

HOPE WHEN THERE SEEMS TO BE NONE

RUTH 1

Introduction

Some people say that “The grass is greener on the other side.” This may be true at times, but most likely the grass is just as green or yellowish green, or even dead, on the other side. Maybe you have experienced this firsthand, where you left what was a good job for what seemed like a better job, only to find that the new job was not as good as advertised. Or maybe you have moved out of one house into another, thinking this new house would be better suited to your needs. What you didn’t realize until you moved was that the new neighbors were not very pleasant, and there was a dog next door that barked often throughout the night. Maybe you decided to go to college away from home, thinking it would be great getting out of the house to go to school, only to find out that now you have to figure out how to pay rent, you miss your mom’s home cooked meals, and am actually feeling homesick. The grass is not always greener on the other side.

But what if you are in a situation when actually your own grass doesn’t even seem green to begin with? You are not looking for a better job, but you are looking for A job. You are not looking for another house, but you are looking for A place to stay. You are not looking at various school options, but you are looking for A school that will actually accept you. You are going through a very difficult time in your life. You have hit rock bottom as far as you are concerned.

What do you do when you hit rock bottom? How do you make decisions when you are in a desperate situation? Where do you go to for help in trying times? Today, we will answer these questions by looking at a particular story in the Bible of a certain family that had hit rock bottom.

Background of the Passage

Before we turn to the passage we are going to study, let me give you a little background. There was a time in the life of the nation of Israel, after they had settled into the Promised Land, and after Joshua their leader had died, that they went through various cycles of good times and bad times. The good times came when they trusted in God and obeyed His commandments. The bad times came as a result of their disobedience and lack of trust in God. The bad times meant oppression by foreign nations and economic depression. After a period of bad times, the Israelites would acknowledge and confess their sinfulness before God, and repent and seek God’s forgiveness and blessings. God would then mercifully respond to them by providing a ruler; a judge, to lead them to combat the foreign nation to deliver them from oppression, and good times of peace and prosperity would ensue. This pattern of good times followed by bad times, and bad times followed by good times, repeated itself during what is known as the time of the Judges.

It was during a famine at the time of the Judges, that a certain Israelite family left their hometown of Bethlehem in Judah (think where Jesus was born many years later) to look for green grass elsewhere. The fact that this was during a time of famine; a bad time, should make us realize that the Israelites were not living by faith in God. Also, however difficult it was, for a family to leave the Promised Land; the land that God had given to

them as God's people, shows a lack of faith in God. This family that had hit rock bottom and left their home to seek a better life elsewhere, found that life on the other side was not what they hoped for. What they found on the other side was great loss. What they found on the other side was devastating. What they ended up feeling was hopelessness. Let's turn to the Book of Ruth to read this story. The Book of Ruth can be found in the Old Testament, after the Book of Judges and before 1 Samuel. It is the eighth book of the Bible. Let's begin by reading Ruth 1:1-5.

Faithlessness can lead to hopelessness

¹ Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. ³ Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. ⁵ Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

As tragic as the story is, and we feel badly for the plight of this particular family from Bethlehem in Judah, a city in the Promised Land, we can recognize that their move from Israel did not demonstrate much faith in God. By the time that Naomi, the only surviving member of this family experienced the death of her two sons, she had lived in Moab for at least ten years, and by this time she was feeling pretty hopeless. Hopeless because her husband and two sons were dead now. Hopeless because in a "man's world", women, especially widows, had very little financial privileges and income earning prospects, and she had herself and her two daughters-in-law to consider. Hopeless because she was living outside of God's Promised Land in a nation that worshiped idols. It was a hopelessness that came as a result of living by sight rather than faith.

The problem with seeking greener pastures elsewhere is that the focus is out of kilter. The problem is that often times our seeking or looking for better ground is based on sight only, and not on our faith in God or seeking His direction. When we leave God out of the equation, we will often find ourselves in dire situations. When we act without seeking God's will and direction for our lives, we can end up in really bad places. Naomi found herself in such a predicament. Yet the story does not end here.

Faith is Strengthened When Hope is Rekindled

If we read on we will see how a glimmer of hope begins to surface for Naomi. Better times in her homeland, the Promised Land, signaling a return to living by faith and obedience to God by the Israelites reaches Naomi's ears. This in turn makes her consider the possibility of returning to her hometown of Bethlehem in Judah. The good news strengthens Naomi to see above her troubling circumstances, and step out in faith in the direction of where she grew up living amongst God's Chosen People, her own people who were to live differently than all the other people and nations that surrounded them, and she was going to take her daughters-in-law along with her. Let's look at Ruth 1:6-7.

⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the Lord had visited His people in giving them food. ⁷ So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

The good news that Naomi heard that gave her a glimmer of hope was of God. The food that was provided for the people, and therefore no longer a time of famine, was attributed to the Lord's doing; that the Lord had visited His people in giving them food. And as this was heard in the land of Moab, the two daughters-in-law who are from Moab, were equally encouraged to step out in faith with Naomi to go with her to the land of Judah. We see how faith is strengthened when God intervenes and provides us with hope. Faith is strengthened when hope is rekindled.

However, something happens where Naomi gets cold feet. She is not afraid to return to her hometown by herself. She is afraid of taking her two daughters-in-law with her. Although Naomi's two daughters-in-law were kind to her, she didn't want to burden them with her care, nor could she be responsible for their care, so she encouraged them to stay in Moab. To put it plainly, Naomi basically says I cannot guarantee your future. She does this by speaking to a family obligation associated with a brother of a deceased person to be responsible to marry his brother's widow and provide an heir to carry on the family name. Again, basically Naomi tells her daughters-in-law that their future prospects for remarriage are much better in Moab than in Judah. Let's read Ruth 1:8-13.

⁸ And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ May the Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? ¹² Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me."

As we see, Naomi was afraid of taking her two daughters-in-law with her. She didn't want to be responsible for their care, nor did she want to burden them with her care, so she encouraged them to stay in Moab. Yet, we also see Naomi's faith here in acknowledging God's Lordship over her life, whether in prosperity or famine. She also acknowledges that her lack of faith is what has led her to this point in her life.

Yet we see how the two daughters-in-law responded to Naomi's urging to return back to their parents' home in Moab. One of the daughters-in-law, Orpah though saddened by leaving Naomi, decides to go back to Moab. She did not fully express her faith in God. On the other hand, we see how Ruth expressed her complete faith in God. She began by refusing to leave Ruth by physically clinging to Naomi, and verbally vowing to stay with Naomi no matter what, even unto death. In the vow that Ruth makes, she makes a very strong declaration of her faith in God and loyalty to Naomi. At this point we see how hope that has been rekindled by God strengthens Naomi, and then Ruth, to exercise their faith

in God. Faith was strengthened when hope was rekindled, and Naomi accepts Ruth to return to Judah with her. Let's look at Ruth 1:14-18.

14 And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 Then she said, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. 17 Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me." 18 When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

In many ways, there is no greater declaration of one's faith in God and loyalty to another person than the one that was made here by Ruth to Naomi. It shows the deep love and respect that Ruth had for Naomi, and her desire to move out in faith based on the hope that has been presented to them. Ruth wanted to be a part of what God was doing in Israel. The hope presented to Ruth and Naomi's faith in God to return to where God was at work, made her strong in her faith in God; the God of Israel.

There is Always Hope in God, and We Should Trust in Him

So, what do we learn from this passage of Scripture? What is the main thrust of this passage? Getting back to the questions we raised earlier. What should we do when we hit rock bottom? How should we make decisions when we are in a desperate situation? Where should we go to for help in trying times? The answer is of course God. However, the take home truth of the passage is this: There is always hope in God, and therefore we should trust in Him. When we trust God with everything in our lives, we have nothing to worry about, because God is in control and we know that He only does what is good. So even when things seem bad in your life, as long as you keep trusting God, you will have hope that He is able and will somehow make things good. When you are faced with a decision regarding your job, or even a lack of a job, you can seek God's wisdom and will, trusting in Him to provide what is best for you. When you are faced with a decision regarding a place to live, or even a lack of a home, you can trust God to provide what is best for you. When you are faced with choices regarding a college to attend, or even not to attend, you can exercise your faith in God by praying and asking for God to lead the decision-making process knowing that He knows what would be best for you. When we have faith in God, there is hope. To have faith in God means we have hope! To have faith means that we don't walk by sight, but faith makes us see God's mighty work more clearly.

Hebrews 11:1 puts it this way, ***"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."***

The final verses of the passage we are looking at today, shows what happens after Naomi returns to Bethlehem. As she returns to Bethlehem, the women of the city welcome her back warmly, but Naomi tells her family and friends the hardships that she endured in Moab, and expresses that God's judgment upon her own lack of faith was the cause of her troubles. Here is where we have to be careful. When we go through hardships, we

must not become bitter, but seek to become better, knowing the hope that we have in God and continue to live by faith. Let's look at Ruth 1:19-21.

19 So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city 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 out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

Naomi was in deep anguish. She was still saddened by what had happened to her in Moab, and was bitter. Yet we see God's goodness and His faithfulness expressed in the last verse of this chapter. The final verse of the chapter mentions that Naomi returned to Bethlehem with Ruth, two individuals who now at this point in the story have expressed their faith in God. And although in the preceding verses, Naomi declared, *"I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty,"* she did not return back empty. She brought with her a kind, loving, loyal, and faithful daughter-in-law. The verse also ends with the timing of Naomi and Ruth's return to Bethlehem, and it was at the beginning of the barley harvest. How timely! How providential! What a hope giving statement this was at the end of this first chapter of Ruth. Let's look at Ruth 1:22.

22 So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Again, we see how the chapter which began with faithlessness and famine, ends with faith and the hope of a harvest. Faith in God means not walking by sight. Faith in God means we walk closely with Him. Our faith is in God's sovereignty and goodness. We have a hope that is eternal, because of our faith in Jesus Christ. When you encounter a situation when you wonder to yourself, where can I find hope when it seems hopeless? Just remember that there is always hope in God. When we have faith in God, there is always hope, because God does not disappoint! Let's pray.