

God Moves in a Mysterious Way

Ruth 1:1-22

Intro: *“All of life is lived either in a crisis, recovering from a crisis, or preparing for a crisis.”*

Life is hard. There is simply no way around it. No matter what you do the crisis always seems to find its way in. Even for the Christian. The crisis can take many shapes.

Maybe life just doesn't have the vibrancy it once had. Every day is just a drag. Maybe you and your spouse have been in a season of just not clicking. Maybe there is a diagnoses that just doesn't make any sense. There is an estranged kid who just has fallen off the map. You want a spouse or relationship or community and just don't feel like you'll find it. You don't feel like anyone in your life understands you. Your body doesn't work like it used to. Money is tight and getting tighter.

The hardest part about some of it is not that you're suffering (whether publicly or privately) but you don't understand why you're suffering, and you don't know if it'll ever get any better. Then, we always start to try and get to the bottom of my suffering. To understand it. Did I do something wrong? Am I supposed to be learning stuff from this? So you try and be a good spiritual person and learn your lesson... but then it keeps coming, and it keeps coming, until your only conclusion you have left is: **God must be really just not like me very much.**

If you've ever been there, then you understand Naomi's situation in Ruth 1.

Here's the danger in moments like that—you're not just suffering... you're interpreting. You're drawing conclusions about God. You might not be reading your life correctly.

- **Context:** *“In the days when the judges ruled...”*
 - Sin → oppression → crying out → deliverance → peace → repeat.
 - Spiritual condition: *“Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”*
 - The book ends in shocking darkness (Judges 19–21). No restoration. Just a sobering picture of how bad things have become. That's where we open.

A Series of Unfortunate Events (1-5)

- **1:1–2 — Famine & Flight**
 - Famine in Bethlehem (“house of bread”) → irony. But fitting for the time.

- Elimelech (“*My God is King*”) moves family to Moab (spiritually dangerous).
 - Names hint at tension: Naomi (“pleasant”), sons Mahlon (“sickly”) & Chilion (“failing”). Both sons marry Moabite women (Ruth and Orpah).
 - Moab = Bad: Descendants of Lot through an incestuous relationship (Genesis 19:30–38). Numbers 22–25: Moab leads Israel into idolatry (Baal of Peor). Moab would elicit boos from a Jewish crowd.
- **1:3–5 — Total Loss**
 - Elimelech dies → Naomi is left a widow in a foreign land.
 - She followed her husband from the land of promise... and now he’s gone.
 - Then both sons die. Naomi loses not just family, but her future.
 - No husband → no provision. No sons → no protection. Catastrophic.
 - Everything that made her “*full*” is gone. She’s in Moab with nothing.
 - Now at this point, Naomi isn’t just experiencing loss, she’s about to interpret it. What she’s going to conclude about God... is going to shape everything else in the story

A Return to the Lord (6-14)

- 1:6–7 — Return Begins
 - The Lord “*visits*” His people by providing food in Bethlehem.
 - God has not forgotten His people. News reaches Naomi in Moab.
 - Where there was emptiness, now provision. So, she decides to return.
- “*Return*” (shuv) becomes a key theme:
 - Physical: leaving Moab, going back to Bethlehem
 - Spiritual: movement toward the Lord and His covenant people
 - Even if Naomi doesn’t see it yet, this is a step back toward God’s place of promise. She returns because there is food... but underneath, God is drawing her back.
- 1:8–13a — Naomi’s Selfless Release
 - Urges daughters-in-law to return to Moab—being realistic.

- Why send them back? Life in Bethlehem would be hard. They are Moabite women → little chance of remarriage, protection, or stability in Israel.
- Their future would be tied to a widow with no prospects.
- She's releasing them to remarriage, which she's really not obligated to do.
- In Moab, they still have: family and a chance at remarriage and stability.

- These are not just daughters-in-law — they've become daughters to her.
 - Years of shared life, grief, and family bonds knit them together.
 - She genuinely seeks their good, even if it means losing them.
 - She blesses them with God's hesed (covenant love): prays the Lord would show them the same kindness they showed to her and her sons.

- Her reasoning (vv. 11–13a): painfully logical.
 - "No more sons" → no possibility of levirate marriage (Deut 25).
 - Naomi is at least 50, Ruth and Orpah are likely 18-25.
 - Even her "*absurd*" scenario (a husband tonight, bearing sons) proves the point: there is no future attached to her.
 - From every human perspective, she is right: a dead end. If they stay, they inherit her emptiness.

- 1:13b–14 — Honest Lament. Now we see what Naomi really thinks.
 - This is where Naomi moves from grieving... to interpreting. This is where everything gets dangerous. Because suffering doesn't just hurt you, it starts telling you what to believe about God.
 - We see Naomi's inner world: not just grieving loss, but interpreting it. Her suffering feels personal. Not random, but targeted.
 - She feels opposed by God: not just that hard things happened...but that God is against her.
 - Her message: "*God is against me... don't tie your life to mine.*" "*If you stay, you step into my misfortune.*" From her perspective, it makes sense: she left the land → everything fell apart. Her sons married Moabites → now no sons remain. She's going back → That'll go badly too.

- Blessing replaced by loss at every turn. The tragedy hasn't changed, but now her conclusion about God has.
- Her conclusion: If God were for me, my life wouldn't look like this.
 - This is human: we read circumstances as a verdict on God's attitude.
 - That sounds honest. It feels true. But this is where we go wrong more often than we realize. We consistently misread what God is doing in our suffering. You are not a reliable interpreter of God's providence.
 - The question hangs: Is she right? Is God against her? Or is something deeper happening that she cannot yet see?

An Unexpected Friend (15-22)

- 1:15 — Turning Point
 - Orpah leaves; Ruth clings. Orpah does what makes sense → returns to her people, her gods, her future. Ruth does what makes no sense → she stays.
 - “Cling” = covenant-level loyalty (Gen 2:24). Adam “clung” to his wife...
 - Naomi argues: Return = your people + your gods (Chemosh). Staying = Naomi's emptiness, Naomi's God, Naomi's uncertain future.
 - Ruth chooses total identification and gives her famous poem... (16-17)
 - The more you ponder these words, the more amazing they become.
- Ruth's commitment to her destitute mother-in-law is simply astonishing.
 - (1) It means leaving her own family and land.
 - (2) It means, as far as she knows, a life of widow hood and childlessness, because Naomi has no man to give her, and if she married a non-relative, Ruth's commitment to Naomi's family would be lost.
 - (3) It means going to an unknown land with a new people and new customs and new language.
 - (4) It was a radical. She will never return home, even if Naomi dies.
- The most amazing commitment of all is this: “Your God [will be] my God” (1:16).
 - Naomi's current experience of God is bitterness. Despite this, Ruth forsakes her religious heritage and makes the God of Israel her God.

- Why? That doesn't come from nowhere. I think, she had committed years before, when her godly mother-in-law told her of the great God of Israel.
 - Somehow or other, Ruth had come to trust in Naomi's God. Now, she trusts the Lord's character, even when Naomi doubts it.
 - This kind of love only makes sense if you believe God is good... even when circumstances say otherwise (she's up a creek too).
 - Ruth acts on what she cannot see. Naomi: *"God is against me—don't come."*
Ruth: *"Your God is my God—that's why I'm staying."*
- There are some lessons about Friendship here worth nothing...
 - Don't assume those who encouraged you in your darkness don't in turn need your encouragement today.
 - I've found myself encouraging people with the same truth they taught me.
 - I've been encouraged by people whom I taught they truths I was encouraged with.
- And lessons about the Ideal Woman:
 - Ruth has faith in God that sees beyond present bitter setbacks.
 - Freedom from the securities and comforts of the world.
 - Courage to venture into the unknown and the strange.
 - Radical commitment in the relationships appointed by God.
 - This is the woman of Proverbs 31:25: *"Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come."* Ruth is one of *"the holy women who hoped in God . . . [and did] not fear anything that is frightening"* (1 Pet. 3:5–6).
 - So, they return together. Empty Naomi and the Moabite woman of faith.
- 1:19–22 — Return in Bitterness
 - Naomi returns, the town is stirred (not a big place). This is not the Naomi they remember. She left full... returns broken, widowed, with a Moabite.
 - Renames herself Mara (*"bitter"*). She has gone from full to empty; pleasant to bitter. She's now defining herself by her suffering.
 - Her interpretation: The Almighty has dealt bitterly with me // The Lord has brought me back empty // The Lord has testified (literally *"taken the stand"* against me // The Almighty has brought calamity upon me.

- Naomi interprets everything through one lens: **God is against me.**
- 1:22 — Quiet Hope (Narrator's Correction) Bitter Eyes are Blind Eyes.
 - It was God who brought bread to the house of Israel and let her hear about it all the way back in Moab. God who gave her a Ruth.
 - They arrive at the beginning of barley harvest. Provision is starting.
 - There's also maybe a couple of relatives in Bethlehem Naomi forgot...
 - The tension in the text: Naomi's interpretation of reality vs. God's reality.
 - There's a disconnect between what she feels vs. what God is doing.

Three Key Lessons

(1) Naomi Shows Us God's Sovereignty in Suffering

- Naomi is right about God's hand in famine, life, death, and all events.
 - 1 Sam 2:6–7: *"The Lord kills and brings to life... He brings low and He exalts."*
// Amos 3:6: *"Does disaster come to a city unless the Lord has done it?"* // Isa 45:7: *"I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity."*
 - God is not a passive observer of suffering. He is not watching, hoping things don't go wrong. He is not wringing His hands at human tragedy.
 - The Bible's God is all powerful. Even over what makes us uncomfortable.
Hard truth, but essential: suffering is not random.
 - God is, in a very ultimate sense, behind every piece of bad news in your life, and I hope to show you what remarkably good news that is.
- If we remove God from our troubles, we no longer have the God of the Bible.
 - Naomi gets this right. The Lord is involved. Not one thing happens in your life apart from the hand of the Lord.
 - Elimelech would be alive if God wanted him alive. So would her sons. She would have heirs had God wanted it. Right?
 - Naomi's theology is better than the average American Christian, at least.
 - Better this God than a powerless god, all shocked and confused, who really wants things to go well for you but just can't get it together enough or just doesn't see things coming.
 - God's hand is all over all your suffering.

- Naomi has a big God... and a small understanding of His purposes.

(2) Naomi Shows Us the Danger of Misreading God's Purposes

- Naomi correctly sees God's hand... but wrongly concludes: *"God is against me."*
 - Naomi gets sovereignty right, but she gets something wrong: what that sovereignty means for her.
 - You can be right about God's power... and wrong about His heart.
 - Bitterness narrows vision: she says she is *"empty"* ... but Ruth stands beside her. Harvest has begun. A redeemer (Boaz) is already in place.
 - When we decide God is against us, **we overstate our hopelessness.**
 - **Naomi is reading her life in real time and she's reading it wrong. The terrifying part? You and I do the exact same thing**
- Some of you are doing exactly what Naomi is doing right now.
 - **You have a diagnosis you didn't want.** You've prayed, but something in you has started to harden. A conclusion: *"If God were really for me, this wouldn't be happening."* You feel it.
 - **The woman who can't have children.** Month after month. Comparison to suspicion: *"Why her, not me?"* Bitterness creeps in.
 - **The one who wants a spouse.** You've tried to do it right, but it hasn't happened. You watch others get what you've prayed for, and now you're tired... maybe even a little angry: *"What have I done wrong?"*
 - **You're stuck in a job you're ashamed of.** You feel overlooked, underused, stuck. Over time, frustration settles into belief: *"God has benched me."*
 - That's Naomi. If you're not careful... that becomes you. When we decide God is against us... we start rewriting reality to match that conclusion.
 - **But Naomi isn't seeing the whole picture. What she feels is real, but what she concludes is not.**
 - In that moment, you're not just hurting, you're interpreting. You're deciding what this means about God. Your pain is real...but your interpretation is not always trustworthy.
- God is doing far more than Naomi can see
 - Preserving a family line, raising up David, preparing for Christ.

- What looks like tragedy (famine, death, relocation)... is extraordinary providence. God is doing a thousand unseen things.
- We instinctively jump to *“why”*: Why is He against me? (or assume blessing when things go well). We think we know... we know nothing.
- There’s more happening here than Naomi knows.
- You almost want to say: *“Oh Naomi, you’re not empty—you’re the fullest person in the story.” “God is not against you—He is working for you.” “If you could see what He’s doing...”*
- This is for us: we don’t know what He is up to, but in Christ **it is good**.
- I’m not saying it is not hard. I’m not saying it is not painful. I’m not saying that by all outward data it won’t seem like God is against you.
- I am demanding, based on God’s character, for you to not believe your lying eyes. God’s hand is never against His children; it is always on them.
- Which raises the bigger question: what actually makes you full?

(3) Naomi Shows Us That True Fullness Is Found in God’s Love

- Naomi defines fullness by what she’s lost...
 - God defines fullness by what He gives, His covenant love.
 - Ruth is hosed in flesh and blood and points to a greater Redeemer: One who brings fullness out of emptiness and joy out of bitterness.
 - In Christ, you have never been empty: God has given us His Son.
 - We have everything we truly need. *“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”* (Rom 8:32). The God who gives His Son is not giving bad gifts.

- **If I can’t trust my interpretation of my life...**
 - **Where do I look to understand what God is actually like?**
 - **If you want that... you have to look at the cross.** Look not only to Joseph, Job, or Ruth, but to Jesus on Good Friday.
 - The most heinous sin in history becomes the place of greatest glory. Don’t you see it? The cross. The only innocent sufferer in history is the hinge of the whole plan.
 - Because if you had interpreted that moment with your eyes alone... you would say: ‘God is against Him.’ Which is what His closest followers all

thought. You would be completely wrong. Which means this: your eyes are not the final authority on what God is doing.

- **So if you can be that wrong about the cross... what makes you think you're reading your life correctly?**
- If God is up to good in crucifixion... What might He be doing in your pain, suffering, sickness, or sorrow?
- I don't know, but based on what I know of God, **I bet it's awesome!**
- The best news I have for a suffering and bitter saint is not that there suffering is going to be over soon, but to quote Paul, that it is a "*light momentary affliction [that is] is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison*" (2 Cor 4:17).

God Moves in a Mysterious Way

- William Cowper was "acquainted with suffering."
 - As a young man, he was brilliant but sickly and fragile.
 - In terror and despair, he attempted suicide, more than once.
 - Each attempt failed in almost ironic, almost providential ways (a rope breaking, poison ineffective), leaving him convinced not that God spared him, but that **God was keeping him alive for judgment.**
 - He spent time in an asylum, where he was tormented by the belief that he was eternally condemned. Beyond grace, beyond mercy, beyond hope.
- Under the friendship of John Newton (author of *Amazing Grace*)...
 - Cowper slowly begins to see flickers of light again.
 - Not instantly healed. But enough to glimpse something he had lost: **the goodness of God even when he couldn't feel it.**
 - Out of that darkness, not after it, but **in the midst of it:** he wrote the now famous hymn: "*God Moves in a Mysterious Way.*"
 - In it, one of my favorite lines: "*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense // But trust Him for His grace // Behind a frowning providence // He hides a smiling face.*"
 - Naomi looks at famine, graves, and empty arms and says, "*The hand of the Lord has gone out against me.*" Cowper says: "*That's feeble sense talking.*"
 - Because behind famine... behind funerals... behind bitterness... **there may be a "frowning providence"** but there is still a **smiling God.**

- Naomi feels abandoned... But she is actually at the very center of God's redemptive plan. She's bringing them out of the time of Judges.
- You may be living in Ruth 1 right now: Circumstances you don't understand.
 - A sense that God is distant or even against you.
 - The truth of this text: God is doing a thousand things you cannot see.
 - Oh, that you might move out of the bitterness of Naomi into the faith of Ruth. You are not a better interpreter of your life than God is.
 - Don't trust your feelings over His character. Don't trust circumstances over His promises. Because if God did not spare His own Son... if He turned the darkest moment in history into the greatest victory...
 - Then hear me clearly: God is not against you. He is not done with you.
 - Behind what feels like a frowning providence... is still a smiling God.
 - Naomi says: "The Lord is against me." Your circumstances might be saying the same thing. But the cross says: "I am for you." One of those interpretations is wrong.
 - So don't trust your reading of your life... trust the character of your God.