



GOD'S HAND IN OUR SUFFERING

Part 1 of Redeeming Ruth

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Ruth 1:1-1:22 | January 07, 2007

You're listening to "Redeeming Ruth," a sermon series following the events from the Book of Ruth, presented by Pastor Mark Driscoll. Follow this wonderfully written story of the redemption to be found in Jesus and his people, and learn how it applies to everyday people today. This is a presentation of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. For more information, go to marshillchurch.org.

"In the days when the Judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife, Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

"But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives. The name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other, Ruth. They lived there about ten years and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

"Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

"But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of her husband.' Then she kissed them and they lifted up their voice and wept. They said to her, 'No. We will return with you to your people.'

"But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters. Go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night, and should bear sons, would you therefore wait 'til they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.'

"Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, 'See? Your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you, or to return from following you, for where you go, I will go. And where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me, and more, also, if anything but death parts me from you.' And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said, 'No more.'

"And so the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town stirred because of them. And the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me.' So Naomi returned, and Ruth, the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest."

Beautiful, isn't it? Welcome to Mars Hill. My name is Mark. I'm one of the pastors here at the church. Today we begin a six-week study in the Book of Ruth, I believe, perhaps, the finest short story in all of scripture. It's something that, to be real honest with you, has been very helpful and very convicting to me personally as I've been studying it. And so tonight we're gonna do things a little bit differently. I'm just gonna read the text and talk to you from my heart, as your pastor. And, we're gonna learn from the life of some amazing people and I'm really, sincerely, am honored that you would join us this evening as we study scripture. If you've got a Bible, you can go to Ruth, Chapter 1. That's where we will be today and for the ensuing five additional weeks. I'll go ahead and pray, and then we'll just get right to work.

Father, as we begin a new year, as we begin a new book of scripture, Father, we thank you for being a good, loving, gracious, merciful, compassionate God. And as we study the lives of Naomi and Ruth, and Boaz, God, we ask for wisdom to see your providential hand ordering the affairs of their life, and God, using all circumstances to sanctify them as we learn them. It is my prayer, Lord God, that we could come to love you and know you and trust you, and that for those of us who do, that those would be truths that we understand in a deeper and more meaningful way. For that to happen, we invite you, Holy Spirit, to come illuminate the scriptures, which you inspired to be written, and we ask that at the end we would see, know, love, and follow the Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Let's get right to work, Ruth, chapter 1. You ready to go? Ruth, chapter 1. "In the days when the Judges ruled" – we get our historical timeline. I'll stop and explain this to you briefly. The period of the Judges is roughly 1200 to roughly 1020 BC, before the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is from the death of Joshua to the coronation of Saul as the King in Israel. And if you want to know more about the days of the Judges, simply go home and read your Bible and look for the Book of Judges. And the Book of Judges is a historical account of the days of the Judges, the time of the Judges, to use the nomenclature of Ruth. And therein you will see that this is one of the most dark, one of the most wicked, rebellious, obstinate, unfortunate periods in all of Israel's history. They were surrounded as we are by many non-Christians, and rather than living as salt, and lead a countercultural kingdom lifestyle as a witness, they sadly, repeatedly, succumbed to varying temptations, particularly sexual temptations.

And the result was that God's people, from one generation to the next, just proceeded in increasing wickedness and rebellion. There were, in that series of generations, a few exceptions, but for the most part it was a godless and wicked time. And Ruth shines as one of the few notable exceptions of absolute sin and rebellion in this extended period of the Judges.

So, we're looking at one of the darkest periods in all of history among God's people. "In the days when the Judges ruled, there was a famine in the land." And the scriptures here do not expressly state it, but it leads us to wonder if the famine was not in fact God's judgment upon his people, because famine, if not every time, almost every time that it is mentioned in scripture, is done so in conjunction with God's judgment against his people, because if they refuse to obey him, then he will refuse to feed them. And it is a good word for us in a day when obesity and gluttony are our problems, to recognize that our daily bread doesn't come from the grocer, but ultimately it comes from the Lord as a gift of grace.

"In the days when the Judges ruled, there was a famine in the land." There was a famine in the land. "And a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife, and his two sons." So this family is in what town? Bethlehem, which means what? House of Bread. You will see many subtle ironies of God throughout this book. The first is that in the House of Bread, people are starving to death. Right? This is God's way of saying, "and they were really hungry at the Great Harvest Bread Company." Guess why? Because God, here, is at work and God is involved, and he has withheld bread from Bethlehem, the town with literally means, "House of Bread." And so what occurs is now we are focused on this one family. There is a husband, his wife, their two children. The husband is left with a decision to make, and that is, "Do I remain with my family in Bethlehem, where there is famine and people are literally starving to death? Or do I journey and relocate, move, to Moab." Moab is some 50 miles away, and he decides, "I will go to Moab."

Now, this is where we might infer that in fact this is a judgment of God because 50 miles away people seem to be just fine. And the famine seems to only be surrounding God's people in Bethlehem. And so what he determines to do is not deal with the underlying spiritual causes of sin and rebellion and such. He instead – as many men do – simply looks at the economics and the job opportunity and the upward mobility that is afforded him in Moab, and he relocates his family to Moab, which at first glance does not seem like such a tragic, strategic error – because ultimately it is, because Moab is no place that God's people are to dwell. If you know the story of the Moabites, they are the product of incest from Lot having sexual intercourse with his own daughter in Genesis 19. They gave birth to a son named Moab. From that boy came the tribe, the race, the people group, the Moabites. They were considered an incestuous, sexually perverted group of people. Furthermore, the Bible tells us elsewhere, they didn't worship Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They worshipped some false God named Chemosh. And so God's people weren't to move to Moab. God's people were not to dwell with Moabites.

And Elimelech makes the tragic decision, as the head of his home, thereby implicating his wife and sons. He moves them away from church and fellowship, and worship of God to a place where they, in all likelihood, would be the only Christian family in the place where there is not church or fellowship. He forsakes all of the spiritual opportunity for food.

The story continues, verse 2. "The name of the man was Elimelech," which means "My God is King," which is another subtle irony because he doesn't act like it, right? Elimelech means my God is king. Things are hard. I should run for my life. And that's exactly what he does. "And the name of his wife was Naomi," which means "pleasant" or "sweet" or "sweetheart." She's a keeper. "And the name of their two sons," – bizarre names for sons. I know these names are in the Bible, but do not, please, give these names to your sons. "Their names are Mahlon and Chilion," which means "sick" and "dying." Right? Here's my boys, Asian Bird Flu Pandemic, and Incurable Walking Pneumonia. I mean, what weird names for your kids. Do not name your kids Mahlon and Chilion. I know it sounds cool, sort of Star Trek-ish. But don't, right?

"They were Ephrathites" – that is the old name for Bethlehem – "from Bethlehem in Judah. They went to the country of Moab and remained there." Now, for all of us men, Elimelech serves for us as a negative, vicarious example of the very foolish decisions that we men can make, that implicate our wives and our children, because, as the head of our household, called of God to lead our household, there is very much a pressure that all of us men feel. And that is to put food on the table, roof over the head, to take care of the basic needs of the wife and children that God has entrusted to us. And I know in Seattle you men feel this as much as I do. We're in the most overpriced city in America. Most people are living off of two incomes, not one. There are very few children. There are more dogs than children. Housing prices, I think the latest indicators are that in the last decade they've increased by 126 percent. All of which to say that living in Seattle sometimes feels a lot like living in Bethlehem. It's hard to make ends meet, and it's hard to figure out how to put food on the table for your family.

Yet Elimelech serves as the tragic example of the man who did not count the spiritual costs of a relocation of his family. He didn't realize, or perhaps failed to rightly consider, that when a man makes decisions for his home and his family, he is perhaps mortgaging their future, thinking very shortsightedly. And what I mean is this: When you men decide where you will live and raise your children, you are deciding who your wife will fellowship with, who you will fellowship with, if you will attend church, and if so, what church? And if you have children, what examples will be set before them, in addition to who they will marry? They will marry the people that you put in front of them. And in deciding to go to Moab, he chose to

leave church, leave worship of God, leave prayer, fellowship, accountability. He left no one for his wife to have for a friend, that loved God. He left no one for his children to fall in love with and marry that loved God. And like so many men do, he simply counted the financial costs, didn't count the spiritual cost; as a result, relocated his whole family to Moab as perhaps the only worshippers of the real God in all of Moab. He did this to spare his family from death.

Verse 3, "But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi" what? "Died." Why did Elimelech move to Moab? So that he wouldn't die. What did Elimelech do in Moab? Died. Moral of the story: Death is in God's hands, not ours. We don't know how he died. Old age? We don't know. Heart attack? Got hit by a camel? We don't know. If you're like me, you read that and you go, "He died. How did he die? Why did he die? Was it God's judgment, God's curse? Was it the so-called natural course of events? Why did he die?" Scripture says nothing. This is so typical of our life, is it not? Something happens – why? Silence. God doesn't answer. The Bible says that the secret things belong to the Lord, that we know in part, that we see in part. We know everything we need to know. We by no means know everything we want to know. We must live by faith, and we must trust God. And so the story simply continues. He died. Next! It's very stark in its transition, and so much like our lives, questions are left unanswered. But life goes on.

"Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died. And she was left with her two sons." There's a bit of hope in that. In that culture, they would look after her, care for her, feed her, nurture her in her old age. She would be okay because she had two sons. "These took Moabite wives." Now the story gets even sadder. Are God's men to marry Moabite women? It is not technically forbidden in scripture, but it is greatly frowned upon. The Moabites were not allowed to enter the corporate assembly of the worship of God's people. This would be like one of you young men at Mars Hill Church marrying a woman who wasn't allowed to become a member at Mars Hill Church. Not allowed to join you in worship and service of God. This obviously creates problems in the home and the raising of children. These were people who were apart from God; they worshipped Chemosh. They're marrying girls who, in all likelihood, worship another God. I mean, this is devastating, but in some ways, we must fault the father on two accounts. One, he moved them to Moab, so he only left the boys one option, that being marry a Moabite woman; and secondly, he apparently approved of these marriages. You men need to think that where you live is also where your sons and daughters will find their spouses.

Mahlon, Chilion. They married two Moabite women. It is not God's ideal. "The name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other was Ruth. They lived there about ten years." They'd been married some time. And you'll see, in a moment, they have no children. And again, we're left to wonder, is this God's curse? If God's opens and closes the womb, did God withhold food and children as a sign of his displeasure with these men? We don't know. What we do know is that this family is teetering on the brink of ceasing to exist. The husband has died. The sons are childless. And there is no daughter. The story continues.

"And both Mahlon and Chilion" what? They died, too! Why did Elimelech move to Moab? So that he and his sons would not die. What happened? They died. In Moab. The story gets as bleak and as dark and as hopeless as it could possibly be. God is saying, at the worst point in history, the worst thing happened. Can you think of anything worse than burying your children? I'm the loving father of, I adore my five kids. I can think of nothing more painful than burying every single one of my children, and then, prematurely, burying my wife. That is what happened to Naomi. She buried her only two sons before she even got grandchildren, and she buried her husband. She was at two, maybe three funerals, and her whole family was gone. Her family had come to an end. And there she was left, in Moab. No church, no women who loved God to pray for her and to walk with her and to encourage her. She is left penniless; she is left broke; she is left destitute. And it says, "She was left without her two sons and her husband." This is the picture of absolute devastation, desolation, and desperation. I love the brutal honesty of scripture. I love the fact that scripture talks about life with the same degree of pain that we experience it. I love the brutal honesty of God's Word. How will she respond?

Naomi has been away from home, Bethlehem, for a long time. Her husband, her sons, are dead. Verse 6, "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab" – she's going home – "to Bethlehem, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food." God is mentioned for the first time in the Book of Ruth, in the sixth verse. God is mentioned in the Book of Ruth 23 times. God is mentioned in the Book of Ruth by the author of Ruth – we do not know who that is. Some speculate Samuel, but that is unlikely. We know the book was written maybe a thousand years before the birth of Jesus. Whomever the writer of Ruth was, they only mention God twice – chapter 1, chapter 4. God gives food, God gives a baby, God's a good God who blesses people. Those are the bookends that the story is to be interpreted in, regarding the character of God. The other 21 occasions that God is mentioned in the Book of Ruth, it is on the lips of the characters who are speaking about God. And here, the writer of Ruth, speaks of God for what will only be one of two occasions that he overtly mentions God. And he tells us that Naomi was in the fields of Moab, and she heard a report that the famine had lifted in Bethlehem, after apparently many long years. And that God had showed up. And that God was being gracious. And that God was blessing his people.

And so in her heart, she decided to go home, to go back to God and his people and the place where he was blessing. And herein we find the theme, the mega-theme of the Book of Ruth, that being the providence of God. As you examine the Book of Ruth, and I would just so encourage you to prayerfully read it over the six week course of our study, repeatedly. Naomi speaks the most. Ruth is the most dynamic character in the book. Boaz is a wonderful, good man and a redeemer who looks a little bit like Jesus. But the hero of Ruth, the hero of the story is God. And what we see here is the introduction of the central theme of the Book of Ruth, that being the providential hand of God. So let me take a few minutes to theologically unpack this for you.

What I am arguing is that God works through history, scripture, and our lives, through two hands. One is the visible hand of miracle. The burning bush has a conversation, right? Fire comes down from heaven. The Red Sea parts. The virgin gives birth to a son who walks on water and raises dead people. Right? God's visible hand of miracle is obvious. God also works most of the time through his invisible hand of providence. Some of you may have said, "I wish I could see God at work!" We do all the time, through his invisible hand of providence, that is only seen for those with eyes to see through faith.

Let me explain to you God's hand of providence. God's hand of providence is the, is the acknowledgement and the belief that God is at work, not just in human history, not just through kings and queens and rulers and nations. That God is also at work in the everyday details of normal people, like Naomi and Ruth and Elimelech. That you and I are very normal people. These are very normal, average people, and that God is at work in the subtleties and the details of their life. That is his invisible hand of providence.

And when I speak of the providence of God, I am, I'm speaking of two doctrines that must be held together because they are friends, that being that God is both sovereign and good. Let me explain these to you. You can go home and look these up in your Bible. Good and goodness, God is referred to by those words many times. Sovereign and Lord, which is a euphemism for sovereign, those are mentioned many times of God. When the Bible says that God is sovereign, that means that he is the highest authority; that he rules and reigns; that there is no one beyond God; that God is over Satan, and demons, and life, and death, and heaven, and hell, and the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, and the beasts of the field. Proverbs says that even when a die is rolled, that the numbers that come up are chosen by God, that he is in everything, from the overarching grandiose rule of all creation, all the way down to where you park when you go to the grocery store, or where you can't park when you come to Mars Hill, all of that. All of that, under the sovereign hand of God. That God rules and reigns, that God is over all, and God is the one who is the highest ultimate authority.

In addition, God is good. God is loving. God is patient. God is merciful. God is compassionate. God is kind. In God's own self disclosure of himself in Exodus, he says, "I'm slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, mercy, and forgiving of sin." God is good. God is good.

Some of you would say, "Yes, but there's so much evil in the world." Yes, Satan is bad. Demons are bad. We are bad. But God is good. And these two truths must be held at all times. If you cling to one and not the other you end up with a very insufficient and dangerous view of God. If you only believe that God is sovereign, but God is not good, you will know that God is in control, but you will think that he is cruel, that he is mean, that he is unjust, that he is capricious, not unlike the mythical gods of Greek fable and mythology. That is the God of what I like to call Cruel Calvinism. And that is not the God of the Bible.

I'll give you one horrendous example of a woman that I knew personally as a friend, who had a theology of Cruel Calvinism. She called me up some years ago. She had been raped. And she said, "Pastor Mark, I was raped." I, I just about dropped the phone. She said, "I have one question for you." I said, "What is that?" She said, "Why would God have me raped?" And this is the dark side of the pastoral ministry. I said, "Sweetheart, God doesn't rape people. God is a loving father, he's not a rapist. God doesn't sit in heaven and decree rape, or the abuse of a child, or the murder of an innocent. God is sovereign and good." She said, "But if God is sovereign, doesn't that mean that everything that happens is God's Will?" I said, "No. There are many things that are not God's Will. We call them sin." In your effort to preserve the sovereignty of God, which I wholeheartedly agree with, you cannot say that everything that happens proceeds from God's will as if God wanted sin. You can't do that. Because as we read scripture, God gets angry. God weeps. God grieves. God mourns. Jesus cries, sheds tears, what does that indicate? Everything is not in obedience to God. That there is rebellion; that there is sin; that there is evil, and that's not what God wanted. God is sovereign, but God is good. God is light. In him there is no darkness at all. Darkness and evil and sin do not proceed from the character of God. God is sovereign, but he's also good. He loves us. He cares for us. He blesses us. He walks with us. He is patient with us. He is good to us.

And the question then is always, "Well, how does this work?" Well what it does mean is that because he is the sovereign and because he is good, God works out everything in the end for his ultimate redemptive good. Genesis 50:20 is a classic text on this, where Joseph's brothers did horrific evil to him, sinned against him grievously, repeatedly. He looks at them at the end of many years and says, "What you intended for evil," – it was wicked. It was a sin – "God used it for good and the saving of many lives." That means that God is bigger than sin. God is bigger than evil. God is bigger than we are, and Satan, and demons, and that in the end, as Romans 8:28 says, "God works out all things for good." That doesn't mean that all things are what God decreed, or wanted, or willed, or wished. But it does mean that God is big enough that even when there is sin, and folly, and rebellion, God is big enough to work it out for good, and he does. He works out all things for good. God wastes not one tear. God wastes not one suffering. God wastes not one hardship, because God is not just sovereign. God is good. God is good. And if you only think that God is sovereign and not good, you'll be a Cruel Calvinist. Someone will come to you and say, "I was raped." You'll say, "Praise God!" No. Weep with those who weep, and mourn with those who mourn, and tell them, in faith, to continue because somehow God works out all things for good.

And if you believe that God is good, but not sovereign, you'll end up being what we call an Open Theist, one who is into openness theology and an open view of God, which says that God doesn't rule over all creation. God doesn't know the future. God can't bring his will to pass. God loves you. God means well. God intends well. God shares your tears. God was just as surprised as you are, but God couldn't do anything. That is not God.

Scripture says that nothing is too hard for God. That God sits in heaven and does whatever pleases him. God is good, but he's not just good. He's sovereign. And he's not just sovereign. He's good.

And here we see that the sovereign God, who is good, shows up through his invisible hand of providence and all of a sudden, what had been to famine in Bethlehem turns out to be a blessing, because now food is on the table, and crops are in the field, and hope is in the heart, and God is in their midst. And the author says, "It's God." It wasn't luck, chance, circumstance, global warming, that brought the rain. It was God that put food on the table, not the grocer. You still with me?

Verse 7. "So she set out from that place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to return to the land of Judah." They say, "That's it! We're leaving Moab. We're gonna go where God is, where God is blessing, where God's people are." And along the way these three women stop to have a what? A conversation. They gotta talk about this. It's three women, right? They gotta talk about this. You're gonna see the first of many conversations, 52.4 percent of the book – I'm a geek – is dialog. It's conversation. Of 85 verses, 55 are dialog. Why? The two main people in the

book are women. They're gonna talk about this a lot. Some of you men are like, "Why does she always want to talk to me?" It's Biblical. Talk to her. Talk to her.

"But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law" – here's the conversation, the first of many – "Go, return each of you to your mother's house." Go home. I got nothing. I'm broke. Got no more kids. Got no money. Got no future. Go home. I love you gals, I appreciate you're willing to go with me. This is not a good idea. Go home. And then she prays. There are many prayers in the Book of Ruth. I think it's interesting that the Book of Ruth includes a number of prayers, and there are two things about the prayers in Ruth, that as you read the book – and I pray you would – that I find most curious. One, no one ever prays for themselves. They only pray for others. Two, every single prayer is answered by the end of the book.

Some of you've been raised in Cruel Calvinist homes. You say, "Well, if God is sovereign, why pray?" Well, you pray because God is sovereign. Because God is sovereign and good, he wants to help, and he can. So talk to him. See, prayer is the flipside of providence. Because God is sovereign and good, we should pray because it is not in vain. That is one of the substories of the Book of Ruth. Every prayer is answered because God is both sovereign and good. Because he wants to help, and he can, and so he does. So she prays, Naomi does. She says, "Go, return each of you to your mother's house." Here's her prayer. "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and me." And there she introduces a small word in the Hebrew that is exceedingly important for our understanding of God throughout the Book of Ruth. She uses the little Hebrew word, *hassed*. And this is the summation of the most wonderful attributes of God, loving, gracious, merciful, compassionate, kind, overflowing with love and blessing and kindness. She says, "My prayer for you girls is this. I have nothing to give you, but our God is a God of *hassed* and I pray he would give you *hassed*, that he would be loving, and gracious, and merciful, and compassionate and kind, and that he would bless you. I can't. I have nothing. But even if you go to Moab, my God is a sovereign God. He rules over Moab, too. He can bless you there."

Only two people are referred to with this word, *hassed*, in the Book of Ruth, Ruth and God, because God is a God of *hassed*. He's a good God. And Ruth is a woman that models her character after the attributes of God, and so she is spoken of as a woman of *hassed*. Some of your translations will say, "loving kindness."

"The Lord grant you that you may find rest, each of you, in the house of a husband." I pray you get remarried. I pray you go back to Moab, you meet a nice Moabite boy, that you get married, that you make babies, and that life gets better, and that the last chapter is not the funeral. "Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices, and they wept." These are women who love each other. They've been through a lot. They've stood at one another's side at the funerals. Naomi is telling them, "Go home. I'll never see you again. I will pray for you. I will pray that the Lord brings you *hassed*."

"And they said to her" – verse 10 – "No. We will return with your people." No. We're going to Bethlehem. We're not going to leave you. This is a hard time. We love each other. We're close. We'll figure this out together. "But Naomi said, 'Turn back.'" I love this little phrase. She'll say it twice here. "My daughters." How does she feel in her heart about these women? These are her daughters. Some of you who are here, you understand what this is like. Your daughter got married and your son-in-law is not your son-in-law, he's your what? He's your son. Your son got married and your daughter-in-law's not your daughter-in-law, she's your daughter. You love her. She's part of your family. She's in your heart. They've been together at this point for more than ten years. She says, "My daughters." I mean, she has them in her heart as her own daughters. She had no daughters, but through marriage she got two daughters. "Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters. Go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night, and should bear sons, would you therefore wait til they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying?'"

Here's what she's saying. "Ladies, I have nothing for you. You married my sons. I love you very much. You need a husband. You don't need a widowed old woman who probably will never get remarried, and if I do, probably can never get pregnant because I'm too old, and even if I do, are you gonna wait twenty years to marry my son? Ladies, go home. Return to your mom and dad. Move back in with them. Get your life back together. Find a job. Meet a nice boy. Start over."

She then says, Naomi does, "No, my daughters. For it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." Who does Naomi hold as ultimately responsible for the suffering and the pain and the devastation that has come upon her? The Almighty. It's God. I don't know about you, I read the book, it seems like her husband has something to do with this, right? The guy who moved them to Moab, let the boys marry Moabite gals. Yet she knows even if her husband is to blame in part, that God ultimately could have stopped the move, could have rebuked them, could have put food on the table. God could have done something! How many of you identify with Naomi at this point? "God, I know I did this and they did that, but you should have showed up. You didn't." And she says "the Lord's hand has gone out against me." This is the indication that she's not seeing God as a friend, but as a foe. "He's dealt bitter with me. He has, he has made my life hard." That's what she's saying.

In his great book on providence, *The Puritan*, and they are a few of the theologians in the history of the church that have dared to even venture into this doctrine, a man named Flavel says that there is such a thing for the child of God as a "sanctified" affliction. Sanctified affliction. And what I would say to you is this, is that if you are a Christian, if you are a follower of God, that for you and I, we have much affliction. But, it is all sanctified affliction. That does not mean that everything comes from the hand of God, but as Naomi has rightly surmised, everything at least must pass through the hand of God. And as the sovereign, he can act, or not act. He can intervene or not intervene. He can allow blessing or hardship to come upon us. He's the sovereign. He gets to do as he pleases.

But what that means practically for you and I is that whatever the affliction is, it is serving a purpose that is entirely different than the exact same suffering and affliction is in the life of someone who does not know God. Meaning that if you know God and someone doesn't, you may both suffer the same affliction, poverty, hardship, betrayal, sickness, whatever it might be. And for the non-Christian, it may simply be cause-and-effect consequence. Reap what you sow. It may be judgment. It may be justice. For you and I who know God, it is a sanctified affliction. It is an affliction that

God will use to sanctify us. It is an affliction that God will use to make us more like the Lord Jesus and to cause us to love him more wholeheartedly, and obey him more readily.

So, for you and I, when we arrive at places where Naomi finds herself, where life is hard, and it feels like God is foe and not friend, we will never have all of our questions answered in this life. In the life to come we will know as we are fully known, Paul says. But in this life, many of the questions remain unanswered. But the one question that God seeks for us each to ask is, "God, how is this being used of you to sanctify me?" Because there is no suffering, and there is no affliction, and there is no weeping, mourning, shedding of tears, or dark days for the child of God that is pointless, purposeless, and without merit. I need you to believe that in your heart. I love you. I'm your pastor. No one is going to tell you this unless they're reading scripture and they're talking about the God of the Bible. But this will change how we suffer. This will enable us to have affliction that is sanctified. And I'm not saying that every evil and injustice is something that God intended. Again, God is good. But, that does mean that every hardship and affliction is also used by the sovereign for his glory and our good, if we see it as a sanctified affliction.

At this point in her journey, Naomi does not see this. But if you keep reading, and we will in the coming weeks, we will see how this affliction becomes sanctified. Let us continue.

Verse 14. "Then they lifted up their voices and wept again." The young women, the women, do not want to leave Naomi. "And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her." Orpah is going to do what we would consider ordinary. She goes home. Ruth is going to do what is extraordinary, and she will refuse to go home. And in this we see that Orpah, when it really comes to an issue of faith and trust in God, she turns her back on God and returns home. We'll see that, verse 15. "And then Naomi says to Ruth, after Orpah has left and gone home, "See your sister-in-law" – that is Orpah – "has gone back to her people and her gods." This is, this is weird, I must confess. This is anti-evangelism. Right? This is, you're dealing with your friend who may or may not be a Christian, you're not sure where they're at with God, and you tell them, "Have you tried Allah?" What? "Maybe he can help." Orpah goes home because she looked like a Christian but was faking it and really a pagan girl, we're going to call her Oprah. That's what we're gonna call her.

That was a good line right there, I don't care what you say. I'm funny.

She said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods" – back to Chemosh – "Return after your sister-in-law." Go do what she did! Go back to your old religion, your old town, your mom and dad's house, meet a nice Moabite boy, start over. "But Ruth said," – here Ruth speaks, the first time in the book, first time in the book. Her words are legendary. Some of you used them for your vows at your wedding. Here she proclaims them as a vow to her mother-in-law, and ultimately to the Lord. "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God." What's the issue? It's the worship of God at stake. Ruth says, "I'm not goin' home. There's no Christians there. There's no church. You're the only Christian in town. You left." Right?

How precious is fellowship to you? How precious is one Christian friend? What a gift. Ruth, at this moment, experiences what we would call her conversion. She is literally at the proverbial fork in the road. "I go back to Moab, and I worship Chemosh. I go to Bethlehem and I worship Yahweh. I'm going to Bethlehem." Let me submit this to you that this is a bold move by a young woman. Do Hebrews like Moabites? No. This is the equivalent to the newly converted black young woman during the era of Jim Crow saying, "I hear there's a good church in the white neighborhood. That's where I'm moving." She is not likely to be well-received. This is the nice Jewish girl saying, "Well, I hear there's a nice synagogue in Germany," during the 40s. "I shall move there." Right? This takes a lot of faith.

Let me submit this to you as well. She is going there with no husband, no home, no friends, no family, no job, no food. Let me go out to the end of a twig at the end of a branch and say that she may have greater faith than Abraham. If you remember the story of Abraham, he left his hometown and his family and their religion of worship of a false god to go somewhere else and start over with Yahweh. Why did he do that? Because God told him to. Ruth's story is in many regards like Abraham's. She left her family, her hometown, and her religion to go start a new life in a new town with Yahweh, with one notable distinction, that being God never spoke to her. God never told Ruth to go. Abraham did what God said; Ruth didn't even have God speak to her. She didn't have the Word of God to rely upon, as a woman who has been a Christian for maybe five minutes. She trusts that God is sovereign and good, and that he'll take care of her when she gets to Bethlehem. She is trusting solely in the character of God. This is a woman of extraordinary faith.

She goes on, verse 17. "'Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.' And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more." What you are seeing here is the power of the second family. Scripture says, if I may borrow New Testament language, that you and I have two families: The family of birth, family of new birth; family knit together by blood, family knit together by the blood of Jesus Christ. That second family is the church. That second family are brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ. And if you have a good family by birth, and you have a church family by new birth, you are doubly, richly blessed. And even if your family is not a great family, or you don't have a family, church family is oftentimes more precious than first family. Some of you have experienced this. If you died, it is not first family, but second family that you would want to raise your children. When trial and hardship come, your proclivity is to run to your second family, not your first family; to run to your brothers and sisters in Christ, the church. And Ruth, when left with the decision to decide between her family of birth, and the potential family of new birth, the church, that awaits her in Bethlehem, she chooses to sojourn with the family of new birth.

So, verse 19, "The two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem." Doesn't tell us anything about the 50 mile journey, other than they made it safely. "And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?'" The bloggers went nuts, that's what happened. It's Naomi! We haven't seen her in a long time! We heard her husband died, her sons died. Who's the Moabite gal? A lot to

talk about.

In the middle of town, everybody looking on, Naomi has to speak. Naomi! Nice to see you! Where have you been? How are you doing? Catch us up! What's goin' on? Here's what she says, verse 20. "She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi'" – which means what? Sweetheart. Pleasant. Cutie Pie. "Call me Mara" – which means bitter. Call me bitter old hag! You ever met a bitter old hag? Aren't bitter old women fun? Aren't they lovely? Oh, aren't they great? No. They are not. They are no fun at all. How many of you would choose – you young women – to give your whole life to a bitter, old woman? You'd say, "I don't need a Christian friend that bad." Ruth devotes herself to Naomi. Naomi says, "Don't call me sweetheart; call me bitter old hag." "For the Lord Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." God has ruined my life. "I went away full" – life was good. We had money in our pockets, song in our hearts, children in our hands – "and the Lord has brought me back empty." I have nothing. I am a destroyed, devastated, broken, bitter, lonely old woman. "Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me, and the Lord has brought calamity on me?"

Let's talk about this. Honestly, what is your first reaction to Naomi? Most of the commentators take this route. "You're not supposed to get bitter!" You look it up in the concordance. Ephesus says don't get bitter. Hebrews says don't get bitter! Don't get bitter! Don't get bitter! Naomi got bitter. Tsk tsk. Bad Naomi. You got bitter! You're not supposed to get bitter. Bitter's bad.

I will confess that I love Naomi because I'm just like her. That's why I think she's so cool. And if you're honest, you will confess with me that it doesn't matter what your theology, how much you love God, at some point you're gonna not be happy with him because he doesn't do what he's told and he never calls for help. He does what he wants, and it's not what she wanted.

How many of you – don't raise your hand, unless you want to – today are bitter with God? You're angry. You're frustrated. You're upset. You're ticked. You're furious. But, unlike Naomi, you're a liar. You break one of the Ten Commandments. On the way in, somebody said, "How are you?" You're like, "I'm fine. I'm fine." Really? "No, not really. Not really. I hate God. I'm not an atheist. I know he's real. I just don't like him." And this is what Christians do. We lie. We fake it. "How are you?" "I'm fine. I'm really fine. I'm doing fine. I'm fine. I'm fine." "Really?" "Oh yeah. The pills, they help, and I have accountability group with Jose Cuervo, and Jim Beam, and Johnny Walker, and together the four of us, we're fine. We're doing fine. We're doing just fine."

If Ruth's virtue is faith, Naomi's virtue is honesty. I love that about her. "How are ya doin'?" "It's horrible! My life suuuuuuccckkksssss. And he is not helping like he should be." Now if she said this in the woods all by herself, we would say, "There is a woman with no faith." Where does she say this? With God's people. The equivalent is she showed up to her community group. She came to church. She got with her friends and said, "I know I'm not supposed to be here emotionally, but this is where I am. I'm furious. I'm not happy. I have cried myself dry. My life is miserable. I'm wondering if God is good." How many of you go, "I can't believe she said that!" But deep down in your heart you say, "Well, I think that all the time. I would just not say it." I love her honesty.

The question is not should you be frustrated; the question is, are you? And if you are, then taking verses out of context and being the nice, churchy person, "Oh, praise God in all circumstances, that's what I believe. I'm more than a conqueror in Christ! That's what I believe." You're lying, that's what I believe. And that verse is out of context. This is what we do. Sometimes the fig leaf we hide behind are verses out of context so that people don't know how we're really feeling but they only engage in our theological presuppositions. The beauty of Naomi, brutal honesty.

Some of you are here, you're frustrated, angry, disappointed, bitter. You shouldn't be, but if you are, let's at least be honest about it. What I love about Naomi, she runs to God's people and she tells them, "Here's where I'm at." And I believe this is her public declaration that she's inviting others in for help and counsel and support and love and mercy and correction. She is telling the other women, "I need help." That is a virtue. I love Naomi for that. I love Naomi because of her brutal honesty. And I would encourage you to be as honest as she is.

So Naomi returned, verse 22, "And Ruth, the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned from the country of Moab, and they came to Bethlehem," – there's a town pregnant with meaning. Micah 5:2, who's gonna be born there? Jesus. This is goin' a good place. The story gets better. You gotta come back.

At the beginning of barley harvest, what is that? That, friends, is hope. The famine is gone. God's providential hand of kindness and hassed blessing has arrived. It's a whole new season in Israel. Maybe it's a whole new season in the life of Naomi and Ruth. We have to continue, by faith, to see what God might do.

Let me wrap all of this up. As your pastor, who loves you very much – I say that sincerely – would you be as honest as Naomi today, and would you acknowledge that your life and mine are like Naomi and Ruth's stories in which the providential hand of God is at work, in which he calls us to be honest and to run to him and one another as God's people, to work out those parts of our life that we consider afflictions, but not yet have received them as sanctified? And would you identify yourself with someone in the story – who are you? How many of you, you're Elimelech-ish? You're Elimelech-ish. Elimelech is the guy – Everything falls apart. It looks dark. It looks bad. He takes a poll. He makes a plan. He decides Moab has a lower cost of living. Moab has more vocational opportunity. Moab has food on the table – I will make a plan. I will be the sovereign. I will take care of everything. Trust me, I know what I'm doing. He leads well. He plans well. He tries to be the sovereign. Everybody dies anyways.

I am Elimelech. I asked my wife, "Which one am I?" Oh, my wife – she didn't even breathe. Didn't even take a breath. "Oh, you're Elimelech." And his name means what? My God is King! That was me. If you ask me, Jesus, sovereign, Lord, King, God, and if I ever need 'em, I'll call, but I don't think I do 'cause I got this all taken care of. Elimelech-ish.

How many of you are Orpah-esque? You tried Christianity, didn't work, engh. Try something else. Find a new God, find a new religion, find a new

spirituality. "I was dating a non-Christian boy. I prayed that he become a Christian, he didn't. It didn't work. Christianity. I give up." Right? "Well, my wife was driving me crazy, my husband was driving me crazy. And I prayed and God didn't change him, and God didn't do what I told him to do, so I give up on Jesus. I give up on Bible. I give up on Christianity. I turn my back on – I go do my own thing. I go back to my old way of life, my old friends, my old religion, my own God, my own self-rule. I give up. I'm Orpah-esque."

How many of you are Ruth-ish? If you are, let us know. We would all love to buy you coffee and see what it might be like to just trust the Lord and walk in faith. Ruth is a woman who just trusts in the character of God. She says, "You know what? God is sovereign. God is good. I trust him. We'll see what happens. I'm gonna keep going." She's not foolish, but she's faithful.

And how many of you are Naomi-ish? You're a bitter, moody, cranky, self-righteous, finger-pointing, brutally honest, frustrating person that God loves deeply, for no apparent reason. You want to know me? Here's how I work. I start with Elimelech. If that doesn't work, I go to Naomi. That's me. "I'll figure it out. I'll make a plan. I'll lead well. I'll take care of everything. Give me the variables. I got it all figured out. It didn't work? Well, God, did you not get the memo? I knew exactly what needed to be done! I'm not sure who to call to tattle." And if we're honest, we find ourselves at varying seasons in our lives identifying with each character in the story. And let me submit to you that the heroes this week, in addition to God, who is the capital-H hero, are Naomi and Ruth, because they do two things. They run to God, and his people. That's what they do. They go to God and church, and in this book, God is referred to as Yahweh, almost every time. Almost every one of the 23 times. There's a few exceptions where God is called Shaddai. Who is Yahweh? Who is the God that is sovereign and good, who's providential hand is at work in the daily affairs of our lives? Who is this Yahweh, that Ruth, after only confessing allegiance to him for five minutes trusted his character enough to take a risk with every aspect of her life? Well, he's Jesus.

John, chapter 8, they come to Jesus, they say, "Who are you?" He says, "I'm Yahweh. I'm Yahweh." We're talking about Jesus. We're asking you today, like Ruth and Naomi, to run to God, the Lord Jesus Christ, Yahweh, and his people, to get in a community group, a Bible study, come forward for prayer, meet with a pastor, get a Biblical counselor. If you're frustrated, angry, if you're at the end, if you're where Naomi is, you're considering the route of Orpah, run to God's people and be honest. Run to Jesus, Yahweh, and be honest. And get the help and comfort you need. And Jesus Christ is one who can sympathize. He has suffered. He has seen dark days. He is a God who can sympathize with us in our weakness. He's been there. And he died for our sins, and he rose to reconcile this to himself, and today he's in heaven seated upon a throne. He is the sovereign, and he's good. And by faith we'll see his hand of providence causing even our afflictions to be sanctified, if we run to him and his people. I'll pray for you. It's time for you to do business with Jesus.

When you're ready, you can give your life to Jesus, become a Christian, confess your sin. Some of you need to identify where you're really at and be honest with God in prayer. You can come and take communion, which is remembering the body and blood of Jesus, that takes away sin and gives new life, that Jesus Christ is the God of hassed. He has blessed us.

You can give of your tithes and offerings, which is part of our worship, and we encourage you to join us to worship God. You say, "But the day is very hard." Then worship him asking that the affliction might be sanctified, that you, through the affliction, might be sanctified. Amen.

Lord Jesus, we pray to you now. We thank you that you are Yahweh. You are the God whose hand appears in our life often through providence and occasionally through miracle, that you are the God of hassed. You are loving and gracious and merciful and compassionate and kind. You are a God who can sympathize with us because you have suffered as well. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the God of Ruth, that her hope was not in vain, that her hope was in you. We thank you that you are the God of Naomi, that even when we are frustrated and bitter and speaking what we should not and feeling what we ought not, you work out all things for good. And Jesus, we thank you for that.

We ask, now, that you would enable us in every circumstance not to seek to be the sovereign or the omniscient, who knows why or rules over, but rather to be the humble worshippers, that in faith run to you and your people, that our afflictions might be sanctified. Amen.