Daily Devotional: For when bitterness takes over

Monday- The List

In the days when the judges ruled in Israel, a severe famine came upon the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah left his home and went to live in the country of Moab, taking his wife and two sons with him. [2] The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife was Naomi. Their two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in the land of Judah. And when they reached Moab, they settled there.

[3] Then Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons. [4] The two sons married Moabite women. One married a woman named Orpah, and the other a woman named Ruth. But about ten years later, [5] both Mahlon and Kilion died. This left Naomi alone, without her two sons or her husband.

Ruth 1:1-5

The book of Ruth Chronicles the story of Naomi and her daughter in law, Ruth. In these first five verses, we see Naomi endure an incredible amount of loss and pain. She has left her country to live in a place that is not her home because of a famine. While there, her husband dies, as well as her two sons. Both of her sons were married, but neither had any children. Her first daughter in law (Orpah) returns to her Moabite family, and Naomi expects (and encourages) Ruth to do the same. She has lost everything in this world-and yet, still ends up being a central figure in a book of the Bible which tells her story thousands of years later.

So if there's hope for Naomi, I know there's hope for you too.

Today, take your prayer time to chronicle everything in your life that you have lost, everything that isn't fair, and everything that didn't work out the way it was supposed to. How long should your list be? Honestly, (and I say this without any judgment or cynicism) it depends on how much you're looking to heal. If you have one situation in mind, you can stick to that. If you feel that you're whole life has begun to revolve around cynicism-I'd encourage you to set aside some time for this.

Before you begin, take a minute or two to be still and quiet. Invite God in- you aren't just writing things down, you're sharing them with your father. Like in previous weeks, we aren't trying to fix anything today-we're just unloading. Today, we simply…

Get. It. All. Out.

Tuesday- The Identity

[19] So the two of them continued on their journey. When they came to Bethlehem, the entire town was excited by their arrival. "Is it really Naomi?" the women asked.

[20] "Don't call me Naomi," she responded. "Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. [21] I went away full, but the LORD has brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi when the LORD has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me?"

Ruth 1:19-21

In this passage, we see Naomi return from Moab with her daughter in law Ruth, who has decided that she will not leave Naomi's side. Despite this glimmer of hope, Naomi returns in defeat. So much so that when she returns home and is greeted by the people of her town, her grief, anger and resentment causes her to reject her own name. She asks to be called "Mara" which is a Hebrew word for "bitter".

While it may be easy to look back on Naomi and feel that she's being a bit dramatic, isn't that what we often do? Maybe we don't try to legally change our names, but we do something far worse…

we allow bitterness and resentment to become our identity.

I want you to take your prayer time today to reflect on that. Ask God to reveal to you exactly who you have become. Some examples:

- Do you fit in at social gatherings using humorous criticisms of the people and things that go wrong in your life?
- Have you accepted the lie that you are a person who is always overlooked, hurt, left alone, or betrayed?
- You're suspicious of everyone, just waiting for them to hurt you
- You take pride in being a "realist" who is never fooled-but beneath it, you're simply an injured person and your "realism" is just a suit of armor you use for protection. The problem there of course is that the same suit of armor that keeps out arrows also keeps out love, relationship, and joy.
- You spend your days dealing with your emotional wounds and disappointments, and don't know what you would do with yourself if all that pain went away

Write these down as they come to you. Again, don't worry too much about fixing anything right now and don't be too quick to skip ahead to repentance. Rushed repentance is often incomplete repentance. Give God time to reveal everything in you he needs to work on today.

Wednesday- The Future

13 So Boaz took Ruth into his home, and she became his wife. When he slept with her, the LORD enabled her to become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son. 14 Then the women of the town said to Naomi, "Praise the LORD, who has now provided a redeemer for your family! May this child be famous in Israel. 15 May he restore your youth and care for you in your old age. For he is the son of your daughter-in-law who loves you and has been better to you than seven sons!"

16 Naomi took the baby and cuddled him to her breast. And she cared for him as if he were her own. 17 The neighbor women said, "Now at last Naomi has a son again!" And they named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David.

Ruth 4:13-17

Today, we're jumping ahead to the end of the story. When Naomi allows God to begin to work in her life, and she moves on from seeing her identity as "bitter", incredible things happen. Ruth marries Boaz, who becomes a "kinsman redeemer"-an ancient term that essentially means he marries Ruth in place of her deceased husband, and the children he has with Ruth are counted as the heirs of her first husband, Mahlon. Not only does this give Naomi grandchildren, she becomes the great grandmother of King David (yes, the guy who killed the giant, united Israel, and wrote most of the Psalms).

Today, reflect on your future. Do you want to stay bitter, or do you want to see what other good things God has in store for you-things that right now you can't even imagine. Flip back and forth between the following verses-do you think Naomi in chapter 1 would have believed the great things God had in store for her and her descendants? Maybe God has more in store for you than you think is possible, too.

"Don't call me Naomi," she responded. "Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me.

The neighbor women said, "Now at last Naomi has a son again!" And they named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David.

Thursday- The Change

Now there was a wealthy and influential man in Bethlehem named Boaz, who was a relative of Naomi's husband, Elimelech.

2 One day Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go out into the harvest fields to pick up the stalks of grain left behind by anyone who is kind enough to let me do it."

Naomi replied, "All right, my daughter, go ahead." 3 So Ruth went out to gather grain behind the harvesters. And as it happened, she found herself working in a field that belonged to Boaz, the relative of her father-in-law, Elimelech.

4 While she was there, Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters. "The LORD be with you!" he said.

“The Lord bless you!” the harvesters replied.

5 Then Boaz asked his foreman, “Who is that young woman over there? Who does she belong to?”

6 And the foreman replied, “She is the young woman from Moab who came back with Naomi. 7 She asked me this morning if she could gather grain behind the harvesters. She has been hard at work ever since, except for a few minutes’ rest in the shelter.”

8 Boaz went over and said to Ruth, “Listen, my daughter. Stay right here with us when you gather grain; don’t go to any other fields. Stay right behind the young women working in my field. 9 See which part of the field they are harvesting, and then follow them. I have warned the young men not to treat you roughly. And when you are thirsty, help yourself to the water they have drawn from the well.”

10 Ruth fell at his feet and thanked him warmly. “What have I done to deserve such kindness?” she asked. “I am only a foreigner.”

11 “Yes, I know,” Boaz replied. “But I also know about everything you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers. 12 May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done.”

13 “I hope I continue to please you, sir,” she replied. “You have comforted me by speaking so kindly to me, even though I am not one of your workers.”

14 At mealtime Boaz called to her, “Come over here, and help yourself to some food. You can dip your bread in the sour wine.” So she sat with his harvesters, and Boaz gave her some roasted grain to eat. She ate all she wanted and still had some left over.

15 When Ruth went back to work again, Boaz ordered his young men, “Let her gather grain right among the sheaves without stopping her. 16 And pull out some heads of barley from the bundles and drop them on purpose for her. Let her pick them up, and don’t give her a hard time!”

17 So Ruth gathered barley there all day, and when she beat out the grain that evening, it filled an entire basket. 18 She carried it back into town and showed it to her mother-in-law. Ruth also gave her the roasted grain that was left over from her meal.

19 “Where did you gather all this grain today?” Naomi asked. “Where did you work? May the Lord bless the one who helped you!”

So Ruth told her mother-in-law about the man in whose field she had worked. She said, “The man I worked with today is named Boaz.”

20 “May the Lord bless him!” Naomi told her daughter-in-law. “He is showing his kindness to us as well as to your dead husband. That man is one of our closest relatives, one of our family redeemers.”

21 Then Ruth said, “What’s more, Boaz even told me to come back and stay with his harvesters until the entire harvest is completed.”

22 “Good!” Naomi exclaimed. “Do as he said, my daughter. Stay with his young women right through the whole harvest. You might be harassed in other fields, but you’ll be safe with him.”

[23] So Ruth worked alongside the women in Boaz's fields and gathered grain with them until the end of the barley harvest. Then she continued working with them through the wheat harvest in early summer. And all the while she lived with her mother-in-law.

Ruth 2:1-23

Today's reading is longer, but we really need to see this whole part of the story. As we discussed yesterday, Naomi was so consumed by her bitterness that she had no hope of a good future. Thankfully, in chapter 2, she opens herself up to hope and begins to help Ruth take steps towards a new future.

I want to point this out again: If Naomi had gotten her way in Moab, Ruth would have stayed behind and none of this would have happened. If Naomi had gotten her way when she first returned and had stayed in the identity of "bitter", none of this would have happened. Ruth insists on returning, and Ruth has the idea to go out and glean in the fields. Thankfully, Naomi comes around, and in chapter two begins to reject the identity of bitter. Take another look at verse 20 where she is thankful and blesses Boaz-this is not the same Naomi who returned from Moab hard and defeated.

This is a hard truth, but you may need to hear it today. You may not have intentionally or consciously allowed bitterness to become your identity. It may have happened, like Naomi, because of things that were completely unexpected and beyond your control.

But the reality is this: if you continue to allow bitterness to be your identity, you will never receive the blessings God has in store for you.

Take some time with that. Do you want something more for your life going forward? Ask God to remove that identity and reject it yourself. Spent time talking with him and spend time listening. Also, (and this is always a good practice) make sure there is some sort of physical expression of your prayer. God made us to be more than just thoughts and feelings, its important that we pray with all that we are. Here are some ways this prayer might look:

- Say "my name is _____" (and say your actual name)
    - In contrast to Naomi's statement in chapter 1, reclaim who you are
- Say out loud- "I will not be defined by my bitterness/resentment/anger" (whichever are significant to you)
- If you've been sitting awhile, get up-go wash your hands and imagine your old identity washing away,
- Throw away or destroy something that you've been holding on to out of bitterness or that keeps a pain of the past present for you

Friday-The Other Person

Congratulations, you made it to Friday! Take a moment to pause and sit with the reality-you have a new identity in Christ! You may feel like a completely new person and maybe you feel exactly the same-his mercies are true either way-trust that he is at work. And at work is just what we're going to allow him to do today.

You may be thinking that there are still many opportunities in your life for bitterness and resentment to work their way back in-what do we do about those? Well, I'm going to let Jesus take this solo today… Take a minute to think about the people in your life that are hurting you right now-the people you keep needing to forgive and how frustrating they are. Ask God to search you and reveal areas you need to grow and change. Finally (and importantly) trust that he is good and king-that he wants what is best for you and that when we surrender to him he cares for us.

21 Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"

22 "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!

23 "Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. 24 In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. 25 He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.

26 "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' 27 Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

28 "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

29 "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. 30 But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

31 "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. 32 Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' 34 Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

35 "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." -Matthew 18:21-35

Saturday- Repair

[23] "So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, [24] leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

Matthew 5:23-24

This is another one of those verses that we often don't like to think about too much. But Jesus is clear-don't bother coming to worship me if you're harboring resentment towards another. Fix that first. You've done a great job this week and I'm sure it's been a lot to process-but there is one final step. Fix what is broken.

I know this may not be something that can happen today-but you can begin. Begin praying about what it will look like to move forward with that relationship. You don't have to open yourself up to harm, and you don't have to tell someone that what they did was okay. You can, however, apologise for holding onto bitterness and resentment. And trust me, when you do, you'll receive far more freedom than you can possibly imagine.

Don't hesitate to reach out to a trusted, mature believer, Pastor, or spiritual leader for help with this one in particular-this can be hard to navigate alone.

Most importantly, don't try to do this without your savior. He doesn't want to send you out alone to do the hard things-he wants to walk through them with you. So in your prayer time, focus on moving at his pace, keeping in step with him, and keeping close.