

I Love and Lament **Ruth 1: 6-14; 19-21**

Review

We are in the book of Ruth in the Old Testament. We are in a series called, *The Redeemer*. Naomi and Ruth must wonder after the first chapter if there is one. Last week we saw Naomi in the crucible of suffering. In just 5 verses we see her life fall completely apart. She loses her husband and her two sons and she is in a strange land, a land hostile to her people—as a woman there can't be a bleaker picture.

But there is strength here. We see in her the power of enduring, steadfast love. Love that starts well and even when called to die, *which all love will call you to do*, she doesn't make life easier for herself, rather she is willing to live alone and without comfort nor companionship to give her daughter in laws a life.

What is shocking in the text and so beautiful is that Ruth out does her in sacrificial love. Orpah takes her Naomi's advice and thinks it is the better part of wisdom to go home and Ruth doesn't and utters some of the most memorial words in all of the bible, **2** ¹⁶ *But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return 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 will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."* (Ruth 1: 16-17) Essentially what she is saying is I will give my life and happiness for yours. You need me, I will die to my needs, so that you can thrive. I will return with you. More, your people will be my family and I will die in your land. In flesh and bone, we see a case study in love. She is for going, or we might say it like this, she is making her mother-in-law's happiness her greatest happiness, because we see no hint of bitterness or resignation in Ruth.

That is love, the essence of love—my life for yours, death, and resurrection. Biblical love, not Disney world love. Enduring love is the only kind of love that even has a change of seeing resurrection joy kind of love. **When hard things in love come you can be sure God is putting you in the school of charity.**

This is hard, so hard when you are in the middle of it. It can be so dark, you feel so alone, so abandoned, forsaken, forgotten. **What do we do in the middle of this kind of enduring love, here is what we do—lament.** This sounds strange but lament is a very big part of the language of love. Still not convinced? Let me show you.

3 Ruth 1: 6-14

⁶ *Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.* ⁷ *So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.* ⁸ *But 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 *The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you 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, we will return with you to your people."* ¹¹ *But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?"* ¹² *Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me."* ¹⁴ *Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*

Introduction

It is in the context of and an expression of Naomi's deep love for Ruth and Orpah that we see this deep lament of Naomi. In sending her daughters-in-law back to marriage and family, kith and kin, home and love, her heart breaks and is filled with gut wrenching grief and she says, **4** ¹² *Turn back, my daughters; go*

your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, **for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.**" (Ruth 1: 12-13) Essentially, she is saying, my life is over, yours doesn't have to be and you don't want to tie your fate to mine because literally, *God is against me!*

Libby Groves, in instructor of Hebrew at Westminster Theological Seminary, puts it like this, **5** *Naomi is an Israelite, one of Yahweh's own children, and yet his hand has persecuted her. There is deep, ancient, forever-binding covenantal anguish in her complaint. Yahweh is her God, and yet he is against her. He has not only allowed but orchestrated the mini-holocaust of which she is the sole survivor, left destitute and without hope. That hurts! You might expect to be treated badly by some stranger, but not by your dad.* (Libby Groves) **What do we make of this?** To take you deeper into the rabbit hole, Robert Hubbard says this, **6** *Ostensibly, the soliloquy is a passionate plea addressed to the women. In fact, however, it amounts to a lament accusing God of cruelly botching up her life. Its effect is to affirm his direct involvement in the story and hence his accountability for her awful situation. Further, it offers a peek both at Naomi's inner pain and her own interpretation of her tragic circumstances.* (Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*)

You see that, **it is an accusation against God**, it seemly disrespects God for where she is in life. Can we do that? Should we do that? Well let's look at the bible and see what God has to say about love and lament. Let's look at it like this. Love laments; The language of Lament; Lament is not the last word

7 Love Laments

If you dare to love, real love, Biblical love, *Hesed* (the Old Testament word for God's covenantal love for his people). That is love that is --sacrificial, *my life for your love*—you will lament. You will have your heart broken. Now, before we are quick to offer Naomi trite words, even theologically accurate words like, "*Naomi, God is in control.*" "*Naomi have faith,*" "*all things work together for good.*" Let's not be so hasty. Our lack of lament says more about our stoical, don't bring your heart, keep a stiff upper lip culture than it does about what it means to be human. We don't see that in the Bible.

And if you think God is ticked off at this lament, this accusation against him by one of his children, look at God's response. God weeps with her through his images. Ruth and Orpah, **8** *"...they lifted up their voices and wept again.* (Ruth 1:14) You say, Jim you are reading stuff into the text. **No, remember when Martha was overcome with grief over the death of her brother Lazarus and makes her lament, a veiled accusation against God, *Jesus if you had been her my brother wouldn't have died.*"** And then like Ruth, she throws herself at Jesus feet and what does Jesus do, rebuke her? No the bible says "He wept." He just fell apart with her, no rebuke, no theology platitudes, he was just with her in her accusation and weeping.

Folks, Love laments, **real love laments**, **believers lament and it not a lack of faith, it is because of faith**. It is Naomi's theology of a good God who is in control that moves her to lament. A lament in the Bible is a believer bringing their heart, just as it is to God. **9** *"A lament grieves that the world is unbalanced. It grieves at the gap between reality and God's promise. It believes in a God who is there, who can act in time and space. It doesn't drift into cynicism or unbelief, but engages God passionately with what's wrong."* (Paul Miller, *A Loving Life*)

See that? Lament happens when what we know of God's promises to us don't matchup with the reality of our lives and culture. So, while Scripture rightly calls us to give thanks in our trials, to have joy of salvation as our strength, to keep our minds on things above, and to know that God is with us, God shows Himself to desire honesty, even with our difficult emotions and questions. **Case in point**. Over one third of the Psalms are bitter laments. Prayers of people praying their bitter lament and broken-hearted pain back to God. People answering God in their deepest pain. For instance:**10**
How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?
²*How long must I take counsel in my soul*

and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13: 1-2)
(can you say that, I mean we know God is sovereign and in control, accuse God of hiding his presence from us? Really) **11**

With my voice I cry out to the Lord;
with my voice I plead for mercy to the Lord.

² *I pour out my complaint before him;*

I tell my trouble before him. (Psalm 142)
(Is this just belly aching and we want to shut up the Psalmist)

Or in the prophets, who watched the distance between God's goodness and the realities of the people of God's suffering grow cry out.....**12**

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?

Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?

³ *Why do you make me see iniquity,*
and why do you idly look at wrong?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

⁴ *So the law is paralyzed,*
and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted. (Habakkuk 1: 1-4)

A lament is a plea for help before God because no one can bear the weight of love alone. **13**
"Lament is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God's goodness...Lament stands in the gap between pain and promise." (Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds Deep Mercy*) God is a good father, lament is how we process our feeling before God, they are just an expression of who we are. *Listen to me, a lament to God is not so much a plea for answers but a scream for presence.*

See me God. I need to feel felt. Like do you care? I mean what kind of God do we serve if when we are broken beyond belief, past believing, if we can't go to him—like this. See lament is faith. Lament makes love possible. As we will see in a minute lament is never final, it is middle prayer. If we clam up and say, well, I know all things work for God, God will bring good out of this, but inside we are dying we risk, cynicism, or worse indifference. "I don't really care." Often good theological utterance in the face of tragedy mask indifference or disconnecting from the pain.

Love cares—that is why it laments. Naomi is not a misguided bitter woman, so much as a woman who has loved much and been broken by life in a fallen world. She doesn't suppress her feelings, nor is she trapped by them. Her love to release Ruth and be alone, her utter denial of self, drives her there and there she is safe in the hands of God.

14 The Language of Lament

Lament is actually the language of intimacy. Shocking I know but let me explain. *When we adopted Addison, Teri and I read a bunch of books about adoption, about attachment and the trauma. One of the shocking things is that if a baby cry's for three months and no one changes them, holds them, changes their diaper in response to their bitter lamentation. I mean all an infant is need. You know what, when they don't get their needs met in response to their cry—they stop crying when in pain or discomfort because they have learned no one cares. Ironically healthy babies do cry, cry because of their confidence in their caregivers. The lament of a Christian is like that, proof we have a Father who cares! Proof we know the heart of the Father, not just theological platitudes about the Father.* Now look at Naomi when she comes back to the city. It gets more intense. **15**

19 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; [a]call me Mara, [b] 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?" (Ruth 1: 19-21)

So, look at this scene. In small town everyone knows everyone, the sisterhood are so excited to see her, *Is this Naomi, we haven't seen her in 10 years, oh and she has this strange woman with her.* They are ready to throw a party everyone is excited and Naomi kills the party spirit. *"Do not call me Naomi (pleasant), call me Mara (bitter) for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, now I am empty.* They she says God has actually *testified against me.* See she blames God for ruining her life. You ever done that? I have. See she is so blinded by her pain, she can't see Ruth, doesn't even acknowledge her. She however doesn't put a spiritual mask on and pretend it is all good and secondly it is precisely her faith in God that prompts her frustration. **She can't square her theology of God as both good and powerful with her present experience. She is muddling between hope and her present reality.** She has mixed motives in this, she is so blinded by pain. So, what does God do. Rebuke her? No and it doesn't seem the women of the village do either. God simply gives her space and as the rest of the book will show—wraps her in his embrace. When we are broken, we lament to God. Steven Brown once's said, *it is easier to hug a dirty kid than a stiff kid.* With a dirty child God has something to work with her. For the stiff and proud, well, you know what the Bible says about that!

Oh, but the invitation is for those who are broken, Jesus was clear, **16** ²⁸ *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* (Matthew 11: 28-30) And this is instructive to us. As one writer says, *"A broken heart that doesn't lament can breed unbelief."* **Let me illustrate by examining our own cultural moment. What is your**

response to all the unbelief around us, the overwhelming power of the culture, that has pushed truth aside—anger, frustration, outrage, anger at the very people we must reach with the gospel. How is that working?

What if we tried tears, tried lament! You know why we don't, it is easier to throw stones and feel self-righteous isn't it. Also, if we begin to lament and weep over the brokenness of the world, our own hearts will be broken too. We might get messy with the messy people of the world. That is what Jesus did, he wept, he entered it. And he got hammered for it by the religious community that just railed! God entered the brokenness of the world and because he was broken by it, he saved it. Maybe that is our next move. Or listen to Paul and his approach to the pagan Roman polytheistic, sexually deviant, oppressive culture he ministers too, as he looked at it, it was not anger but a deep burden he felt. **17** *"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, [b] of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. (2 Corinthians 1: 8-9)*

Now back to Lament and the language of lament. So may ask and it is a fair question. How do we know that this is not just an expression of bitterness. Her exchange in the gates of the city suggest she might be. Her lament, her accusation is not so much a prayer to God but an accusation against him. It is easy to do. How do we keep from it? The Psalms suggest that bitterness expressed to God and not others is healthy, we are processing our emotions before him, whereas the Israelites in the wilderness are just bitter and it leads not to repentance but to disobedience and rebellion. We desperately need a community to help us process this. Lamenting into a community who are faithfully present with you, not judging, not correcting, but who see you, and feel you and is actually the very essence of faith. But to lament alone for long periods of time with no other word from the outside might lead to bitterness or worse as we see in our last point.

18 Lament is Not the Last Word

We don't see it in the text before us but we do see it in the book. God does turn her lament into Joy. We will see faith begin to rise throughout the rest of the book and climax at the end of the story when we

see this broken, lamenting, hopeless woman holding the future hope of the world. Lament is as N. T. Wright says, *middle prayer*. Prayer in the meantime. We know this is true, we know what Naomi doesn't know. We see this in God himself, Jesus will take up and pray verbatim Old Testament psalms of lament—accusation even—on the cross is cry, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.*” So deep is his pain he can't even call him Father. And yet because he brought his heart to God, God gave him the desires of his heart—you and me. Talk about being broken for love, enduring in love, lamenting through the pain of love and staying put—for the joy set before him. On the other side was resurrection joy.

It is there for us to—but we have to go to him—not stiff and disengaged, but messy, and dirty, afraid, heart sick and there we find him. All you need is need, they are your best riches. And when we find him we are able to reflect on his obedience in suffering and realize what Jesus shows us in his love, lament, loss and joy. Eugene Peterson commenting on this says this, **19** “*All suffering, all pain, all emptiness, all disappointment is seed: sown in God it will, finally, bring a harvest of joy.*” - Eugene Peterson, He can say that with certainty because of the words and deeds of Jesus who said...**20** ²⁴ *Truly, truly, I say to you, 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)