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Finding Ruth

I've been pursuing my own missionary journey for over twenty years now. Sometimes I'm crying out to God for fresh zeal and revelation. Moses was also a man on a journey. After so many years of walking in the dry desert his heart must have been longing to set foot in the promise land. *Psalm 106 : 23* shows us Moses at his best, interceding for the people and saving them from destruction. *Verses 32 & 33* however, show Moses in a less favourable light as his spirit becomes bitter and frustrated with the people because of their rebellion. My French version translates it,

" they (the people) made him bitter in spirit .. "

After years of pioneer Christian work in France and other nations I can identify with Moses best and worst moments !

Moses faced the challenge of **" Meribah "** and **"Massah". Quarrelling** and **testing.** The constant squabbles and strife amongst brothers coupled with the onslaughts of cynicism and unbelief are enough to put *"rash words"* on even the most saintly of lips !

The Satanic pressure was strong enough to push even Moses to unbelief and anger resulting in him falling short of his dream. I'm always glad to see that he finally got there being "beamed up or down" at Jesus' transfiguration !

Better or Bitter ?

I'm sure that most ministries eventually come to this kind of testing. We either become cynical, negative " has beens " or we come through into greater victory and brokenness. The testing brings a real cross and, as the years roll past, Paul's words in *2 Corinthians 4 : 10-12*

"..death is at work in us , but life is at work in you. "

become more experience than theory.

How do you become better when circumstances around cry out for bitterness ? A couple of years ago I found myself asking this question and God seemed to lead me to the beautiful book of Ruth in the Old Testament to challenge and present me a personal, and dare I say prophetic answer.

Let's look at Naomi. She can be an image of all the tired ministries amongst us. She is equally an allegory of the tired Western Church. (I've not forgotten Israel either !) Tragedy strikes and she finds herself under death, bereaved of sons and husband.

How many sons has the Western Church lost through its cruel, intolerant religious wars and how many more cut down in the prime of life on the killing fields of Flanders during the First World War ? Countless others drift into spiritual death without a shot being fired, seduced by the deceiving decadence of the " free " West. In a nutshell Naomi has lost all hope of fecundity. She is hopelessly, tragically barren ! She has lost her inheritance.

Was this her sad destiny ? Her original name means " tenderness " " charming " " pleasant ". Love, grace and joy ; holy attributes of Christ's Body the Church, called to fill a world with light and life but tragically wounded and old before her time.

Whether we like it or not the Church in the West is pretty barren and in decline. Naomi has changed her name !

> *" Don't call me Naomi " she told them." Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi ? The Lord has afflicted me ; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. "* *Ruth 1 : 20-21*

Mara means bitter. As we think of all that happens around Christmas time and the hope it brings, it's sobering to think of Naomi journeying back to that sacred place to be **bitter in Bethlehem**.

Is there hope for her ? Is there hope for my own weary heart ? Can the Western Church know a new beginning ? The answer for Naomi, and for us, came in two things.

The first.

A fresh revelation of Christ as REDEEMER…….Redeem your dreams !

Naomi had a friend in Boaz and, as the old song puts it, we have a friend in Jesus.

> *" That man is our close relative ; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers. "*
> *Ruth 2 : 20*

Jesus our redeemer. The one who can heal history and hearts. The Hebrew "goël" (redeemer), is used to describe the "avenger of blood" and also the "kinsman redeemer" of property. It sums up the double aspect of redemption. **Salvation and inheritance.** May we know a fresh hunger and passion for His presence and a renewed quest to seize our inheritance.

That's the obvious " spiritual " answer ! As every Sunday school pupil knows, Jesus is always the answer to everything ! However, there was also a more strategic answer for Naomi.

The second requirement for her healing.

She Found Ruth….And Ruth Clung To Her.

Ruth, from the " evil " incestuous race of the Moabites, was the answer for Naomi.

What does Ruth represent to me ? At least two things.

Youth :

We must be investing in, and praying for the next generation. I'm convinced that, even in the face of Satan's destructive onslaught on the youth of nations, God is wanting to bring a powerful missionary revival amongst a new generation of Joshuas. Just as the Jews may have been shocked by Ruth's culture and background our religious and missionary structures will need to adapt to the adolescent energy and fun of young people. Without realising it some of our Churches and missions look more like adverts for " Help the Aged " and "SAGA " holidays ! Many of us are totally out of touch with the real world of young people, with their dreams, temptations and aspirations.

New Nations :

Make way for the sacrificial martyrs of China, the fervent prayers of Korea, the hungry soul hunters of Africa and the globally generous Brazilians ! To name just a few !

As Ruth received Naomi we will find our future in creating discipleship environments for such as these. We will be learners as much as teachers, receivers as much as givers. Again, structures and personal comfort zones will need to change to stand alongside the colourful, potent, raw energy of God expressing himself in many cultures and skins. A humble Chinese man recently stood in front of over 500 French pastors urging them to pray for his *" Back to Jerusalem "* vision and the raising up of 100,000 Chinese missionaries. He'd spent much of his life in prison but spoke out :

"Whatever the circumstances on your life, God's calling does not change. "

A young Chinese girl from Paris who had come with their choir to sing to us then said how the Church had begun in Paris 5 years ago with just 10 members. They now have 500. I also remembered how a French mayor of an inner city district of Paris had said that the people who were doing the most to curb inner city violence were the Black African Churches.

In the light of this, my own prayer, and perhaps your own, is very much to find Ruth.

Perhaps you think I've been hard and extreme on the " Western " Church and that your own church is wonderfully alive, winning the lost to Christ, sending out missionaries and influencing society for God. If you are indeed a Caleb, go and take your mountain, seize the territory but learn to love Ruth.

And there in Bethlehem, where Mary was to hold Jesus to her breast, old Naomi finds new life, nurses a son of promise in David's line ;

" she took the child , laid him in her lap and cared for him. "

She rediscovers her name and is **" blessed in Bethlehem. "** As some of you will be reading this, remember Christmas. May you too be blessed in Bethlehem, may you be " better " rather than " bitter " and may the opportunity Ruth offers be accepted as a true gift of Christmas to a waiting Church.

" Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel ! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter- in-law, (Ruth) who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth. "