



Ruth 1:1-21

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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?"

"It's not fair!" "Why are you doing this to me?!" Words of anger, confusion, perhaps despair. Words which might reflect the unspoken thoughts of my 11-month-old when I take things away from him, when I stop him from putting things in his mouth. From a child's viewpoint, parental discipline is rarely fair or deserved, it often seems cruel and unnecessary. Of course, expanding that viewpoint to the perspective of a *parent*—things start to make more sense. Sometimes I *will* "cruelly" take things away from the baby, because they are dangerous to him, because he could choke on them, and I don't want him to get hurt. Of course, right now, this doesn't make sense to him. And all he can understand is that dad is taking things away that he really wants. "It's not fair!" "Why are you doing this to me!?"

Those words of confusion and despair might *also* be what Naomi was thinking around the time of our text. Not that she said these words *exactly*, but those thoughts are reflected in the words she *did* say, when she says in verse 14: ***“It is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.”*** And then in verse 20: ***“Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.”*** The name Naomi comes from the Hebrew word for “pleasant.” The name Mara is the Hebrew word for “bitter.” Naomi no longer wanted to be known as “pleasant,” but “bitter” because her life was bitter.

If Naomi had planned out her life when she was a young woman, I doubt her plan resembled at all how it turned out. Naomi and her husband had been forced to leave their homeland of Israel and go to a foreign nation of Moab with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, and there they lived with the idolatrous Moabites. There, her husband dies, and we read, ***“And Naomi was left with her two sons.”*** Her two sons marry, but they marry *Moabite* women, worshippers *not* of the *LORD*, but likely of Chemosh, the Moabite god of destruction. And then her sons die too, and so there Naomi is, widowed, children dead and buried, left in a foreign land with two Moabite daughters-in-law.

Now, Naomi *does* still have a wonderful, loving relationship with Ruth and Orpah. And that’s reflected in the beautiful words Ruth pledges to her mother-in-law, ***“Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”*** But even still, Naomi had lost everything she held dear, and at this moment the only thing she could see was pain. She had only her small perspective, only the *inside view* of these events.

So, our text ends with Naomi bitter against the Lord, because in her mind, ***“The Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me.”*** Naomi was looking at her life from the inside view, the point-of-view that a child has when being “unfairly” treated by parents—the point of view which can only see that things are not fair, that I did not deserve this—the *inside view*.

Now, even with Naomi’s inside view of things, from her own limited perspective, things *did* improve. You know the rest of the story. Ruth does *not* leave her, they return to Bethlehem, and there Ruth marries Boaz and gives Naomi grandchildren. But even with these happy turns of events, she still was without her beloved husband. Her sons were *still* dead. I’m sure she still questioned, “Why, God?!”

From the inside point-of-view, things don’t always make sense. Perhaps *your* life is like that, and you don’t know why things are happening the way they are. The truth is, our daily stories don’t always have *happy* endings, because we are still plagued by the effects of sin—sickness is still very real, we are still confronted with death, and these realities are painful. And we are left asking, “Why, God?!”

When you or someone close to you is suffering, seeing the world with the inside view of Naomi, we must remember, it’s *not* the only point of view. Not in this text, not in my life, and not in yours. There is an *outside* perspective, an *outside* view. Naomi did not write this book, nor did Ruth. It was written by an outside author that was blessed with seeing the larger picture. The author knew *more* about Naomi’s life than *Naomi* ever came to realize, and he shares with us the *outside* view.

He begins our text, ***“In the days when the judges ruled.”*** If you remember from the book of Judges, this time in Israel’s history was one fraught with confusion and chaos, when even the divinely appointed judges were confused and not entirely faithful and woefully inadequate.

At this time, the author writes, **“A man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab.”** And if you needed to hear that again, the writer repeats himself in the next verse, **“They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah.”** Why does he focus on this fact? Ephrathites from Bethlehem? Well, does that ring any bells for you? Perhaps it would help if I rearranged those words and said, **“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah...”** (Micah 5:2) Do you remember the promise made to them?

Some of these details *seem* a bit redundant, and when taking an inside view, just looking at these verses, they don’t seem to hold much purpose. But let’s expand our view past these 21 verses, past the four chapters of the book of Ruth, and include the other 65 books of the Bible. Because the importance of these events go much further than just what Naomi could see at the time.

We begin to see some of the importance of everything that happened to Naomi at the end of chapter four, where Ruth gives birth to son, and we read, **“They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”** (Ruth 4:17) And again, it’s not enough for the author to say it once, because just a few verses later, the author repeats, **“Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.”** (Ruth 4:22)

This is God’s way of making sure *we* do not miss the importance of Naomi’s life. Because if we take the *narrow* view of Naomi, we might think, “What was the point?” So, God reveals to us the *outside view*, what His plans were all along—His plans in bringing Naomi to Moab, in bringing Ruth into Naomi’s life, in Ruth’s husband dying, in Ruth getting remarried in Bethlehem to Boaz—all of this was so that Ruth and Boaz would bring forth Obed, and Obed would father Jesse, and Jesse would father David. And David would be king over all Israel. David would be the one to whom God would give the promise of the Savior. And through His line, God would be at work in Israel.

Even as the Old Testament story of Israel plays out and according to the *inside view* there is sin and idolatry and Israel and her kings fall away from God, and death and judgment and destruction and captivity comes upon them—God is *still* at work in Israel. That’s the *outside view*. The inside view may be painful, may be disappointing, may be discouraging, as it was for Naomi, and as it was for Israel. But that’s not the only view.

God was at work for Naomi. God was at work in Israel. God is at work here today. He is not like the god of the Moabites, Chemosh—the destroyer god. He is Jehovah, God who concerns Himself with His children. He is God who directed the events of Naomi’s life to bring about David, the shepherd king who would *not* lead the people into idolatry, but would lead the nation in worshipping the only God. A God whose mercy endures for a lifetime, even a lifetime that *may* be filled with sadness. God has a plan, and He is carrying it out all around Naomi. His plans lead to David, and He was working through David and carrying out His plan all around David’s life, but His work did not end there.

His promises and His plans continued to hold fast throughout Israel’s history—centuries filled with faithlessness and betrayal and sadness and death. The people departed from God and the prophets wept. But *God’s* plan held fast! Because He held the *outside view*, He had something great in mind. And His plans reached their climax when the true Shepherd King was born in Bethlehem Ephrathah, in the days of Herod the King. And through Jesus, God was working. Because Jesus is God’s bigger picture, he is God’s *outside view*.

He was the one *with* the outside view, being God Himself, yet He subjected Himself to our *inside* view, experiencing our pain and our sorrow firsthand, and He did *not* take it away from Himself, and He does not promise to take away your pain or sorrow either, not in this life anyways.

But He does promise a conclusion to our bitterness. As He Himself took on the sin which weighs upon us and took on death which is the scourge of us all. And though those things still remain with us, we know that sin, and death, and sickness—their ultimate power is gone. They cannot defeat us when Christ has won. Because of Jesus, God will always be our faithful, loving, merciful God. Because of Jesus, God continues to work through us and in us and around us to bring us to paradise. And now matter how bleak our inside view becomes, no one can take these things from us.

When we read through the book of Ruth, we see God's hand at work. We see how God works in the lives of ordinary people to work the extraordinary—to conquer sin and death and the devil. We see how in one woman's painful life, God was still present and actively working for the bigger picture, to save her and us as well. And it's easy to see that in Naomi's life, in Ruth's life. But it's sometimes hard to see the same truth in our own lives.

We have the inside view of our lives. We're like Naomi, experiencing setbacks and disappointments and heartache, and perhaps crying out, "God, it's not fair!" Wouldn't it be nice if we had a book written about *our* lives? If we had an outside perspective written about our lives and how God was working in them even when it seemed He had forsaken us? Wouldn't it be *such* a blessing if we could read a book about how God worked in *every moment* of our lives to bring about His goal for us?

Well, we do have that book, don't we? In the Bible, we have *all* of these assurances and more, as God tells us that regardless of what's going on, "**Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not tribulation or famine or peril or sword.**" (Romans 8:35) This is the outside view, "**That neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**" (Romans 8:38-39)

This is the outside view, in Jesus' words, "**In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.**" (John 16:33) This is what God writes about your life, about even the times of trouble: "**All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.**" (Romans 8:28)

True faith is this, the ability to see from two points of view at the same time. It is not *pretending* that bad things don't happen. It's not pretending you're ok. Faith does not mean you're automatically happy and joyful all the time. Faith can see the pain of our inside view, and keep in mind God's outside view, God's perspective, and trust that God's view is set on eternal life for you, and He's working even through this pain to bring it about.

So, dear friends in Christ, when your inside view is fearful and strong, may God give you hearts that are stronger still, to cling to Him, to cling to what is always true—the cross of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection for you, the life won for you, the eternal peace given to you. May God grant it to us, in Jesus' saving name. Amen.