

Reading: Ruth 1:1-22

Theme: God's Smile Begins to be Known!

In our lives there can be dark, bitter, painful and confusing times; when all we can say or cry out is "Why?" Such swept into Naomi's life when she and her 2 daughters-in-law are left as widows. Naomi seemed to be in the centre of dark and painful happenings - living in the dark and troubled times of the Judges, a famine that caused her husband to take his wife and 2 sons to Moab; worse still he died there and even after the boys married both were childless and then they died! Things seemed really dark and Naomi, knowing God was the Sovereign God, traced all back to Him allowing such. She didn't know the hymn we sang "*God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;*" but she may well have owned that first line. Yet she would realise that she and we need to listen to all the Biblical truth expressed in that hymn by William Cowper - a man who had many dark depressing times and was suicidal on 4 occasions, who was converted in an insane asylum - especially listen to the fourth verse: "*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace; behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.*"

Those last 2 lines are amazing - even behind dark, dark providences our God has a smiling face - not cruel glee, but is lovingly wise as He works out all things for good, according to His plans and purposes and here in v6 onward we begin to see the smile appear, its intensity growing throughout the book.

If we are in, or go through, dark and mysterious providences, I hope and pray we will see through the dark clouds and see the Sovereign God and His love and know His smile breaking through even in our darkest times and experiences. Let us see of the journey - not only back to Bethlehem, but towards the sunshine of God's smile beginning to dawn on Naomi and also see Ruth's journey to faith in the Lord. I've 7 headings to look at this narrative in v6-18 as they head back to Bethlehem, 3 this morning and 4 next time:

1. Hearing (v6)

After all the tragic events, good news reaches Naomi there in Moab. *"When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them..."* We are not told how the news came, but it came and was really good news - *" Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land."* (Proverbs 25:25). To Naomi's weary soul this must have been as refreshing as an ice-cold drink on a very hot day! She hears the Lord had been good to His people, had visited, come to the aid of His people. This is the first time God is mentioned in this book, He's actually mentioned 23 times throughout the book and 21 of those references are as people speak of Him. Only here and also in 4:13 is the Lord mentioned by the author. It seems as if the book is sandwiched between God providing bread for His people and a child for Ruth - two bookends showing the goodness of God.

In our dark times we have to remember the goodness of God and that every part of our lives are surrounded by that goodness; even when it is seemingly impossible to be so. Our God knows what He is doing with our lives and ultimately His plans and purposes are beyond our limited understanding.

The writer doesn't give us an account of the changes in circumstances, but traces the ultimate reason back to the Lord Himself - He had come to the aid His people by providing food for them. Naomi realised the Lord was at work, had returned to His people in mercy and had given them food, bread. Yes, it may have been in sending rain, or in raising up a judge to deliver the people from their enemies, but it was entirely of the Lord and Naomi recognised the Lord had come to the aid of His people, had visited them. The chastisement on Israel for forsaking Him was over and He was graciously giving them mercy. Naomi recognised this, owned it and acted on it.

Perhaps we've never experienced a famine, or hard times or great difficulties in our lives, but then perhaps we have. Whatever our past experiences, do we take time out to see that God provides for us every day? It's so easy to take many things for granted, to even grumble about

them. God's mercy and love are not less because we have constantly received them. The ongoing goodness of God should cause us to rejoice and if we are ungrateful or away from Him, His goodness should lead us to repentance and then rejoicing.

Naomi in her dark, painful and hard time saw and acknowledged the Lord had visited His people and she acknowledged His goodness and He was in control. Naomi, even though she may not have realised it, had grown in her trust and faith in the Lord even in her hard and difficult times. She may have had a lazy faith in the good old days, when she had a rich and comfortable life, sons, a husband, all things going so well, but now her confidence in other things is swept away, all that was left was a faith in the Lord that stood firm and she readily acknowledges Him blessing His people, even though He had seemingly worked against her.

We do not want dark shadow times in our lives, but more often than not, they are times when the Lord is working in our lives in ways we cannot even begin to understand. It may be to bring us to an end of our confidence in self and self-reliance to bring us back to Him or for the first time. Maybe to increase or refine our faith; or to show to others the reality of God in our lives and we will serve Him no matter what. Perhaps many of these were occurring at the same time in Naomi - her faith being refined and increased, its reality being shown certainly to Ruth, if not Orpah as well. God's smile begins to show...

2. Departing (v6 & 7)

In Naomi's circumstances, many people could turn their backs on God, shake their fists at Him, question how can He claim to be a God of love and grace when such things happened to them. Naomi does not do that. If we knew someone was going to come at us the sharp instrument and cut us deeply, I don't think our initial reaction would to allow it nor to say *"Thank you"* after it had happened - unless it was a skilled surgeon who had just saved our life! I think Naomi saw God's loving hand in these dark situations and realised this good God was working in amazingly good ways she could not fully grasp. She saw covenant

blessings had returned and there was a supply of food for His people. He graciously brings her back through bitter experiences to a position where she recognised and owned His blessings. Now it's decision time for her - does she stay in Moab or return back to Bethlehem?

The good news of the Lord's goodness must have been both joyful and yet poignant news too, as she must have cast her mind back to the fateful day when she, with her family, left Israel for their good and yet it had been disastrous. Now it seemed that those in Israel had fared much better than her family had! Moab now seemed such a disappointing place, an undesirable place and Naomi's heart longed for Israel, to be back with God's people again. She would return from Moab back to Israel. She would turn her back on Moab and return to Israel. The word used in the Hebrew for "*return*" (AV) is one of the words used for repent in OT. It is quite a graphic picture here of repentance as she leaves the place where false gods and idolatry is the norm and she went back to her God, His people and His land (c.f. the prodigal son).

Sometimes God's children can wander away from Him and His people. They can wander into their own Moabs. Yet all who are the Lord's cannot truly be satisfied with Moab. Their heart and hope lie in the Lord and their home is ultimately with His people in heaven, but also on earth. All the many sources of joy and pleasure without God are ultimately going to prove barren and joyless places in their life. If we know the Lord, then we can never really be happy in the world no matter how much we immerse ourselves in it. A backslidden Christian is the world's most miserable creature - not truly happy in the world, not truly happy in Christian company either.

It may be that someone here finds it attractive to leave, to be away from God, His ways and His people. It may be that someone, younger or older, is considering what the world has to offer and wants to go away from Christian teaching and the restraints they feel it brings and so they can live as they want, in ways their non-Christian friends do. Don't be like Naomi, don't have the regrets, the heartache of leaving this God and His people for a time. We are to stay close to the Lord and His

people. That is what we were created and re-created for - heaven in God's presence with God's people and praising Him forever. I urge us all to continue in our lives now in God's ways and be preparing for eternity. Don't go in to your own Moab, away from God and His people, abandoning His ways that are designed for your good and well-being and fail to know His smile upon you.

3. Praying (v8 & 9)

Naomi heads for home. She's leaving Moab and her daughters-in-law go with her. She heads down the road for Israel. For Naomi, the future looked hard and fruitless, and she has no desire for her dear daughters-in-law to face the same hardships, On the way these women stop and they talk! One writer (Mark Driscoll) says *"They gotta talk about this. Its three women, right? They gotta talk about this. You're gonna see the first of many conversations, 52.4 percent of the book – I'm a geek - is dialog. It's conversation. Of 85 verses, 55 are dialog. Why? The two main people in the book are women. They're gonna talk about this a lot."* Don't blame me for what the quote says, but we need to realise that women usually do have a need to talk and as men we had better learn to 1stly listen and 2ndly communicate with them!

Firstly, she urges them to return home. Matthew Henry notes Naomi's tender love and concern for her daughters-in-law and says she is an example to all mothers-in-law! It would seem there were tensions between in-laws in his days also! She doesn't just urge them to leave, but we see her praying for them. There are many prayers in the book of Ruth and it is fascinating to note 2 things about the prayers in this book, 1stly no one is recorded as ever praying for themselves! They are recorded only praying for others. 2ndly it would appear that every single prayer is answered by the end of the book. *(Although we can't be sure what happened to Orpah.)* It's amazing how this little book teaches us about prayer and hopefully it will encourage us to go to God in prayer in our dark and our good times - because God is in control, is good and is working His plans out and there is no one better to pray to.

Naomi is burdened for her two daughters-in-law because she was going back to an uncertain future. If it was going to be hard for her, then it would be even harder for these two young Moabite women, who would be foreigners, part of Israel's natural enemy and so the chances of them finding husbands in Judah would be extremely remote. She wants them to go back to Moab and find rest, security, comfort and provision in the home of another husband. She wants them to go back to Moab, to meet a nice Moabite boy, to get married and make Moabite babies and their life would be better and fulfilled.

She tells them to go back to their mother's house/home; usually a widow was said to go back to her father's house. Some have speculated that their fathers were dead - it may have been the case. Yet this phrase "*mother's home/house*" when used in the Song of Songs refers to a place where sexual intimacy occurred, the place where children were conceived and Naomi wanted this for them – God's smile would be on them and they have children.

Naomi prays to this end and although it's a short prayer, she asks precious and great things for them. She wanted the Lord to bless them and to show kindness to them as they had shown to her and to her sons. Most versions say "*deal kindly*" and yet all our translations hide and obscure the force of what she is praying. She uses a small Hebrew word *hessed*. It is a grand word in its meaning - encompasses not just kindness, but loving-kindness, faithfulness, love, covenant love and loyalty, goodness, unfailing mercy and all of these are linked most often to God and His care of His people. Naomi is asking the Lord to show all this to her two daughters-in-law. She knew she had nothing to give them, so she asks her God to give them the richest blessings from heaven by giving them His *hessed* as they went their separate ways. Naomi knew her God was sovereign and could bless these women in Moab. This rich blessing is asked for both Orpah and Ruth as they were urged to back to their homes.

We've touched upon the fact that they would find rest in the home of a new husband and so have security - Naomi prays that for them too. She

knew the state of young widows in their time - they were helpless, defenceless and had no hope unless received by their parents again, or remarried and had children, especially a boy child and gained a provider, along with respect in their community. It's interesting to note that the Lord makes careful provision for widows in the OT. In the NT the churches were to care wisely for widows, we will see a bit more of the OT provision as go into chapter 2.

We too can commit our loved ones and each other to the *hesed* of the Lord. The equivalent term in the NT would be *agape* - the undeserved love of God which also is faithful, never failing, it encompasses His mercy and His steadfastness. We are to ask the Lord to show this to each one of us in all our various situations of life, whether in our joyful times so that the joy will be the sweeter; especially so in dark and sorrowful times as this will keep us and strengthen us; it will refresh us when we are weary; it will keep us going on in times of fear and when we feel like giving up.

We can pray this for those who do not yet know the Lord Jesus as their Saviour - young or old. If anyone here is not a Christian, then your greatest need is not of money, or health, or fame, possessions, or success, but your greatest need is to know the *agape* love of God as revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3:16). Without Him you will never know the rich love of God. Yes, you may experience good things from God - health, strength, joy, happiness, success, long life, and prosperity; yet you will be a stranger to God, a stranger to His love, not be His child and not have Him as your Father, you will have no place kept, put aside for you in heaven either.

You may have many, many good things in life, but your end will be hell, everlasting suffering under God's judgement. By trusting the Lord Jesus as your own Saviour, you will know the steadfast, undeserved and, at times, the overwhelming love of the Lord. It will give you new life, a new purpose, new desires, and new nature, a new hope, a new Friend, a new Father and a new destination. You will have a secure future in heaven, you will be given a new understanding for the things

of this present life as well. Our prayer is that if you don't yet know the love of the God in the Lord Jesus that you will soon come to know it and know the help He can give you in your everyday life.

As Christians, we can pray many things for each other and especially for our own children and families. There are many legitimate things we can pray for our loved ones – their education, health, prosperity, jobs, even marriage partners, but our first priority in prayer, which we should desire above all else, is to be their salvation. Other things are important, but of secondary importance compared to the eternal salvation of their souls. There are so many things to pray for our children, grandchildren, relatives, friends and work colleagues, but most importantly is that they trust the Lord and He show them His love in the Lord Jesus.

Naomi prays this great prayer for her daughters-in-law and yet then urged them to go back and marry pagan husbands, even telling Ruth to return to her gods (v5)! What is going on here? Why would she do such? It's incredible that she asked God to bless them and then sends them back, even discourages them from going to a place where they can learn of the Lord! Why would she do this? We will touch on this in more detail next time!

Until then I pray that we would all know the Lord's *hessed* and *agape* upon us and our families, that we would richly know the warmth of His smile upon us all in every area of our lives.