

## **Love Story: God's Epic Tale of Redemption**

The Mystery of Mercy

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### **THE MYSTERY OF MERCY** **Ruth 1**

Do you have a Bible? I hope you do. I invite you to open with me to Ruth 1. This morning we begin a journey through one of the most moving stories in all of scripture. It has all the elements of a love story; tragedy, loss, despair, triumph, hope, loyalty, romance. You have no need to take your wife to a chick flick during the month of July, gentlemen, just bring them to worship and that will suffice.

It's not just a love story spread out over four chapters of scripture. It's a story within a story; a story a part of a much greater story, of which we, too, are a part. It's a story within a grand, epic tale of redemption; a tale of who God is redeeming a people for Himself, bringing them from them from despair to delight, from hurt to hope and you and I find ourselves in the middle of that story.

Now, as we approach the Book of Ruth, we've got a couple of challenges us. First is the challenge of reading this story. It is intended to be read in one sitting, Ruth, 1 through 4 and we're going to spread it out over four sittings, so to speak, over four different weeks. And so, we've got a couple of options about how to address reading through studies in the Book of Ruth. We can go ahead and look at what happens in chapter 4 so we can understand chapter 1 completely, or we can move through this book slowly and feel the tension that original readers felt as they were listening just chapter by chapter, not knowing the end from the beginning. And really, both options have their advantages and here's what I've chosen to do.

What we're going to do over the next four weeks is we're going to move through this book slowly and we're going to hang out just in chapter 1 today. We're not going to look at what's happening in chapter 2, 3 and especially in chapter 4. Now some of you may have read Ruth before; some of you may not have read Ruth. Maybe it's been a long time since you read the Book of Ruth. Let me encourage you not to be like those novel readers in this room, who open up a novel and go immediately to the last few pages to see where this thing's going and then come back to the beginning just to kind of breath a sigh of relief. Just don't do it.

What I'm going to do, is I want to walk us, shepherd us through this book step by step without looking ahead. Now once we look ahead, once we find out what happens at the end, it'll help us understand what we've seen, but I want us to feel the tension and not just what the original reader heard when they were reading this book, but these characters, the people in the Book of Ruth were feeling as they walk through this journey. I want us to feel the weight of Ruth 1.

Now we have to be careful. The disadvantage there is if we're just going to hang out in Ruth 1 today, there's a great likelihood we could walk away from here totally depressed and that's not the goal. And so we're going to have to kind of massage that a little bit, but the goal is we're going to take this step by step, which leads to the second challenge.

We are reading this book in the English language and not in the original language it was written in, the original Hebrew. And if I could just put it point blank simple, the author of the Book of Ruth, which we're not sure exactly who it is, but the author is a brilliant writer. And there are literary devices that he uses, she uses, whoever wrote it, throughout that bring things to life, that we will miss if we're not careful in the English language, in many things we just can't get in the English language.

And so what I'm going to do this morning, this will be a little different than what we normally do, instead of just reading through this chapter, Ruth 1, that we're going to look at this morning, what we're going to do is we're going to kind of pause along the way. And my goal, I pray that God will help me to tell this story well and to point out some of the nuances in the language that help heighten our sensitivity to certain truths, to certain pictures, to certain facts, to help us get a feeling sense of what's going on in the Book of Ruth.

So you got your notes. What you got in your notes, just kind of almost put them aside for a minute, 'cause we're not going to get to that. We're going to spend some time, just walking through these verses. And you might make notes there on the page that you have, the half sheet that you have in front of you, or you might make notes in your Bible. Just draw little lines, this or that, just make this whole book very colorful in your Bible in the next four weeks as we walk through just verse after verse and try to let this story come alive as if we're in the middle of it. So that's the goal.

Book of Ruth, now. Keep in mind, this book is only one of two books in the Bible named after a woman. The other one being Esther, okay. There we go. Now Esther and the only book in the Old Testament that is named after a non-Jew. So that should grab our attention from the start. Then we get into Ruth 1:1, "*In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.*" Okay, we're not going to get very far here. Let's stop—h pause.

In reading a story, we're looking for certain elements and these elements arise in the surface from the very first verse, time and place. The time, "*In the days when the judges ruled.*" Give you a little picture of Old Testament history up to this point. You got Genesis through Deuteronomy, which gives us a picture of the founding of the people of God, the patriarchs, then developing into the exodus from Egypt and wandering through the Promised Land. The end of Deuteronomy, the people of God are on the brink of the Promised Land.

Then you get to the Book of Joshua and Joshua leads the people into the Promised Land and the people of God establish themselves in the Promised Land and settle there. The Book of Judges really describe—look at the very last verse in the Book of Judges. It's on the page to your left when you're looking at Ruth, the very last verse before you get to Ruth. Judges 21:25. This sums up the whole Book of Judges right here.

Judges 21:25. "*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*" That's a commentary right there on the entire Book of Judges. Basically, the Book of Judges is a cycle. There's no king in the land. Everybody's doing as he saw fit, which means everybody's running rampant in sin among the people of God in the Promised Land. This is before the kings. Before King Saul, David, Solomon. What you've got is a time where it's just kind of everybody doing his own rule.

And there's a cycle in the Book of Judges. What happens is the people are engrossed in sin and as a result of their giving into sin, they find themselves being attacked by the enemies around them and they cry out to God for help and what God does is He raises up a judge to help deliver them from their enemies and then the cycle starts over again. Once they're delivered, they're engrossed in sin, then they're attacked by their enemies, they get overtaken, cry out for help, God raises up a judge. This happens over and over and over again.

And the Book of Ruth, we come to this book, what happens is we get a little bit of a spotlight of what has happened in the middle of the Book of Judges. We're not sure exactly where in the Book of Judges. Some scholars think around Judges 10, but what happens is Ruth is not advancing the history in the Old Testament, so to speak. It's given us a pause here, at the end of Judges, and taken one story from the middle of that time period and bringing it to light. So that's time.

Place. A famine in the land of the people of God, particularly in Bethlehem, which is particularly interesting because Bethlehem means "the house of bread." The house of bread has no bread. And so what you've got is the people of God in the Promised Land famine. Just imagine most of us, if not all of us in this room relatively unfamiliar with famine. What does it mean to be without food completely? With wondering what you're going to eat, what your children will ever be able to eat? There is no food. You are starving. We say, when we get hungry, "I'm starving." We have no clue what starving is.

So there's famine in the land of Bethlehem and what happens is, a man from the people of God takes his family, turns his back on the land that God has promised and he goes into the land—of all places—Moab.

A little background on Moab, had started at Genesis 19, when Lot had an incestuous relationship with his daughter, that's the beginning of the Moabites. When the people of God wanted to pass through Moab on their journey, wandering in the wilderness, the Moabites said, "No, you can't come." There was division between the Moabites and the Israelites. There was a point when Moabite women—you've got to catch this—Moabite women seduced Israelite men into sexual immorality and all kinds of idolatry. God brought judgment down—24,000 people were struck down and killed.

This is a place that is known, particularly where the women are known for sexual immorality, a place that is known for idolatry and worship of false gods, enemies of the people of God in Israel, and this is where this Jewish man takes his family to. Shameful place, Moab. That's verse 1.

Verse 2, *"The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there"* (Ruth 1:2). Now what we've got, we've got time, place, people. The man's name was Elimelech. You might circle that, put a little line out to the side. Elimelech's name means, "God is King" or "My God is King", which just think about it: In a day where there was no king in the land, the first picture of a character we have in this story is a picture of God is King. His wife Naomi, following her husband as he makes this decision to lead his family into Moab with two sons, Mahlon and Kilion.

Now we're about to read verses 3, 4 and 5 and this is one of those places where there's a literary device that the author uses. It's a style that's really kind of staccato like. It is really choppy, terse, unfeeling, unemotional. What you've got verses 3, 4 and 5, you don't have details, you just have brute, cold, hard facts one after the other. Just kind of feel the

coldness in these next verses. Verse 3, *"Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband"* (Ruth 1:3-5).

Just like that. A 10 year nightmare summed up in three quick verses. No details. No story. No background. It's just one tragedy built upon another tragedy, upon another tragedy. Elimelech died. A man who provided for her and brought her into this land, gone. We don't know how. We don't know what happened, but she's now left a widow in Moab with two sons.

They married Moabite women, building on the tragedy here. Moabite women? This is not how Naomi had things pictured in her family. She'd heard stories of Moabites and now, her sons have married them. Picture the women who have indulged themselves in sexual immorality with Israelite men in the past and that's who is in her home now.

*"After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died"* (Ruth 1:4-5). We don't know if they died at the same time, close to one and other, but all of a sudden, Naomi looks around and her husband is gone. Her two sons are gone and she is at home with two Moabite daughters-in-law. She has lost everything. She has lost her security. She has lost her family. She has lost her providers. She has lost her hope.

To heighten this whole picture is the fact that Naomi is not only a widow and not only without sons, but the daughter in laws that her sons have married, are childless. They're barren after ten years, no kids, which means no descendants, which means no one to carry on her line.

This is the curse of all curses in ancient Israel. Your name stops with you and you will not continue on in your line. This is the depth of despair here in verse 5. Five verses in and this is heavy. You get to the end of verse 5, it says Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. What's interesting is, in the Hebrew, Naomi, her name is not even mentioned there. Instead, the author says, "the woman" was left without her two sons and her husband." Now the English translators help us understand who this was talking about, but the reality is, the Hebrew doesn't even identify who she is. "The woman was left without her two sons and her husband." She has lost everything.

And it's the depth of despair and hopelessness in five verses that sets the stage for a glimmer of hope in verse 6, *"When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there"* (Ruth 1:6). This is a microcosm of what we're going to see in the whole book. What we're going to see is darkness and in the middle of darkness and hopelessness, a light of hope coming in God, His faithfulness, His provision. And this is the picture. God had visited His people in Bethlehem and had given them food. He had come to their aid.

And so, Naomi prepares with her two daughters in law, to go make the trip to Bethlehem. Verse 7, *"With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah"* (Ruth 1:7). Now on the way, we see the first dialogue that this book is going to give us. Now this is important. We've seen 10 years, three deaths, terrible tragedy—nobody's said a word in the book yet. Nobody's said a word. What the author does is he takes poignant moments to bring dialogues to the surface, to help us understand the reality of what's going on here. And so this is the first dialogue, the first interchange that we see between people and this is what happens.

It's Naomi and her daughters in law on the way back to Bethlehem and she says to them, verse 8, *"Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband'"* (Ruth 1:8-9). This is more than just a "Goodbye and God bless you" here. This is Naomi looking at her daughters in law. Now obviously there is tension and has been because of the Israelite, Moabite relationship here at the same time. You can only imagine what these women have walked through together.

Now over this process of years, how they have mourned and grieved and cried together and they're all they have. Even for Orpah and Ruth, they have left Moabite families to join up with this Israelite family. They're all they've got. And so as they're walking along the road together, Naomi turns to them and says, "You need to stay here." And I've thought before, "Why is Naomi trying to talk them out of coming with here? It almost seems rude of Naomi." But the reality is the more you think about it, it seems like a demonstration of kindness. It would be good for them to stay in Moab. They could find another husband. They could have a family. They live happily every after. They don't need to come with her.

And what she does after this, it says, "She kissed them and the wept aloud." You can just imagine the emotions in this scene. They're all weeping together. They're looking at each other and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." They kindly say, "We'll go with you. We won't leave you alone." This is the kindness they have shown to her all throughout these years, now showing it to her.

What Naomi does, in verse 11, is she basically builds an argument for why they need to stay and it's a pretty good argument, strong, convincing argument. See what she says, *"Naomi said, 'Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!'"* (Ruth 1:11-13).

A little background here. In Deuteronomy, God had set up a way for widows in those situations to be provided for, like Orpah and Ruth, if your husband died, then what would happen is his brother would basically take responsibility for caring for you and you would be cared for by his brothers. The picture is, because both sons have died, there's no brother to care for Orpah or Ruth. No family to care for them. Naomi has nothing.

And so she says, almost hypothetically, "Even if I were married, which I'm not because my husband died, even if I were, even if I were pregnant at this moment and about to give birth to a child, you still would not be able to wait long enough for him to grow up to care for you. You come with me, you have nothing. You stay here, you have a life and a family. So stay here." And then she brings it to a climax at the end, she says, *"The Lord's hand has gone out against me!"* The implication is, "If you stick with me, the Lord's hand is against you, too." This is a pretty convincing argument.

And so what happens is, at this the author says, *"They wept again"* (Ruth 1:14). Just feel the emotion here. This last week, Caleb had his tonsils and adenoids out and so we treated him yesterday and took him to a movie. We went and saw a Disney Pixar movie and within five minutes in this movie, it's just really sad and my Heather's just bawling next to me and I'm like, "This is a cartoon. How did this happen?" These emotions. This is made for movie

type stuff. They're weeping again. You can just hear the sniffles across the room as we're reading this.

*"Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her"* (Ruth 1:14). So, Orpah leaves and Ruth stays. Not just stays, *"clung to her"* (Ruth 1:14). You might circle that word and make a little note out on the side, Genesis 2:24. It's the same word that Genesis 2 uses to describe how in marriage, a man and woman will leave their families and cling to one another, cleave, leave and cleave to one another. That's the picture, clung to her. And now the stage is set for a dialogue between Naomi and Ruth.

Naomi says, *"Look...your sister-in-law is going back to her people and to her gods. Go back with her"* (Ruth 1:15). And in response, Ruth gives us one of the most memorable speeches in all of scripture, two short verses, which on a side note, part of what we're doing in the new website, is there's a place on the website to memorize certain verses every week. We have a verse every week so at the end of this year, if you were to follow that and memorize 52 verses that go along with the truths that we're looking at in God's Word, so if you don't have an intentional plan of memorizing scriptures, let me encourage you to one verse a week, one verse a week. And then, if you're a little more ambitious, what we've got is a passage for every series. For example, this series over the next four weeks, through Ruth, there's one passage from the Book of Ruth we'll memorize together and that's Ruth 1:16 and 17, two verses.

So, these verses, Ruth 1:16-17 are just filled with drama, emotion, love, devotion, commitment. They're so thick. Listen to what Ruth said. Ruth replied, *"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me"* (Ruth 1:16-17). You can just hear the orchestra music in the background here, swelling up. This is strong.

You know, I find it really interesting that these words are often used in the wedding vows. Have you ever heard these words used in wedding vows? Which it's certainly an incredible picture of commitment, no question. And if you use these in your wedding, that's great, that's great, but you think about it, this is a daughter in law speaking to her mother in law. Ha! Let me tell you what I've never heard at a wedding. These kinds of words to in laws. That's not happening today. How profound, how deep she is, changing everything and this is one of those moments where everything changes. Moments in our lives where we make a decision that alters everything else to come in the future.

Ruth is... Think about what she's leaving behind, her land, her family, all that is familiar to her, her religion, her gods, her security. She is giving her future completely to this widowed, childless woman. She is committing her future to perpetual widowhood and childlessness. That is what she's doing here. And not just in this life, ancient and Near Eastern thought where you were buried, among whom you were buried had implications for an afterlife in ancient and Near Eastern thought. So, she's saying, *"I will be buried among you and your people under your God, everything from this point forward is committed to you."*

You can just imagine the intensity of the scene as Ruth is clinging to Naomi. She releases her grip on her, looks into her eyes and says, *"I'm committed to you. Do not try to talk me out of this. I am going with you to your people and your God. And if I break this commitment, then your God will judge me severely."* This is profound, so profound that the rest of the journey to Bethlehem is silence. We don't even hear a response from Naomi. It just soaks in verse 18 says, *"When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her,*

*she stopped urging her. So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem*" (Ruth 1:18-19).

Now, I want us to pause for a second here. There's silence here in the story because of the profound nature of what's just been said from Ruth to Naomi, but there's also an awkwardness here. I want you to imagine yourself in Naomi's shoes for a moment, as you were coming back from Moab, walking in to Bethlehem. This is the place that your family turned your backs on years before. And you went off to a pagan land where you lived among Moabites and now you're coming back, destitute. Not only is it hard enough to come back into the land that you left, but you're coming back without a husband, without your sons and the only thing you have is Moabite daughter in law.

You can imagine the tension as Naomi steps into the city. And the town begins to become a buzz when they arrived in Bethlehem. *"The whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, 'Can this be Naomi?'"* (Ruth 1:19). People start saying, "Is this Naomi?" "Is this Naomi?" You can imagine, people start coming up to her, "Naomi." And people who came up to Naomi on that day and said, "Hey, Naomi, you're back." Got a mouthful they probably were not expecting.

She looks back at them. *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). You see, as soon as she heard her name mentioned, her name means, "Pleasant, lovely." And so when people come up to her and say, "Naomi, pleasant, lovely" She looks back at them and says, "Not at all. I'm a different person. I'm no longer pleasant. I am bitter. I left her full with everything I needed, everyone I loved and I come back here totally empty." You can imagine the tension in the group that is listening to this.

But now, put yourself in Ruth's shoes. As you are coming with Naomi into the city, you know that you're coming into a city where there is undoubted prejudice against you. You stick out and everybody is turning their eyes to look at you. There's a Moabite in the camp. And you know. This is a part of what you risked there in verse 16 and 17. You knew that this was going to be a reality, but now it sinks in for the first time and everybody is staring. They're shocked that Naomi is back and then they're looking in bewilderment at who she has brought with her, a Moabite woman. Your people are known for seducing these people and bringing about the judgment of God upon them.

And so you're standing quietly by as people start to talk to Naomi and she responds to them. Now, picture yourself standing there in Ruth's shoes as Naomi looks at the small group of people and says, "I left here full, but I came back empty with nothing." And they sit there listening to Naomi. They hear her say she has absolutely nothing and they turn and look at you and all you can do is look down, less than nothing. You are a picture of the misfortune of the Almighty. You are a symbol of the Lord's affliction as you stand beside Naomi.

And the author says in verse 22, *"Naomi returned from Moab accompanied,"* not just by Ruth, but *"by Ruth the Moabitess"* (Ruth 1:22). As if it wasn't already obvious. The author points out the tension. What is a Moabite doing in a strange place? *"Her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning"* (Ruth 1:22).

That's just one chapter. This story is so incredible, beautiful. Now, like I said, if we're not careful, we're going to walk away from here this morning, extremely depressed. And so what I want us to do is I want us to think about the stage. I want us to make sure we're on the same page with the stage that the author has just set and then, let that lead us to one

promise that I pray you hold on to, as we walk away from Ruth 1, this morning. So the stage is set. We're going to fly through some of these things.

## Two Places...

### A Land of Promise

The stage, all the elements that lead to this promise. Two places, first, a land of promise. This is Bethlehem, the house of bread. We talked about this. This is the Promised Land, the land God had led them to, the land that God had promised to bless them in. And not just the land, but the city in particular. We know this. We know that for years to come, this city will house the blessings of God. Right? Bethlehem, a land of promise.

### A Land of Compromise

Second, a land of compromise. Moab, a land of paganism, not promise. The land of retreat where the Jewish man who led his family to turn their back on the people God went, to the land of immorality and idolatry. That's the land of compromise. We have a book in our Bible named after a woman from Moab. A land of promise, a land of compromise.

## Two People

Two places, two people. By the end of the chapter, we've got two characters still there, Naomi and Ruth and they are so different.

### A Woman with Honest Hurt

On one hand we have a woman with honest hurt—honest hurt. Now, based on her last words in chapter 1, we probably don't have too favorable of an impression of Naomi at the end of this chapter. Bitter woman. But before we're too hard on her, let's make sure we think about what she has been through.

This has, indeed, been a ten year nightmare. She lost her husband, her sons, found herself in the middle of Moab with daughters-in-law from that pagan land with no heir to carry on her line. She has lost everything—honest hurt here.

Don't miss this. It's similar to the Book of Job. She has experienced the suffering not due to any particular, specific sin in her life. The author makes sure not to say, "This happened to Naomi because she had done this." This is similar to Job, in that this seems unwarranted, unexpected, mysterious, why? Why is this happening? And this is what Ruth is wrestling with. She's struggling with why this is happening. I love the honesty of the scripture here. Scripture not glossing over the reality, not just in life, but the reality in the lives of people who follow after God.

The reality according to scripture, is that people who follow after God experience suffering and trial and tragedy. The scripture is not glossing over that at all. I'm guessing that if we're honest there's a variety of times where we find ourselves identifying with Naomi. Do you ever feel like the providence of God has been hard on you? Have you ever felt, or do you feel even at this moment, like the weight of your circumstances and your situation is too heavy to bear? Do you ever feel like it has just been one thing after another? Or one thing just won't go away? Honest hurt.



### **A Woman with Humble Devotion**

And then on the other hand, a woman with humble devotion. The more you read verses 16 and 17, the more amazing they are. All that Ruth has left. All that she has surrendered to do, this is the ultimate commitment and right in the middle, it's an intentional picture, right in the middle of her commitment, "Your people will be my people and your God, my God." This is surrender, not just to Naomi; this is surrender to the God of Naomi. This is forsaking all that she knows for that which she does not know, but she trusts in.

Pray God will continually raise up 'Ruths' all across this faith family, all across this church, women who forsake earthly pleasure and worldly security and comfort and boldly, with adventurous faith, trust deeply in God, that do what makes no sense to the women of the world around them. Do that which seems to forsake all the good stuff that this world had to offer and says, "I will trust in you, not just now, but for all of eternity." Bold abandonment devotion, humble devotion. This is the picture of Ruth. God raise up women and men who are willing to stake their lives on radical abandonment to Him.

### **Two Points of Need...**

Two people; two points of need. As they come back to Bethlehem, they have two basic needs. This is part of the tension that the author is setting up here, two needs.

#### **They were in need of food.**

Number one, they were in need of food. They had obviously left in a time of famine and they were coming back in the time of feasting, but the problem was, who was going to provide for them? Men, providers in homes of the necessity of food.

#### **They were in need of family.**

Which leads to the second need, they were in need of food and they were in need of family. Not only did they not have a husband, sons to carry on their lines in the future, but they didn't have a husband or sons to care for them in the present.

They were in need of food and family. And this is setting up a tension. The main problem in the Book of Ruth is how these two widowed, childless women can survive in ancient Israel. That's the problem of the book, right there. In need of food and in need of family.

Now, in each of these versus, every word, every phrase, what we see is the author giving us subtle pictures amidst the rest of the scene, subtle pictures of who God is. And they are sometimes extremely subtle. But I want to show you in this chapter, two pictures of God.

### **Two Pictures of God...**

The reality is, in Ruth, sometimes we struggle to see God, much like in our lives, sometimes we struggle to see God in that same way. But I want to just show you two pictures of God that the author of Ruth is putting on the scene before us, here. They're both surprisingly in what Naomi says at the end. Look in verse 20, "Don't call me Naomi" she told them, "*Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter*" (Ruth 1:20). That's the first time she mentions God. The second time, "*I went away full but the Lord has brought me*

*back empty. Why call me Naomi?"* (Ruth 1:20). The third time. *"The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty"*, fourth time, *"has brought misfortune upon me"* (Ruth 1:21).

Four times in those two verses, she mentions who God is. What's interesting is, she uses two different words to describe God, four times, two times she uses one word and two times another word. Here's where I want you to see the picture of God, two characteristics of God here.

### **He is great.**

Number one, God is great. The first word she uses, "Call me Mara because the Almighty has made my life very bitter." She does not use a name for God there. You might even have a note that takes you to the bottom of your Bible, there it says, "Not the name for God, it's a title for God and the title is Shaddai. You maybe familiar with El Shaddai, God, Almighty. Shaddai is a title for God that emphasizes His omnipotence, His power, His supreme sovereignty over all things. And this is what Naomi confesses.

In the depth of her bitterness, she says, "The Almighty has done this." And here's where I want us to realize where Naomi is totally right. There is not one detail in the Book of Ruth that is not ultimately under the sovereignty of a great God. There is not one detail in the Book of Ruth that is attributed to chance. Instead, the picture here is Naomi saying, just like what Job said...

And it's interesting, Job 30 plus times uses that word, Shaddai. Job in chapter 27:2, says almost the exact same thing that Naomi says here. Job 27:2, *"As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty [Shaddai], who has made me taste bitterness of soul."* The same Job who said, "God gives and God takes away."

The same Job who said, *"Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"* (Job 2:10). Job knew that God was sovereign over all things and Naomi knows that God is sovereign over all things. People say, well Naomi's faith seemed just so weak at the end. Brothers and Sisters, I'll take this kind of faith over the shallow faith we bring to suffering and tragedy in our contemporary culture any day. Even in church, when we say things like, "God didn't know this was going to happen." Or, "God was surprised by this, just as surprised as you are." Or, "God is doing the best that He can. There are some things that are beyond His control."

No, brothers and sisters, it's not true. We do have a puny God who is surprised and shocked and unable to keep things under control. We have a great God who is sovereign and omnipotent and almighty. And this is a rock to stand on. I read one commentary this week. I was shocked when I read it. A commentary this week that said, "The doctrine of God's sovereignty is not especially comforting in suffering." What? How I want us to see the sovereignty of God is a rock to stand on in suffering. You do not have a God who is ever caught by surprise. He is never caught unaware. He is always in control and this is how we can know that He's working all things together for the good of those who love him, who've been called according to His purpose.

It's how we can stand and say He is sovereign over nature. He is sovereign over disease and cancer. He is sovereign over illness and death. He is sovereign over all of our circumstances. That's a rock to stand on. He's almighty, He is great. Now here's the question that comes with that, "Well if He is sovereign, then why do these things happen? If He is great, can He be good?" And these things still happen and the answer the Book of Ruth gives us is yes.

### **He is good.**

He is great and He is good. And this is the picture, verse 20, "*Call me Mara, because the Almighty [Shaddai] has made my life very bitter. I went away full but the Lord...*" (Ruth 1:20-21). Circle it there it's what we've seen already in verse 6. It's the covenant name of God, with His people, Yahweh, the name that sums up His faithfulness, His faithful love to His people. This is Naomi in the midst of her bitterness saying "*The Lord [the Covenant and Faithful] God has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me*" (Ruth 1:21).

This is a picture of the goodness of God. You think about, just think about our lives when we walk through struggle, suffering, trial and tragedy. This is where we wrestle. Isn't this the locust of it? We wrestle with either one or both of these truths, that God is great and God is good. We wrestle with is God really great? Is God really in control? And we ask the question, God, how is this good? When you hear this diagnosis from the doctor and your spouse comes in and says "They're gone." And this happens in your child's life and this happens at work when the house is taken away or whatever it may be; is this good?

## **One Promise for His People...**

### **In His sovereign design, God ordains sorrowful tragedy to set the stage for surprising triumph.**

We struggle to see the greatness and the goodness of God together in the midst of suffering; this is what the Bible is giving us a real picture of here. And it leads us to promise for God's people and this is the promise, I have prayed for this moment, this truth right here, to come alive in brothers' and sisters' hearts all across this room today. And even if you're here and you don't know God, personally, you don't know Christ; that you would see this truth from God to His people and you would see how much great and good.

And here's the truth promise for His people in His sovereign design, brothers and sisters, in His sovereign design, God ordains sorrowful tragedy to set the stage for surprising triumph. That's the promise. God ordains sorrowful tragedy to set the stage for surprising triumph. It is so hard not to read the rest of the book right now. Not to just go to chapter 4, let me show you this, but what we've got, the end of verse 22 is a slender thread of hope.

"*Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning*" (Ruth 1:22). Now, here's the deal. Naomi is looking around her saying and she said, "I'm empty. I have nothing." And the reality is, from all appearances, she does have nothing. And these are moments, not just how Naomi feels, it's all over scripture, isn't it?

Famine strikes Abraham and Isaac both leads them to another land for their good in the end. It's famine that leads Jacob's family—set the stage in Egypt for God's powerful salvation in the Exodus. It's barrenness all over scripture. It's Daniel is being thrown into a lion's den, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego being thrown into a fiery furnace. It's over and over. Why is this happening? And let's be honest. This is there in your notes, there are times when we think that God is far from us. Let's take off the veneer for a moment and just admit there are times when we think that God is far from us. Think about it in this story and in stories represented around this room.

We'll fly through these, but just think about it, when we're surrounded by famine. When we long for what we do not have, when we long for what we need and we know we need it and yet we don't find ourselves receiving it from God. We know we need it. It's not there.

When everything seems foreign and we find ourselves in a new place, physically, maybe we find ourselves in a new place, relationally, maybe the relationship with a mom or a dad or a child or a husband or wife that once was one way and now is completely different and you're thinking, "How did this happen?" When we find ourselves in a new place emotionally, physically, with cancer or disease, and you're looking around saying "This is not how it was planned. I don't know how to walk through this. I've never been down this journey before. I never thought I would be in the middle of this journey."

When everything seems foreign, when death strikes—your family—and the pain just will not seem to go away. Maybe it was a short time ago when death struck or maybe it was a long time ago. Maybe it was expected. Maybe it was totally unexpected, but the pain will not go away.

When despair sinks in, when we're just not sure we really want to continue on in our current circumstances, when we feel like there's no way out and like there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

Amidst loneliness when no one else understands, even those we love or maybe when we can't find someone who'll love us enough to walk with us, even though they don't understand.

Amidst loneliness; amidst barrenness. Oh, the pain I know that couples all across this room struggle with, the pain, I know of wanting and desiring a child, wanting and desiring a family and asking God, "God why would you give us this strong a desire and not provide? It just doesn't make sense. We just want a child to glorify Your name amidst barrenness."

In our grief when we hurt and we cry and we wrestle, maybe in our shame and the things we struggle with, we may not be proud of. Things we struggle with are things that others don't understand or maybe others would look down upon us because we're struggling. In all these things... And I don't want to be depressing here, but this is real.

When we get that diagnosis, when we hear that news, when this and this happens, when this circumstance turns that way, when this person says those words that change everything from this point forward, when those things happen, is God really near in all of this? And we think that God is far from us, and this is the way I want you to see the promise here. See the promise. When we think that God is far from us, we can know, people of God, we can know that God will show Himself faithful to us.

We can know this: God will show Himself faithful to us. Naomi is saying, "I'm empty. I have nothing." Little does she know—don't miss this—little does she know, I'll tell you this much. Little does she know that standing right beside her in a Moabite daughter-in-law, is the fullness of God. And in this moment when she thinks God is completely gone and far from her, in that moment, God is actually laying the foundation for the greatest demonstration of His faithfulness to her. Arriving in Bethlehem as the barely harvest has begun, a thread of hope. There is a harvest that's coming.

Now, this is where we stop in the Book of Ruth, because we're not going to chapter 2, but this is not where we have to stop in the holy Scripture. If you could just step back with me for a minute and see the picture, brothers and sisters, this is the gospel. It is the great,

glorious, beautiful gospel, God's epic tale of redemption, because here's the reality. We find ourselves in the middle of this story.

We are Elimelech. We have wandered from our God into a land of idolatry. We are Ruth. We are born into a land of idolatry and immorality, children of disobedience, objects of the wrath of God, deserving of nothing but the judgment of God. This is where we find ourselves. And the picture we have in the book of Ruth, is the picture we have all over scripture, is of a God who is pursuing after His people in their sin and even using their sin. He's using Elimelech's sin here to set the stage for a demonstration of His grace on the grand scheme of human history. This is the great gospel. God takes our sin, nails it to His Son on the cross and there sets the stage for the grandest picture of His glory to all nations.

This is the gospel, in our sin, God covers us with His grace. His grace covers our sin. His Grace covers our sin. This is not in your notes but write this down. Don't miss this. Brothers and sisters, sin from your past does not dispel hope for your future. Sin, praise God by His Grace, sin from your past does not dispel hope for your future. That's the gospel because Christ has taken our sin upon Himself so that we are not held to our lineage in the past, our land from the past, our gods from the past. We have been freed and we are part of the promise of God and He has made that a reality by turning a sorrowful tragedy of the cross into the surprising triumph of our salvation. This is the gospel in our grace God covers our sin.

And in our sorrow, His mercy overcomes. His Mercy will overcome our sorrow. Naomi had experienced great loss—great loss. We, in this room will experience great loss. Some of us have. And here's the deal. It may not be immediately recognized, it may take a long time, it may take many days of patient waiting, but know this, when God seems far from you, you can know He will show Himself faithful to you. It's guaranteed. Eternally, He will show Himself faithful to you.

Turn over your notes there and what you'll see is a hymn that I want to share with you, written by a guy named William Cowper. A little background that will help you understand this hymn. Cowper came to Christ in an insane asylum. He was in an insane asylum and he found a Bible that a Christian worker had left there. It began a process whereby God opened his eyes to grace and mercy. He battled with depression, bouts of severe depression all his life. And yet this hymn is a picture of how in the middle of suffering he learned to see the grace of God behind the circumstances and it's a powerful picture.

Listen to it.

God moves in mysterious way, His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. Deep in unfathomable minds of never failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs and works His Sovereign will. Ye fearful saints, fresh curds take the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His Grace, behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face. His purpose will ripen fast, unfolding every hour, the bud may have bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower. Blind unbelief is sure to earn and scan His work in vain, God is His own interpreter and He will make it plain.

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