

From The Pulpit Of



IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH

Call Me Mara

No. 1
Series: Ruth

Ruth 1

May 3, 2026
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Text

1 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. ² 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. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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 voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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, ¹³ would you therefore wait till 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." ¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

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. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" ²⁰ She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ 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?"

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.

Introduction

We are resuming our journey through the OT today. How do you feel about the OT? Some people are scared of it, avoid it, or find it boring. It's further removed from us in time and culture, and so it can seem hard to understand or unrelatable. But I've

actually noticed that often times people seem to get the most out of sermons from the OT books because they are less familiar with it and so it's fresh. When you see what it actually means and how it points to Jesus, preaching the OT can be a powerful spiritual experience. The whole Bible has a peculiar unity that attests to its coming from a divine mind, with a spectacular master plan.

Well, in 2007 we started with the first book of the OT – Genesis – and we preached through the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). It took 10 years (we almost always preach a NT book in between each OT one). After we got through the first five, then we thought – “It's going to take a long time to get to the end of the OT at this pace.” So we skipped to the end of the OT and preached through all of the 12 Minor Prophets. Then we came back and picked up with the next book of the OT – Joshua. And then we did the next book – Judges. Actually, between Joshua and Judges we preached through the OT Wisdom book of Proverbs. But for the most part we've been methodically walking through the OT: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and now we're ready for the next book of the Bible – Ruth.

Ruth comes next in the order of our English Bibles, which is based on the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the OT). But in most Hebrew Bibles, Ruth actually comes right after Proverbs, providing a nice juxtaposition with the ode to a virtuous woman at the end of Proverbs in ch. 31 and this novella which features feminine main characters. Ruth, as we're going to see, is an excellent wife!

But it also makes sense for this book to follow Judges because of the way it begins – “In the days when the judges ruled...” Do you recall what those days were like? It was after Moses led the nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and Joshua led them into the Promised Land, but before David ruled over a unified, powerful and prosperous kingdom. In between the tribes were a loose federation with different leaders arising at different times to deliver them and administer justice, people like Ehud, Gideon, Samson.

But it was hit or miss. The days when the judges judged were rough and tumble. The society was devolving, disintegrating, going downhill and picking up steam. The book of Judges told of a time of moral decay and chaos, breaking God's covenant and experiencing the covenant curses. They cycle of apostasy. And in such times, women especially suffered. If you don't remember the stories from Judges, think of (or look up) Jephthah's daughter or the gruesome tale of the Levite's concubine and how women are treated in the aftermath of that at the end of the book. This book that we're starting today is set in those wild days.

So with just the first few words of this book, we're already supposed to be feeling sad. The period of the judges shows us how fallen this world is, how sinful humans are – everyone wanting to do what is right in their own eyes, even the people of God. It started in Genesis 3 and has continued. And it makes a mess of this world. As a result, we face all kinds of situations that are not the way things were originally supposed to be. This world is full of sin and sorrow. Things fall apart, frustration, futility, and finally death touches us all.

This book tells one family's sad story of suffering. It zooms in on one, poor, ordinary Israelite man and his wife and two sons and their wives and shows us what life was like for the common person caught in the sad world of the judges. It's history. It's true. It involved real people. But it's told to us as a masterful short-story, with an

absorbing plot, and intriguing character development, and what every good story is built on – a problem, tension, conflict. This story taps in to that common human experience in this world – suffering. Let’s get in to the story...

But first, let’s pray...

Naomi’s Narrative

“In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land.” Famine is a feature of life outside the Garden, where food is earned by sweat in the fight against thorns and thistles and conditions aren’t always favorable (e.g. Gen. 12:10). Famine is also a negative consequence promised by God to his people for disobedience to his Covenant in Deuteronomy 28. Whether through lack of rain or locusts or something like that, there was no food, which is what you would expect in the period of the judges when the people were habitually unfaithful. Can you imagine famine conditions – rationing food, not knowing where your next meal is going to come from? It’s not something we really face, currently, in America. But people regularly face it still all around the world. 26.6 million people in Sudan are facing extreme hunger, for example.¹

And that was the case for “a man of Bethlehem in Judah.” Bethlehem was in an ordinarily fertile location. The name – Bethlehem – literally means “house [*bet*] of bread [*lehem*].” It was the breadbasket of Judah, known for abundant grain harvests. But not now. The bread had run out.

And so this man of Bethlehem went “to sojourn in the country of Moab.” He was a migrant. Think about someone fleeing from a dire place like Venezuela to Chicago today. Was it right or wrong for this man to move to Moab? It’s hard to say. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob relocated because of famines. It’s an understandable decision when you’re desperate.

But it could be that this was ill-advised, that it indicated he didn’t trust the LORD and was turning to his own wisdom. The Moabites were the Israelites’ cousins, descended from their ancestor Abraham’s brother Lot and his incestuous relationship with his daughter (cf. Gen. 19:30-38; the OT is not boring!). During Israel’s trek to the Promised Land, the Moabites had not been helpful and hired the sorcerer Balaam to curse Israel. And when that didn’t work, they came up with a plan to seduce Israel into sexual immorality and idolatry (cf. Nu. 22-25). And remember the story of the judge Ehud and the fat man that he shoved a sword up into his belly and the bowels emptied? Eglon. He was a Moabite. So the Moabites aren’t really safe, friends of Israel. They had their own deities, preeminent among them was the god Chemosh. So it’s a dangerous move, at the least. Nonetheless “he and his wife and his two sons” make the journey from Bethlehem to Moab.

We find out their names in v. 2 – “The name of the man was Elimelech,” which means, “My God is King.” It’s a great name. Does it represent his faith? Or just his parents’? We’re not sure. But it’s the first clear reference to God in this story. A subtle reminder to the reader that Israel’s God *is* the King. “[T]he name of his wife [was] Naomi.” Naomi means something like – “Lovely” or “Pleasant.” It looks like a happy family – mom and dad with two kids. But “the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion.” These names may mean something like “Sickly” and “Finished/Coming to an End.” Perhaps the first ominous foreboding. We’re told – “They were Ephrathites from

Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.” But that’s not the happy ending of the story – a family experienced famine and then relocated. No, it’s just the start.

Verse 3 – “But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died and she was left with her two sons.” Tragedy has struck. Naomi is a widow and a single mom. The sons are fatherless. A fatherless home is one of the greatest examples of brokenness in the world. Next we see that the boys “took Moabite wives.” Technically, this was not prohibited in the letter of the Law (cf. Dt. 7:3-4), but it was almost certainly an arrangement that was frowned upon by the spirit of the Law. Interfaith marriages are almost always spiritually deleterious. “[T]he name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth.” This Israelite family is settling in to a foreign land. “They lived there about ten years.”

But then tragedy struck once again. “[B]oth Mahlon and Chilion [“Sicko” and “Done for”] died, so that the woman was left [like a remnant] without her two sons and her husband.” Robert Hubbard writes, “So the narrator has sketched the gloomy, hopeless setting for his tale. Driven from her homeland by famine, cruelly robbed of loved ones by death, a lonely old widow sits abandoned in a foreign land.”² A case could be made that this book should be titled Naomi. I think Naomi is the main character of the short story. But here do you see how she is just referred to as “the woman?” She’s reduced to a poor, pathetic woman, stripped of everything, even at some level her very identity.

Can you feel Naomi’s pain? Does her plight make you sad? A culture of moral and political chaos leading to a famine leading to migration leading to widowhood leading to the early death of her two sons. She’s lost. Her world has come crashing down. She has no security, no means of support. These first five verses sound very similar to the beginning of the book of Job – a longer treatment of the seemingly senseless suffering that quite regularly befalls men and women sojourning in this fallen world. Can you relate to Naomi in any way? Have you felt grief? Have you ever gotten a call you never wanted to get? If not, just wait. Tragedy touches everyone in this world at some point. There are times that are bleak. Life will beat you down and make you feel like you just can’t possibly keep going on.

But Naomi “arose,” she got up, she kept going, she didn’t just lay down and die. “[S]he arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab.” The Hebrew word “return” (*shuv*) is often used to refer to repentance, turning around and to the LORD. I think it’s a subtle hint that Naomi in her despair is looking to the LORD with what little faith she can muster.

What makes her heart turn back to her home? Good news – “for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food.” The LORD (all caps) is translating the personal name of Israel’s God, the covenantal name. And that word “visited” is an important word. “In positive contexts... the word means ‘to intervene on behalf of, to come to the aid of.’”³

Do you remember how the book of Genesis ends? There’s been a famine in the land. God, in his sovereignty has sent Joseph on ahead to Egypt to save the people (and his story is one full of suffering). Jacob and his family of 70 migrate to Egypt, but their time there turned into 400 years of suffering. But at the end of Genesis Joseph says, “‘I am about to die, but God will *visit* you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.’ Then Joseph made the sons of Israel

swear, saying, ‘God will surely *visit* you, and you shall carry up my bones from here’” (Gen. 50:24-25).

How does the next book of the OT begin? Exodus. The LORD appears to Moses and promises to use him to lead the people back home. And it says “when [the people] heard that the LORD had *visited* the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped” (Ex. 4:31). And when they dramatically leave Egypt “Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, ‘God will surely *visit* you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here’” (Ex. 13:19).

God operates according to patterns. The same thing is happening here. This Israelite family has found themselves in a foreign land to wait out a famine. But God has *visited* his people back in Bethlehem. There is bread again. It’s an upswing in the cycle of the judges. The people have seen where their sin gets them and turned to the LORD and he was gracious and merciful and came to their rescue. This is who God is. A *visiting* God. A God who is not aloof from his people’s pain and not inactive in the world he created.

And Naomi hears that the LORD has come through on his promises and “[s]o 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.” Orpah and Ruth accompany their mother-in-law part of the way down the road that leads west to Israel.

“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 voices and wept.” What do we notice here? Naomi is releasing them so they can go find new husbands and be cared for that way. This is act of kindness. And notice that she blesses them in the name of the LORD, twice. Again, this is a woman who knows the LORD, who prays, and who is not ashamed to pronounce benedictions in his name, even in the land of Moab.

And they love her. They weep at the thought of parting from her. Naomi is not a hated mother-in-law, but one who has endeared herself to her sons’ wives. “And 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 till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying?’” This is one of those places where the ancient Near Eastern world is very different from ours. It seems that behind this strange statement is the custom of levirate marriage, where if a man dies childless, then his brother is supposed to have a child with his widow in order to keep on the family line. It’s weird. Don’t think about it too hard. But here all the brothers have died. And Naomi is post-menopausal. It’s not realistic that she would have other sons to marry them. And even if she did, it would take a long time until they were old enough. They have no future with her.

And this is part of Naomi’s suffering. She aches for the loss of her husband and her sons and is filled with fear about her own future. But she is also broken up by the plight of Orpah and Ruth. She says, “No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” Bitter. That’s a good

word to describe Naomi's situation. It will come up again. She's had a bitter life. And added to her bitterness is her heartache for the bitterness of others' suffering. Do you ever just feel like everything in this world has a bitter taste? Your life? The lives of those you know?

But notice who Naomi attributes the bitterness to. She interprets the hard events of her life as the LORD's doing – “the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” This is a hard pill. It's more like a Sour Patch candy. It can be very bitter at first, on the surface. But if you know that the LORD is sovereign and nothing, not even tragedy, comes to you apart from his hand, then there can be a sweeter inside. Robert Hubbard states it this way – “By holding [the LORD] responsible for her losses, Naomi affirmed his participation in the events. Thus, despite appearances, things were not out of control; if he is at least involved, [the LORD] might very well straighten things out. In sum, bitter complaint cloaked firm faith.”⁴

“Then they lifted up their voices and wept again.” There's a lot of weeping in this life. When is the last time you cried? “And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law[, meaning, she said goodbye and turned back to stay in Moab], but Ruth clung to her.” It's the same word that's used to describe God's original intention for marriage – “a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast [cling] to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The dialogue that transpires here between Naomi and Ruth is a stunning and stirring display of love and commitment.

“And [Naomi] said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’” In other words, “I have nothing to offer you. This is your home. This is your chance for a better life.” In one sense that makes sense and seems logical. In another sense, this is odd to hear Naomi say, for it seems despairing and faithless. Doesn't she know that life in the land with the LORD is infinitely better than anything else? How can she recommend someone stay living in a false religion? It may not be Naomi at her best. Or maybe she is testing Ruth.

But look at Ruth's determination and ask yourself again – “Why would Ruth be so insistent on this course of action if she had not heard and seen something different and attractive from Naomi??” “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.’” This is a rare example of a non-Israelite conversion in the OT! “Where you die I will die.” “Even after death Ruth plans to be with Naomi.”⁵ “May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” This is a confession of faith in Israel's covenant God – the LORD is on the lips of a Moabitess! She is swearing an oath of allegiance to him, and joining herself with his covenant people. It's beautiful! It's reminiscent of another woman proselyte to the worship of the one, true God – Rahab (Joshua 2). Intriguingly, Rahab was an ancestor of the one who would become Ruth's husband (spoiler alert; cf. Mt. 1:5). It's all connected.

But answer this: how would Ruth know enough about the LORD to leave everything to follow Naomi and throw her lot in with God's people? She must have heard of him through Naomi (maybe also her husband, Mahlon). It seems likely that Naomi evangelized her. And now Ruth feels a bond stronger than blood and land to Naomi and her God. “And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.” Are you hooked by this story yet?

“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. And the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’” You hear the collective gasp of the community. Two strangers walk into town. But one is not a stranger. It’s been over 10 years. She’s changed. She looks worn, wrinkled. Life’s bitterness has altered her countenance. Have you ever seen someone you knew after a long time and you hardly recognize them? Sometimes you can just tell that they’ve been through a lot. There’s murmuring – “Did you see that woman? I think it’s Naomi, Elimelech’s wife. Remember her?”

Naomi says, “Yes, it’s me. But I’m not the same person. I’ve changed.” The text reads – “She said to them, ‘Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara.’” Remember: Naomi means “Pleasant.” Mara means “Bitter.” In Exodus 15:23 the Israelites found a well with water that was undrinkable, bitter. They called it “Marah.” “[C]all me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” The Almighty – *Shaddai*. It’s one of the names for God that refers to his sheer power. It occurs frequently (31x) in the book of Job. For example, Job 27:2 – “the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter.” Naomi knows that God is in charge and he has allowed horrible things to happen to her. And so she is lamenting, with brutal honesty. “I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.” *God Almighty, why? Why?* As the Proverb says, “The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy” (Prov. 14:10).

Naomi feels singled out in her suffering. She says, “Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” Her life is not pleasant. She’s suffered the loss of home, the loss of husband, the loss of heirs. She is bitter. And she sees herself as the target of the LORD. He is testifying against her in court, showing her guilt. And she feels that his might is aimed at her, against her, not for her. “God has given me a hard lot. He is disciplining me.” She is a female Job. And she wrestles openly with God. She is a bitter, old woman.

But she is still Naomi. 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,” which is late April. So about this time of the year we’re in right now – springtime. We’ll pause there until next week.

Naomi’s Doctrine

So that’s the start of the story – Naomi’s narrative. I hope you’re eager to see how it turns out. But I think even right here we have enough points and perspective to stand back and extrapolate some truths. We’ve looked at Naomi’s narrative. Now what is Naomi’s doctrine? What do we learn theologically from this chapter? A lot. But I think the big idea is just this: **when life is bitter, believers can know that things will get better.**

Now, I don’t say that glibly. Believe me: I understand that there is a lot of bitterness in this life. Death is everywhere. Tragedy is in the news every day. Heartache is real. Sadness. Loneliness. Loss. As I was praying through every member by name this morning I was struck again at how much heartache many of us are dealing with right now. And when you suck a lemon, it’s okay to pucker. You don’t have to pretend it’s an orange. Don’t hide it. Weep. Lament. Cry out to God. Be honest. You don’t have to put on a happy face.

But you can know that even in your darkest moments God is still working. He is sovereign. Nothing happens outside of his will. He is working out a bigger plan than you can see at the moment. But you can trust him. He is still good and is doing good. Where do we see God working for good for Naomi in chapter 1?

- He kept her alive in Moab for 10 years! She didn't starve during the famine. God wasn't limited to the land of Israel. He is everywhere and always working.
- He visited his people back in Bethlehem! He hadn't abandoned them. And somehow Naomi heard the report!
- He gave her Ruth! At the end of ch. 1 she feels like she's lost everything. She says that God has brought her back empty. But "God has not brought Naomi back completely empty. She has Ruth."⁶
- And he brought her home just in time for harvest! Did you catch that detail at the end? Chapter 1 "began with famine and departure: it ends with harvest and return."⁷ A chapter of bitterness ends on a note of hopefulness. Perfect timing.
- And he sustained her faith! In the face of all this tragedy and her confusion and pain, she still instinctually turns to the LORD and trusts him, even if she doesn't understand or like what he's doing. You see that throughout the chapter and that is a grace of God.

And this is just looking at ch. 1. When you see how the whole story unfolds in all four chapters, you have to see that God is weaving a bigger picture that Naomi can't see all of in her season of bitterness. And I've been asking myself this week – "Why is this chapter, this book here? Why is it in the Bible?" Paul tells us clearly. Romans 15:4 – "[W]hatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." The book of Ruth was written for our instruction and our encouragement. It's written for us so that we don't have to wonder in our moments of pain and suffering and bitterness if it's all pointless, if we have no hope. No, we have Naomi's story to teach us that even in the bitterest moments, God is still good to us and he is working out a grander plan for our good. "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28; HCSB). That is not trite or insensitive to say. It's in the Bible to prepare us for suffering and to help us not despair when we are in the midst of it. **When life is bitter, believers can know that things will get better.**

William Cowper was a Christian in the late 18th century whose life was marked with intense suffering and sadness. But, by God's grace, he penned one of the most profound hymns – "God Moves in a Mysterious Way."

*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 mines, of never-failing skill;
he fashions up his bright designs, and works his sovereign will.*

Ye fearful saints fresh courage take, the clouds that you much dread,

are big with mercy and will 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 every hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.*

The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower. As someone else has observed – “[The LORD] is well known for turning tragedy into triumph.”⁸

One of my teachers, Jerry Root, has this exercise he often does with groups. Let’s do it right now. Think of the worst thing that ever happened to you in your life. OK, now think of the next worst thing that ever happened to you. Now the next. And the next. And the next... Now the next... Are you starting to have trouble coming up with something? Jerry Root says, “I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone get to more than ten things (even while teaching in an underground school in the Stalinist dictator, Ceausceau’s Romania; or in Khartoum, Sudan, teaching Southern Sudanese refugees all of whom had been tortured or seen friends and relatives tortured).”

Next, think about the good things you have experienced in life; remember the times you have beheld something beautiful, the times you’ve laughed; a good conversation, a good meal, a good cup of coffee you’ve enjoyed; friends you’ve had... If we’re honest, we’ve also experienced many good things in life.

But think back on that list of bad things in your life. Given time, how many of you saw some good come from some of the bad things on your list? Either, the bad was resolved; or, unresolved, you saw some good come from the difficulty (you grew wiser or matured through the experience in some way, increased in your capacity for empathy at the sufferings of others, etc...)? I think you’d say you could see this with some of them. But maybe some are still throbbing and you haven’t seen a silver lining, but if, GIVEN TIME, you saw good come from some things you’ve suffered then you have good reason to believe that, GIVEN ETERNITY, good could possibly come to all of the things you’ve suffered.⁹

There’s enough evidence from your life and the testimony of other believers and ultimately from the Bible in stories like Naomi’s to help us trust that the infinite, all-wise, all-powerful God moves in a mysterious way and so **when life is bitter, believers can know that things will get better.**

Naomi’s (and Ruth’s) Application

We’ve looked at Naomi’s narrative. She had experienced bitter providences. We’ve extrapolated Naomi’s doctrine. God is doing something sweet even in our bitter providences. Now let’s make it even more personal with Naomi’s (and Ruth’s) application. Narrative, doctrine, application.

First, for the suffering believer. What are you going through right now? What bitter bud are you tasting? Trust God in it. Lament. Weep. Scream at God. But find comfort, as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, that “He... watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.”

On November 3, 2020, Tim and Aileen Challies received the shocking news that their 20-year old son Nick had suddenly and unexpectedly collapsed and died at college. I'm reading his book right now where he processes that nightmare. It's called *Seasons of Sorrow: The Pain of Loss and the Comfort of God*. In it he writes out what he calls his 'manifesto'. I encourage you to adapt it to your situation and make it yours. He says:

By faith I will accept Nick's death as God's will, and by faith accept that God's will is always good. By faith I will be at peace with Providence, and by faith at peace with its every decree. By faith I will praise God in the taking as I did in the giving, and by faith receive from his hand this sorrow as I have so many joys. I will grieve but not grumble, mourn but not murmur, weep but not whine.

Though I will be scarred by Nick's death, I will not be defined by it. Though it will always be part of my story, it will never become my identity. I will be forever thankful that God gave me a son and never resentful that he called him home. My joy in having Nick will be greater than my grief in having lost him. I will not waver in my faith, nor abandon my hope, nor revoke my love. I will not charge God with wrong.

I will receive this trial as a responsibility to steward, not a punishment to endure. I will look for God's smile in it rather than his frown, listen for his words of blessing rather than his voice of rebuke. This sorrow will not make me angry or bitter, nor cause me to act out in rebellion or indignation. Rather, it will make me kinder and gentler, more patient and loving, more compassionate and sympathetic. It will loose my heart from the things of earth and fix it on the things of heaven. The loss of my son will make me more like God's Son, my sorrow like the Man of Sorrows.¹⁰

When I think of Ruth's undeterred commitment to go with Naomi and thus go all in with God, I see many lessons, but what keeps ringing in my ear is Jesus' words to his disciples when many had "turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, 'Do you want to go away as well?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God'" (Jn. 6:66-69). When stuff hits the fan, who else can you turn to? Where else can you go for comfort other than this infinite, mysterious God who has shown himself good in so many ways? Cling to him, even in your confusion and pain.

When life is bitter, believers can know that things will get better. *But what if they don't? What if it's just bad and I get killed or die?* Ah, my brother or sister, do not forget what Paul says in Philippians 1:21 – "[T]o die is gain!" When contemplating continuing to live and do ministry for Christ or to be killed and be with Christ, Paul said, "I am torn between the two[, but] I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Ph. 1:23; NIV). Heaven will make everything worth it, make it all make sense. The promise of heaven makes it undeniably true that **things will get better**.

But now these assurances are only for the believer in Christ. If you're not a believer, then you don't have any such promise. You have no hope. You have a bitter

life here. And you have only hell to look forward to in the future, something unimaginably worse than anything you could experience here! So the application of this text for you today is to repent. Turn from your sin and turn to God in Christ. Like Ruth, leave everything behind and throw your lot entirely in with Jesus and his people. Give it all up to gain eternal life. It's worth it, no matter what suffering you will face.

The Lord's Table

Let's finish as we prepare to approach the Lord's Table by focusing on Jesus. Jesus, the distant descendant of Ruth. At the beginning of the Gospel of Luke as events are starting to happen that reveal the coming of the Christ, Zechariah prays – "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has *visited* and redeemed his people" (Lk. 1:68). Jesus is the great and ultimate Visitation of God. He was born in Bethlehem, but soon had to flee with his family, a migrant in Egypt. It was just the beginning of a life of suffering, of identifying with his people, recapitulating the story of his people who have faced exile.

Jesus is a Savior who is able to sympathize with us. He knows the bitter pain of life in this world. He fully experienced all of it. In fact, he knows it better than anyone, for he drank the bitter cup of God's wrath for all of our sins on the Cross all the way to the bottom so that we would never have to. He took our sins and went to hell on our behalf. And then he rose from the dead, fully vindicated, to live and reign forever. His is the quintessential story of bitterness turned sweet. And for all of us who have repented of our sins and thrown our lot in with him, his pattern of death and resurrection will be ours. Because of his work, we can know **when life is bitter, that things will get better.**

In Christ, God has shown that he is sovereign, that he is working out a Master Plan, and that he is good and kind and merciful and gracious and can be trusted...

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, May 3, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ <https://wfpusa.org/news/global-food-crisis-10-countries-suffering-the-most-from-hunger/>

² Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 97.

³ Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (Brentwood: B&H, 1999), 631.

⁴ Hubbard, 113.

⁵ Leon Morris, "Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary" in Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008 [1968]), 252.

⁶ K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 433.

⁷ Hubbard, 131.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹ <https://www.drjerryroot.com/post/the-problem-of-good>

¹⁰ Tim Challies, *Seasons of Sorrow: The Pain of Loss and the Comfort of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 36-37.