do you pray?

BIBLES

2 Pentecost '20 A - 'SWEETNESS OF REDEMPTION': FROM BITTERNESS TO BLESSING

What do you do when life gets tough? When nothing is as you hoped? When plan A collapses in ruins & Plans B - Z catch fire & you got nothing? When the world around you is chaotic & seems it's everyone for themselves? Maybe that's you over the last 3 months...experts can't get their story straight, fear jacked up to 11, social anxiety redlining, you never wanted to work from home but you are maybe indefinitely, you had a job...a business...toilet paper...life. You couldn't go to your grandmother's funeral or nephew's wedding but a bunch of angry folks can stage a rally or play sports?

Well...if you're Elimelech & you live during the time of Judges (after Joshua & b/4 Saul) when we're told 2X, *In those days there was no king in Israel; & all the people did what was right in their own eyes – Jdg 17:6/21:25* AND into that sort of me/self-centered chaos...a severe famine came upon the land you're asking that question every day...dozens of times a day. What do I do now? How am I going to get through this? Feed my family? Raise my kids? Just make it through today?

Well...if you're Elimelech part of your answer is your signature: your name should give you a hint. Elimelech means "My God is King." Every time he heard his own name, Elimelech should remember that no matter what anyone else believes, the Father who rescued the Israelites from Egypt & gave them the land beneath his feet, is still ruling over all things... They do have a king. His name is Yahweh. He has not abandoned his people. He is not apathetic to their plight. In fact their plight is the problem. The plight in Israel was not the lack of food. The plight was lack of obedience to God...proper reverence honour & devotion to the Father. The problem in Israel was *all the people did what was right in their own eyes.*

Pr 14:12/16:25 say, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but it ends in death." When everyone does their own thing...is their own king...you get famine. This was not the first famine in the land flowing with milk/honey. It wouldn't be the last because this wasn't the last time God's people would live like pagans...practical atheists...as if God doesn't exist/care. Now that's a bit harsh...it wasn't a completely godless time. When God appointed a new Judge to govern by his wisdom in his place, the people were relatively faithful; but when the Judge died it became a hamster wheel – recurring cycle of disobedience, judgment, suffering, desperation, & returning to the Lord...lather rinse repeat. This was one of the down-cycles. Disobedience, judgement, suffering...but again it was as God promised it would be. Dt 28:24 Moses warned God's people that disobedience would be met with disaster: *The Lord will change the rain that falls on your land into powder, & dust will pour down from the sky until you are destroyed.* When everyone does their own thing ...is their own king...you get famine.

I suspect most of us have felt Elimelech's dilemma...hard times seem to call for desperate measures. But desperation is a terrible decision maker & Elimelech makes a terrible decision: he leaves Israel for Moab. In his desperation he decides the grass is greener/growing in Moab & abandons his ancestral homeland near Bethlehem to become a refugee among Israel's historic enemies: Moabites. Land for an Israelite was not just a place for your house/crops/kids/sheep. Land was not tied to some mystical storytelling & mythical connection. The Promised Land was God's specific gift to his specific people according to specific boundaries attached to specific blessings & specific curses. To walk away from that specific allocation from God to you...if you cut yourself off from the source of blessing what do you think's going to happen to the blessing? God intended their lives to be long & satisfied & fulfilled in the land he had chosen to give them. Elimelech walked away when things got tough to live on the east side of the Dead Sea among the pagans: turned his back on God? Some translations offer a justification for his cross-border move. There is allusion in the original Hebrew that this was a temporary relocation...a sojourn not a settlement...just until things got better back home. **But** what happened? Good motives or not; a bad decision is still a bad decision. How many young people sacrifice their virtue just one time? How many of us step across an ethical/moral line, just this time? How many violate an oath a trust a relationship under duress? How many addictions reclaim us because of just one? How many quit being part of the worship family because....A bad decision's still a bad decision. A change of scenery doesn't produce a change of heart. Whatever you were before is what you will be wherever you go next. Elimelech thinks he's pitching his tent. What he's really done is dig his grave. He's trying to make a living & in the middle of that he died. He thought he'd go to Moab, hang there until the famine was over then go home. Three graves later his bad decision meant he & his 2 boys never made it back to Bethlehem.

As this unfolds...Now **Naomi** has a decision to make & she gets it half-right. *Then Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had blessed his people in Judah by giving them good crops again. So Naomi & her daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab to return to her homeland...and they took the road that would lead them back to Judah.* 10 years after she & Elimelech had first crossed the Jordan & travelled the 40-or-so kilometres to Moab she now reverses course. The famine is over...the land has become a fertile fruitful place again & in that transformation Naomi sees what her dead husband could not...God's hand in this act of graceful deliverance. God had used the famine to discipline his rebellious people & draw them back to him. Now he blessed them in grace & showered them w/ his mercy & Naomi recognizes God's providence when she sees it.

But this road leading back to Judah isn't paved with certainty & bright with blue skies & sunny days. This journey is a perilous/uncertain one. Those 40/50 Ks might as well have been to a different galaxy. Who will accept 3 widows into their home...2 of whom are Moabites? What has become of the land they abandoned? How would they lay claim to that which is no longer rightfully theirs? Food? Shelter? \$\$\$? Naomi sees with eyes wide open. She knows the way home may not be a joyous reunion, so she releases Ruth & Orpah from any bond to her so they may try to restart their own lives among their own people. In doing so, she twice more invokes God as the agent of grace & provision for their lives: "*...may the Lord reward you for your kindness to your husbands & to me. May the Lord bless you with the security of another marriage.*" Naomi confess trust in the Father as a flowing well of unfailing love & she bids the women to place their trust & commit their destiny into that unfailing love...but back among their own tribe/nation where life may be more secure.

I said earlier Naomi made her decision & got it half-right. The younger women at first refuse to separate from their mother-in-law. So Naomi paints a picture in the bleakest hues & most depressing shades she can. She's too old to have more sons. Even if she could, the women would be too old to have children of their own by the time these "new sons" were ready to marry. Every brush stroke Naomi paints says hopeless, desolate, darkness overlaid with darkness. **AND** she gets it wrong: *Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord himself has raised his fist against me.* When they return to Bethlehem she would declare to the townspeople: "*...the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has caused me to suffer & the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me?*"

While Naomi trusts God can bless others...she sees him as her enemy...an adversarial power arrayed against her. Her heart is so badly broken & she feels the weight of the famine & the decade spent apart from the Source of life & blessing & joy...her grief magnified...She sees herself & her circumstances as beyond redemption. Naomi, like so many of us, underestimated the Father heart of God. She fully believes that there is no blessing left for her...no kindness...no unfailing love...no amazing grace that could flow to her. Maybe that's you...bad decisions, choices made in desperation, willful self-focused behavior, back turned on the promises & blessing & the Father...maybe you like Naomi see God as adversary not advocate...not Father but foe...

But Ruth will not buy into that image of God. In fact, it is the foreigner, the former pagan whose conviction & confession of faith draws Naomi back to life in the Father's care. *Ruth replied, "Don't ask me to leave you & turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, & your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, & there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!"* She takes upon her own life the name Yahweh. From this Moabite comes confidence & assurance that God is & will be at work in the worst of times. Ruth carries an undying certainty that God has not yet closed the book on their lives. Today's GP has this from Oswald Chambers: "Continually revise your relationship to God until the only certainty you have is not that you are faithful, but that He is." Ruth embraces Naomi's broken heart & bruised spirit & leads her to the Father & his faithful love for healing/wholeness.

Together they re-enter Bethlehem to the joy of Naomi's former community. The homecoming Naomi dreaded is one of rejoicing. Naomi discovers through her daughter-in-law's steadfastness the steadfastness of the Father & the consolation of faithful people. She is being drawn into grace that is greater than all her pain...grace that far exceeds even human sinfulness.

Sometimes every hope is destroyed, every dream is shattered & every plan is crushed. Sometimes life goes to ruin in an instant. But in those moments, when you have to wonder if God has forgotten you or even intentionally stepped on your heart, you discover God has not left you to crumble on your own. He is still holding you, still leading you, & still working in you for his glory. In the very worst of times, God's demonstrates the mystery of His mercy at work to bring fullness from our desolation and blessing from our bitterness. We do our worst, but God already done his best by sending his Son for us...to reveal that unfailing love of the Father for each of us. When Christ died & rose he took hold of our lives with an eternal compassion & never-ceasing grace to reunite our lives with God forever leading us from the bitterness of certain death to the blessing of life with the Father now & always.

I'll finish with 3 scriptures...as a foretaste of that blessing that never ends...hear them as your assurance/certainty
The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing. - Zeph 3:17

See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! - 1 John 3:1
God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. - 1 John 4:9

Let's pray with that in mind...

For the Spirit of Peace that calms our mind and stills our life, we give you thanks.

For the Spirit of Love that touches hearts and reaches out, we give you thanks.

For the Spirit of Joy that lifts our soul and gives us faith we give you thanks.

For the Spirit of Power, that gift of grace for this your church, we give you thanks..

We ask for your forgiveness, Lord, when we forget the power that lies with you in us, and trust instead upon our human strength. Remind us of that glorious day when your Spirit transformed the lives of those who hid in fear, into men of power. Renew these hearts which have grown cold with flames of fire, as on that Pentecost, that this might be the church that you desire.

Lord we pray for an end to the panic & pandemic that has had us locked away from our brothers & sisters. In all those places where life is moving forward into free space, let your church also be free of the burden of fear for the joy of sharing your salvation in Jesus Christ. We remember those who struggle against injustice. Let human hearts recognize your love's supremacy against all violence & cultural disorder.

Remember us in your kingdom & teach us to pray...