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7/8/07

Ruth 1:1-5 “When Family Dreams Are Shattered”

Intro. In November, 2005 we were getting ready to head home to GA for the Thanksgiving holiday. We were looking forward to spending time with family. Then I received a call from my brother. He told me my sister had just tragically died. She was just 51. She left a son who had just graduated from High School, and a daughter who was 21. Our Thanksgiving feast was turned into a funeral. Five years prior to that, my mother lost her battle with cancer. Now our family gatherings seem quite a bit different with both my mother & sister gone.

My grandmother Clark grew up in a Christian home, and as a young woman she signed a pledge never to drink alcohol as a beverage. She married a young man from a good Christian family. When my grandmother married, I imagine that she had dreams of a happy marriage and several children. But her husband developed a drinking problem. I believe his drinking got worse and they separated, then divorced. That was back in the days when divorce was much less common. My grandmother’s family dreams were shattered by alcohol and divorce. My mother was raised by a single mother who sold Avon & rented apartments for a living. My mother wanted to be like other children, and come home to a mom & dad who loved each other. But that was not to be. I never knew my grandfather Clark. His alcohol addiction & throat cancer took his life when I was just a very young child.

I have been preaching a series of messages on the Christian family. For the most part I have shared with you how the family *ought* to be. But what about the family that *isn't* the way God designed it? Suppose your spouse has walked out on you, and they have hardened their heart, and refused to take steps toward reconciliation. It takes two to make a marriage, but one person has the power to destroy it. For many children, their worst nightmare is for their parents to divorce. When that happens, they also have the ongoing experience of being shifted back and forth between parents. What if your dreams of having children were never fulfilled? If you did have children, what if one or more becomes a very rebellious teenager? What if your grown children never visit, or you never get to see your grandchildren? What if your family is in a constant state of conflict? You see and experience very little love and affection. Let’s face it, more than half of all families in America today are different from God’s design for the family. What if you live in one of those families? I believe that reconciliation is God’s will, but what if it just doesn’t happen, in spite of all your prayers and pleas to restore the family?

In my text today we read of a woman named Naomi, whose family was devastated. They experienced financial hardship (v.1) and moved to a neighboring country where they hoped to do better. Their two sons had to make new friends in a foreign land. Then, Naomi lost her husband (v.3). Being a widow in those days was very hard. But shortly thereafter her sons found wives among the Moabites (v.4). Their marriages must have been joyous occasions. Then, Naomi had one of the worst experiences for any mother. Both of her sons died. Her family was indeed devastated. She had lost her husband, both sons, and she was very poor. Both of her sons died childless. Trouble often comes wave upon wave, and it certainly did for Naomi. All she had left were 2 daughters-in-law, and she suspected that their loyalty would be to their own families and country over her.

Now this morning I want to share with you what you should do when your family dreams are shattered. You may have recently experienced a crisis in your family. On the other hand, things may be fine now, but you never know when *your* family dreams may be broken. Many of the tragic events of life are beyond our control. All we can do is learn how to *respond* at such times in our lives. So allow me to help equip you for such times. First:

I. DON'T ALLOW YOUR ANGER TO HURT YOU & OTHERS

Sometimes when the storms of life begin to blow in on us we react to them very badly. When you've been hurt by a loss or disruption in your family, it's normal to become sad and upset. Then, our next response is to become angry. Yet Eph. 4:26 says, "Be angry, and do not sin...." It is not a sin to become angry.¹ Anger can provide the emotional fuel to right what is wrong, or to help us protect ourselves. But prolonged anger is harmful. That is why Paul went on to say, "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath." Furthermore, our anger can lead to sin. That is why Paul went on to say, "and do not sin...." Furthermore, he said, "nor give place to the devil." Anger can become a mighty weapon in Satan's hands. Don't let Satan use that anger to lead you into sin. Psa. 37:7-8 says, "Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him.... Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret—it only causes harm."

Consider with me some of the ways you can sin in your anger, and cause harm:

A. You May Retaliate – Anger can explode into retaliation in the form of violent action or very ugly & hurtful words. But we should remember the word of the apostle Paul in Romans 12:17. There he says, "Repay no one evil for evil." Paul said the same thing in 1 Thess. 5:15. Peter made the same exhortation in 1 Peter 3:9. The sins of others do not give us the right to sin in the same manner. When someone hurts you, you are not to respond in like manner. In fact, we should even respond with kindness and goodness. Paul says in Romans 12:21, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

So don't retaliate when you get angry. Just trust the Lord to deal with them. In that same context in romans, Paul quotes the Old Testament, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord (v.19).

Furthermore, when you get angry:

B. You May Become Bitter – Prolonged anger will lead to bitterness. So Eph. 4:31 says, "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor [shouting], and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice." Heb. 12:15 warns, "Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled." When life delivers a heavy blow, one way we are not to respond to it is by becoming bitter.

Prolonged anger results from an unforgiving, resentful spirit. The person who has hurt us may not seek our forgiveness, but we must release them to God, and not hold a grudge against them. That may be a tall order, but we can forgive as we remember how much God has forgiven us.

A young woman wrote of the time when her 46-year-old mother was struck by a car and killed as she walked across a street. She vowed never to forgive the young driver who took her sweet mother's life. Shortly thereafter, she began to experience frequent headaches, stomach problems, and at times she found it difficult to breathe. It never occurred to her that these

¹ Anger is ascribed to God (I K. 11:9; Ps. 7:11; 79:5; Heb. 12:29; etc.), and to Christ (Mk. 3:5; In. 2:15-17).

ailments could have been from pent-up, prolonged anger and sadness. But realizing what was happening to her, she decided to begin her own journey into forgiveness, and found healing. She realized that her mom would have wanted it that way.²

So forgive. Let go of your anger, and you will be healed of your bitterness, and the problems that go with it.

Furthermore, when our family dreams are shattered, we may even become angry and bitter toward God. We say, “Why didn’t He prevent this from happening?” That’s the kind of reaction Naomi had when she lost her husband and sons. She said in 1:20, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” Then she says in the last of v.21, “the Almighty has afflicted [or hurt] me.” Some day God will intervene when Jesus comes again. He will remove the plague of sin from our world. But until then, we just have to accept the fact that bad things are going to happen. If God is going to allow us to be free moral agents, there will be sin, and we will get hurt. But don’t get angry at God. Don’t become bitter toward God. That will severely hinder your relationship with God, and it certainly will not do you any good.

Another way you may sin in your anger is this:

C. You May Respond with Hatred – Some people, when they get angry, say, “I hate you.” Have you ever heard someone in your family say that to you? It hurts, especially when it comes from a family member. So if you allow your anger to explode, you can say some very hurtful things. Be angry if you must. Express your anger to God. Express your anger in appropriate ways. But be on guard, and don’t sin in your anger.

Let me say a word to parents. When family dreams are shattered, perhaps the greatest victims are the children. They will get angry over what has happened. They are too young & immature to know how to handle their anger. And if you do not help them overcome their anger, or express their anger in appropriate ways, then they will express their anger in inappropriate ways. Some kids just bottle up their anger on the inside. This is especially true of kids who want to please their parents. Then, their anger will come out, not in their words, but in their actions through rebellion. This is called passive-aggressive behavior. They are passive about expressing their anger verbally, but they become aggressive in expressing their anger through their actions. They may start misbehaving more frequently. A young child may begin to soil their pants, or wet their bed. An older child may refuse to turn in their homework, or clean up their room. You may find that discipline doesn’t seem to work. A teenager may rebel by missing curfew, drinking alcohol, etc. So talk to your kids about their hurts and their anger. If they learn to express it verbally, they are less likely to express it with their behavior.

Now the second principle to follow is this:

II. DON’T BURDEN YOURSELF WITH GUILT

When anyone experiences the loss of a loved one, or some other significant family loss, it is normal to become down & depressed. One symptom of depression is excessive guilt. You keep reflecting on what you could have done to prevent the loss. You wonder if you had been a better wife, perhaps he would not have walked out on you. Or a child may feel it is their fault that mom or dad are no longer together. If a loved one dies, you wonder what you might have done to

² April Spezze-Berger, *Reader’s Digest*, July 2004, p. 22.

prevent it, or make their last days better. Sometimes we go from blaming ourselves to blaming others. That is not helpful either.

Folks, we are never more vulnerable to the attacks of the flesh and the devil as we are when we are down & discouraged. When we have tried to cross all our T's and dot all our I's and things still fall to pieces, it is easy to get defeated and discouraged. When that happens, we begin to wonder why. We begin to question God. We begin to lose faith and hope.

Please remember this: sometimes we pass through a storm of correction. In other words, God allows us to go through trials to correct us, to rebuke some sin in our life. But at other times, we pass through a storm of perfection. These trials are not a direct result of our personal sin, but of the fact that we will in a fallen, sin-cursed world. Bad things are just going to happen. But at such times, God is going to use these trials to perfect us, to make us stronger.

In 1 Kings 17 we read about a widow whose only son died. What a tragedy! The prophet Elijah came to see her. She said to him in v.18, "What have I to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance...?" In her sorrow she was burdened with guilt, and assumed that what had happened was a judgment from God. It wasn't. God allowed this tragedy to test her faith, which was ultimately rewarded when God used Elijah to raise her son back to life. Through it all she became a stronger believer.

We all make mistakes in our family relationships. We should learn from our mistakes, repent of mistakes, confess our mistakes, & claim God's forgiveness. If we do so, we should be free from the burden of guilt. Paul said in Php. 3:13-14, "...one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Don't let past sin and guilt adversely affect your life today and tomorrow.

So when family dreams are shattered, watch out for excessive & prolonged feelings of guilt. What happened probably had nothing to do with your personal sin or shortcomings. And even if it did, you can claim God's forgiveness. Jesus died for your sins. Don't carry the burden of guilt any longer. It will only cause more depression, and it will damage the remaining relationships in your life.

Furthermore, when family dreams are shattered:

III. STAY COMMITTED TO THE FAMILY YOU HAVE LEFT

In Ruth's widowhood, she clung to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Naomi needed her, and she needed Naomi. Her commitment to Naomi is expressed in v.17, "The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me." When bad things happen to a family, it is not the time to cast blame & throw stones at one another. It is a time to come together. It's a time to love each other even more. Ruth responded in the right way. She loved her mother-in-law. In fact, look down to 4:15. Near the end of that verse we read what the people were saying to Naomi about Ruth, "your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons..." Naomi lost a son, but gained a loving daughter-in-law. So let us also not focus on our losses, but remember what we have gained, and remember to love those whom God has kept in the family circle. This will help us avoid the problem of loneliness, which is so common after a divorce, or after the death of a loved one. Don't drive people away with your sadness & anger.

If your spouse has left you, you need to assure your children that you will never leave them. If some other family member has nothing to do with you, be thankful for the family members who do love you. Cling to them. Be loyal to them. Love them all the more.

I want to make an application regarding our relationship to the Lord. You don't know how often I have seen people experience the loss of a loved one through death or divorce, and then drop out of church. Just because God did not interfere and stop this from happening doesn't mean that He has abandoned you. And you should not abandon Him. Jesus experienced the day when large numbers of His disciples walked out on Him (John 6). Later, even His closest disciples walked out on Him when He was arrested & crucified. But He said in John 16:32, "Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me." Dear child of God, always remember these words of assurance that you are never alone, though all others forsake you. Your heavenly Father will always be with you. So when loved ones leave you, it is a time to cling to the Lord even more, for He will never leave you, or forsake you. And this leads to my last point. When family dreams are shattered:

IV. PUT YOUR HOPE AND TRUST IN THE LORD

A family crisis is one of the great trials of life. When trials come, we can either let them hurt us, or we can turn to God for comfort. Turn to God, and you will discover that God is able to work good in the midst of your trials. You see, it is in the storms of life that we learn God can walk on the waves. God allows trials into our lives in order that we might learn to depend upon Him more completely. Sometimes God will allow our dreams to be shattered so that we will look to him. It is sadly true that for many, if it were not for crises, they would not pray much at all. But it is also true that the pain of broken dreams will give your prayers the sincerity and passion that God so desires. Psa. 34:18 says, "The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit." When family dreams are shattered, it is time to look to the Lord and cry out to Him in prayer.

In 1 Samuel 1 we read the story of Hanna. When she married, her hopes & dreams no doubt included having children. Yet, she was not able to conceive. She prayed year after year that God would give her a son, and yet it seemed her prayers went unanswered. Then one year, as she went to Shiloh for the annual feast, the Bible says "she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish" (v.10). In desperation she told the Lord that she would give up her son in His service as a Nazirite, if only He would give her a son. She looked to the Lord, and God eventually answered her heart-cry. Hannah's son turned out to be the great prophet Samuel. Like Hannah your pain might bring to fruition a great event like the birth of the prophet Samuel—who knows?

Likewise, when Naomi and Ruth experienced great losses in their family, both turned to the God of Israel. Naomi believed she would fair better with God's people. Likewise, Ruth decided the same. She said in 1:16b, "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." Now look down to 2:11-12. Notice what Boaz said to Ruth, "It has been fully reported to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and how you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before. The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge." In Ruth's time of family crisis, she turned to the Lord, as should we. No matter what happens or will happen, remember that God is on the throne (Rev. 4:2). He is greater than any problem, and He will always be there for the trusting soul. So look to Him in faith & hope when your family dreams are shattered.

It's a shame when people are caught up in troubles, and yet they don't look up to the Lord. You can catch a wild buzzard and put him in an open pen that's, let's say, 6' x 6', and he will die there. He cannot fly away. Why? A buzzard needs at least a 12 foot runway to take off! Take a bat, place him on the ground and he will flop around there until he dies. Why? He can only achieve flight from an elevated position. He must launch out into the air. Take a bumblebee and put him in a glass jar. I am told that even if you leave the top open, that bee will never find his way out. He is so interested in trying to fly through the glass in front of him, he will never think to look up and find the way out. What is the point? All three of these, the buzzard, the bee and the bat all fail to notice or take advantage of the freedom that is right above them. As a result, they remain trapped in their prison.

So when your family dreams are shattered, look up! God is the One who can lift you out. Otherwise, you will remain trapped in the prison of anger, bitterness, & guilt.

Now I want to conclude by telling you 2 reasons why you should look to the Lord. First of all:

A. Look to the Lord, for He Cares - God sees our broken dreams, and He cares. The apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 5:7 that we should cast "all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." He knows your hurts. He knows your fears and worries. So look to the Lord. Cast your care upon Him, for He does indeed care for you.

The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther lost a son. His wife Katie shouted at him, "Where was God when our son died?" Martin replied, "The same place He was when His Son died. He was there watching and weeping."³

B. Look to the Lord, for He Is Able to Lift You Up – In 1 Peter 5:6 Peter says, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time." Let God work in your life during the bad circumstances, and He will build character, and He will lift you up.

We see this truth illustrated in the lives of Naomi and Ruth. Notice what God did for Ruth. Because she placed her faith in God, He granted her favor in the eyes of Boaz, a relative of her deceased husband. The poor used to glean any remaining grain from the fields after harvest, and so that's what Ruth did to survive. When Boaz saw her gleaning in his field, he told her to glean only in his fields. He even told his workers in 2:16 to drop sheaves of grain on purpose, that Ruth may glean even more from what remained of the harvest. On several other occasions he provided grain for her and Naomi (e.g. 3:15-17). Naomi began to sense the Lord's work in their lives in response to their trust in Him. She said to her daughter-in-law in 2:20, "Blessed be he of the LORD, who has not forsaken His kindness to the living and the dead!"

Beginning in chapter 3 Naomi advised Ruth to make herself available to Boaz, and let him know that she desired that he be her kinsman-redeemer. In fact, she said to him in v.9, "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative." Ruth had come under the wings of the Lord God (Ruth 2:12); and now she would be under the wings of Boaz. Well, Boaz accepted his responsibility to marry Ruth, and raise up a child to inherit the deceased father's name & inheritance. But Ruth's husband had a closer relative, so Boaz had to check with him first. He refused when he realized he had to marry Ruth, the Moabite woman. So Boaz married her. God provided a redeemer! God turned their mourning into the joy of a wedding. Soon, she conceived, and they had the joy of the birth of a child. The townspeople

³ Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story* (Word Publishing, 2000), 186.

said in 4:14, “may his name be famous in Israel!” Indeed the child did become famous. His name was Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, king of Israel! And look what God did for Naomi. She became a grandmother. The people said to her in v.15 concerning her grandchild, “may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age....” Isn’t that a good description of what grandchildren do for us?

Now here’s the point. All of these blessings followed great family tragedy. But Naomi and Ruth turned to the Lord, and in time, God turned their sorrow into joy.

Conclusion: So when your family dreams are shattered, don’t let your anger turn into bitterness. Instead, turn to the Lord. Trust in Him. He is your hope. Then wait upon the Lord patiently, and in due time, the darkness of the storm will pass, the dawn of a new day will come, and the Son will dispel the clouds of despair. Make the best of the family relationships you still have, and perhaps God will bring someone new into your life.

My family was broken up with the loss of my mother and sister. While no one can fully replace my own mother and sister, I will say that God has given me some ladies in this church who love me almost like my own mother. I have some sisters in Christ right here in this church. And most of all, I have the Lord, and I still have my dear wife, my 2 sons, my father, and my brother. I choose not to dwell on my losses. I am not angry at God. I choose not to be angry at the doctors who treated my mother & sister. That will do no good. Instead, I choose to be thankful for what I have, cling to what I have, and to allow God to work in my life through whatever trials He allows to come into my life. Trials only cause me to trust Him more, and pray more earnestly. So if I respond in the right way, I will not become bitter. I will only become better. That’s how we all should respond when our family dreams are shattered!

Sources: Ross Campbell, *Kids in Danger: Disarming the Destructive Power of Anger in Your Child* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999); Alan Carr (www.sermonnotebook.org); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 2 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).