

Understanding Our Hard Times

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Ruth 1:1-22
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So today, excited to start a mini-series in the book of Ruth. And it's been called the Bible Cinderella love story, which means I just lost all the men in this room when I said that, right? No, you guys are here to study God's word. So that's what we're going to do. Now, like many love stories, except to the Disney variety, I guess, this one is filled with good times and bad. And all of it with God working behind what is seen to accomplish His will.

So before we get into all the details of the text, I want to take us out you know 40,000 feet and look at the big picture. What's what's going on in the book of Ruth? What's the background? Well, if you look at verse 1, it says that the events took place "in the days when the judges ruled". Now, if you're not familiar with the Bible, we're glad that you're here. Let me explain that the time of the judges would've been like living in Tombstone with Wyatt Earp. It's kind of the wild west, everybody doing what they want, survival of the fittest, kill or be killed, violent, evil days. It's marked by disobedience, instability, assassinations, idle worship, sexual sin, pride, lying, rape, murder, dismemberment, human sacrifice, marriage to pagans, heretical priests, chaos, and even a little bit of civil war mixed in for good measure. A summary of it is in the last verse of of of Judges, 21, verse 25, where where it summarizes this 300-year period by saying, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." What what was right in God's eyes? That doesn't really matter. I'm my own. God, I'm going to do whatever I want. I'm going to do what's right in my own eyes. This is like Jews gone wild. This is just craziness going on in this book. It's not the part of the Bible that that we should really look at for for a lot of spiritual guidance, except on like how not to live, how not to follow the Lord and all of that.

Now, because this happened in the time of Judges, probably towards the end, so probably around 1100 BC. So these events took place 3,100 years ago. Now, in saying Ruth is a Bible Cinderella, rags to riches story. That does not mean that Ruth is fiction. This book is in a historical context, it's an inspired, historical narrative that teaches us about God. It teaches us about how to live in God's world. So when we when we put Ruth together with Judges, what we see is that Ruth is a light in the darkness of the Judge's period. She's she's in Oasis in the spiritual desert, where at least some Israelite didn't follow the culture, didn't follow the disobedience, didn't go wild, but remained faithful. And It's important for us to think through because our our culture's going wild. Even even on the church, it's it's seeping in there. And and as we enter this text, the the message overall for us, we can take away, just at the very beginning, is that when it comes to a crazy culture, we remain faithful to Christ.

Now, Ruth has been truly admired. It's been considered the work of genius. It's called the perfect story. It's called one of the most beautiful tales in the Old Testament. All of that and nobody knows who wrote it. It's been it's been uhh surmised, maybe Samuel, maybe Nathan, but nobody really knows. I believe it was written around 1000 BC, which is somewhere during, or soon after David's life. But that's about it. It's about all we know.

Now, we are in chapter 1 today, and chapter 1 is going to lay the foundation. The rest is going to be the story that's built on top of this love story. But because this is inspired, because this is profitable, because it teaches us how to live in God's world. This is not just going to be a historical, like oh, isn't that interesting, facts from 3000 years ago. No, this text will help you. It will help me understand the hard times that we go through. We're going to see some terrible times that this family goes through. But what happens to them, we will be able to learn from and take into the hard times that we face.

Ruth chapter 1 will give us a framework to understand the hard times that you and I face in our lives. Let's look at the text in verse 1. The story begins with with maybe one of the hardest things people can endure. Verse 1 says, "There was a famine in the land." Now we read that matter of factly and probably move on because I'm

sure nobody here understands what a famine actually is, has never experienced it. Famine means no food. It means death by starvation. You know sunken eyes, bloated bellies, uh jaw bones and ribs that show through the skin. We're talking about horrible, horrible conditions. And remember in book of Judges, there's all this disobedience and rebellion. And and because the people of Israel made a covenant with God and those covenant stipulations are stated in Leviticus 26, restated in Deuteronomy 28, both of those passages give a theological framework to understand famine. All the famine that happens after they make that covenant, listen, is evidence of God's judgment for rebellion. It's not just happenstance, oh, there was a famine. Famine was meant to show them. We are not right with God and we need to change.

Now, Bethlehem means house of bread, the place of food. So famine in Bethlehem is like starving at a grocery store. It's it's not supposed to be that way. And famine in Bethlehem is like civil war in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. It's ironic. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't fit; and I think that's a clue. In these first 5 verses, we're going to see things that don't fit; and I think every single one of those in verses 1 to 5 is evidence that what this family did when they left Bethlehem and went to Moab was not what they were supposed to do.

Let's look at it a little more, verse 1, God's judgment and this famine is localized. It's it's in Israel, but 30 miles away, Moab, they're fine. No problem at all. Everything's good. We'll just, we'll just go 30 miles as the crow flies, straight you know, straight shot, 30 miles and there's no famine. That's like us saying, "Okay, there's a famine in Gilbert, so let's all move to Phoenix; and we're going to be fine in Phoenix. We're we're not going to be fine here, famine, we're all dying, but just just go over to Phoenix and we'll be okay." Just again, you read that, and because we don't know the topography, geography, all that, we go, "Oh, move to Moab." No, it's like some... I read one guy who said they could see Moab from Bethlehem. So they're looking and going, "It's it's better over there." I don't know if that's true, but that's what that guy said. Now, this family leaves Bethlehem, goes to Moab, seems innocent enough, right? But the author expects us to know something from the book of Judges. Judges ends, chapter 17 to 21, ends with two just horrific incidences. Just awful, awful horrific things. And here's the thing, both of them start with people who left a city called Bethlehem. So already built into the Old Testament is this idea that you don't want to leave Bethlehem. Not a good idea to leave Bethlehem, but this man did with his wife and kids and they settled, it says, in the country of Moab. It says in verse 1, they're sojourning there. They don't plan to stay. They're gonna stay there for a, they're gonna going to wait out the famine and then go back home.

Now, depending on where they stayed, the route they likely would've taken from Bethlehem to Moab would've been would've taken about 80 to 100 miles to do the whole route. Straight shot, 30. They don't have planes, so they've got to walk along the road; and here's the deal, Bethlehem is about 3,500 feet high on a mountain range. They've got to go down to Jericho, below sea level, got to cross the Red sea, I'm sorry the Dead Sea; and then they've got to cross the Jordan River, and then they've got to go up 4,500 feet to Moab. So this is about an 80-to-100-mile walk. This will probably take one or two weeks and most of it was through the desert. And about you, if you had to walk 100 miles to go to church today, chances are, we're not going to need four services.

And so this is... Now, Moab is not grandma's house. Okay? Moab is not good. Moab is known for four things by the time we get to the book of Ruth. First, do you do you know how Moab, the Moabites, that people started? Genesis 19, starts from an incestuous relationship where a daughter worried about not having children gets her dad drunk so that he could impregnate her. That's not a nice family. That's not a good way to start your family. Second, they showed hatred to the Israelites when the Israelites left Egypt going to the promised land, they're about to enter, oh, but the Moabites stopped them and try to keep them from entering the promised land. Not nice, hatred, hire a profit, curse them, all that. Third, before they enter the promised land here they are still in Moab, the Moabite women go and seduce a bunch of Israelites; you can read about it in in Numbers 25, seduced them into sin and pull them into idolatry. And then fourth, about 100 years before the book of Ruth, the king of Moab decides it'd be a good idea to send bands of of soldiers into into uh Israel to attack them and and take their stuff. So other than not starving, the author is hinting pretty strongly that there's nothing good about this move. And here's the thing, when we get to verse 19 later, we're going to see that there were people that stayed in Bethlehem. Lots of people, Naomi arrives and be like, "Hey, there's Naomi. Hey, this is so awesome." So the

indication of this text is that, unlike this family, most people stayed. They didn't go to Moab. And you probably know why that is, right? Moving to Moab would've meant being surrounded by people that don't worship your God. And not only that, no family, no friends, no followers of God, no tabernacle, priest, sacrifice, worship, uh no prayer. Like you don't have any of that. You are a stranger in a strange land in every possible way. Add to that being a migrant in a foreign land? That's a hard life. You're not getting, you're not going to be a doctor or a lawyer in Moab. You're going to be a street sweeper. You're going to be the lowest of the low kind of job. Sorry to the street sweepers here. You probably have a great job. But it is it is going to be the worst kind of work that you're going to get for the most meager of pay. Migrants would be on the same level of widows and orphans in that society. And Bethlehem, God's people, God's land, God's presence; "Yeah, but God's not providing for us so we're going to move to a land with another god, a demon god, and we're going to follow some better economic opportunity there."

So they're out of church, out of community, out of teaching for at least, verse 4 says, 10 years. 10 years away from God's people. 10 years away from teaching. All for money and for comfort. And notice verse 2, the man's name is Elimelech. You're seeing that these decisions are not not very spiritual, not very very godly decisions, but his name means God is king, or God is my king. He's not acting like it. He's like an atheist named Christian. It's like, nah, there's something not right there. Again, what that's saying to us is the author is saying to us, these inconsistencies are showing God is not pleased with what's going on. But it's the time of the judges. He's a lot like his culture, he's worldly, even rebellious. He's making economic decisions without any regard for spiritual realities. That's like people saying, Jesus is Lord, but not, not living like that. Living the opposite. Elimelech, "I'm providing for my family. I'm I'm putting food on the table." But he's spiritually, he is spiritual and name only. Literally. There's no real commitment to the Lord.

Let me just walk over to the side here and say, "dad's," Any dad's in the room? Dad's, raise your hand. Could we just all right now just make a commitment? We are not going to be like Elimelech. We're not gonna, we're we're not gonna you know shirk our responsibilities as the spiritual leaders in our homes. We're going to lead our family. We're going to pray with them. We're going to study the Bible, read the Bible with them. We're going we're going to have hard conversations because we want them to know and love Jesus. Let's let's commit to not be like Elimelech.

Now, look at verse 2, he's married with a wife named Naomi, two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. It says there that they're Ephrathites, which could mean that they're from a specific neighborhood in Bethlehem. Maybe it's the name of their clan or it could refer to the upper class, so it's the nice neighborhood in Bethlehem. Scholars aren't sure. So the move seems to be a good decision though, on the surface. Verse 3, "But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died." It's just like it's like newspaper, matter of fact. Doesn't say it was God's discipline, but I think the text is hinting pretty strongly that it was. So here they are, foreign land, no community, no family; he dies, dream's dead. All's not lost though, verse verse 3, "And she was left with her two sons." Boys are going to take care of her, but like fathers often do, they follow the bad example. I'm sorry, as sons often do they follow the bad example of their fathers. And look at verse 4, "These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah." I always thought that was Oprah. Then I heard somebody say Orpah and I'm like, no, that's not right, and then I look closer and it was. "The name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth." Now, the text doesn't condemn them for marrying Moabites. But the first readers probably would've been like, "What? You don't marry foreign wives." Like that's that's not considered a good thing in the Old Testament. It's it's even evidenced, Deuteronomy 28, that someone is under God's judgment. Why though? See, we automatically default, oh, it's a racial thing, but it's not. Marrying somebody who doesn't worship the same God as you is the issue. Because you don't marry foreign wives because they worship different gods. And if you if you marry them, they're going to pull you away from Yahweh. As you see throughout the Old Testament, that's what happens. And so they go, "No, no, no, we don't do that."

So let me just pause right here and walk over to this side and say, do we have any single people in the room? Single people, can you just say right now, "I am not going to follow Mahlon and Chilion. I am not going to marry a non-Christian." Could you could you just put a stake in the ground right now and say, "That's not going

to happen. I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to try to worship Jesus in my home and then there's also going to be this... we're going to worship some other god in the home and we're going to try to make this work." Like don't do that. Job one, marry a Christian.

Verse 4, whether they lived in the land for 10 years or were married for 10 years, the text doesn't say, but things are now going to get worse, especially for Naomi. Look at how the text talks about it, verse 5, "And both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman..." So now this is interpreted in light of Naomi, "So that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband." Now notice there were no grandkids. So the names Mahlon and Chilion, they might be based on Hebrew words that mean uh sick and dying. Not exactly words that I would name my sons, you know if I had if I had multiple sons, they did. And what some suggests is that it probably meant that they were very unhealthy when they were born. So, and it may explain why they died, and it may explain why they had no kids, maybe they were sterile. See, as soon as Ruth and Boaz get married, what happens? She gets pregnant. So it doesn't seem the problem is with her. It's likely with these two, two men.

As we take a step back and we think about this, 10 years in five verses. One plan, two countries, three deaths, no hope. No family, no community, no welfare system, no community college to go back to school and get some new skills and enter the job workforce, because there is no workforce for you if you are a widow. All three of them are staring economic destitution, like a freight train coming at them.

So what can we learn from this? I think point **1) you and I need to assess the source of our hard times. Assess the source of your hard times.** When you're in the midst of a hard time, you need to ask, why am I going through this? What is what is it that's putting me through this? What is bringing these hard times into my life? Why why am I facing the pain that I'm facing? See, I think Naomi is facing her hard time, partially as a result of bad decisions by her husband, but partially for going along with it. She's going to say it later in verse 21, that the Lord has got a case against me. Maybe she was doing what the others around her were doing. Maybe she didn't put up a fight when her boys married idolators. Maybe she stopped caring that she lived where no one worshiped God. Maybe she just got used to not going to church, reading the Bible, living like anyone... Maybe she just kind of got used to that and it was just comfortable for her. We don't know. But what we see in the text is, we're going to walk through it, is that she clearly affirms God's existence., she clearly affirms his action in the world, but her decisions show the rebellion of judges was alive in her heart. Now, that's Naomi, but when you think about Job, he was a righteous man. It was his goodness that got him trials. He was James 1:2-3, the trial was meant to produce greater character. But think about, that's that's Job, think about David and Solomon, their hard times were a result of their sin. Their decisions brought the hard time they were facing. Their decisions brought it on themselves. It's a form of discipline, Hebrews 12 said that they won't keep doing that sin again.

There there are all kinds of reasons that we face hard times. Some of it, we have no idea why it's happening, but other times we do know why this is happening. Tragedy hits our lives like Naomi, our lives go from normal to really hard and we don't know why, but sometimes we do. So if you're going through it right now and you know why, "I did this, I said this, I had." Like if if you know that and you can do something about it, listen, do it. Do it.

As we're going to see in the book of Ruth, God never leaves his people in their trials. He helps them. He sends encouragement. He's always there. Now, Naomi might not be the strongest believer, but she does know that God is with me. God is here. And she also may have thought, "I can do something about this, and so I'm done being under God's discipline in Moab, I'm going home." Look at verse 6. "And she arose with her daughters-in-law to return to 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." There's nothing left for her in Moab. And and while while there, she's probably in a field somewhere, she's she's working, but she hears the gossip around the field is, "Hey, something really good is happening in Judah." And she's like, "Wait, that's where I'm from. Those are my people." She hears, notice verse 6, again, that the Lord had visited his people. That wasn't like, "Hey people, how's it going?" That's not what that meant. What that means is that this arrival was to bless or to curse,

depending on what he found. And in the book of Judges, you see that there's this sense of, okay, the people of Israel, they're sinning against God, they get punished, that punishment causes them to repent and then they get right again. And that's probably what's happening in Judah, that the people have turned from their sin and God goes, "Okay, I'm sending the rain back and the crops can grow now. Whatever it was, they saw God is active in history. They attribute all of this blessing to him. But but notice, whatever God did, it must have been pretty dramatic to hear about it in Moab. Now, you probably missed this, but in verses 6 and 7, did you catch the repetition of those words, her daughters-in-law? Her daughters-in-law. Said in verses 1 to 5 that the inconsistencies point to God's judgment. I think the inconsistencies in verses uh 6 to the end of the chapter, I think the inconsistencies are the glimmer of God's grace. Notice that repetition with her daughters-in-law. The author wants us to notice this, because this is not normal. Think about it. Naomi must have been the most incredible, amazing mother-in-law in history. Both of her daughters-in-law refused to return to their own moms in order to go to Bethlehem with her. Like that that's not normal.

But somewhere on the road to Bethlehem, they're walking together and Naomi realizes, "You know what? I like their company, but this might not be what's best for them." Look at verse 8. "But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go. Return each of you to her mother's house.'" She's saying your responsibility is to your own moms. It's not to me anymore. And then she hopes that God will bless them in two ways. Look at verse 8. Again, "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." And then she continues, "The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband."

You've got to take a step back and realize that there's a deep bond with these women, that they love each other. They've been through life together, two weddings, three funerals, trying to stay alive. There's a devotion that was forged in adversity. And that devotion was strong. She loves them, she cares about them, and so she's going, "Okay, it'd be great if I kept them here, but it wouldn't really be great for them. So maybe they should go home. They need to go home. And and when they do, I pray that God will treat them kindly, and and like they've treated me and my sons. That that God would show them love and loyalty and kindness and faithfulness. That He'd reverse all the adversity and pain and that He would give them the safety and security that came from a husband in these in these days." Because again, no welfare, no community college. She wants what's best for them, but she knows best for them is not them staying with her. So verse 9 says, "Then she kissed them." Which means kissed them goodbye. And it says, "They lifted up their voices and they wept." They cried. They they, again, they love each other, there's a connection, a devotion. They've known each other, they struggled together. Now, daughters in-law on the road to Bethlehem with you is one thing. The readers would've been like, what? But then the readers would've said, that's unbelievable. Verse 10, "And they said to her, 'No. We will return with you to your people.'" Again, she must be one incredible mother-in-law to have daughters in-laws do that. "No way," they said. "No way," the readers would've said, this is not normal. Again, the not normal is a clue that the author is showing you grace is breaking into the story of Naomi. By following her, think about it, they're abandoning their family, any chance they'd have of getting remarried. They'd be foreigners in Israel, Israel wouldn't want anything to do with them. They're more attached to their mother-in-law than they are to their own families. And in that culture, it would've been really good for an older woman, like Naomi, to have them take care of her. But again, she wanted what was best for them, not herself.

So she asked them multiple questions, versus 11 to 13, she starts using logic, she's like, "Look, you really need to think about your decision." She wants to show them, this is just hopeless for you. Verse 11, 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?" Translation, menopause was a long time ago. I've got no more kids in here, no more eggs. Like this isn't going to happen. So you're not gonna... And she's like, "Really? You've you've got a better chance of remarriage back at home than getting getting your next husband from me." She's saying. Then she goes one level deeper, verse 12. She repeats the command, "Go home." And then she just shows, "Your situation is impossible if you stay with me." Verse 12, "Turn back, my daughters; go your way, 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 until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying?" Translation, "are you going to wait? I mean, I'm too old to get married, she says, but let's say lightning strikes and I get married

tonight, and and there's a miracle that happens and I get pregnant. Are you going to wait 20 years for my son? Two of them. They're going to be half your age. Are you really going to do that? Of course not. She says, let's be real. Go home." And then she saves her best argument for last, verse 13, "No my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake, that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." Translation. "I'm under God's discipline so you want to stay away from me. It's already touched your life, it's already claimed my sons. I don't want you to experience any more of that, so you should go." This, I think, verse 13 is the admission that she thinks the move from Moab, the three deaths, the lack of grandchildren are all due to God's hand of discipline on her life.

Well, what are they going to do? Verse 14, "Then they lifted up their voices and wept again." This this is not cold logic. They they love her. There's a bond of of of love between them. But, "Orpah kissed her mother-in-law," which means kissed her goodbye. And as you read, If you read the literature on this, there's all this back and forth about Orpah, she's evil. She goes back you know she abandons her. I don't think that's true. I think that she didn't do anything wrong. Naomi convinced her. She's like, "Okay, I'll do what you say." She made the normal logical choice anyone would've made, "Okay, I'm going to stay with you and be, never have a husband, i'm never, I'm going to go to people I don't know and aren't going to like me. Or I can go home." Well, that's pretty easy.

So for her, for Orpah, she's not bad and Ruth is good. That's not what's going on here. No, Orpah is good and Ruth is just great. Look at verse 14 again, "Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye, but Ruth clung to her." That word clung is the same word in... In Genesis 2:24 of a man leaving his mom and dad and cleaving, clinging, holding fast to his wife. She's like, "I'm not going anywhere." Think about it, all the facts that caused Orpah to leave are the same facts that cause Ruth to stay. No prospect of Naomi having a husband, no prospect of Naomi having sons. She would need someone to take care of her because she has nobody. And Ruth says, "I'll take care of you." Orpah chose safety and security of a husband, it's normal. Ruth chose the danger and uncertainty of serving and blessing Naomi. She's not going anywhere, which makes no sense. Makes no sense. Nobody reads that and go, "Oh, of course. Of course you would do that." Nobody would ever do that. Which, again, is a clue. The grace is breaking into Naomi's life. Naomi though, she's not going to have it. Verse 15, "See your sister-in-law's gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." "Hey, chase her down, follow her, go after her, get out of here. You have no place in Israel. Go home." And to that, Ruth responds with some of the most incredible, beautiful, memorable, selfless words I think that you will find it anywhere in literature. Verse 16, 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 will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything, but death parts me from you."

Typically, the first words of a character in an ancient text like Ruth is an indication of that person's character. These are her first words and it is resolve and it is courage, and it is selfless. These, there's five lines above symmetrical poetry here, where she's she's saying, "I'm renouncing my entire life. Everything I dreamed, everything that I had, I'm renouncing all of it." Her family, her people, her gods, all to take care of Naomi. There's no faith like this anywhere in the book of Judges. There's absolutely no advantage for for Ruth in doing this. You got to put her, got to put yourself into her shoes. This commitment means she's going to be poor. It means that she's going to be an outcast, which means that she's not going to have a husband, she's not going to have kids. When Naomi dies way before she dies, she's going to be all alone. And you can say, "No, no, no. She can she can go back to Moab at this point." No. Did you see verse 17? "Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried." "I'm not going back to Moab. I'm here for the rest of my life, and when I die, I'm going to be buried right next to you." And then she says, "Just just so you know I'm serious, I'm going to pronounce a curse on myself, if that doesn't happen." "May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." Like she had seen what God did to discipline Naomi's family, and she still pronounces this curse on herself. If anything, but death separates her from Naomi.

Again, we might know this story, so we've read it and we know that's what she's going to say. This is not natural. This is supernatural. This is a supernatural faith in God. Your God will be my God. This is a supernatural love for Naomi. She pledges her allegiance. She gives her life to Israel's God, and I think in that moment she is saved. And then you see that that that love pour out, that love from salvation pour out into Naomi.

Now, I don't know about you, I'm amazed at those words. Naomi, she doesn't seem to be verse 18. "And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more." All right, she's silent. You know, all right. What is that? What's going on there? No like, "I can't believe you said that." No, "Thank you." No, "Gosh, you just saved my life. Because I've got to walk a hundred miles in the desert and how am I going to do that? I'm my old lady." She just said nothing. And I think it's because she really loved Ruth, and I think she's sitting there going, "This doesn't make any sense. Why would you sacrifice your whole life just to take care of me?"

Now, what can we learn from all this point 2) ***I think we can learn this. Then in our hard times, we need to embrace the complexities of faith. In our hard times, we need to embrace the complexities of faith.*** If you haven't noticed it already, the book of Ruth is really about Naomi. It really is the story of Naomi. She's the focal point. From beginning to end, she's the focal point. She's the focus. But did you notice her schizophrenia in in on her view of God in this passage? On the one hand, God's hand of discipline is against her in verse 13. He's the cause of the hard time, he's behind the death of her husband and her two sons. Notice how she puts it in verse 20, "Do not call me Mara, for the almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." Notice how she puts it in verse 21, towards the end, "The Lord has testified against me and the almighty has brought calamity upon me." He brought his case against me. He's deeply scarred my life. He's brought disaster on me. So on the one hand, here she is going, "God has been disciplining me." On the other hand, she's like, "God, please bless my daughters-in-law as they go back to Moab and give them husbands and deal kindly compassionately with them." Which one is it?

I want you to notice that for Naomi, God is in absolute control. The 25-cent theology word is God is Sovereign. She would've been very happy with Ephesians 1:11, that God "works all things after the council of his will, both the good times and the hard times." The seeming contradiction in Naomi really makes sense only if God really is working all things that happen in our lives after the council of his will. He decides what to do based on His perfect wisdom, and then He works it in our lives. If He's Sovereign and we face trials, then part of that Sovereignty means the perplexity, the complexity, the mystery of disaster that enters our lives. How do we make sense of that? If God is Sovereign and he loves his kids, how do we how do we make sense of that? Here, she knows, God can bring blessing into the lives of my daughters-in-law and graciously give them husbands, so she she prays for that. And she also knows that that God is disciplining me and that discipline is hard. So here she is lamenting and complaining and struggling with all that God has done. But listen, she never walks away from him. She never rejects him. She never says, "And because of that, I'm done with Him," and she's gone. No. Every time she talks about him in this passage, noticed she refers to Him by his covenant name, Lord, Yahweh. She has embraced the perplexity and she stays committed to Him, despite a very real struggle. And again, she might not even know why. I guess that she knows why. I believe that this text is is saying she knows that she's being disciplined, but but it's not clear in the text. It's it's not like stated straight out. That's kind of like us, right? We don't always know why we go through the hard times we go through.

But what I want you to see in Naomi is that that her theology didn't lead to an instability where she goes, "Well, I'm out of here." Tossed to and fro by every difficulty that enters her life. "And there's no, God and I can't trust Him, and oh, no, I got to go here. No, maybe He's all false." No, not at all. So does your theology lead to instability or does your understanding of God, especially His Sovereignty, is that like an anchor in your soul when times are hard? Look, God is Sovereign. He's in charge. He's a loving God. He works all things together for your good. And, he can bring disaster into our lives. Sometimes because of our sin. Sometimes not because of our sin. And again, it might not be that for you. So so what is it?

Suffering is never gratuitous. It's never, it's never needless, it's never random or accidental for the Christian. That idea, "Oh, it's just chance. Just kind of happened." That's not biblical, that's pagan. That's not what Naomi

thought and we shouldn't think that either. Think about Job. Job just had one question that he just keeps asking in a myriad of different ways over and over again, and that question is simply why? And there's never a moment in Job where God's like, "Hey, come over here, Job. I just need to tell you, Satan and I conversation, saw you down there, unleashed him on you. That's why you went through this." Never has that conversation. He never got his answer. So will you trust God even if you never get your answer? If the only answer you get from him is, "Trust me, I know what I'm doing." You're going to see that by the end of the story, by the end of Ruth, God clearly knew what he was doing.

But for now, let's get back into the events. Two women keep walking, verse 19, "So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them." This question that the... Sorry, I stopped. "And then the woman said, 'Is this Naomi?'" There's excitement, like she's back, their friend, their relative. There's a buzz, a buzzing hive of conversation and Naomi knows it, she knows the women are excited to see her. And so, I mean her words in verse 20 only make sense if they're happy to see her, so she says, "Oh, you guys are happy to see me." Debbie downer. Look at verse 20, "She said to them do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." The name Naomi means pleasant. She says, "I'm not pleasant. No, I'm a bitter old hag, I'm angry." Verse 21, "I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty." God is clearly against me. So don't call me by that name anymore. That name doesn't describe my life. The Lord has a case against me and I lost. Verse 21, "Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" She believed God was showing his displeasure with her situation by the disasters that she experienced.

Now, was she right? The text doesn't say explicitly, but I think enough was said to suggest that she is right. God did discipline her and her family for their sin. But while we read that and we go, "Okay, she's kind of cranky." We can't minimize her pain, right? This is real, severe, devastating. She's she's got this group of people that are happy to see her and she sees that on their face, but she's like, "No, you need to understand the truth." She's venting a little bit. She said, "I left happy. Everything was great. I had my husband and my kids, and there was there was the thought of a new beginning and we weren't going to starve and everything was going to be okay. I think I brought these tragedy after tragedy, after tragedy into my life. And it has scarred me deeply and I'm never going to be happy again." Or so she thought. Look at verse 22, "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." I said before that verses 6 to the end of the chapter, there are these these glimpses of grace and verse 22 ends with two very strong evidences of grace. The first one is this, they arrive as destitute widows, when? Right at the barley harvest. Huh, how how interesting. Right in time for the house of bread to get restocked, they show up. How nice. And then second, notice what it says about Ruth. It says that Ruth was "with her." Verse 20 says that that God was uh, I'm sorry verse 21 says, "I went away full and God brought me back empty." Maybe he didn't bring her back as empty as she thought she was. She had Ruth, and we're going to see next week that Ruth is probably the greatest thing that ever happened to her. Now, all of this, these two evidences of grace and all of the inconsistency that show more glimpses of grace, all of them tell us what about God? Maybe God wasn't as against Naomi, as Naomi thought he was.

So what can we learn from this point 3) ***Trust that God is working for your good, regardless.*** Regardless of what's happening, regardless of what you've seen, even when you don't see it, even when the time is so hard that you can't see it, ***trust that God is working for your good***, even when you can't see it. Listen, because he is. He is. He only ever works for the good of those that love Him, those who are His children. He only works for our good. Naomi, didn't see this, but the grace in verse 22 is a glimmer of hope that the final chapter of her life was not going to be the hard time that she endured. Here is Ruth; Ruth is a glaring, a massive glimmer of hope that, look, things are going to get better. She can't see that right now, even in hard times, especially in hard times. Do you check to make sure Romans 8:28 is still in the Bible? Do you do that? God is working all things. He's constantly in the process of working all things, good times, hard times. Constantly working all things together for our good, for our benefit, for what's best for his kids. Even when we don't see it, especially when we don't see it, He is working. Do you believe that? Or does the, do the hard times crowd out your vision of God, so all you see is the hard time and then the bitterness and the hopelessness that we're seeing in Naomi

begins to take over? She may have been right in her theology and right in the assessment of her situation, but she was wrong in how she was counseling herself. Yes, we can excuse her for that because it's the time of the judges, and she'd been away from God's people, God's land, God's worship for 10 years. Yes, she went through devastation, so we can cut her some slack and she didn't have a Bible and she lived on the the other side of the cross. But we don't have that. We don't have those excuses. We have the resurrection. We have the proof, the verifiable, He is alive, this whole thing is true. And if that's the case, then can we bring that reality, the promises, all things work together for our good, can we bring that into our hard times? We should not follow Naomi's example here because God was already putting the pieces into place to reverse Naomi's hard time. God is good. He only does us good. We don't deserve it. That's grace.

We see this glimmer of God's grace in chapter 1 that becomes the noonday Arizona sun of his grace in Christ. When we, who are destitute spiritually, poor, impoverished spiritually with no hope without God in the world. When we deserved more than discipline, we deserved punishment, judgment. Instead of giving us what we deserved, Jesus took our punishment, he took our sins. He died in our place, and then he rose from the dead showing that for all time, his grace is enough. That he will receive anyone, no matter what they've done or what's been done to them, he will receive anyone, even a Moabite beyond that, even us. He will receive anyone. It's a gift of his grace. And that grace keeps working throughout your life to show that he's always working good in your life, regardless of your experience.

Now, I close with the words of a song by William Cooper, William Cowper. Do you know him? If you don't know him, he wrote dozens of hymns and God saved him in a psych ward. Someone left a Bible there and he started reading it, saw God's grace in Jesus and God saved him. But, if you know anything about his life, you know that he never got over his mental issues, but that didn't stop him. He wrote song after song about the truth, because he knew it was only God's truth that would pierce the darkness. It was only God's truth that would help him see the light when the darkness just wouldn't lift. So if you're going through a hard time today, or if you know someone who is, let these words, not only summarize what we've seen in Ruth chapter 1, but let these words minister to your soul. He wrote,

"God moves in a 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.
You fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds you 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 purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding ev'ry hour;

The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.
Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make every hard time plain.”

Let's pray.