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The Danger and Delight of an Empty Life
Ruth 4:13-21

Have you ever felt empty? Maybe there has been a season of life where you have felt empty, unable to be filled, unable to be satisfied, It feels like you will never become content and completed. It is a restless, aching, emptiness that weighs down your soul dragging the rest of you with it. A uninvited guest that refuses to go away. There is nothing heavier than emptiness inside. Maybe the emptiness comes from a longing for relationship...the terrible loneliness that excludes and refuses. Maybe your emptiness comes from a long-term illness that continues to beat you down month after month and year after year...no hope in sight. Maybe your emptiness comes calling in the form of thin pink slip. Your job is terminated. Your bill is due. Your check has bounced again. Maybe your emptiness is imprisonment in an area of sin...victory seems no where in sight. You want to do right but all you see are the failures. You see no way out, nothing ever changes. Maybe your emptiness this morning is an emptiness in your soul. You see no hope for the future, no life, no chance of contentment or restedness. Only left inside is a deep aching emptiness in your soul.

If you find yourself empty this morning. I wish to warn you there is a danger of emptiness. The danger of emptiness is filling yourself with the wrong things. In striving to quench the bitter ache. In order to bribe the uninvited guest of emptiness out of your life...it can be tempting to try and press out the emptiness by filling up your life with the wrong things.

Several years ago Oprah Windfrey made her battle with excess pounds public after having tipped the scales above 235. She had tried diet after diet and would lose weight only to have it come right back on a few months later. In 1993 Oprah found a new personal trainer, Bob Greene. He gave her some good steps involving healthy eating and excising 5-7 times a day for at least 20-60 minutes. But Oprah told People magazine, what really turned the tide was Greene's helping her

understand why she wanted to eat so much. He helped her discover the trigger that caused her to eat. For her food was comfort, pleasure, love, a friend, it was everything. Now she works everyday at not allowing food to be a substitute for her emotions.

See one way to try and fill up our empty lives is to stuff it full of things that are wrong, or too much, or excess. When we are down, empty, sad and lonely, eating is one way we try to fill this void. Some people try to self-medicate the emptiness they feel with alcohol, or drugs, or working 100 hours a week, or sex outside of marriage, or sports or leisure. We try to satisfy an emptiness within with things that may seem fun for awhile...but will never truly satisfy. So many people in this world scurry about attempting to find rest and contentment on their own when those things come only from God. For it is God alone who can soothe the restless soul within. God created us. He designed us to live in relationship with Him. Therefore we will continue to feel empty until we love him and walk with Him. When we try and substitute our emptiness with things like money, sex, drugs, success....we are fighting a losing battle. There is only One who can draw us out of our emptiness and fill in the void. Only God can fill our emptiness. For it is out of our emptiness, God implants life. It is out of our despair that God infuses hope. It is out of our bitterness that God steps up to bless. It is out of our deep aching sorrow that God replaces with radiant joy. chances are if we find ourselves feeling empty today it is not the fault of God, it is our fault...because we have filled ourselves up with stuff other than God. It could even be good stuff in itself. But anything that tries to take God's place in trying to soothe our aching emptiness, is never any good. We are empty people when we fail to fill our lives up with the stuff of God. Yet, it is that very emptiness that reveals our need for Him. It is seeing our need that sets us up for great delight in enjoying His provision, His completion, resting in His fulfillment, His total satisfaction and contentment. It is out of emptiness that God implants life.

If you are feeling empty this morning, what should be our response? How can we begin taking steps to filling ourselves up with the good stuff? Where does true filling begin for the empty life? You may not yet be a believer in Christ. I'm not sure what is holding you back from His free offer of life and salvation. But there is inside you a vacuum

shaped by God that only He can fill. You will be empty until you allow Him to fill it. If you are a believer, you may be beaten down by the enemy; the evil one wants nothing better for you to lose an eternal perspective, to have you wallow in depression and discouragement, to accent your failures and make you fill empty and without purpose. You may be beaten down by the flesh, by some sin habit that continues to taunt you and drag you under. You may be so empty the sin that so easily besets you. You may feel empty and drained dry by the circumstances of life that when you compare what you see of others life, compared to what you expect life to be they match up horribly, leaving you to fill empty and alone...far, far from the exciting presence of God. Maybe you have been hurt in the past and the wounds still linger. You long for God to come and complete you.

I want to encourage you this morning that God is the One who brings people true satisfaction. It is out of our emptiness God will implant life. We need the eyes to God and what He has done, will do and wants to continue to do. God open our eyes to see the sin that stops us and the life that you offer. Then give us the strength and direction as you draw us to yourself.

Turn with me to the book of Ruth. You will find it in the Old testament about 1/4 of the way through the Bible hidden behind the dark book of Judges. Written during the times of Judges it is a light of hope for the hopeless, blessing for the bitter and fulfillment for all who have lived in seasons of emptiness. The Book begins with an Israelite woman Naomi who has left Bethlehem, her home town...because of severe famine in the land. She left to go to Moab with her husband and two sons. During the decade she spent in Moab, both her sons married, yet both sons died as did her husband. In a foreign land with no husband, no means of support, no sons, no family. She decides to return to her hometown of Bethlehem where she has learned "the Lord has once again visited with blessing and provision of food." Her daughter in Law, a Moabite named Ruth loyally sticks with Naomi and returns with her to Bethlehem. Back in Bethlehem the younger Ruth, gleans behind the reapers to provide food for her and Naomi. Ruth's diligence and hard work ethic and servant loyalty to her mother in law catches the eye of the land owner named Boaz. Who happens to be a close relative of Naomi.

Toward the end of the harvest season, Naomi encourages Ruth to engage in the Israelite custom of proposing a Levirate marriage, where Ruth asks a close relative, Boaz, to marry her, and buy back the family lands...in a real sense asking Boaz to redeem both Ruth and Naomi. Boaz agrees to pursue redeeming Ruth and Naomi, even though another man who is a closer relative has first rights in the opportunity to redeem. The other man gives up those rights and Boaz is blessed by the elders of the city as he steps up to the challenge and redeems Ruth and Naomi.

Lets read the conclusion to this story in Ruth chapter 4 beginning at verse 13. (READ) Out of emptiness, God implants life. How can we who are stuck in the middle of empty feelings begin to respond in the way where God can fill us?

First this morning, we need eyes to see the life that God has implanted. When you are feeling empty, it is pretty tough to see life, even sometimes that life that has been planted there by God. When you are empty and depressed all you can see and all you are looking for are the negative things, the depressing things. As you will find exactly what you are looking for, the empty person will, see all the missing things in there life and dwell on them. (Hold up a glass "what do you see? It all depends on what you are looking for") The depressed person will look at a situation and see only the empty part not that which is half full. The empty person will not see all the good that they have but only stare at the emptiness they do not have. Because of that they become increasingly withdrawn and cut themselves off from friends, church, family, God. Anything that might draw them back to a healthy and Godly and spiritual perspective that would begin to see life as God sees it.

If you are empty this morning, you must begin to pull off of yourself, off of dwelling on what you see now as lack and emptiness and see with eyes the life that God has planted all around you. For God is life and He alone plants life. The problem is not the absence of life. Our problem is in our ability to see the life that has been planted their by God.

The Book of Ruth began with a focus on Naomi and now ends with a focus on Naomi, with her daughter in law Ruth highlighted in the middle of the book. In chapter one we learned that Naomi left Moab. Why? There was a famine in the land. She thought she was empty and

need to go to Moab to get filled and food and provide for her family. She thought she would be better off in Moab....but look back with me in verse 19-21 of chapter one. The women of the town are all stirred up about her return. They want the scoop. They want the report. And it is in Naomi's conversation with the town women we get insight into her feelings. In v.21 she tells them. "I went away full, and came back empty." Imagine, from Naomi's perspective looking back she saw herself leaving a famine as being full. Yet, for her that was real feelings. If I lost my spouse and three boys, I too would feel empty. Far more empty than any famine or lack of food. Ten years earlier, Naomi left Bethlehem, thinking she was empty and would get filled in Moab. But that was before her husband and all of her sons had died. Now, she complains to the women of the town that back during the famine she thought she was empty, but didn't have any idea of empty until death wreaked havoc in her family. Now, she is convinced she is totally empty. Now she says God has totally abandoned her. Call me Marah she tells them, Call me bitter, for God has afflicted me.

She felt empty. She felt abandoned by God and alone...but was she? No read the next verse 22. Ruth was right there with her. It took several months before Naomi was able to wake up and see what she had right there next to her. RUTH, whose name means friend. She had Ruth. Ruth was life and hope staring her right in front of her eyes and it took awhile before Naomi was able to wake up and see God's blessing and life and hope that He had planted for her. Folks, even in the middle of the worst circumstances God will implant His life and hope. We must develop the eyes to see that life that God has planted.

For Naomi it didn't happen all at once. She was down when she first got back to Bethlehem. She began to pull out of it and even engaged in helping matchmake for her daughter-in-law Ruth. But here in the final verses of chapter 4 it is again Naomi's conversation with the women of the town that reveal her feelings. V. 13 Boaz and Ruth have married and they conceive a child, a son is born. V.14 The women said to Naomi. Wow! God has surely blessed you in amazing ways. For He has not left you...not left you without a redeemer. Naomi couldn't see it but God had planted life and hope right there near her the whole way, she just didn't see it as from God.

The Lord worked in many ways in this story but the main tool He used was a daughter in law named Ruth. Naomi's feelings of emptiness varied from despair to delight, but God's tools of blessing, Ruth was one of them, was always right there...It just took awhile before Naomi could see it. If you are feeling empty, I challenge you to look for the life that God has planted around you. Get a piece of paper and sit down in a quiet place begin listing the places, the people of life that God has planted all around you. When those empty places pop up. refuse their entry into your mind. I am not saying to deny the reality of difficult things, I am saying to refuse to let them control your thoughts. For this time begin to train the eyes of your heart to search only for the places and people that God has planted around you that impart life and hope. If you are feeling empty, a change begins with eyes that see the life God has implanted. I was there last week. Down and out. Everything was black and negative and one bad news after another. Then slowly God began to open my eyes and see all the great things, the life, the hope he has planted around. Once you get started that is what you see all over, visitations of God's grace...even in the small things. Sometimes when my kids get down, and start to whine and complain; sometimes when I get down; I like to sing them a simple song to remind us of everything we have from God. It goes like this, "Oh be thankful for the good things that ya got...the good things that ya got are for many but a dream, Oh be thankful for the good things that ya got." Travel around this world, our country has been visited by the Lord, we are wealthy and blessed materially. May God open our eyes so we can be filled spiritually.

Second point this morning. We need eyes that trust God is still at work, even when it doesn't look like it. If our eyes are not trained to see the life that God has planted around us, it is going to be tempting to stop believing that God is still at work. Folks God is always at work. God never stops working and moving and shaping. We just fail to have the faith eyes to see it, so we get in danger of failing to trust that God is, and He is working, and that God still rewards those who seek Him. We need eyes that trust that God is still at work. Do you believe that this morning? Do you believe there is a God and He never stops working? Yes! Then we need to begin living like it or be doomed to live empty lives of desperation.

All through the book of Ruth we see affirmations of faith that God is at work, even when the characters don't like what He is doing. 1:6 God gives the people food again after times of famine. 1:8 Naomi affirms the Lord's sovereignty by blessing her daughter's in law "May the Lord deal kindly with you, give you rest and give you husbands." Even in her despair Naomi was able to affirm God was still at work even though she didn't particularly like it. We read earlier v.19-21 The Lord has dealt bitterly with me. I went out full, but He brought me back empty. The Lord afflicted me. Boaz affirms God at work several times in chapter 2. v.4 May the Lord bless you. v.12 may the Lord reward your work.v20 May He be blessed of the Lord. 3:10 May you be blessed of the Lord. The elders to Boaz affirm that God continues to work in their blessing the sees God the one who builds up, provides children and honor. Then in verse 13 Its the Lord that enabled Ruth to conceive and v.14 The Lord provided a redeemer.

Folks, God is always at work. We need eyes that trust our God is still at work, even when it doesn't look like it. God is in sovereign control of the events of life. He knows what he is doing even when the circumstances don't seem like it. We need to join Him in his plan by being there with Him, not fighting against Him. We need to be faithful, available, teachable servants in order to be able to join God in what He is trying to do. We need eyes to see the life that God has planted around us. We need eyes that trust our God is still at work even when it doesn't look like it.

Third point this morning: We need eyes that help others see where God is working. In most stories of the Bible, the women of the town miss the truth, they tend to be idle gossipers spreading half truths. But, these women of Bethlehem have got it right. In v.14 of chapter 4 they recognize the blessing of God visiting Naomi. This is an added blessing coming from them for when Naomi first returned it was not a pretty picture. But now they see how God is working in Naomi's life. Sure its obvious. But sometimes it's so obvious in our own lives and we fail to see it until someone comes along and says. Wow! God is doing some great things in your life. We are blind to it until someone says God has really used you to encourage me in your life. I received a card this week and a blue communication note last Sunday that really encouraged me when I was

only seeing the glass half empty. They reminded me that God is still working. Folks we need to help each other out. Sometimes we are so close to ourselves, I am with myself constantly, almost day and night, and fail to see God at work. Can we begin to point God's work out in each others life. It is a very encouraging thing to do. They are not in danger of getting proud because it's about God not them, but it is so helpful to have the eyes that see God working in others. Tell them straight to their face, jot them a note. Lets be a church the helps each other see where God is working.

These women of the city say to Naomi. Look. God has not left you. He has not left you without a redeemer. May he be famous in Israel. May he sustain you. May he restore you. V. 15 Wake up out of your emptiness Naomi, you are blessed woman you have a daughter in law, Ruth that is worth more than seven sons. In Hebrew culture, seven sons was thought of as the ultimate blessing from God. The town women have witnessed the change in Naomi and help her see the difference. She was once empty but now is full. Her deep sorrow has turned to joy. Her bitterness is exchanged for blessing.

Naomi is a picture of rest and contentment and fulfillment in v.16. Just picture a grandma in her rocking chair holding her very first baby in her lap, caring for the child. There is nothing like the delight of a grandmas first grandchild to bring back all the fond memories of motherhood and the life and hope it implants. For out of death and barrenness and emptiness. God has planted life and sat in the lap of an older woman in danger of becoming bitter for the rest of her life. She now has hope and life. For Naomi, rocking that baby was a perfect fit of fulfillment for what God wanted for her. Now rocking a baby is nice, but for me that perfect fit of contentment and fulfillment and satisfaction is going to be something different. But I need to trust that God has a plan that is a perfect fit just for me. And God has planned a perfect fit just for you as well. It may be rocking a baby...it may be something else. But God has a plan for each one of us far beyond the daily grind of life.

That brings us to our final point this morning. To begin to escape from the emptiness of life, we need eyes to see God's plan far beyond the daily grind of life. There is more to this life. More then just living and dying. More than just trying to make through this life. There is far more

beyond what our eyes can see. Naomi, Ruth, the women of the city had no idea how the story would end. Yet, God used Naomi and Ruth and blessed them for their faithfulness and availability with a legacy that continues. As the genealogy describes in the final verses that were written several hundred years later. Boaz and Ruth had a son named Obed, named by the town ladies, it means "one who serves" isn't that a perfect name for Ruth and Boaz baby both who demonstrated sacrificing servanthood for others. Obed's son was named Jesse and Jesus had a youngest son who spent time out in the fields tending sheep. His name was David. He became one of the greatest kings of all Israel and if you read the genealogies in Matthew you will find it continues to the Greatest King ever, the Lord Jesus Christ, a descendant in the line of Ruth. Wow there is more to this life isn't there. We can join with God and be a part of a great spiritual legacy that lasts forever. I am going to be vaulted out of my feelings of emptiness when I have the eyes to see God's plan far beyond the daily grind of life. Prov. 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own understanding in all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths."

Oh God give us the eyes to see the life that you have implanted around us. Give us eyes that trust our God is still at work even when it doesn't seem look it. Give us eyes that help others to see where God is working. Give us eyes that see God's plan, far beyond the daily grind of life.