

BEYOND HOPELESSNESS

Ruth 1:19-22

*This message delivered at Lincoln Christian Life Center, Sunday evening April 22, 2007
The scripture references in this message is taken from the New American Standard
Update.*

Companionship is good but even more so when you go through trouble.
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says:

Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

As bad as Naomi's life had become, at least she had one consolation she wasn't alone. Loneliness can be an impossible foe. God said, *"It is not good for man to be alone!"*

We are told that the two disciples of the Lord walked together on the way to Emmaus, after the crucifixion of the Lord, (Luke 24:20). The Prophet Elijah has his companion—a prophet in the making named Elisha. (II Kings 2:9). Then, Enoch learned to walk with God—and one day, he was not found because God translated him so that he would not see death, (Hebrews 11:5). What a walk that must have been!

So, when you read, *"So they both went until they came to Bethlehem,"* You know as hard as the journey had been, it was not completely unbearable. They both went!

A GREAT SHOCK

Naomi returned to Bethlehem without wearing time or the last ten years of sorrow well. As the town folk looked at her, she became the stir of the town.

When Naomi left for Moab ten years earlier, she was Mrs. Sunshine. She has such a radiant personality. You know you have met people like that—all light and glow.

"Is this Naomi?" the town women asked. She was so different. She carried the marks of the horror of Moab. She was almost unrecognizable. Could it be? She has a semblance of Naomi. Could this be her?

Then when the town concluded, *"This is Naomi and all the city was moved."* Their emotions attempted to grapple with all that has so dramatically changed Naomi's very face.

AN UNBEARABLE SORROW

Naomi is insistent! Do not call me any longer "Naomi" which means "The pleasant one" but call me "Mara"—"the bitter one." She completely surrenders her name for it no longer conveyed the meaning of her life.

It is never what happens to us, but how we take what happens that determines what is made of our lives. Bitterness is the fearful beast of hell that robs the soul of hope and happiness. Hebrews 12:15 warns, “*See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.*”

She acknowledged that the hand of God has fallen against her. She was hopelessly afflicted. “*The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me,*” she says.

Naomi used the term for “The Almighty,” twice which is the Hebrew “El Shaddai,” –that is, “the All-powerful one.” What is it to deal with the supreme God. And in dealing with Him and having Him deal with you, it is easy to blame Him for all your trials.

The next phrase is even thornier: “*I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty.*”

It is bad to go through bad things, but worse when you start the full and then become empty. The pain is doubly painful.

You can be full of the Holy Ghost—to know His power—the very power that formed the worlds and created all there is.

You can be full of faith—to be faithful and steadfast, as the Greek term *pistis* implies. Nothing can harm you when you are sheltered by the shield of faith.

To be full of glory means you are fully aware of the divine presence of God.

Ah, to be full of good works means that your life knows the full measure of meaning, that there is purpose to your life and you are fruitful in all your endeavors.

“Full of new wine” means you are full of joy. “*These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full,*” promised Jesus, (John 15:11).

John Wimber tells of a woman who approached one of the pastors after a most glorious meeting. She appeared to be worried. “The only thing that happened to me,” she said, “is that I have this incredible inner peace and joy.” The pastor was reassuring to her telling her that peace and joy were the fruit of the Spirit. That isn’t that bad!¹

To be full of wisdom is another coveting fullness. The term wisdom is the Greek “Sophia” meaning “skill. When you are full of wisdom, you know what to do with what you know.

Oh the delight to be full of God. When Naomi left her home in Bethlehem, she went out full! Paul speaks of being filled with the fullness of God.

¹ John Wimber, The Way In is the Way on, (Atlanta, GA: Ampelon Publishing, 2006), p. 245.

What a reverse, when you come back to where you left full, and now you return empty. The final phrase is the most disastrous—“*the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me.*”

How do you handle such bitterness? When King David was guilty of adultery, he at last came to the Lord and said, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me,*” (Psalm 51:10). There are things a man can manufacture, design, fashion and form. But he cannot create. Only God is the creator. So when David prayed, “Create in me, he came to the only source he could secure an answer. He asked God who alone could create to give him a clean heart. And that the source of your victory! It is in God alone!

A FLICKER OF SATISFACTION

There is a glimmer of light. Verse 22 concludes the chapter, “*And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*”

There were three harvests in the springtime—one was the barley which was the poor man’s food. It came first. Then came flax. Once the first grain harvest arrived, it was a guarantee that the wheat harvest was coming.

It may not be here yet, but it is coming!

You may not want to read it, but it is a literary gem—a painful one to read. C.S. Lewis writes, “*A Grief Observed,*” in which he tells of the death of his wife whom he was so deeply privileged to know in marriage life for a far too short time of four years. “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear,” he says in the opening words of the book. “The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning.”² Lewis comes quickly to his feelings about God. “But go to Him when you need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face. . . . The conclusion I dreaded is not ‘So there’s no God at all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”³

Other comments of Lewis include:

“Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery’s shadow or reflection: the fact that you don’t merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer.”⁴

“Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers.”⁵
“I look up at the night sky. Is anything more certain than that in all those vast times and spaces, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch? She died. She is dead.”⁶

² C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, (New York, NY: Bantam Books, Inc, 1976), p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁴ *Op.Cit.*, p. 9.

⁵ *Op.Cit.*, p. 11.

⁶ *Op.Cit.*, p. 16.

On and on Lewis goes in what seems to be an endless cycle from one bitter scare to another. It is all maddening pain, so much that you feel like leave his book alone when a ray of light creeps into the book:

“Something quite unexpected has happened,” says Lewis. “It came this morning early. For various reasons, not in themselves at all mysterious, my heart was lighter than it had been for many weeks. For one thing, I suppose I am recovering physically from a good deal of mere exhaustion. And I’d had a very tiring but very healthy twelve hours the day before, and a sounder night’s sleep; and after ten days of low-hung skies and motionless warm dampness, the sun was shining and there was a light breeze. And suddenly at the very moment when, so far, I mourned (her) least, I remembered her best. Indeed it as something (almost) better than memory; an instantaneous, unanswerable impression. To say it was like a meeting would be going too far. Yet there was that in it which tempts one to use those words. It was as if the lifting of sorrow removed a barrier.”⁷

There is never a harvest without the death of the grain. Jesus said, “*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit,*” (John 12:24). To know the fullness and then become empty seems like you will never know fullness again. But there is a place that only is found in God where the once full becomes even fuller. “. . . *Weeping may last for the night, But a shout of joy comes in the morning,*” says Psalm 30:5. That is what makes the book of Ruth so personal and reassuring. It tells the path back from emptiness to being “*filled with the fullness of God.*”

⁷ Op.Cit., pp. 51-52