

Strand #2 – FAITHFUL OTHERS (God’s cure for bitterness)

The quietly incredible story of *Ruth*

Can God reclaim a heart that has been enslaved by bitterness?

Can God restore a heart that has been crippled by bitterness?

Can God release a heart that is imprisoned in bitterness?

Can God revive a heart that has been deadened by bitterness?

When the tough stuff of life has embittered the heart, does God have a remedy?

Two women sat quietly on the bench at the front of the cart, reins in hand. Jostled left one moment, then quickly leaning right to keep their balance the next. Two yoked oxen slowly pulled their load, keeping to the pathway that alternately dipped then rose, on its way southwest into a smallish village. The larger city of Jerusalem lay off their right shoulders. The sloping barley fields were packed with workers, harvesters. Come late March/early April, the days of harvest trumped everything else. Few lifted their heads to notice anything about them

Behind the bench, all that they had...which wasn't much. In leaving Moab, they sold what they could, kept what they needed, in hopes of somehow restarting life in Bethlehem. Traveling solo was risky, but the roving bands of thieves, so common in the days of the Judges, left them alone. They had nothing worth taking.

It was then Naomi's mind now flooded with those moments when, 10 years ago, their fully-loaded cart was pointed in the opposite direction. Elimelech her husband, frightened by days of famine, chose to pack her up with their two young sons, to head east over the Jordan River, then south to Moab. No, it was not God's land of promise, but it had food, and perhaps work. Prospects which he thought would keep his family alive.

Naomi's mind raced through the memory-reel of tragedies. Too soon after settling into Moab, suddenly Elimelech died! How could that happen? He was so strong, so determined! Now alone with their mother, Mahlon and Chilion were eager to provide for their mother, quickly marrying Moabite brides. Yes, young girls who worshipped other gods, but their motives were right, weren't they? Hope was revived until... until suddenly Mahlon, and then Chilion also suddenly died.

Naomi? Bereft!! Left with nothing, she anguished over the reality she had nothing to offer the wives of her dead sons. Together, for a time, the three worked in the fields of whoever might hire them. But as the weeks passed, wilting under withering sun, in a foreign land, living with foreign women, Naomi longed for the familiar, for home.

“Go back to your families,” she insisted “as I will go home to mine. I have no more sons for you in my womb.” They wept, then Orpah left. But Ruth...Ruth refused.

*Do not urge me to leave you. Do not insist I go away.
I will follow you. I will love your people. I will love your God.
Where you die, I will die. I promise...by Yahweh!*

“How foolish,” Naomi thought. “Why should she have confidence in Yahweh?”

Suddenly, she realized the oxen had found their way into Bethlehem, and she pulled them up to as stop. A woman emerged in the doorway of a nearby hut, and stared long at the two on the bench. Then, she quickly approached. “Naomi!” she screamed. “Is that you!????” She almost pulled her life-long friend off the cart. “Naomi! Naomi!! Blessed be the Lord!” Her scream had echoed up the lane. Other doors opened, other women, children poured into the street, all incredulously barking the same question: “Is this Naomi? Is this really Naomi? Naomi, is it really you??!”ⁱⁱ

The crowd swelled, all happily shouting her name. Which is what burst open the dammed up bitterness of her heart. With a wave of her hand she exploded:

“DO NOT CALL ME **NAOMI!** There is NOTHING pleasant, there is NOTHING sweet about my life. MY NAME NOW IS **MARA!!** And I am very bitter. I left here FULL!!!! The Lord – the ALMIGHTY -- has brought me back EMPTY!”

In fact, she literally says it this way: “*Call me Mara, for the Almighty has cruelly marred me!*”

Can God release a heart that is imprisoned in bitterness?
Can God revive a heart that has been deadened by bitterness?

When the tough stuff of life has embittered the heart, does God have a remedy?

Bitterness is tough stuff. The word means “tartness, sharpness, pointed painfulness, acid-like sourness.” It describes a person who has chosen to be angry over a perceived personal injustice,

and has further chosen to nurture that anger into a bitterness of spirit that is always just below the surface. You hold on to your anger so long, so tightly, that it becomes your identity. Someone said, “bitterness is like drinking poison and then waiting for the other person to die.”

Naomi was right there, and the Spirit of God inspired someone in ancient Israel to write down her story and preserve it in sacred text. Why? Because what the Lord God did with Naomi he can do with any embittered heart. What’s God’s remedy? RUTH teaches that

**God’s REMEDY for bitterness is
the “hesed” of His sovereign hand
through the “hesed” of His godly people.**

Now perhaps, when I repeated that statement, you leaned forward a bit twice. If you could raise your hand, your question would be “What was that word you said? HESED? What’s that?”

It is one of the most important words in the entire Bible, occurring over 240 times in the Old Testament text. Psalm 107:43 says, *Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things; let them consider the steadfast love [hesed] of the LORD.* So what does it mean?

This powerful word (often translated “loving kindness”) expresses all of the following:

- A love which is grounded in God’s relentless promises to His own
- A love which acts and endures whether it is recognized or not
- A love which demonstrates God’s unmerited grace and mercy
- A love which is merciful, unfailing, and extends into eternity
- A love which is never merely an abstract feeling of goodwill but always entails practical action on behalf of another (cf. Will Kynes, Cambridge Ph.D. student)ⁱⁱⁱ

Through Isaiah, God said to his oft wayward people, “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love (hesed) for you will not be shaken” (Isa 54:10a).

- My unfailing love, my enduring actions of mercy, my practical active intervention in your life *shall not be shaken.*

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So what did that look like in Naomi’s bitter situation? God’s remedy is His HESED.

**1st – The HESED of God’s sovereign hand
was already engaged, though unseen**

What do I mean by that? The HESED of God's sovereign hand? What I mean is that over and over again in Scripture, we see a Sovereign God, a God who is free to do anything His purposes desire, to work behind the scenes for good even though we can't see it.

- Young **Joseph** was sold into foreign slavery by brothers who never wanted to see his face again. Years later, in command of the agricultural resources of the Middle East, Joseph would say to his brothers, "You meant it for evil; but God meant it for good."
- A young baby named **Moses**, who should have been crocodile food, was remarkably raised in Pharaoh's house. Then suddenly driven into obscurity, confused and alone for years in the desert. But God's sovereign HESED was in control, so that He might use Moses to release Israel from bitter Egyptian slavery.
- **Three young Hebrews** refused bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image. They had no guarantees for their obedience other than to be bound and thrown in a furnace. But God's unseen, sovereign hand was in the whole matter...and thrown in, they would walk tall in the flames, accompanied by someone like "a Son of God," proving to the Babylonian monarch that their sovereign God had no equal.

Why these stories in Scripture? Over and over again. We belong to a sovereign God, who does what He pleases in all of our lives. And the HESED of God's sovereign hand – unseen, unrecognized by an embittered Naomi –

- ✓ had already prompted her to move back to the land of His promise.
- ✓ had already placed a tenacious young daughter-in-law in her life, fierce in her loyal-love for Naomi and solid in her new love for Naomi's God.
- ✓ was already arranging a remarkable meeting between Ruth and a near relative – a uniquely godly man named Boaz – whom Naomi had completely forgotten about.

All the pieces of God's HESED were falling into place **even while** Naomi bitterly complained that the Almighty had ruined her life. Bitterness blinds, but it doesn't stop the HESED of God. God is always engaged in our lives way before we recognize it, and sometimes even as we belch out our bitterness.

God's remedy for bitterness is the HESED of His sovereign hand.

2nd – God's powerful HESED unfolded through the quiet faithfulness of godly people

Take a look at your Bible with me at Ruth 2:1-7

2:1 Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." ³ So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she *happened to come* to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. ⁴ And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you!" And they answered, "The Lord bless you." ⁵ Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" ⁶ And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab." ⁷ She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.' So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest."

There is so much about the 2nd chapter of Ruth that shows how **God's faithful love to Naomi powerfully, yet quietly unfolds**. It includes

- ✓ the faithful work ethic of young Ruth, who is willing to go out in a strange place and do the back-breaking work of gleaning the edges of a harvest field so they could have something to eat...out of love for her bitter mother-in-law.
- ✓ a uniquely godly man named Boaz, who unlike many other land owners during the days of the Judges, walked with God and invited God into his every work day, evidenced by the way he greeted his workers each morning ("The Lord be with you" < > answered by "The Lord bless you." By the way, those of you who own businesses...is that the way you start your work day?) Such was the godly character of Boaz.
- ✓ The remarkable happenstance that as Ruth went out (vs. 3) "she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz." And
- ✓ Boaz "happened" to notice her (vs. 5)...and Boaz (vs. 8) decided to extend his protection over her...because Boaz had done his homework about Ruth -- how she

^{2:11} All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹²The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"

My point? Godly people – who truly love the Lord and want Him to be reflected in what they do from Monday-Saturday – do these kinds of things. They work hard for someone else's benefit. They manage their businesses as if the Lord is in the middle of all of it. They take notice when someone has a need. They verbally and practically encourages someone taking new faith steps with the Lord. And through a hard-working godly woman like Ruth, and a dedicated-to-the-Lord businessman like Boaz, God's faithful love and provision begin to quietly unfolding in the life of Naomi.

God's HESED begins to flow quietly, powerfully through the faithfulness of godly people. The strands of the 3-fold cord.

People often say, "Why should I bother with joining a church? Why should I commit to faithfully GATHERING, to CONNECTING, and to SERVING? I've got enough going in my life; me and my spouse and my kids, we've got enough going. The church? Why bother?"

Please let me tell you something. There is nothing so needed, so powerful, so critical, as to being in a community of God's faithful, godly, obedient people. There are RUTHS and BOAZeS in this church that you need, that your kids need...and quite frankly, you are called to be a RUTH or a BOAZ to someone else who, going through very tough stuff, needs to experience God's HESED.

**God's REMEDY for bitterness is
the "hesed" of His sovereign hand
through the "hesed" of His godly people.**

The HESED of God's sovereign hand behind the scenes
The HESED of God's faithful, obedient people.

And then...here's how the story ends. It climaxes as

3rd – God's HESED is fully realized through a saving redeemer

And respecting our time, let me give you the shortened version:

- (1) Ruth returns home after a day of gleaning in Boaz's field with an extraordinary amount of grain
- (2) Surprised, and curious, Naomi says, "Details, girl! Where did you get to glean today? Blessed be the field-owner who took notice of you!"
- (3) Ruth, in reply, uttered one name: "Boaz"
- (4) And suddenly, all the HESED pieces begin falling into place for this discouraged woman.
 - She realizes that Boaz is a close relative of her deceased husband.
 - She realizes that Boaz could be a GO-EL, a "kinsman-redeemer" – someone from the larger family who, if he chose to be obedient to Jewish law, could buy back land formerly owned by Elimelech – land which he sold when he left for Moab - which would include the obligation to marry the widow of Elimelech's son and raise up offspring for Elimelech's family (Deut 25:5-10).

All of the sudden, Naomi decides to become part of the solution to her own bitterness. She begins coaching Ruth to

- **Continue to glean and hang out** with "the maidens of Boaz" thru the weeks of the harvest
- Then, when the crops were gathered to be threshed at the threshing floor, Naomi coaches Ruth to "wash herself" and "anoint" herself and put on her best cloak (3:1-5) and go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be working, then eating his evening meal and drinking, then lying down to sleep. "Observe where he lies down, Ruth," Naomi urges. "Then go, uncover his feet (so he will eventually wake up) and lie down at his feet...and he will tell you what to do."
- At midnight, a groggy Boaz awakes and finds a woman at his feet. "Who are you?" he asks. And in one of the most beautiful **reverse proposals** you will ever hear, Ruth quietly replies, "I am Ruth, your servant. **Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a Redeemer.**"
- Boaz is blown away. But he is ready:

RUTH 3:10 "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. ¹² And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. ¹³ Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning."

The next day, at the city gate before the elders of Bethlehem, Boaz advances the issue. He asks the closer relative to Elimelech, the nearer-redeemer if he wants to buy back Elimelech's land.

He does, until Boaz reminds him that he must also take Ruth the Moabite as his wife and raise up offspring for Elimelech. “I can’t do that!” comes the response, and yields his right to Boaz...who redeems the land and redeems this incredible young woman named Ruth. Finish the story:

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. ¹⁷ And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

God’s wonderful, long-acting, enduring, practical HESED, sovereignly working behind the scenes, expressing His love through the actions of faithful, godly people, then fully delivering His love through a redeemer who spreads his wings over Ruth and Naomi’s barren life.^{iv}

A embittered heart reclaimed, released, revived, restored through the HESED of God himself.

Important Application

#1 **Boaz** – the “kinsman redeemer” is a **TYPE** (fore-runner, an illustration, a fore-taste) **of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

- Naomi and Ruth’s lives needed a rescue. The hopes and dreams they had died with the death of their husbands. They came back to the place where God could be found with nothing...except a God who had already begun to love them and sovereign draw them back to the place where life could be restored. And at the right time, Ruth humbly makes this request of Boaz, “**Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a Redeemer.**”

That’s what you say to Jesus in faith when you humbly realize you need to be rescued.

#2 **God’s remedy** for the heart wounded (and perhaps embittered) by the tough stuff of life is **His steadfast love** flowing through His steadfast people.

Get connected with God’s people. Become a cord of three strands which overcomes with others through the tough stuff.

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ⁱ Cf. Ruth 1:16-18.

ⁱⁱ Ruth 1:19 (ESV) So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” ²⁰ She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” ²² So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/430

^{iv} Will Kynes, “As divine **hesed** on the vertical plane intersects with the human horizontal plane, it transforms it. Our lives are infused with the **hesed** we experience from God, creating new relationships with those around us as His goodness pours through us.”