

RUTH 1 “CALL ME BITTER”

In this Christmas season, we turn to God’s Word in the book of Ruth.

Why the book of Ruth? Let’s think of it this way.

I am fascinated by the notion of hiking the Appalachian Trail. I doubt I will ever have the courage to actually do it! But as I have read about it, I have learned that the trail is often well-marked, but sometimes not so well-marked. Yet the trail does reach its destination, in Maine to the north, and in Georgia to the south.

The book of Ruth is an important link in the trail leading to the birth of Jesus Christ. It may not seem so well-marked at times, but as you ponder God’s sovereign work in the lives of these otherwise ordinary people, you can see how God ordered events from hundreds of years before, to bring history to the day we call Christmas.

The trail that includes Ruth, is the trail that includes Jesus, and the trail that includes Jesus, is the trail we follow, to know the real joy of Christmas.

The events of the book of Ruth occur during the difficult and sometimes chaotic time of the judges, when there is no king in Israel, each person does as he sees fit, and the trail seems less well-marked.

But God is still on the trail of saving his people.

Christian author Richard Winter writes of going to see a movie called “The Thin Red Line”, which he describes as a “harrowing” film about World War Two.

He writes, “As we (the viewers) are in the tall grass with the small group of men who are waiting for the signal to attack a heavily fortified Japanese bunker on the hill above, with only a small chance of coming out alive, the camera moves from the sweating, terrified face of a young soldier to a blade of grass right in front of him, on which is perched a most beautiful butterfly.

“In the background are the audible thoughts of one of the soldiers; he asks how - in the presence of such glory as the loyalty, love and heroism of human beings and the stunning beauty of butterflies, birds and flowers - human beings could be so ugly and barbarous to each other...

“He asks, ‘The great evil, where did it come from? How did it steal into the world? What root did it grow from?’”

Where did it come from? We ask in days of war, and we ask in the other battles and struggles of this life. Why such evil? Where is God, in the evil?

Near the end of the first chapter of Ruth, Naomi cries, “Call me Mara.” Call me bitter. The start of this story takes us into the bitterness. Then, mercifully, it begins to take us through the bitterness, on the trail to Jesus.

THE BITTERNESS here is everywhere. Bitterness of the body. Bitterness of the heart. Bitterness of the soul.

The book of Ruth begins with BITTERNESS OF THE BODY.

In verse 1, we read of famine in the land of Israel. This was part of life in that part of the world, because of the climate. Yet the writer of the book reminds us that this is during the strange time of the judges. Maybe this is a hint that evil people made the famine possible, or made the famine worse.

There is nothing more bitter for the body, than hunger. We may say we know that, but we really don’t. We cannot imagine the bitterness of starving.

Yet the starving does not last forever. In verse 6, we read that the Lord provides food for Israel.

That’s good news, but is that the end of the physical bitterness in this story? No.

Enter into this story with me. Naomi’s husband has died. Her two sons have married, but now they have died. Three women are left: Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah.

What will their lives be like? They will face poverty and uncertainty. If they have no husband, they have no promise of even enough food to eat.

Famine. Poverty. Uncertainty. Bitterness of the body.

It is real. At times, some people have tried to dismiss the importance of the body. Some have even said that physical suffering is not real. It is only an illusion. It is just in your mind.

But the sickness is real. The unending pain is real. The cancer is real.

It is in your body, and it is real, and it is bitter.

The bitterness of the body. THE BITTERNESS OF THE HEART.

Naomi’s husband has died. Ruth and Orpah’s husbands have died. They are not just three women. They are three widows.

What bitterness of heart! Yes, that culture was different than this culture. We must not put all of our romantic views of marriage onto these women, and into this culture. But Hebrew culture did rejoice in the love of husbands and wives, and these women grieve not just because they struggle with bitterness of body, but because they face bitterness of heart.

And even worse, especially for Naomi, there is no hope of relief from this bitterness of heart. She is too old to marry. Who will be with her now?

Yet the bitterness of heart is multiplied even more, because as we read of these three widows setting out on

the road to Judah, we see them weeping at the prospect of separation from each other. If Ruth and Orpah are to be married again, they should let Naomi return to her homeland, and turn back to their homeland.

Loss upon loss. Heartbreak upon heartbreak. Bitterness of heart.

Yes, this is real. If some would have you believe bitterness of the body is not real, others would have you believe bitterness of the heart is not real.

Just stuff it. Just medicate it. Just soothe it with fake pleasures.

No. It won't work. Bitterness of heart is real, as we see from the people in our lives or in our homes or in our mirrors, whose hearts are not healed, from the bitterness of emotional loss.

Bitterness of body. Bitterness of heart. BITTERNESS OF SOUL.

Naomi has left with her husband and her sons and her hope. The name "Naomi" means "pleasant." Maybe life has been pleasant for her, or maybe she has been known as one who is pleasant.

Now Naomi returns with Ruth, but little else. She says, "Call me Mara." My name is "bitter." It is all repulsive to me. It is all a stench to me. The unpleasantness of this world has assaulted her body and attacked her heart, and now she is bitter, even to the very depth of her soul.

We know Mark Twain only for his humor, but much of his life was filled with sorrow. He was once traveling, away with his wife, trying to pay the debts that had piled up, when he heard that his daughter was very sick.

He sent his wife to be with his daughter and said, "The calamity that comes is never the one we had prepared ourselves for."

Isn't it so? Where did it come from? From where comes this bitterness of body, heart, and soul? Why do we read of the suffering of Naomi? Was this chance? Was this the hand of an unknown force?

Here is what we must not miss. Even as Naomi and her daughters-in-law groan in this bitterness, they know it is not from chance, or from some force they could never know. It was from the Lord.

Verse 13: "...the Lord's hand has gone out against me." The image here is of someone striking someone else in battle.

Then in verse 21: "The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." The word she uses here is translated "sadday." It is the description of God that emphasizes his unopposable power.

Where does the bitterness come from? It comes from the hand of the unstoppable, unsearchable, Almighty Lord of the universe! He is not himself evil, but in his sovereign rule, he has allowed evil to come.

After the Asian tsunamis, an Indianapolis religious leader wrote, "God was not in the earthquake...It was not God's will that caused the sea to swell and the tsunami waves to take so many lives."

The words of Naomi reveal something very different. They reveal that while we do not know why God would will his world to be this way, his world is this way, by his will.

He was not asleep. He was not wringing his hands and wishing it would not be so. He did not give his sovereignty to a fantasy called "chance," or to any other nameless force.

This is the testimony of the inspired Scripture. As God reveals the trail of his purposes in history, he reveals that he is all along the trail. Even the bitterness he hates, is from his hand, for his sovereign purposes.

For you, that may add bitterness to bitterness. It is one thing to say that bitterness of body, heart and soul is real. It is another thing to say that this bitterness is from the hand of the Lord. But it is what he says, here and elsewhere. When we say God is sovereign over all things, we must say that God is sovereign over both evil and good, for that is what he shows us about himself, here and all along the trail.

This would seem to be the end of hope. This would seem to urge us to cry with Naomi, "Call me bitter." But in a way that only this sovereign Lord could design, this is not the end of hope.

It is, instead the root of hopefulness, for even as this story of Ruth drives us to bitterness, it begins to move us THROUGH THE BITTERNESS.

How so? The start of this story calls us to come to the Lord, and even to cling to the Lord, through the bitterness.

COME TO THE LORD.

Who comes to the Lord in this chapter? It is Ruth herself. She has grown up worshipping a false god - probably a god called "Chemosh." But in God's mercy, he has shown Ruth that Chemosh is not God. The Lord of all, Yahweh...Sadday...he is God.

Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are on the road to Judah. Naomi urges Ruth and Orpah to return to Moab. They have no prospects in Israel. They should go back to their people and their gods.

Orpah does. Naomi says to Ruth, "Go back with her."

Ruth responds, "Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you from me."

She will stay with Naomi, and Naomi's God. In fact, she calls upon the Lord to curse her, if she should fail to keep her word, and stay with Naomi, even to death.

By the grace of God, she knows a true God when she sees one! All other gods, including her "god", are

false. But this God is true, and this God is now hers. She comes to the Lord.

What has happened? She suffers bitterness in her body. She suffers bitterness in her heart. She suffers bitterness in her soul. But instead of that bitterness driving her from the Lord, that bitterness drives her to the Lord. The One who has ordained her sorrows, has sought her in her sorrows, and he has captured her for himself.

Now the trail begins to appear again. Now hope takes root again. The God who has ordained the bitterness he hates, has designed such bitterness to draw people back to his love.

It did not seem to happen, with Mark Twain. Not long after letting his wife go to their daughter in her illness, the daughter died. Twain wrote, "I bear it as I bear all heavy hardships that befall me - with a heart bursting with rebellion."

What about you? What about me? What bitterness besets your body, your heart, and your soul? How will you respond to the knowledge that the Lord's hand is in this?

How will you respond to the bitterness of the wasting disease?

How will you respond to the bitterness of the lost relationship?

How will you respond to the bitterness of the cries of your soul?

Will you respond with a heart bursting with rebellion, or will you see that such bitterness is God's call to you, to return to him?

Where are you right now, before the sovereign, Almighty, Lord of all? Are you far from him? Or is your bitterness helping you to see, that your only hope and your only help, is from him, who alone is greater than this?

Through the bitterness, come to the Lord. Through the bitterness, CLING TO THE LORD.

Ruth clings to Naomi. She clings in desperation and determination. She knows she must have the Lord of Naomi, and she will never, ever let him go.

Naomi sees this. We read in verse 18 that "When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her."

In Ruth, we see a desperate determination to cling to the Lord, through the bitterness. She could rebel. She could hate God. She could despise him for extending his sovereign hand in this way, in her life.

But then where would she be? She would be completely cut off from the only One who could give her hope and help. She would be isolated from God's mercy, grace and love. She would be off the only trail that could lead her to true life.

The God who has ordained bitterness in our world, calls us to a desperate determination to hold on to him. Yet he also promises that he will hold us, as we cling to him, along the trail of bitterness.

I love this story. Maybe you remember it.

It is the story of a Christian man, and a horse named Brazos. The man's friend let him ride Brazos, and Brazos took him for a ride. They went hurtling across a pasture that seemed so big. But it was not so big, for looming before them, was a barbed wire fence.

The man writes, "One would think that...a horse would begin to curve into a wide arc when he reached the limits of his confinement; but this beast gave no hint of altering his present course or velocity in any way..."

"I stared at the fence. My mind strained, struggling to conceive the image of Brazos soaring into the air, just clearing the top strand and blithely touching down on the other side. Instead, what kept rapidly replaying itself in my imagination was a view of us pounding straight ahead into the wires..."

"I began reining hard to the left...I forced Brazos to at least turn his head and lean his neck...There, dead ahead and coming fast, was another fence!...and it was only five quick strides away.

"There was no time to turn him, no time to bail out, no time even to think. I just gripped his sides with my legs, leaned back on the reins with one hand, squeezed the juice out of the saddle horn with the other and stared helplessly at the approaching wires.

"Then, even as the angels were pulling open the pearly gates and the pitch-pipe was sounding for the first hymn and the final frame of my life's story flashed before me - at the last possible second Brazos the Terrible gave two violent, grunting jabs at the earth with his front legs and came to a complete, dead stop."

The man on the horse concluded, "(God) does hear the groans and cries and pleadings of poor, helpless, sin-racked beggars. He said he would. Praise him, He does not forget those on the back of the stallion."

I ask again: what bitterness is in your body, heart and soul today?

If bitterness is the result of chance or some unknown force, you have nowhere to go, and nowhere to cling.

If all you see in your bitterness is the bitter side of God's trail, then you will run from him.

But if this bitterness is from his hand, and yet this bitterness is his tool to return you to himself, will you cling to him?

Will you cling to him, in heartfelt, soulfelt, prayer?

Will you cling to him, by learning and reciting his promises, as you walk the trail of bitterness?

Will you cling to him, by praising him still, in worship?

He will hear your groans. He will hear your cries. He will hear your pleadings. He said he would. He does not forget those who say, "Call me bitter."

But wait a minute! What does this have to do with Christmas? How does this trail, lead to the manger?

We will see this more as we follow the trail of the book of Ruth, but for now, let us see this.

Jesus Christ does not come into a world of ease, to live a life of ease. He comes into a world of bitterness, to suffer bitterness himself, so that through his life, death and new life, he might conquer this bitterness.

Jesus Christ has come, to suffer bitterness of body. He has walked this earth with hunger, poverty and uncertainty, and he has felt the indescribable pain of the cross.

Jesus Christ has come, to suffer bitterness of heart. He has wept over sin and death, and he has wept in the garden, as he has realized the immense work that his Father has called him to do.

Jesus Christ has come, to suffer bitterness of soul. He has cried on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He has been pierced in even the depths of his soul, as he has suffered the pains of hell, for the sins of you and me.

Jesus Christ has done this, as the Son of God, forever glorious, but now humbled, broken and embittered, for bitter people, in a world of bitterness.

Jesus Christ has done this, as the Son of David, who was born as the result of God's trailblazing in the life of Ruth.

We do ask, "Where did it come from?" We struggle to find peace as we realize that God has ordained bitterness in his world.

Why, God? Why this bitterness? Why this bitterness we see, and why this bitterness we experience? From the pain of our body and the wreck of our hearts and the depth of our souls, we wonder!

God does not answer with all the explanations we would like. He answers with his Son. We say, 'Call me bitter.'" He says, "Here is my beloved Son! With him I am pleased. In him, through him, with him, you find peace, hope and rest for your body, heart and soul. You find a measure of it now, and a forever of it later."

He ordained the bitter trail. But then he put his Son onto the trail, that he may bring us back to himself, the God of the trail, and one day take us to a trail of no more tears, no more suffering, and no more bitterness.

I ask again: what bitterness besets your body, your heart, or your soul today? What besets the ones you love? What besets the person you know, and care for, and long to help?

What can I offer you today? I offer you Jesus, the Savior of the one who says, "Call me bitter", who has come into our bitter world, to enter into our bitterness, to defeat the everlasting effects of that bitterness, and to offer sweet, new, everlasting life...even while we still suffer bitterness.

Begone unbelief, the Savior is here
Though cisterns be broken, and creatures all fail,
The word he has spoken, will surely prevail.

Ruth...Naomi...the Savior is here.