

Opening Scripture: Matthew 1:4–6 “Aram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz by Rahab, Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered King David.

Historians have used the term “Dark Ages” to describe the early medieval period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the beginning of the “Renaissance” or “rebirth.” During this cultural rebirth, the Protestant Reformation occurred. The Reformation was a spiritual revival that sparked dramatic changes and presented numerous challenges to the Catholic Church, which had become rotted through with spiritual and political corruption. Figures such as the fiery and implacable Martin Luther, the studious and tireless John Calvin, and the brilliant philosopher Philip Melanchthon led this cultural revolution against religious tyranny.

- They reemphasized the biblical doctrines of justification by faith and grace in Christ in place of the empty, unbiblical, and taxing ritualism of medieval Catholicism.
- The Reformers reintroduced the Bible to the masses who had been denied access to it. The Reformation was, if nothing else, a mass literacy movement. At last, the Bible could be translated into the common vernaculars of German, French, and eventually English producing the King James Version of the Bible, which became the conceptual canopy for the western culture.
- The Reformation set into motion pervasive curiosity about matters of heaven and earth—encouraging the ethic that drove the first scientists to make breakthroughs.

The Reformed movement represents true sea change—an unstoppable shift toward something that would renew and redeem the old.

Transition—And the humble, simple, short book of Ruth captures a similar moment of change in Israel’s history. On one level it’s just a short story about God redeeming a particular family during the age of the Judges. On another level, the story sets into motion God’s plan to redeem the whole world through the family of King David.

Let’s Recap—The tribes of Israel have become thoroughly, hopelessly Canaanized—a nation fractured by sin and disloyalty to God, a country without a high king, and the result—everyone does what seems right to them. Yet, in this age of moral insanity is a story about God providing for Israel’s redemption. God is working in ways we often cannot see, and we would not expect.

Let me offer a quick overview of the book of Ruth—we need to get some sense of where the story is going.

Act 1: Redemption from Past Bitterness (1:1–22): Having endured famine, migration, and the loss of her husband and sons, Naomi departs with her only remaining family, her daughters-in-law. One daughter returns to Moab, while Ruth stays with her till the end.

Act 2: Redemption for Ruth's Present Poverty (2:1–23): Ruth gleaned in Boaz's field, Naomi's relative, who generously provided her with food, protection, and encouragement—a sign of God's favor and providence.

Act 3: Redemption for Naomi's Family Line (3:1–18): Naomi devised a plan for Ruth to approach Boaz, her kinsman, to redeem her land through marriage. Ruth agrees, and Boaz compassionately accepts.

Act 4: Redemption for the Nation of Israel (4:1–22): Boaz's kindness to Ruth led to the birth of a son, who would become the grandfather of King David through whom Jesus the Messiah would come to give his life for our sins.

But before we get there, let's unpack the first act of this story.

Ruth 1:1–5 “During the time of the judges, The author clues us in on the period—the story of Naomi and Ruth happens during the period of the judges.

there was a famine in the land. A man left Bethlehem in Judah with his wife and two sons to stay in the territory of Moab for a while. Bethlehem was in the territory of Judah to the west, while the plains of Moab were across the Jordan Valley. We’re talking about a 70–100-mile walk. The area is arid and hot, making famine a distinct possibility. Despite this, Bethlehem, meaning “the house of bread,” has generally been a good place, unaffected by northern wars. Famine in the Old Testament is often seen as a sign of God’s judgment (cf. Gen. 12:10; 26:1; 41:57; 42:5; 47:4). But why would God’s judgment rest upon this people and this family in particular?

2 The man’s name was Elimelech, and his wife’s name was Naomi. The names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the fields of Moab and settled there. Elimelech (Heb. *Eloi Melech*; God is my King) and his wife Naomi (Heb. “pleasantness; sweetness,”) had two sons named Mahlon (sickness) and Chilion (weakness). Where they lived, Bethlehem was associated with unfaithfulness to God and the absence of a King.

3 Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, died, and she was left with her two sons. Her sons took Moabite women as their wives: one was named Orpah and the second was named Ruth. After they lived in Moab about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was left without her two children and without her husband.” Naomi’s return to Bethlehem as an impoverished widow with Moabite daughters-in-law made her utterly destitute in the eyes of the Ancient Near Eastern reader. Women could not inherit property, so she had no means of support. Her sons’ marriages to Moabite women were seen as a violation of Moses’ law, further compounding her social isolation.

Naomi hears that Bethlehem is being blessed with abundance, so she sets out to return there—traveling the “Jericho-to-Jerusalem” road, about 70 miles.

⁸ Naomi said to them, “Each of you go back to your mother’s home. May the Lord show kindness to you as you have shown to the dead and to me. ⁹ May the Lord grant each of you rest in the house of a new husband.” She kissed them, and they wept loudly.

¹⁰ They said to her, “We insist on returning with you to your people.”

¹¹ But Naomi replied, “Return home, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands? ¹² Return home, my daughters. Go on, for I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there

was still hope for me to have a husband tonight and to bear sons, ¹³ would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the Lord's hand has turned against me." Naomi is confronted with the reality that she, as an elderly woman in her mid-40's, is too old to take another husband and the girls have at least two strikes against them back in Judah—they're widows (not virgins) and their foreigners. Marriage prospects would be limited.

¹⁴ Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Follow your sister-in-law." We see here that Naomi's concern for her physical well-being overrides any fears she might have for the spiritual well-being of both girls.

But Ruth will not leave her—and in this moment she makes a decision that changes her family's destiny.

But Ruth replied:

Don't plead with me to abandon you or to return and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. ¹⁸ When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped talking to her. In this period of the Judges, known for cruelty, tribal warfare, and unfaithfulness to God, such a moment of selflessness is exceptionally rare. Suddenly, a spark of hope emerges when someone acts not for their self-interest but for the sake of another. This self-sacrificial act, pledging loyalty to Naomi until the very end, embodies the central ethic of Judeo-Christian faith and remains the driving force of the Christian life. Jesus said that there are only, really, two commands God has for you:

(1) Love God supremely above all else—with all that you are—your heart, mind, soul, and body. Love and remain loyal to God alone! And the second command is like it.

(2) Love your neighbor as you love yourself (Lev 19). "Do unto others," Jesus said, "As you would have them do to you." The whole law and the prophets—all of Scripture can be summarized in those two commands. Love God and love people. Ruth's actions are deeply Jewish and become the seed of the Christian faith.

Ruth's pledge to stay with Naomi to the bitter end is a rare and beautiful moment in this world of rampant idolatry and evil.

¹⁹ The two of them traveled until they came to Bethlehem. When they entered Bethlehem, the whole town was excited about their arrival and the local women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

²⁰ “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara,” she answered, “for the Almighty has made me very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has opposed me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

²² So Naomi came back from the territory of Moab with her daughter-in-law Ruth the Moabitess. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Naomi’s return to Bethlehem was met with a warm welcome from the townsfolk, especially the women. This suggests that she was well-respected and well-liked in the community. However, Naomi’s own heart was filled with pain and sorrow. She had lost her husband and two sons and was now a widow with no means of support. Her life had been full of abundance and plenty, but now it was empty.

And so she insists, “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara.” Whereas Naomi means “Pleasant; gentle” Mara means “a bitter countenance; one with the appearance of heartbreak.”

Some observations we see from the passage...

1. God is present in both abundance and scarcity. Naomi assumes that when times were good, God was with her and on her side. Now that times have turned difficult, and loss and lack characterize her life, she assumes that God is somehow against her. God has forsaken her or judged her for whatever reason.

A couple of insights related to this:

First, not every problem we face is a direct judgment from God for a particular sin. We tend to leap to that conclusion, don't we?

Illustration: Jesus was asked this very question when the disciples saw a man suffering blindness from birth: "Rabbi," they asked, "Who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind?" What was the underlying assumption of that question? Surely the disease and the misfortune is due to his sin. Jesus' reply? "Neither this man nor his parents sinned" (John 9:1–2). He wasn't saying that they've never sinned, he was saying that the man's condition wasn't a judgment for a particular act of sin. "But this has happened so that God's power might be displayed in him" then Jesus heals the man for all to see. Jesus said, "For he [the Father] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45).

Don't jump to the conclusion that just because you're in a tough spot that there is some particular sin that God is addressing in your life.

Second, every problem we face is ultimately due to sin. Paul tells us in Rom 5:12 "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned...Rom 8:18–21 "I consider that our **present sufferings** are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the **creation waits** in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the **creation was subjected to frustration**, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be **liberated from its bondage to decay** and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."

Adam's sin caused the earth to be cursed and their labor to be toilsome. Adam and Eve's sin led to our death, spiritually, relationally, and physically. For from the dust you came and to it, God says to Adam, you will return. That statement was a judgment.

We are reminded that everything from the ground under our feet to the molecules in our bodies is under a curse subject to the decay of death.

New creation, when God resurrects our bodies and renovates the world we live in, is going to be heaven on earth.

In the meantime, we say with Paul,

Philippians 4:11–13 “For I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself. ¹² I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. ¹³ I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Naomi doesn't know it yet, but she will discover that even in her suffering and loss, even in times of scarcity and poverty, God has never left her. And God in his providence is working everything according to his eternal plan.

2. In times of scarcity and suffering, we tend to blame God. Ruth 1:13, 20–21 “because *the Lord’s hand* has turned against me... for the *Almighty has made me very bitter*.²¹ I went away full, but *the Lord has brought me back empty*. Why do you call me Naomi, since the *Lord has opposed me*, and the *Almighty has afflicted me*?”

I do not for one second think that Naomi has abandoned her faith in the God of Israel. She proves it by calling him “El Shaddai” —meaning, “God Almighty.” Even while she assigns the responsibility of her suffering to God, she acknowledges that Yahweh, the God Israel, has all power to turn the situation around.

These words don’t strike me as contemptuous or having metastasized into an incurable cancer of bitterness in her heart. But it is bitterness nonetheless.

And I want to tell you, you cannot avoid situations in life that bring you grief and temporary bitterness. I’ve had people close to me that I discovered were actually betraying me and my confidence. That is one of the most challenging things to go through because the person presented themselves as though they were a counselor, a confidant, worthy of your trust. But in the end they were operationalizing your suffering to use against you. It is devastating when that happens to you (I never thought it would, I just thought I was too likable). It is soul-crushing.

You say, “Well, sure. But then, how do I make it to the end?”

That’s just it. The only way to get to the other side of this struggle is through it. This is why we need perseverance.

Illustration: Job’s story is famous for suffering. How could one man experience more grief and loss than Job? The question the book poses to us is: “Why do the righteous suffer?” Indeed, after losing his kids, his fortune—everything dear to him except for his wife, he refuses to curse God, even at his wife’s suggestion that he do just that. While it is clear that he never curses God or throws away his faith in the Lord, Job nevertheless questions God. At times he seems angry and bitter toward God. Half a dozen times in that book Job either directly or indirectly attributes his bitterness to God. In fact, when God finally shows up and speaks from the whirlwind to Job, he confronts him for accusing God of injustice and assigning blame to God in order to justify himself (Job 40:6–9). Yet in the midst of his self-righteous songs, his agony that God has left him destitute, he clings to his hope in God. And he refuses to allow the bitterness of a season to go septic, rotting his bones.

This is where we find Naomi. She is bitter, there’s no denying that. She is empty. Her life is a tragedy, unquestionably so. But she hasn’t lost her faith in the God of her youth. We see a glimmer of hope in the next chapter.

Folks, difficult situations will come. And they will tempt you to accuse God of injustice or caprice.

I think the last thing we learn from this story is that...

3. God is gracious to us even when we falter. No doubt, Naomi is struggling here. In our fallenness, in our limited understanding, and our ignorance of God's ways, we, like Naomi, Job, and the disciples in the boat wondering if Jesus cares whether or not they drown in the middle of the Lake—we will tend to question God's judgment, his wisdom, his plan.

Illus. I've done exactly that at pivotal moments in my life. When loss or grief comes, I've struggled to see how God could possibly be working in all that. Several times I've wondered out loud in prayer to God,

- “Where are you?
- What are you doing in all this? Why me?
- When will this suffering end?” And I have to confess I've even lashed out in anger at God on a rare occasion because I felt that he was punishing me for some unknown reason.

God, in his mercy and his grace, is patient and long-suffering because, unlike me, he has all wisdom and knowledge. Unlike me, he knows exactly how everything will work out.

And this is what Paul tells the Romans and the Ephesians.

Romans 8:28 “We know that ***all things work together for the good*** of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” If there was one thing in your life that God couldn't or didn't work for your good (in context, being conformed to the image of his Son Jesus in life and death), then God would be a liar. “No,” Paul says, “Nothing in all creation could separate you from the love of God in Christ.”

Ephesians 1:11 “In him we have also received an inheritance, because we were predestined according to the plan of ***the one who works out everything*** in agreement with the purpose of his will,¹² so that we who had already put our hope in Christ might bring praise to his glory.” What does he work out for those who have already put their hope in Christ—everything according to the counsel of his will?

The author of the book of Ruth knows something Naomi, in Chapter 1, doesn't know yet. The author knows what we know—God is working this whole thing out for the good of all involved.

God has orchestrated events, so Naomi and Ruth return at the beginning of the harvest season at just the right time.

This marks the beginning of his redemption for Naomi's bitterness.

This story marks a sea change. The whole direction of Israel and the world will change right here.

Closing:

God, we thank you for being present and never leaving us in times of abundance and scarcity. In times of plenty, and in times when we feel so empty.

We know that ultimately the world is cursed because of sin, the very ground under our feet, the very dust of our flesh and bones—but we also know that you've redeemed us from the curse of sin in Christ. Because you died for us, we can live forever with you.

God, when trouble comes, and we are tempted to jettison our faith, to allow our bitterness to spread and deepen and take over our minds—will you graciously pull us back from that? Give us a spark of hope and warm our hearts again to new possibilities.

We thank you for graciously sustaining us and working everything out for the good of your people. We confess that we have not believed your great and precious promises—that all things work together for the good of those who love you because they were first loved by you, and you work everything out according to your eternal plan.