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The Book of Ruth
Part 2
From Emptiness to Hope



TALKINGPOINTS WALKINGPOINTS



A publication of **DISCIPLE**, the adult discipleship ministry of Triangle Community Church.

Talk together about the glory of God's kingdom. —Psalm 145:11
Love the Lord your God and **walk** in all his ways. —Joshua 22:5

Triangle Community Church aims to be a "transforming church". We exist to be used by God as He transforms ordinary people into extraordinary followers of Jesus Christ. TCC believes not only that life-change is possible—but that it is to be expected. Growth is God's will for his people. But transformation does not happen by accident. It requires intentional, intelligent action. 1 Timothy 4:7 instructs you to "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." Since "Talking Points, Walking Points" is intended both for individual reflection and for group discussion, questions vary in degree of vulnerability required. Generally it is best to begin group discussions with questions which involve less personal disclosure—but don't linger there. Be sure to "dive deep" too! The questions which require the greatest openness and honesty, as well as those in the section entitled "Digging Deeper in your Daily Quiet Time", are perfect for private reflection.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

Observation—*What does it say?*

- Ruth 1:1 simply states—without editorializing—that "in the days of the Judges" there was "a famine in Israel" and therefore a Jewish man took his family to "sojourn in the land of Moab." But what would **every** Israelite **know** about...
 - the days of the Judges** from Judges 2:10-12; 3:7 & 21:25?
 - drought and famine** from Deuteronomy 11:13-17?
 - Moabites** from Numbers 22:1-6 & 25:1-5 and Deuteronomy 23:3 & 6?

Interpretation—*What does it mean?*

- From Ruth 1:1 & 3-5, should we anticipate anything good coming from this situation? Ruth 1:16-18 is heart-warming, but should we anticipate anything more than that now two women will suffer together?
- What sense should we get from the two rays of hope found in Ruth 1:6b & 22b?

Application—*What do I do with this?*

- Yahweh (typically rendered as LORD)—God's personal, covenantal name which emphasizes relationship and protection—appears eighteen times in this small book. What should you do with the fact that Yahweh had given up neither on faithless, disobedient Jews nor on pagan Moabites?

Have you blown it worse than did the Jews during the period of the Judges or the pagan Moabites?

Naomi trusted in Yahweh's compassion and forgiveness. How does Isaiah 55:7 encourage you?

- Complete the study of bitterness in the **Digging Deeper** feature of today's *Talking Points, Walking Points*.

Sermon Summary

Key Text: Ruth 1:5-22

Last week we looked briefly at Ruth 1:1-4. For the Jew reading this passage there would be a sense of foreboding for a couple of reasons: (1) famines were seen as a sign of God's judgment on the land; (2) leaving the promised land for a place like Moab was a risky move. You can't escape God's judgment by moving to a different location.

In v. 3-5, we read of the death of Naomi's husband and her two sons. Death of a loved one is always difficult. But at this point in history, people didn't have the hope of resurrection that we have today. Their understanding of the afterlife was very limited. When we have a loved one die, especially if they are a believer, we are comforted in knowing that we will see them again. It is not a final goodbye. But Naomi, Orpah and Ruth had no hope of ever seeing their husbands again. For them, death was very final, which would have heightened their pain. Three grieving widows were trying to survive under very difficult circumstances. All they had was God. But the truth is, God is the giver of every perfect gift. He is our real provider.

Oftentimes, when we find ourselves at the end of our rope, we are forced to make decisions that we might not otherwise make – as Naomi did in v. 6-7. In that day Moabites and Israelites didn't get along. This environment would be difficult for her daughters-in-law. Naomi's life may have been hard, but she had not rejected God. Despite living in Moab, she kept alive her witness to Yahweh. She desired His blessing for herself and for her daughters-in-law. Just because you leave home doesn't mean you have to leave God behind. While Naomi may have felt abandoned by God, she had not turned her back on Him.

Because Naomi loves her daughters-in-law, and because she wants good for them, she encourages them to return home to the protection and love of their families (v. 8-9). In the ancient Orient, the position of unmarried women and young widows was perilous. It was this fact that Naomi had in mind when she urged Orpah and Ruth to seek safety, respect and honor, in their parents' homes and then in the house of a husband (v. 10-13).

In v. 13, Naomi's disposition toward her lot in life is exposed. Remember, we learned last week that the name Naomi means "pleasant". But now she is a bitter woman who blames God for her troubles. She feels as if she is the target of God's wrath. In her bitterness, Naomi doesn't factor in the role of human sin. Rather she points her finger at God alone. But God never acts unjustly. As we learn in v. 14-15, Orpah returns to her people but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi alone. Ruth wants to share Naomi's future: her travel, her home, her family and her faith. She is promising a lifetime of devoted loyalty (v. 16-17). Naomi is silenced by the determined devotion of Ruth. In v. 19, Naomi returns to Bethlehem quite differently from when she left over ten years ago. Then she had a husband and two sons. Now she is returning with only her Moabite daughter-in-law. When she left, she was pleasant – now she is bitter towards life and God (v. 20-21).

YOU EVER FELT THAT WAY? Where everything you have found happiness in has been taken away. The future seems bleak. You pray and heaven seems sealed. Your prayers aren't getting through, or worse yet, you fear that God hears them but doesn't care. This is a theology problem. God is far more gracious than Naomi believed. God has not turned His back on her. He loves her and has a wonderful plan for her life! She just hasn't discovered that yet. Furthermore, if Naomi's circumstances are related to her sin or that of her nation, the proper response would be to humble herself, repent and trust God as best she knows how (James 4:6-8).

It is also true that there is not a direct correspondence between all suffering or tragedy and personal sin. Sometimes it is just part of living in a fallen world. Jesus made this clear in His ministry (Luke 13:4). If Naomi had only known and believed the truth of Romans 8:28, her perspective might have been very different. The full story reveals that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him. This promise isn't made to everyone, but to those who love God and are seeking to align their purposes with His. Of course, God sometimes chooses to bless people, even if they are not walking closely with Him! Blessing the undeserving is at the very heart of grace. Grace blesses the unworthy.

The barley harvest is the best possible time for Naomi to return to Bethlehem in terms of finding provision for herself and Ruth (v. 22). God's providence here is on full display. The truth is, Naomi is blind to much of what God is doing in her life. She is the recipient of His unrecognized mercy, despite her contention that God is against her. Naomi thinks she is coming back empty, but God has put her in a position where she now must place her hope in Him alone. And that is a good place to be. I think the author of Ruth is trying to show us that tragedy and mercy are tied together in the lives of God's people.

Application/Challenge

- Self-examination in the face of tragedy is a good thing.
- When it comes to walking with God, don't expect all of your circumstances to make sense. Because they won't.
- During times of trial and difficulty, determine to faithfully participate in your local church community—both large and small group gatherings. Satan loves an isolated believer (Psalm 73:16–20).

Digging Deeper in your Daily Quiet Time

Naomi (Hebrew: "Pleasant") brought a serious accusation against God (Ruth 1:13b & 20-21):

"The hand of Yahweh has gone forth against me... Do not call me 'Pleasant'—call me 'Bitter', for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I left Israel full, but Yahweh has caused me to return empty. Why do you call me 'Pleasant'? Yahweh has answered against me, and the Almighty has brought calamity against me."

Was Naomi's charge true? Was God being unjust? How should we respond to our difficulties? Let's develop a "biblical theology" of bitterness...

Monday—What (Who!) is the ultimate source of life's difficulties?

- Read Ruth 1:20-21. **Whom** did Naomi blame for her difficulties?
- Read Haggai 1:11. Did God indeed **cause** that drought?
- Read Deuteronomy 32:39. Was God indeed **responsible for** the death of husband and sons?
- Read Job 1:8, 12; 2:3-6 & 42:11. Who **instigated** Job's suffering? Who **inflicted** Job's suffering?

Tuesday— Yes, God is responsible for our difficulties, but is he blame-worthy for them?

- Read Romans 9:21. Try to argue "**no**" to this question. Were you successful?
- Read Psalm 119:67-68, 71 & 75. Is God **evil** because he afflicts us?
- Read John 9:1-3. **Why** did God cause this man to be blind from birth?
- Read John 11:1-6 & 14-15. Why did Jesus **delay**, giving Lazarus time to die?

Wednesday—What is the proper response to life's difficulties and disappointments?

- Read Job 1:20-22. How did godly Job (1:1 & 8b) **respond** to his suffering?
- Read Job 2:9-10. What **course of action** did Job's wife recommend? Was that wise/good?
- Read Ruth 1:20-21. Did **Naomi's** response to suffering resemble Job's or Job's wife?
- Read Ephesians 4:31. What are we commanded to **do** with our bitterness?

Thursday—What is the fruit of bitterness?

- Read Matthew 26:33-35 & 75. What does bitterness **produce** for us?
- Read Colossians 3:19. What does bitterness **produce** in our families?
- Read Hebrews 12:15b. What does bitterness **produce** for all others around us?
- Read 1 Samuel 30:3-6. To what did wrongly blaming David for their misfortune lead?

Friday—What dangers lie ahead if we do not "put away" our bitterness?

- Read Hebrews 12:15a. Bitterness **indicates** that we've "fallen short of the _____ of God".
- Read Ephesians 4:31. With what other behaviors is bitterness **associated**?
- Read James 3:13-16. We may think we're wise, but **who's** the **source** of our bitterness (v. 15c)?
- Read Acts 8:21-24. What is ultimately at **risk** if we **remain** "full of bitterness"?

Saturday—How do we actually rid ourselves of bitterness?

- Ephesians 4:22-24 outlines the biblical procedure for laying aside **any** sin. The three steps are:
 - (1) **Lay aside any sinful practice** which is unworthy of our calling (v. 22; cf. Ephesians 4:1 & 17).
 - (2) **Be renewed in our thinking** (v. 23; cf. Romans 12:1-2).
 - (3) **Put on the appropriate righteous and holy practice** (v. 24; cf. Romans 13:14).
- Read Ephesians 4:25-30 for illustrations of these steps for lying, anger, stealing and foul speech.
- Read Ephesians 4:32. What is the biblical alternative to, and solution for, bitterness?
- Question: Against whom are you embittered? Will you resolve it biblically?