

Shadows of Christ & His Bride

Lesson #35

Arriving in Bethlehem: Bitter

October 15, 2025

Ruth 1 begins with a severe famine and a man, Elimelech [God is my King], leading his family into an ungodly land. His way seemed right to him, but it brought death and destruction. Ruth & Naomi were starting over as widows in a culture that didn't really provide well for the needs of a poor widow or foreigner. They had no male family member to provide for them. God saw their affliction. No Hope! No future! Naomi heard that God had visited His people.

Ruth 1:6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law,
that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard
in the country of Moab how that the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread.

Remember: These were "the days of the judges" when the roads were anything but safe for men much less women. Once again one senses the protecting hand of the LORD watching over these two defenseless women on their dangerous journey thus assuring their safe arrival home. Normally a trip from Moab [~50+ miles] would take 7-10 days. The road descended about 4,500 feet from the high plains of Moab into the Jordan River Valley. Then it ascended 3,750 feet through the foothills of Judea.

Ruth 1:19 Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened,
when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them;
and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

Naomi and Ruth are like storm-battered ships limping into harbor.

Neither of them is in good shape after their long journey.

Naomi returns indigent, worn, beaten up by life, dejected, joyless,
bereft of her husband and sons - and she has a Moabitess with her.

Ruth 1:20-21 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?"

Naomi had allowed her bitter experience, misfortune, or tribulation while sojourning in Moab to change her name, disposition, self-image, or identity.

Consider: When we pass through deep affliction, we sometimes wonder
"Will I ever be happy again?"

Our emotions can lie to us: whispering discouragement rather than feeding your faith.

I Cor. 10:1-11 states that all things happened to Israel happened as examples for us.
We can always learn Biblical truths from the experiences of the nation of Israel.

Lessons From Bitter Waters

The Israelites were totally helpless to deliver themselves from bondage and slavery.
God sees their affliction and hears their cries.
The Parting of the Red Sea: God miraculously delivered His people.

The Song of the Redeemed was sung by Moses and Israel after God's miraculous deliverance from Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea.

Ex. 15:1-3 Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord:

"I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;

The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!

² The Lord is my strength and my song; And He has become my salvation;

He is my God, and I will praise Him— my father's God, and I will exalt Him!

³ The LORD is a warrior; The LORD is His name!

Out of Egypt! Bound for the Promised Land! God is our guide.

- Egypt is behind them, and Canaan is in front,
but they have no ability to provide for themselves.

From Worship To Whining In A Few Days

Describes the transition from expressing praise and thanks to God to complaining and expressing discontent when circumstances change. Worship focuses on God's glory, actions, and enduring goodness. We are to offer God a sacrifice of praise.

Phil. 4:6-7 Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication

with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.⁷ And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep [guard] your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Whining stems from ignoring God's past deeds, allowing circumstances and mood

to dictate one's faith and leading to bitterness and frustration

Nancy Leigh DeMoss: God's will is what we would choose if we knew what God knows.

I can whine or I can worship.

Interesting: When the Israelites were first freed from slavery in Egypt,

God Led Them to a Place Of Bitter Waters.

- All the things they depended upon back in Egypt are actually taken away from them and they have to learn to rely on God. [Fully Rely On God - FROG]
- When you can't see God's hand, you must trust His heart.

Ex. 15:22-24 God had just delivered the Israelites from the bondage and slavery in Egypt.

- After crossing the Red Sea, they traveled 3 days in the desert without water.
- Wandering in the wilderness, thirsty, exhausted, and desperate for water.
- Imagine their relief when they finally found a spring of water.
- Disappointment: It was too bitter to drink. They called the place Marah = bitter.
- Disappointment turned to desperation. They cried out, What shall we drink?

This theme of continual moaning, complaining and whining about God and their circumstances continues throughout all their wanderings.

Remember: It's only been a three-day journey. Where is the song? Where are the tambourines? They have just had a massive experience at the Red Sea crossing.

Here they are, so soon after, saying where is God? Where is God that can do the impossible?

Their bodies were thirsty, but due to their circumstance, their faith was also running dry. Consider: God could have led them straight to fresh water.

Instead, He used this moment to teach them something greater. Learning Zone! God brings us to bitter streams to test us to see if bitterness will come out of our hearts.

Context of Hebrews 12: Running The Race Of Faith: Run Strong > Finish Well

II Cor. 5:9-10 Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

What Does Bitterness Have To Do With Our Race Of Faith?

The 5 warnings in Hebrews admonish us to press on and obtain all God has promised to the faithful Overcomer. These warnings represent the very real possibility of the loss of privileges or rewards offered to the believer. These warnings concern the possible negative consequences for the unfaithful believer. The results will be revealed at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

A Danger Exists In Our Bitter Waters:

A. They can cause feelings and roots of bitterness in our souls.

Heb. 12:15-17 Looking diligently: [Lest = God forbid]

- lest any man fail of the grace of God;
- lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;
- Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

¹⁷ For ye know how that afterward, when he would have Inherited The Blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

While Scripture plainly identifies unbelief and immorality as characteristic of the profane, the term also warns believers that holiness may be undermined by careless attitudes, empty talk, and a willingness to trade eternal privilege for fleeting satisfaction.

Profane surfaces when temporal appetite tramples covenant privilege.

Esau's account illustrates how Lightly Valuing The Sacred Invites Irrevocable Loss.

It requires diligence to run the race successfully. The 3 dangers before us are illustrated by Esau's decision which was irrevocable even though he regretted it later.

Spiritual Failure is seldom an explosion. It is usually an erosion.

It is constant spiritual oversight by each one of us of our own lives. Be on guard!

The Route Of Any Failure Is A Progression Involving Three Stages.

1. Failing to appropriate God's Grace

Appropriation does not necessarily mean gaining something new but to set aside for our practical possession something that already belongs to us.

Heb. 12:15a "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God."

"Looking diligently" = searching out carefully or minutely

The Hebrew Christians were going through trials, testing and facing persecution,

BUT they had failed to appropriate God's grace so they could stand firm.

Thus, they were living defeated lives. They had failed of the grace of God.

C.A. Coates: It is appropriation that tests us. How often we stop at admiration.

Consider: Know what I have in Christ > See my need of it > By faith receive it

This brings us from childish meandering into a responsible, specific walk of faith.

Takes me from a "help me" attitude to that of giving thanks;

from a begging attitude to appropriation.

H.F. "We are plunged into new tests where only a fresh supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ will meet our need. As our need is met, as we prove the sufficiency of Christ to meet our inward need, so there can be a new showing forth of His glory through us."

Truth: Whatever God brings into our lives, He will give us grace to overcome it rather than to be overcome by it. We experience overcoming victory. Many promises for those who overcome.

II Cor. 12:9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities,
that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Consider: If I fail to appropriate God's grace, I will react according to my sin nature.

God's grace does not fail, but we can fail to take advantage of His grace.

I Peter 2:11 Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims,

abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul,

Gal. 5:16 This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

Truth: Only the Holy Spirit of God can control the flesh with its sinful desires.

The tragedy is that thousands are trying to control and eradicate it in their own strength.

2. Bitterness In The Heart

Heb. 12:15b Looking diligently... lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you.,
and thereby many be defiled.

Bitterness in the heart leads to murmuring with the tongue. Murmuring is one of the most dangerous sins because it always affects others and leavens the whole camp.

When I fail to appropriate grace, there will be a root of bitterness in my heart against God who has allowed this "trouble" to come, and it will ultimately come out in my speech.

The author now turns to Esau, a descendant of Abraham, who lived in close proximity to those whom God would favor with the blessings promised Abraham and his descendants. But in the end, living in close proximity to God's blessings is not the same as entering into them.

3. Open Contempt Of What Is Our Responsibility Or Our Privilege

The sole place in the NT where the loss of the "birthright" is mentioned specifically is in Heb. 12:16. Esau's story is brought forth as a warning to believers of the possible loss of the birthright. The writer encouraged his readers to depend on the grace of God by urging them to look BY FAITH at the life of Esau.

Look Back To Esau Heb. 12:16-17 Looking diligently...lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

➤ Profane = a common person, one who lives for the world and not God

Gen.25:29-34 And Jacob cooked a stew: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint:

³⁰ And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red stew; for I am faint: therefore, was his name called Edom. ³¹ And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright.

³² And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me? ³³ And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he sware unto him:

and he sold his birthright unto Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus, Esau despised his birthright.

Note: When Esau was willing to give up his birthright for a mess of beans, he was faint or weary. What was the author's exhortation in Heb. 12?

Heb. 12:4 For consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. [Spiritual failure is a gradual erosion.]

Remedy for faintness or weariness:

Isa. 40:29-31 He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fail; But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint.

Waiting: Live For Him Look To Him Listen To Him Long For Him

The author of Hebrews warned the readers: Do Not Yield to transitory pressures and forfeit their inheritances. You would ultimately regret the foolish step and might find their inheritance privileges irrevocably lost as were Esau's.

Hold On To Your Birthright Inheritance

Heb. 12:14	Pursue peace and holiness
Heb. 12:15	Do not fall short of God's grace
Heb. 12:15	Deal with roots of bitterness
Heb. 12:16-17	Value your inheritance and birthright
I Tim. 4:6-8	Exercise discipline and godliness

Deut. 8:2 And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that He might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. The bitter waters of Marah revealed the bitterness that lodged in the hearts of the Israelites. The external obstacle revealed the internal realities of their hearts. The Israelites betray a lack of trust as they grumble among themselves against Moses. What becomes evident in the face of Marah is that the Israelites needed deliverance from more than just Pharaoh.

- They need deliverance from their grumbling, mumbling, bitter selves.
- God has a remedy to bring about that deliverance.

Ex. 15:25 So Moses cried out to the Lord for help, and the Lord showed him a tree. Moses threw it into the waters. And the waters became sweet. It was there that God tested their faithfulness to Him.

Showed: 3384 yarah = instructed and taught.

➤ God instructed and taught Moses something about the tree to cast into the waters. The Bible frequently uses the metaphor of a tree to represent God's Word. It portrays it as a source of life, wisdom, and spiritual nourishment that yields fruit and remains strong and stable. This comparison emphasizes the benefits of following God's Word, such as bearing fruit, having a strong connection to God and withstanding difficult times.

Hope in a Tree: Jesus is the Tree of Life. The original Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden is a prefiguration of Christ, who is presented as the Source of Eternal Life.

- His sacrifice and resurrection provide the way for believers to have eternal life.

The Cross: The crucifixion is the transformation of a tree of death into the Tree of Life.

Ex. 15:25 -26 and the Lord shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: After the waters were made sweet: He made a decree and a law for them, and there He tested them. ²⁶ And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His sight, and will give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee.

This text makes it plain: The emphasis is on the transformation of the Israelites rather than the water of Marah. Israel is to be "Yahweh-centered" in all their living.

Lesson: God's purpose is to transform me in the midst of my trial.

I am to be God-Centered in all my living.

When I cast Jesus into my trial, He will miraculously transform it for His purpose & glory and for my good. He can transform hard trials into sweet, unexpected blessings.

Bitter Waters Made Sweet: The tree's presence miraculously sweetened the water, providing life-saving sustenance for the thirsty Israelites and representing a moment of hope in their challenging journey.

All such bitter waters are meant in so many different ways for our growth in sanctification,

- that God might further conform us into the image of His Son, and
- that we might share in the sufferings of Christ so that we will be partakers in His glory.

Rom. 8:17 If we are to share His glory, we must also share His suffering.

Ex. 20:20 Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him [that is, a profound reverence for Him] will remain with you, so that you do not sin." [AMP]

This same pattern happens in our lives. When things are easy, we enjoy life, but we don't always grow. It is in the hard moments that we see God's love, provision and power. Don't lose heart. God works in our trials, even if you can't see it yet.

He can take your hardest moments and bring something beautiful out of them.

I AM THE ONE WHO HEALETH THEE

God uses a tree to make bitter water drinkable, symbolizing the transformative power of Christ's cross to sweeten the bitterness of life's challenges, providing healing, hope, and salvation from sin and death. It serves as a spiritual lesson, showing that God can transform difficult circumstances. It reveals His nature as a healer, Jehovah Rapha.

Ex. 15:27 After leaving Marah, the Israelites traveled on to the oasis of Elim, where they found twelve springs and seventy palm trees. They camped there beside the water.

Abundance and generosity: The 12 springs and 70 palm trees at Elim contrasted with the single bitter source at Marah, showing God's generous care that exceeds basic survival needs.

Spiritual Healing, Respite & Refreshment: Coming to the plentiful water of Elim after the hardship at Marah signifies a period of rest and spiritual rejuvenation, symbolizing God's healing and His ability to provide relief.

Elim provided a place of preparation for the challenges ahead.

- The Israelites needed to stop and renew their strength before moving on.

12 springs of water symbolize God's complete and generous provision for the Israelites.

The number 12 is linked to the 12 tribes of Israel, suggesting that there was enough water for each tribe.

70 Palm Trees: The number 70 also recalls the 70 people who went with Jacob into Egypt, linking their past with their present deliverance and future hope.

The Journey: There were 12 forefathers of Israel. 70 journeyed with Jacob to Egypt.

- Reminder of God's promise to Israel's ancestors
- It is a direct remembrance by God that He has done this thing to fulfill His promise to Abraham. It is an orderly recognition by a supernatural occurrence.

Key: This should encourage the current generation and assure them of God's faithfulness.

Note: The Bible only gives 1 verse about Elim, the oasis where they later found plenty of water and shade. The Bible gives 4 verses about Marah because struggles teach us more than comforts ever will.

At Elim, they enjoyed what was already there. But at Marah, they saw God provide.

One day, Charles Spurgeon was walking down a staircase. He was so lost in thought that he lost his footing and fell. The accident left him in terrible pain and struggling to recover.

As he lay there, a friend came to visit and said, "You have come to Marah."

Spurgeon sighed and said, "Yes and it is bitter."

His friend said, "Marah is better than Elim. At Elim, the Israelites had water and fruit, but it did not last. At Marah, God gave them a lasting promise."

He gave them a promise: "If you trust Me, I will take care of you."

➤ He revealed a new name: Jehovah Rapha- The Lord who heals, restores and makes whole. The truth stayed with Spurgeon: Difficult seasons - the ones we wish we could skip - often bring the greatest blessings.

We may not like them, but in the end, their bitterness turns into sweetness.

God has both seasons of Marah and seasons of Elim. He uses both as He seeks to grow us.

Marah represents those moments after victory when the high of a miracle fades and bitter waters return. God did not lead Israel to Marah for punishment. They needed to learn to trust and depend on God as their provider. Just as they were dependent upon Him at the Red Sea and God was their only answer there, so God is their only answer at the bitter waters as well.

God transforms the heart by means of His Word, His instruction for sweet living.

John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. . ."

Jesus is our transforming Word from God for life. As we receive and follow Jesus, as we become Jesus-centered, we discover a healing transformation being worked within our hearts.

It is the internal journey from the bitter waters of Marah to the twelve springs of Elim, from barren desert to seventy palm trees.

May the tests of life bend us towards Jesus, that we might open ourselves to Jesus at ever new depths, heeding His word and experiencing His healing.

We can allow ourselves to become embittered by the circumstances into which we are often thrown. When life is bitter, cast Jesus in your bitter waters.

Emptiness and Bitterness: Upon returning to her homeland of Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth, Naomi asks the townspeople to no longer call her "Naomi" [pleasant] but "Mara" [bitter]. She openly declares that the Almighty has afflicted her.

J. Vernon McGee Although she did not know it at the time, by returning to Bethlehem, Naomi went to the very place where bitterness could be removed. She entered the House of Bread in the Land of Praise and there was a blessing awaiting her.

Ruth 1:22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the Beginning Of Barley Harvest.

Hope Is Rising! It is the Beginning of Barley Harvest!
Boaz, type of Jesus our Kinsman Redeemer, is coming.

Consider: You may be experiencing a difficult trial like Naomi, but keep in mind: God uses strong trials to build strong faith.

Malloch: Good timber does not grow in ease; The stronger wind, the tougher trees; By sun and cold, by rain and snows, In tree or man, good timber grows.

Scottish author George MacDonald told this story of a woman who had experienced a great tragedy in her life: "The heartache was so crushing and her sorrow so bitter that in her distress she exclaimed, 'I wish I'd never been made.' With spiritual discernment, her friend answered, 'My dear, you are not fully made yet; you're only *being* made, and this is the Maker's process!'" MacDonald wisely concluded, "We can let God take our troubles and make out of them a garment of Christian fortitude which will not only warm our souls but also serve to inspire others."

It has been said that God may have to break us in order to make us. Naomi could not sing in this chapter but by the end of the book, I think she would have gladly sung these words...

- For all the heartaches and the tears, For gloomy days and fruitless years
I do give thanks, for now I know these were the things that helped me grow.
--Anonymous