

Session 1

GOD'S FAITHFUL PRESENCE IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF

Ruth 1:1-22

Memory Verse

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


– RUTH 1:20-21, CSB



God's Faithful Presence in the Midst of Grief

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God's ways are higher than man's ways (Isa. 55:8), yet His character is just, merciful, and good. Those who look to God can do so with confidence despite the fact that much of what God does or why He does it is unknown to them.

 Have you ever been in a place where you had to boil water in order to purify it?

 What happened when you brought the water to a boil? Did you see anything?

Sometimes water that looks as though it is crystal clear and clean is full of impurities that will do great harm to those who drink it. In order to purify the water, it is necessary to put it over a flame and bring it to a boil. Once the water reaches a boil, the impurities begin to rise to the top and form a layer of scum on the surface.

Just as fire brings out the impurities in water, so the flame of affliction exposes the impurities in the believer so that they may be rid of them. Sometimes the sickbed can teach Christians more than the sermon. God doesn't abandon the Christian in affliction, but gives them hope and help to comfort them in times of trial. In our study today, we will consider the emptying of Naomi.

Session Summary


The story of Ruth took place during the time of the judges, a sad and low period in Israel's history. Situated between the conquest and the installation of Saul as the first king, the period of the judges was characterized by the phrase, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6, et al.). Some see Elimelech's journey to the land of Moab with his family and his securing of Moabite wives for his sons as an example of the spiritual milieu of the time. Elimelech, apparently, decided to take matters into his own hands and disregard the commands of God: "You must not intermarry with them, and you must not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, because they will turn your sons away from me to worship other gods. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will swiftly destroy you" (Deut. 7:3-4).

The Book of Ruth is appropriately named because the primary narrative arc of the story features this obscure Moabite woman. Naomi, however, must not be overlooked. The Lord's work in her life serves as the bookends of the story—her going from filled to empty and from empty to filled. Chapter one may be summed up as a blessed woman (having a husband, sons, daughters-in-law) who suffered great loss (losing all but one daughter-in-law).

From Naomi's case we can draw several principles by which we may look at our own lives and trust the Almighty, recognizing that His sovereign hand is trustworthy. Christians are able to walk in the midst of a season of emptying because "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

1. Naomi Emptied (Ruth 1:1-5)

We can't say for certainty what caused the emptying of Naomi, but what has been given us to know through this text is that Naomi was greatly afflicted. Though the others in her family also suffered, she was made to carry the burden when it had been lightened for the others, some by death, others by release.

 How do we see Naomi's suffering in these verses? Why do all people face suffering to some degree?

In the short span of five verses we read of Naomi's serial losses. First, she lost her homeland. Then she lost her husband. She lost also her sons, and with them her daughters-in-law (or so she thought). With all of that immediate loss came the realization that she would be deprived of grandmotherhood and the preservation of her husband's family line. Naomi was truly emptied.

We can't say for sure why Naomi underwent so great a trial. We may be tempted to assume that Naomi was suffering for some grievous sin. That may be true. We may also decide that Naomi suffered for the sin of her husband. This is also quite possible. We will consider more carefully the origin of Naomi's suffering in our third section, but we can rightly say that Naomi's suffering was not in vain because she played a key role in the line through which Jesus the Messiah would come.

We can also consider Naomi's affliction and be reminded of our own. Everyone must pass through the valley of the shadow in this life. This sin-soaked world cannot but cause its inhabitants to be wounded. No one traverses this world untouched by the abounding sickness, sadness, conflict, and sin.




How does God use suffering to shape His people?

Suffering is not wasted for those who are in Christ. For those who have heard the gospel, trust fully in Christ for salvation, and repented of sin, suffering is a means by which they may be sanctified and glorify God. Aside from the regular means of grace (personal prayer, Scripture reading, gathering with the body of Christ), the state of affliction is the quickest route to Christlikeness for the believer. Thus, in this way suffering becomes a blessing, not a curse.


Afflictions teach the Christian both dependency and contentment. Often, Christians are never more prayerful than when they are passing through a time of suffering. Times of prosperity and well being often lead followers of Jesus to forget their desperate dependence upon God. They become so enamored with the gifts they have received, that they no longer recognize the hand that has given them. God, in His kindness and wisdom, may remove some of those blessings as a sure way to correct those who are His that they may repent of their self-reliance and idolatry.

Afflictions teach Christians to be content because they cause them to find their joy and peace in that which is not shaken, namely Christ. In times of abundance, Christians may fall into the trap that the Devil has laid for them. The trap is baited with the glittering things of this world and the snap of the jaws closes tightly around a person's heart; the removal of this trap is painful indeed. When the Christian is taught to be content in Christ, then afflictions are of no worry to them. If someone throws a pail of water into your living room, it would cause some resentment. However, if someone throws a pail of water into the ocean, no attention is paid to that person. The vastness of the sea swallows up that small bucket of water. Christians who are content in Christ have a sea of joy that is more than able to drown any small bucket of affliction that is thrown into it.

 **Application:** In what ways have you been emptied in your life? How did God use that suffering for your good and His glory?

2. Ruth Clung to Her (Ruth 1:6-18)

In Ruth 1:6-18, we find some of the most poignant words in all of Scripture. We must remember that it wasn't only Naomi who had been emptied. Ruth was facing affliction of her own. Her husband was dead and her womb was empty.

 **What did Orpah and Ruth do when Naomi implored them to return to their parents' homes? When was a time you bonded with another believer through a time of great suffering?**

Both women wept. Orpah then kissed her mother-in-law and departed. But Ruth clung to Naomi. Although Ruth had suffered great loss and was grieved, she gave up even more, her homeland. Ruth was from Moab. She wasn't a part of Israel, the

covenant community. She was from another nation, with different customs, language, traditions, and gods. She turned her back on all of that so that she might take on a new identity in a new land as Naomi's daughter.

Even before Naomi left Moab, we see the Lord's mercy and kindness to those who are His. In the middle of Naomi's grief and bitterness, God gave her a daughter. What a comfort this must have been for Naomi. What a kindness this was from the Lord.



How did Ruth's commitment to Naomi reflect God's commitment to her?

Ruth's commitment and loyalty to Naomi was complete. She held nothing back. Her promise to her mother-in-law was so meaningful and heartfelt that her words have been lifted from its original context many times and used in wedding ceremonies to express the commitment of marriage. She said,

*Don't plead with me to abandon you
or to return and not follow you.
For wherever you go, I will go,
and wherever you live, I will live;
your people will be my people,
and your God will be my God.
Where you die, I will die,
and there I will be buried.
May the Lord punish me,
and do so severely,
if anything but death separates you and me.*

Ruth's commitment to Naomi knew no bounds. She even abandoned the gods of her father to follow the God of Israel. Notice that she said that Naomi's God would become her God. The reason behind the prohibition of intermarriage was that Israel's sons would be led away to worship the foreign gods of their wives. In the case of Ruth, the opposite happened. The Lord opened the heart of Ruth to the truth of His power and goodness. We see the same thing in the conquest when the spies found safe harbor in Rahab's house (Josh. 2).

? Application: When was a time when you were passing through a difficult time and the Lord showed His grace and kindness to you in a special way?

3. The Almighty Dealt Bitterly (Ruth 1:19-22)

Here we come to the hard medicine of this passage. Naomi claimed that her loss came at the hand of the Lord. She made four statements that summed up her assessment of her situation:

- The Almighty has made me very bitter.
- I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.
- The Lord has opposed me.
- The Almighty has afflicted me.

This is hard medicine for many Christians today because they have adopted the view that the love of God is equivalent to their comfort and desires. The idea that the love of God might be the root of affliction seems impossible and wrong to them. But the Scriptures reveal that those who are in Christ will have troubles (John 16:33) and that those troubles will be used for their good (Rom. 8:28).

? How should Christians think about suffering in their lives in light of God's control over all things?

Whatever the secondary cause may be, there is nothing outside the control of the sovereign hand of God. Christians believe that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the all-powerful ruler over all of His creation. They believe that not even one rogue atom exists in the universe. Everything comes under His subjection and authority. The fact that God is sovereign and powerful is a comfort to Christians who give themselves over to His will and set aside their own wills and preferences.

However, when a person seeks to hold on to what they perceive to be their rights, quite often an inner-conflict ensues.

That conflict is a result of the reality that what they desire may not line up with the will of God. If they aren't willing to deny themselves, then they position themselves against God. Naomi acknowledged that it was God Himself who had afflicted her and she grieved, but she did not curse Him, nor did she abandon Him. She acknowledged her affliction and she waited.

? What are the ways God uses suffering in the lives of His people to draw them closer to Him?

No created being may take for him or herself the judge's seat. In other words, Christians may grieve, complain, question, and petition. They may not, however, hand down a sentence to God declaring His actions or will to be just or unjust, good or evil, right or wrong. God has revealed His character in His Word. Christians are to simply walk in faith, repentance, and obedience. Mature Christians understand that the worst things work for the good of the godly. They know that the evil of affliction works for the good of those who are in Christ.

? Application: How have you wrestled with the idea of suffering and God's control in the world in your own life? How has He used suffering to make you more like Christ?

Conclusion

The story of Naomi in the first chapter of Ruth is an example of affliction, through which all who are in Christ must pass. Those who are in Christ, however, should view their troubles not as a curse, but as a means by which their heavenly Father desires to bless them. Affliction is a blessing when it leads God's children to trust Him more and be more content in Him.

❓ What trials and suffering have you had to pass through in your life? In what ways did God work in your life in the midst of that?

❓ What comforts has the Lord given you in times of suffering? Were there times you only noticed these things in hindsight? How might you seek to recognize these things in the midst of suffering?

❓ How can believing that God is working even in our suffering give us opportunity to share with others about the love of God?

CHRIST CONNECTION: God's purpose in the life of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, at least in part, was to involve them in the physical birth of Jesus the Christ.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Christians serve God according to His Word, humbly and faithfully knowing that God will use their efforts wisely and efficiently, oftentimes in ways that they cannot even see.



FOR NEXT WEEK

God's Heart for the Marginalized and the Outsider

Main Passages

- Ruth 2:1-22

Session Outline

1. Ruth's Humility and Industry (Ruth 2:1-3)
2. God's Providence (Ruth 2:4-7)
3. Boaz's Favor (Ruth 2:8-22)

Memorize

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

- Ruth 1:20-21, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Ruth 1:1-5
- Tuesday - Ruth 1:6-7
- Wednesday - Ruth 1:8-13
- Thursday - Ruth 1:14-15
- Friday - Ruth 1:16-18
- Saturday - Ruth 1:19-22