

A bitter experience

Ruth 1:1-22

No one can read Ruth without being touched by the tragedies that begin the story. This is real life and doubt, drought and disobedience in some combination scare many lives, even today. But there is always a bigger picture. Or, as someone once described it, our lives are like a tapestry. On the back side there are only knots and stray ends and any pattern is barely discernable. But on the front the appearance is very different. The pattern is dominant and sometimes its beauty takes our breath away. The opening chapter of this little book is like looking at the back side of an incomplete tapestry. There's doubt about God, disobedience and premature deaths. But there is another side to the story that will emerge, which utilises these disasters and reveals something beautiful.

What's going on in this section

- If you accept the opening words (1:1) as historically accurate (and there is no good reason not to), put together a picture of life in Israel at this time. Here are some questions which will help you:
 - ❖ What were "the days when the judges ruled" like? (Judges 2:10-23)
 - ❖ What are the causes of a famine? How could such a thing happen in the Promised Land, the land of "milk and honey"? (cf. Deut 28:45-48)
 - ❖ What would both Elimelech and Naomi have known about Moab and the Moabites? (Deut 23:3-6; Judges 3:12-15, 26-30)
- What sort of picture do you get when you assemble all the above bits of information?
- Abandoning the Promised Land *might* be an indicator of what sort of attitude to God within the family? Elimelech and Naomi would also have known about Moses' advice in Ex 34:15, 16. So what *might* Ruth 1:15 indicate about the marriages that Naomi arranged (as it appears Elimelech was dead before their sons married)?
- All things being equal, would you expect God to be gracious to a family who apparently despised the Promised Land and arranged mixed marriages?
- Put yourself in Naomi's shoes. If you returned after 10 years to your place of birth, as a widow, what could you reasonably expect from those who had toughed it out through a famine?
- Naomi's idea of a widow having other sons (who might become husbands for her daughters-in-law, (1:11-13)) seems, at best, quaint. But Naomi is almost certainly reflecting what she knows God said to her people before they entered the Promised Land (Deut 25:5-10). Why do you think this apparently abnormal custom is so important to God that it

is enshrined in legislation? (Hint: If God were “to cut off the name” of someone what does it amount to eternally? (Ps. 109:13; Is. 14:22))

- Ruth shows a commitment to her mother-in-law that seems remarkable, given that she was much more likely to survive in her own land of Moab than in Israel, as an alien from a despised nation. How much do think Ruth is actually saying in 1:16, 17? What is she sacrificing?
- How does Naomi interpret what happened to her in Moab? (1:13, 20, 21) Do you think she is right or wrong? Is she right or wrong to complain?
- Naomi returns to Israel at harvest time (1:22). Given that she left due to famine, what are we being told about the land, about the change in the people and about God?

What about us here and now

- Naomi could look back over her time in Moab and see God’s hand in her experiences. Should we expect to do the same? What might stop us from reflecting honestly on life experiences?
- Can you give a prognosis for someone who is bitter? What is the best antidote for someone afflicted with bitterness? Do you think bitterness is a spiritual condition and/or a psychological one?
- Some people experience “broken worlds” (when their plans and hopes are destroyed) but don’t get bitter. Why? Remember Ruth too had lost a husband, which today we would interpret as particularly unfair because she and her husband had no time to enjoy their marriage.
- Why should we not expect much from God when we turn our back on him?
- Do you think God runs a risk in letting us see people complaining about his treatment of them? What is the difference between Naomi and Job, who also complains? (cf. Job 27:2)

So what can I do?

- Have there been times when you felt like changing your name to reflect how you were feeling? Did God enter into you thinking?
- Have you experienced bitterness? Can you reflect on what part your own actions played in generating the bitterness?
- In Eph 4:31 Paul says “get rid of bitterness”? What might this have to do with grieving the Holy Spirit in the previous verse?
- Do you see any parallels between Naomi and Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son?