

Pleasant or Bitter

By Al Felder

“¹⁹So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi? ²⁰And she said unto them, call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt bitterly with me. ²¹I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?” (Ruth 1:19-21)

Life can be full of many great challenges. We can face many difficulties that can almost seem impossible to overcome. Our response to these challenges will determine whether or not we become bitter. Naomi faced many difficulties in her life that we are going to talk about for just a little while. She allowed these things to take hold of her and dominate her life for a time. She told her countrymen to no longer call her Naomi (pleasant). Now, she wanted them to call her Mara (bitter) because of all that she had been through. For just a little while we would like to consider her story so that we may make the choice to be “Pleasant and not Bitter.”

The book of Ruth covers a time period that took place during the time of the judges. The contents of the book roughly cover a period of thirty years from 1300 B.C. to 1270 B.C. During this time period there was much wickedness in the land of Israel. God allowed the Moabite King Eglon to oppress the people for an eighteen year period, and they also experienced a famine in the land. It was because of these factors that Naomi left the land of Israel, and went to the land of Moab with her family.

Naomi arrived in Moab with her husband and her two sons who were not married at that time. Not long after being there, Naomi lost her husband and she was left with her two sons. The Bible states that they took wives from the land of Moab, one of which was Ruth. It wasn't much longer before Naomi lost her sons as well.

Then, Naomi receives news that the famine was over in Israel. The book of Judges informs us that God's people had repented. He raised Ehud as a Judge to kill the Moabite King Eglon and end his oppression of Israel. Also, as we stated, God ended the famine that existed at this time. As a result of these events, Naomi was ready to return home.

Life was hard for Naomi at this time. There are events in life that can be bitter pills to swallow. If we allow these events to, they can cause bitterness to grow within us. This bitterness can have a devastating effect on our life.

In the book of 1 Samuel we read where Hannah, Samuel's mother, had allowed herself to become bitter. *“And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore.”* (1 Samuel 1:10) Hannah was unable to bare children. That in and of itself would have been bad enough, but her husband's other wife mocked her and ridiculed her. This bitterness caused

Hannah to reach a point where she refused to eat. Eventually, Hannah learned to turn the matter over to the Lord.

In 2 Samuel we read of another case of bitterness due to the events of life. David had a daughter by the name of Tamar, and hers is a truly heart breaking story. Tamar was raped by her own half-brother Amnon. She hid herself in shame. *“And Tamar put ashes on her head, and rent her garment of divers colors that was on her, and laid her hand on her head, and went on crying.”* (2 Samuel 13:19) The Bible tells us that Tamar remained desolate in the house of her brother Absalom.

The experience itself was bad enough for Tamar, but I can't help but wonder how her father David's inaction added to her pain. David did nothing to defend his daughter, and it makes one wonder if his own past sins led to his silence on the matter. You see, David too had desired a woman at one time, and that desire led him to sin. Now David sees a similar sin in the life of his own son Amnon, and his own guilt may have kept him from helping to heal his daughter's bitterness.

Job is another person we read about in the Old Testament who for a time became bitter due to the troubles of life. *“Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.”* (Job 3:3) Have you ever felt so bitter that you wish you had never been born? Job did.

Job is known for his patience and he certainly displayed that through his faithfulness to God, but Job did have his highs and lows. As we read the Biblical account of his life we find that he suffered many great tragedies. Job had what was probably the worst day of any man's life with the exception of the suffering that Jesus endured. In one day Job received news from four different messengers with stories of how his livestock had been stolen or destroyed, his servants had been killed by raiders, and all of his children were killed by what may have been a tornado. As if this were not bad enough, Job also endures illness, and his own wife turned against him.

Bitterness can also be the direct result of sin in our life. *“³For the lips of a strange woman drop as a honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: ⁴But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two edged sword.”* (Proverbs 5:3, 4) Sexual immorality can lead to great bitterness in one's life. It can lead to broken homes, the loss of one's influence with family and friends, resentment felt by unwanted children, and the development of diseases. All of these consequences can cause bitterness in the life of the one guilty of sin and others as well.

Disobedience to one's parents can cause bitterness as well. *“A foolish son is a grief to his father, and a bitterness to her that bare him.”* (Proverbs 17:25) Contrary to the views of modern society, children need discipline within their life. If a child's parents refuse to discipline him he will grow up causing bitterness in his life as well as his parents.

A child's misbehavior can bring constant shame upon his parents. If he is unruly and will not listen to instruction others will soon dread his presence. This resentment will be noticed by the parents, and over time they can become bitter by the reaction of others.

The child himself will become bitter in life if he is not corrected. He will grow up without the basic understanding of how relationships work. As a result, he will lead a life of isolation being unable to sustain a relationship for very long. He will lack the trust and respect of others, and that can cause bitter feelings to arise.

Turning from God can cause bitterness in one's life. *"Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood."* (Deuteronomy 29:18) Israel of old was warned by Moses that turning away from God would lead to bitterness. Over the course of time they did not heed these words, and they found suffering and bitterness to be the result of their disobedience.

God is the only true source of happiness. We can search this world high and low for joy. We can look for it in everything this world has to offer, and in the end all we will find is bitterness. A life lived in service to God is the only solution to this problem.

Whatever the reason may be that bitterness exists in our life, if left to fester it will cause us to make poor decisions. *"¹⁴Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: ¹⁵Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; ¹⁶Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright."* (Hebrews 12:14-16) The Jewish Christians in the first century Church needed to learn this lesson and learn it quickly.

They had lived their entire life as God's chosen people. They had the Law of Moses. No other group of people could claim these things. They had a pride and longing for the good ole days as they looked at them. Christianity required some changes. It was a new and better covenant. It did not have the weaknesses that were contained in the Law.

Some of these changes were hard for the Jews. The hardest, however, was the fact that the new covenant was open to all. In their minds they had lost the special status they enjoyed under the law. They were in danger of allowing bitterness to overcome them in these matters. Like Esau, if they continued down this path they would become guilty of taking something holy, and treating it as something common. They were in danger of fulfilling what they saw as the more pressing need (fulfilling the lust of the flesh), and trading their birthright by leaving the New Covenant and returning to the Old.

What are we to do with bitterness when it arises in our life? *"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice."* (Ephesians 4:31) The Bible says that we are to put bitterness away. It has no place in the life of the Christian. This may sound like a difficult task to some, but it can and must be done. In

order to be successful we must recognize the source of our bitterness, and deal with it accordingly.

If our bitterness is the result of our own sin, then we must remove the sin from our life. *“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”* (James 3:7) As long as we give the devil a place, he will continue to have his way with us. It is only when we repent of our sin and submit our self to God that we can gain the victory. Sin must be removed from our life.

If bitterness is the result of the ups and downs of life, we need to change our focus. Naomi dwelt on the negative things that had happened unto her. Yes, they were difficult and tragic experiences for any person to go through, but she focused on them so much that she failed to see the good things in her life. Naomi had a wonderful daughter-in-law who left her people to stay with Naomi to be a help to her.

We cannot control the things that life throws at us sometimes, but we can control how we react to them and what we focus upon. *“⁸Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. ⁹Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.”* (Philippians 4:8, 9) We need to fill our life with the knowledge of God’s word. As we do so, we need to meditate on it day and night. Once we do this, we can have confidence in God through the teachings of His word that He will be there during the highs and lows of life.

Naomi finally learned to change her focus, and her life became pleasant once again. *“¹⁴And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that this name may be famous in Israel. ¹⁵And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him. ¹⁶And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it. ¹⁷And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi; and they called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.”* (Ruth 4:14-17) At one time her house was empty and her hope for the future was gone. Now, there was the love of a devoted daughter-in-law, and through her offspring there was hope for the future.

In conclusion, we must never lose sight of God. *“¹⁷Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stall: ¹⁸Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds’ feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places.”* (Habakkuk 3:17-19) In order to keep bitterness out of our life we must draw near to God. We

must follow his word and remove sin from our life, and we must turn to Him for strength when life knocks us down.