

THE GREATNESS OF GRATITUDE

by Steve Zeisler

The first prayer that I remember learning as a child I didn't learn in church; I learned it from a Walt Disney cartoon of the story of Johnny Appleseed. It was in a little song that Johnny Appleseed sang:

The Lord is good to me,
And so I thank the Lord,
For giving me the things I need:
The sun, the rain, and the apple seed.
The Lord is good to me.

Although the content of that prayer could be expanded to include some other things, it has exactly the right starting point for a child (or anyone else) who would learn to pray. The heart of it is acknowledgement that the Lord is good and gratitude to him for what he's done to meet your needs.

We've been studying the book of Judges together, a book filled with spiritual darkness by and large. There are periods when the light breaks through, when someone will act in faith in the Lord and something positive will happen, but there are always subsequent periods of rebellion. A spiraling descent takes place in the story of Judges; things get worse and worse, the heroes get less and less heroic, and at the end of the book, as we saw last week, a number of accounts exist primarily to break our hearts as we read them. The story of Judges is a descent into hell, if you will. It ends with rape, murder, dismemberment, and genocide. The lack of response to God's heart at the end is terribly sad.

One key to understanding the book is that there is no place in it where thanks to God is expressed, where the motivation of someone's speech or activity is their appreciation for what God has done for them. Unlike Johnny Appleseed, no one begins by saying, "The Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord." There are moments of courage, tears, cries for help, blame, activity, forgetfulness, and remembering---any number of other things that take place---but a heart of gratitude that expresses itself and becomes the center of an individual's life is not to be found.

Romans 1 describes this descent into hell in theological terms and shows the awful, tragic condition of man that results from the fact that we're estranged from God. Verse 20 says:

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God....

God is clearly displayed, and if any one of their five senses work, they have the opportunity to know him; even so, no one honors him. But then, Paul goes on to say, even more basic and appropriate than honoring God is the simple giving of thanks:

...or [even] give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools....

Thus their culture disintegrates. Thankfulness is the only beginning point that makes life make sense, in which we approach our heavenly Father with the recognition that he exists, that he is worthy, and that we are to be grateful for the opportunity to know these things.

This morning, thankfully I must say as a preacher, we are out of the book of Judges and into the book of

Ruth. If you look at verse 1, you realize that this story takes place in the same time frame:

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed....

The book of Ruth is a beautiful story. It contains wonderful instruction and describes people that you'd love to know. It has fascinating details and all sorts of winsomeness. It takes place right in the middle of the period of Israel's history in which we have seen so many leaders of the nation acting foolishly, Levites doing terrible things, and judges being hard-hearted. People did what was right in their own eyes, and there was no bowing of the knee to God. This story ought to teach us something about living as a remnant in our age. It will have many other helpful things to teach us as well.

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. And they took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

Now, these five verses cover a span of ten years in the life of the family of Elimelech. Virtually all of the details we're given about this family should elicit a sense of sadness about their circumstances. Difficulty after difficulty descend on them. They are poor and are struck with famine. (This may have taken place during the time of the Midianite destruction of the southern tribes, because the Midianites at one point in the time of the judges made life miserable and created a famine.) We have already mentioned that the time of the judges is a period in which there is very little spiritual light in the land. Further, they experience the cultural dislocation of living among a people to whom they are foreigners, whose religion is antagonistic to the things of God. Then, perhaps most difficult of all is widowhood.

It is very hard to be a widow in any age, to be left alone with the emotional and other consequences that descend. But it was especially difficult for women in ancient times to be widowed. In the Bible, the classic definition of what it means to have compassion in your heart is to care for widows and orphans; these groups of people were the most destitute, the most set upon. There was nothing like social service agencies or Social Security that would provide for them. Women and children needed a man: a father, brother, grown son, or somebody else who would act as their provider and protector. This woman Naomi not only loses her husband, but it says clearly in verse 5 that she also loses her grown sons who might have provided for her. So everything about the introduction in the book of Ruth bespeaks hardship.

Finally, in this introduction are two women whose lives are going to stay intertwined through the rest of the book. One of the daughters-in-law leaves, which we'll see shortly; Orpah is lost to the story. But Naomi and Ruth continue side by side. As we read this introduction we realize that their circumstances are roughly equivalent: Both of them suffer from poverty; both have been widowed; both will live as foreigners in a territory where they were not born, where they can't draw on the customs that are familiar to them; both have a hard road to travel. Yet their respective responses to the difficult circumstances they are given will be very different.

One of the interpretive keys to the book of Ruth is to contrast Naomi and Ruth. How do they handle deprivation, widowhood, hardship, and dislocation? Each of them is dealt that hand, but they come out as different people. God loves them both; it's not as if one is rejected in favor of the other. But clearly Ruth's response will be much more filled with faith, and I hope it will be an example to us.

Let's continue reading in verse 6:

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food. So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

And 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. May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people."

This is a very touching scene. These three women have been bonded together by their circumstances, and they obviously love each other. In fact, Naomi is loved by everybody in this story. When she comes back to Bethlehem, the women greet her with open arms, and they're consistent in their concern and love for her. Boaz, whom we meet later, is solicitous of Naomi's welfare. And, of course it's clear that Ruth loves her very much.

Naomi is a complicated person. She is, I think, a woman of great energy, one who is very effective in life. People are drawn to her. But she is also someone who has a very difficult time trusting God when she can't see him at work. This is a beautiful, encouraging beginning, with the tears of these daughters-in-law, her tears, and her calling on God to bless them. But let's continue on and see if we can gain further insight into Naomi's complex character. Verse 11:

But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Naomi has just prayed for these young women, "May the Lord care for you." But the very next statement out of her mouth is, "I can't do anything to fix the problem. Go back to your mother's house." It's clear that she doesn't expect God to do anything that doesn't include human beings' making the best of the difficult circumstances that they are in. "What you see is what you get," might well be Naomi's motto in life. She dismissively suggests one scenario: "Well, let's suppose I get married tonight. We'll find somebody, right? I'll marry him, and I'll have babies. We'll do it as quickly as we possibly can. Are you going to wait for these boys to grow up so you can marry them? It's ridiculous! Your best bet to find husbands is to go back to your mother's home, your native village, your network of friends, and hope for an opportunity." Significantly, in verse 15 she'll say after Orpah has gone that she's gone back to her gods as well. Going back into that culture means going back to that religion, but clearly, if human beings are going to solve human problems, that's the best course to be on. So she's prayed on the one hand for God to do something, but all of her thinking, expectations, and instincts are that we have to do our best to fix our own circumstances. Verse 15:

Then she said, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back 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. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me." When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came about when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" And she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara [the name Naomi means attractive or pleasant, and the name Mara means bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call

me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?" So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

I don't know many people who would quickly rise above the standard set by Naomi here. When dealt hard circumstances, when blow after blow descend, and maybe the first or the second isn't so bad, but difficulty after difficulty, poverty, and loss continue over years, most of the people I know tend to respond eventually by becoming hard. (I see the tendency in myself.) But it needn't be so. Naomi says in verse 13, "The hand of the Lord has gone forth against me." Then down in verses 20 and 21, she is saying, "I am bitter because I have been treated bitterly. God doesn't care for me; he has afflicted me. I have become his enemy." She's drawing conclusions about life, God, and herself based on what she can see, on her circumstances.

Ruth is very different. Ruth's life ought to serve as instruction for us that hard times don't have to make hard people. She begins with the choice to be grateful---everything in her speech assumes a grateful response to God as the basis on which she is going to live her life. Ruth grew up as a Moabitess, and the head of the Moabite pantheon was Chimosh. Chimosh was a demon who demanded the sacrifice of children, burned alive at times, in his honor. She grew up in great spiritual darkness. She may very well have had any number of other hardships that would go with growing up in such a culture.

But Ruth discovered in marrying into the family of Elimelech that there was one God in heaven, the Creator of all, who had made a covenant with his people, who loved them, who gave laws that were honorable and brought out the best in human beings. She heard the stories of the patriarchs, we can well imagine. Perhaps she knew a psalm or two. Maybe they recited to her the Ten Commandments with the inspiration for living life that they give. And Ruth went from darkness to light. She is grateful enough to have heard the truth about God that nothing else is as important as that. All of her conviction in life is that this truth is so valuable that she will not lose it under any circumstances, and her only life line is Naomi. So she says to her, "If you are going back to your people, I am going with you!"

Jesus told a parable in which he said the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it he hid it again, and then in his joy he went and sold all that he had and bought that field. Everything else would be forfeit if he might have that glorious treasure. That's exactly the way Ruth approaches the discovery of the God of Naomi. The center of her statement to Naomi is, "Your God shall be my God."

Ruth, starting from a grateful heart, from thankfulness, looks at life expectantly. Naomi has been crushed in many ways, beaten by the hard circumstances. Ruth is looking forward to the future. "Where you go I'll go, and where you lodge, I'll lodge." There's life left to live; there are places to go. She doesn't know yet what God will do, but she's not quitting or terrified. Her gratitude makes her expectant: Because God has been so good in giving her himself, he'll be good to give them more. And she begins to believe that the things you can't see are more important than the things you can see. Naomi is deriving her sense of life from what she can see: "I have no husband, I have no sons, I am poor, I am old, I am...bitter." Ruth is deriving her sense of life from what she cannot yet see, and that is that God cares.

Second Corinthians 5:7 is one of the shortest verses in the New Testament and one of the most important. It says, "We walk by faith, not by sight." We make our walk, our progress through life, based on believing things that we cannot see; we believe them because God has said them. We don't walk just by what we can see. So Ruth is filled with expectation, and love for Naomi pours out of her heart.

Let's turn to chapter 2 and see how this story unfolds:

Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers,

"May the LORD be with you." And they said to him, "May the LORD bless you." Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" And the servant in charge of the reapers answered and said, "She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. And she said, 'Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.' Thus she came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been sitting in the house for a little while."

Gleaning was a provision made in the law to protect poor people from devastation. A landowner was not permitted to reap his field all the way to the very border of his property. He had to leave some trim around the edge so the poor people could come and glean a little bit of produce. And if in the process of harvesting the reapers dropped grain on the ground, they weren't allowed to pick it up; they had to leave it so the poor people could come and glean it to sustain themselves.

So Ruth, with an awareness of that provision in the law, wakes up one morning and says to Naomi, "Let me go glean." Now, Naomi is harumphing her way through life at this point and is not inclined to go glean herself. (It may be that she is actually too old.) But Ruth, with typical optimism, says, "If we are poor and God has made provision for the poor, let's go through the door the Lord has opened. It's the only one we have." So she starts early in the morning and works hard all day long. She is taking the outstretched hand that God offered; it isn't a lot, and it certainly isn't going to make them prosperous, but it is going to provide sustenance.

The entire second chapter of this book is amazing for a couple of reasons. One is the wealth of detail it has. Remember, the first five verses of the book covered ten years. We saw three men die, buried them, and spoke of marrying two others---a quick sweep in five verses. Now all of a sudden we have conversations with details like, "Good morning," in this chapter. The writer of the book of Ruth was a magnificent storyteller, and the way this is written is beautiful.

The other amazing thing about chapter 2 is its spontaneity. Nothing that happens is planned by anybody, not a single conversation or a decision to go someplace. No one knows any of it is going to happen. So everything you hear and see is the result of people living out who they are. If someone has enough time to work things out ahead, it isn't always possible to detect the kind of person they are. But if they're caught off guard, and they have to respond without preparation, you're very likely to see something about the real person that you wouldn't see otherwise. And everybody is caught off guard in this chapter. We'll find as a result that some helpful truths are displayed in these people. Verse 8:

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw." Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" And Boaz answered and said to her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge." Then she said, "I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to [literally, you have spoken to the heart of] your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants."

Ruth walks through the only open door she had, and it says that she "happens" onto the field that belongs to Boaz---pure coincidence. Boaz himself turns out to be an extraordinary coincidence; that he should even exist is terrific. We don't know much about his prior history; we have to guess a number of things, but I think these are reasonable guesses. He either has moved to this area in the ten years when Naomi was in Moab so that she

is unaware of his proximity, or more likely, his circumstances have dramatically changed. It's unthinkable, given ancient Israel's culture, that a man of his age---he describes himself later as an old man---could be a wealthy landowner or gain status as an elderly squire, if you will, without ever being married. The best guess is that he was married once and has been widowed himself. That he is not married now becomes clear as the story unfolds. And either he never had children, or, more likely, his children have grown up, received their inheritance, and have gone out on their own to start their own families, while he still retains a fair bit of his own property.

In any case, Naomi has certainly been unaware that he is single, and has perhaps been unaware of his proximity at all. Ruth doesn't know who he is. She just stumbles onto his field, the first one she comes to. She has no idea that her reputation has preceded her, and Boaz has no idea that he will meet her when he goes to the field. And what we find here is the Lord God orchestrating events in a tremendous way to bring blessing to his people, and in particular to his daughter Ruth, the one who loves him so.

What is delightful about Boaz is that he is so sensitive. When he speaks to the boss of his crew, he urges blessings on him, and the workman returns blessings on him. They obviously care for each other. And Boaz is not the sort of person who is uninvolved with those who work for him. He says, "Wait a minute---I know all the gleaners. This is a new gleaner. Who is she?" When he hears her name he says, "I have heard of her! What I know of her has filled my heart since the day I heard it. She is someone who loved God enough to come and seek refuge under his wings. She is someone who loved her mother-in-law, who isn't always that easy to love, enough to commit her life to her. Oh, this is the one I've heard of!"

All of a sudden, a spontaneous outpouring from Boaz begins: "Let me care for you! Let me make sure you have enough to drink; it's hot out here. You drink from what my workers would draw. And you're not just to glean as a poor person with no other provision." He goes on to speak of God's provision: "The one from whom you have sought help is going to care for you."

And Ruth is astonished. "Why would you look at me, since I'm a foreigner? I have no standing, no claim on this. Why would you care so for me?" There's a wonderful intimacy about the interchange between them. Each of them is delighted with the other, each surprised. Each of them expresses themselves before they have a chance to think about what they're going to say, and a great tenderness builds up. Ruth began by being grateful to God, and she finds herself more easily able, therefore, to express gratitude to someone like Boaz.

What we're seeing is the provision of God behind all this. Naomi stays at home, assuming the worst; she believes that God has it in for her. Ruth assumes the best. Her heart is filled with the love of God, so she's out taking the opportunity she knows of, and the Lord is able to steer her into greater and greater opportunity, greater and greater blessing. Ruth trusted a God who could not be seen, and expected that the future would have possibilities in it that no one could predict. She didn't know what they were, and she is surprised at the details when they come. But she is not surprised that God is meeting her needs, because her life was changed by the knowledge of his existence; if he loved her enough to give her life to begin with, he will love her enough to sustain it.

The relationship between Ruth and Boaz begins to pick up a little speed. Verse 14:

And at mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar." So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left.

It turns out she has enough left to take some home and feed Naomi later that night. His actions toward her are extravagant; there's always more than enough.

When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. And also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her."

She can go wherever she wants in the field, even near the grain that has been harvested. And they are to drag the grain out of the sheaves and drop it so that she will have plenty. Over and over again Boaz is doing what a servant of God would do. She had come to seek refuge under the wings of God, and he is the servant of God who is meeting her needs. It is his delight to do it; he is so thrilled with the person she is, with the story of her heart, life, and inner beauty. And she is genuinely grateful throughout this story.

If you were trying to put this on stage or on film, I don't think you could do it without including something of the interest that is growing between the two of them, not just as boss and gleaner, nor just as landowner and foreigner, but as man and woman. There is a growing intimacy in their speech, in the way they care for each other, in the things they appreciate in each other. We're not going to read the rest of chapter 2, but as the story goes on, she comes home with an entire ephah of grain, about four gallons, and Naomi is astonished: "Where did you get all that grain?" Ruth tells the story, and a light goes on for Naomi: "Boaz!" Presumably there's the discovery that he is now single, and she instantly sees potential there because he is a close kinsman who has a responsibility for these women, and Boaz and Ruth are attracted to each other. There's a sense that God is going beyond just meeting the needs of these people; he is in the process of giving gifts that are thrilling. And the rest of the story is thrilling---the greatest gift of all is going to come from this.

Naomi finally begins to express thanks to God at the end of chapter 2. She does so because she sees that the circumstances have changed; now there are possibilities out there. What Ruth is able to do is believe it before she can see it, and that's why her example is the one that stands out. She trusts that God loves her before she knows how he will love her. And God loves Naomi, of course, even though she can't believe it until she can see it. But how much better it is if we are able to start with an attitude of thankfulness to God that we can be known by him and that his face brightens our lives, and not only that, but we are able to begin to expect him to act because what is unseen is more real and more important to us than what is seen.

This isn't a very romantic scene in any classic sense. There are a lot of other people listening in while Boaz and Ruth are trying to have this touching little mealtime conversation. Everybody's sweaty, and there is chaff all over the place and dirt under their fingernails. But this is the beginning of a relationship in which hearts are expressing caring for each other, and the things in them that mean the most to each are the best things.

To conclude, the circumstances the two women face are roughly the same, but their responses are different, because Ruth starts out being thankful and begins to believe in what can't be seen. We walk by faith and not by sight. One of the great prayers of the Bible is in Ephesians 1, and I would like for us to close by reading it together as a prayer. Ephesians 1:18-23:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all.

This is a week in which the truths of Jesus' death and resurrection, his sacrifice and our resulting guiltlessness, and forgiveness and the power of the resurrection will all be spoken more loudly than in other weeks. You and I have an opportunity this week to make some decisions. If you are not a Christian, you have an opportunity to give your life to Christ and begin to have your world filled with the presence of a caring God who understands us, knows us, and gives himself to us. If you are a Christian who has become more like Naomi than you want to be; more dominated by the circumstances; more filled with what human beings can do or can't do; more likely to measure your world by the things you can touch, taste, hear, and see, you have an opportunity to ask God teach you to see what you can't see, to believe what is invisible.

Paul's prayer in Ephesians is not for God to do anything; he is not praying for the Lord to act or establish something. What he prays is that we who know the Lord will see what he has already done, that we will be enlightened, that we will be captivated by the truth that is already in place. The change he prays for is that we will be convicted by it and live on the basis of it. Let's make this prayer our own.

Catalog No. 4320
Ruth 1:1-2:23
Fifteenth Message
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April 12, 1992

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