

HOPE IN OUR SUFFERING

RUTH 1:19-22

Ruth 1:19-22 NIV

'So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.'

- What a scene it must have been as Naomi returned to her hometown of Bethlehem in Israel.
- It says that the "town was stirred" — it was buzzing with conversation.
- Like any tight-knit community which has not seen one of their members for a long time, I imagine word had spread far and wide — "Naomi is coming home".
- After all, it had had been over a decade since anyone, in Bethlehem, had seen her.

- But, as she approaches, instead of being greeted with excitement by the women in the town, she is met with bewilderment, "Can this be Naomi?" they said.
- On one hand, that the fact that she was back in Bethlehem at all, must have been a surprise.
- But on the other, the years of suffering and loss had apparently taken a toll, not only on Naomi's heart, but even on her appearance, for her old community can hardly even recognize her, after just 10 years.
- She had left as Naomi the pleasant one — a thriving woman in her prime. But she had returned as a haggard and destitute woman, beat up by the tragedy of life.

- As we saw the last two weeks, Naomi, and her husband and their two sons had moved AWAY from Bethlehem in Israel, to Moab, during a time of famine in Israel.
- While they were in Moab, Naomi's sons met and married Moabite women.
- "Praise God!" We've moved to Moab. There is no famine here, we're not struggling to find food or work anymore. Our sons have met women and gotten married. The Almighty has provided for us."

- But soon after they move, Naomi's husband passes away.
- And then just a few years later, BOTH of her sons die.
- The narrator of this story doesn't give us any details about *how* Naomi's sons and husband died, but I can imagine the pain.
 - It's maybe the greatest fear that any Mother and Wife can face. The greatest fear that any Father and Husband can face — Your spouse suddenly dying, and then losing all of your children, long before they should've died (her sons were probably mid 20s, at the most).

- So within a 10 year period, this woman faces a famine which leads to poverty that is so bad that her and her family have to leave their entire extended family, and all of their friends; all of the people they are comfortable with, the people who speak like them, and live like them, worship the same God as them.
- They leave the comfort of their homeland and move to a place that was despised by people like them — Moab, the land of the Moabites, the ancient enemies of the Israel.
- Naomi and her husband and their two sons move to this God forsaken foreign land of Moab, but at least they were all together, right?
- Until they're not.
- And so Naomi is left alone, childless, probably unable to marry again, no one to carry on her heritage and blood line; which for woman in the first century ALSO meant that she had no one to provide for her; she's living in a foreign land far away from her home town, her community, and her family of origin.
- **This part of her life, truly is a tragedy.**
- So when she hears that the famine is over in Israel, of course she wants to go back home. After all, what's left for her in Moab?
- And at first both of her son's wives try to go with her, but, as we saw last week when Tim preached, one of the daughter in laws listens, but the other (Ruth), in a noble act of loyalty, commits to staying with her Mother-in-Law, declaring **"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried."** (v.16b-17a)
- Realizing that there's nothing she can do to force Ruth to stay, Naomi allows her to come along.
- And the narrator of the story is **silent** about what happens over the next 7 days, as they journey from Moab to Bethlehem.
- What did they talk about?
- Did they honor their husbands and reminisce about their old life with them?
- Did Ruth ask questions about Naomi's God and her people that they were going back to?
- Or did they not talk at all?
- Some commentators believe the silence of the narrator, is actually intentional.
- That maybe the 2,000 mile journey was full of bitter, cold, silence.
- Maybe the trip was as sorrowful and as bitter as Naomi's heart.
- **But it wasn't just that wasn't just that Naomi was *experiencing* this bitter sorrow. Naomi had BECOME this bitter sorrow.**
- And this is really the key point of this part section of the story, and what we need to see today.
- In order to understand the Hope of this story, we need to understand just how HOPELESS Naomi actually was at this point.

- She wasn't just suffering. This woman had suffered so greatly for so long, that she had now become **DEFINED** by her suffering. It had engulfed her. She now embodied the bitterness of her suffering.
- And it wasn't simply that people **OTHER** could see it on her (although that was true). **But SHE** had chosen to wear it.
- "Can this be Naomi?" she hears them saying, as she approaches Bethlehem.
 - "Naomi" — in Hebrew it means "Pleasant". Her name means "pleasant"
 - But Naomi's life was now anything but pleasant.
 - "I went away full", she responds, "but the Lord has brought me back empty".
- And some of us have been there. The pain of life's circumstances becomes so intense that it feels like it has sucked the life right out of you.
- Like the air is thinner, food tastes bland, colors are muted.
- "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty".
- You know, it's possible that it had actually been years since Naomi heard her name out loud.
- They most likely didn't make friends in Moab, so her only community would have been her family.
- Her sons would have called her "Emuh" (mom in Hebrew).
- Her daughter in-laws would have called her "Emuh".
- The only person who would have used her name would have been her husband. But he had been gone for years.
- This may have been the first time in years that she heard that name "Naomi" — "pleasant" in reference to her.
- And while this name may have even been true of her when she left ten years earlier, this woman who had departed as "Pleasant", had now returned as "Bitter".
- "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter." (v. 20)
- What a name right? "Mara" in Hebrew it literally means "bitter"
- She had not only experienced bitterness from her suffering. But she had become it.
- We are all made up of different things. We all have an identity that is unique to each of us. God made us like that, on purpose.
- In life, there are things that you, not only DO, but thing that you ARE.
- **There things that just exist in our life, and then there are things that actually become a part of who we are.**
- And rightly so. We see throughout scripture, God renaming people **according to who they were or who they would become** — specifically who God knew they were and who HE knew they would become.
- **Abram** (Father) name was changed to **Abraham** (Father of many) because he would become the Father of an entire nation.
- **Each one of us has a unique identity as a child of God.**
- And that identity is often connected to what God is doing in our lives.

- God put a calling on Abraham's life and that calling became a part of who He was.
- God will do things in our lives that become a part of our identity.
- And THEN we begin to live out of that identity. You will live out who you believe yourself to be.
- God says "You are more than a conqueror" so then you begin to live, not like you're defeated, but like you're more than a conqueror.
- Our identity informs how we think, feel, and ultimately act.

- God DOES allow suffering in our lives. And that suffering WILL produce, in us many emotions.
 - sorrow, doubt, and fear, even bitterness
 - That's to be expected.
 - No one would have looked at the life of Naomi and tell her to "just get over it".
 - It is understandable that this woman was experiencing some bitterness in response to the bitter tragedy of her life.
 - I even get that she is wanting to blame God for it.
 - Scripture is chalked full of honest complaints to God, about our circumstances.
 - It's part of part of the lamenting process, that we are honest with God. We MUST be. We need to be.
 - AND scripture is full of all of the emotions that come from painful circumstances.
- **But those emotions were never intended to define us, or to form our identity.**
- Because when they become the lens through which we see everything, and they become the fuel that drives our decisions.
- "I AM a sufferer"
 - "It's not just that I am sufferING". But I AM a sufferer. (identity)
- angry"
- "I AM..."

- **Hardship is an external thing that affects us, but if we are not careful, we can become identified by our hardship.**
- **"Don't call me Pleasant"** Naomi said, because that's not who I am any more.
- And that's not what my life is, and not what my life will be. Don't call me that.
- My new name is "Bitter". That is who I AM now. That is what is my life IS, and what my life WILL BE.
- **And as she put on her bitterness; as she embodied tragedy of her circumstance, she began to think and act, not like one who's life could be pleasant again, but like someone's who's life would always be nothing more than bitter.**

- And some of us have done the same.
- Some of us there right now.
- Our well being has become directly connected to our circumstances.
- Our hope, is contingent on the level of suffering we experience.
 - If the hardship is present then we are not OK. But when the hardship subsides we're back to normal.

- It becomes a part us, and defines the way we think, feel, and act.
- **The truth is, we are going to have trouble in this life.**
- Jesus said it: **“In this world you will have trouble”**. James said, **“Do not think it a strange thing when you fall into various trials”**
- We live in a fallen world. People are gonna fail you. Friends are going to leave. Disease will come. People will die.
- And until Jesus returns with the new Heaven and New Earth, God WILL allow suffering in the life of the Christian.
- Many of you have suffered deeply, and experienced the sorrow of deep loss and grief.
- You know what it is like to feel like God has dealt bitterly with you.
- Like you were full and now you have become empty.
 - To pray...
 - To question...
- **And some of you know exactly how Naomi must have felt, when her anger and bitterness grew so big, that she became identified by it.**
- When she became no longer defined by the pleasant one who happened to experience some bitter circumstances. But who had, herself, BECOME bitter.
- And it was true. God HAD dealt bitterly with her. Or at least HE had not stopped the BITTER tragedy from entering her life.
- That much was true.
- What wasn't true was her interpretation of what that MEANT for her life.
- Her conclusion was: Because the circumstances of my life are terrible, my LIFE will now be terrible. THIS is now what defines my entire existence.
- She was not wrong about her situation. It was terrible. That much was true. But her **interpretation** of what that MEANT for her, was false.
- Because God has a way of using the most terrible circumstances to make the most beautiful things.
- God has a way of bring beauty from ashes. It is WHAT He does best.
- We even see it in all of creation.
 - Life comes from death.
 - Look at the **cycle of leaves** on a tree. The only ones must die for the new ones to live.
 - Look **cycle of our cells** as they regenerate every seven years. The old ones must die so the new ones can live.
 - We see it on a **hillside is charred by fire**, or the Hawaiian Islands formed by volcanoes creating some of the richest soil on earth.
- **That same fire that brings pain and destruction is the fire purifies and makes the soil fertile.**
- **In the Kingdom of God, death brings life.**
- **In the Kingdom of God, broken things make beautiful things.**
- Hebrews 12:11 says:

- **“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:11)**
- It’s hard to see when you’re in the middle of, but God is actually working ALL things together for your good, even the hardest and worst things.
- **Naomi’s tragedy led her to believe that God was punishing her. But actually, this whole story is about God’s plan to restore her and her family.**
- **He wasn’t just bringing the fire. He was purifying the soil to make way for new abundant growth.**
- Little did she know, despite the emptiness she felt, the Almighty was actually preparing the way for Naomi to experience the fullness of His blessing.
- She doesn’t even realize it, but right there standing next to her is glimmer of hope in her daughter in law Ruth.
- Blinded by her shame and her loss though, and defined by her bitter suffering, Naomi can’t even see the hope of her pleasant future.
- **But the narrator of the story hasn’t lost track of what’s happening.**
- He slips in another hint of hope as he closes this chapter in v. 22:
- **“So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.” (v. 22)**
- The widows return at the beginning of the barley harvest.
- The last time Naomi was here, these same fields were barren and desolate.
- But this April–May harvest was begging to sprout up.
- And maybe... the author hints... just maybe this harvest would provide enough grain for **everyone**, including the poor, the immigrant, and even the bitter widow.
- **Could it be that God was actually orchestrating everything, just perfectly? Even the the timing of the harvest?**
- **It’s almost as if, God was working for Naomi’s good, even when she couldn’t see it.**
- **And now even the barely fields are prophesying about what is to come.**
 - The place of famine was about to become a place of plenty.
 - And although she didn’t know it, the Almighty One was about to replace her own emptiness, with fullness.
- Alexander Whyte once said that the victorious Christian life is “a series of new beginnings,” and he was right.
- Naomi didn’t realize it, but there is ALWAYS a new beginning around the corner.
- All she could see what her suffering. Surely it was too late for something new and beautiful.
- But Naomi was about to experience a new beautiful beginning; because with God it’s never too late to start over again.

- You may be here today, like Naomi — your circumstances have been so overwhelming that they have defined your life. You now wear them like a cloak.
- They have overtaken your perspective and have become the the lens through which you see all of life, and even the lens through which you interpret God’s thoughts and actions toward you.
- Maybe you, like Naomi, don’t even remember who you used to be..
- But you need to know today that is not the end, and in the Kingdom of God, suffering doesn’t get to have the final word.
 - Sin doesn’t have the final word.
 - Even DEATH doesn't have the final.
- The night is always darkest before the dawn, but the does dawn always comes.
- There is always a new beginning ahead.

- And so I’d like to ask you this morning: If you find yourself in a difficult (even suffocating) time, are you will to trust God for a new beginning?
- I want to encourage you, God DOES allow suffering in our lives, but like a loving a Father He will ALWAYS use it to teach us, to shape us, and to produce something glorious in us.
- IF we will only LET Him do it.
- Because if we let Him, then His loving discipline will produce in us a “harvest of righteousness and peace” (Hebrews 12:11).
- But if we don’t let Him, then a bitter root will begin to grow in us, as Hebrews 12 goes on to say:
 - ‘See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.’ Hebrews 12:15
- **The way to avoid a bitter root is to recognize that the Lord’s loving discipline is always an act of grace.**
- He is always working in the middle of our suffering. And His working is always for our good.
- Some of you need to hear today that God is not wasting your pain.
- He NEVER wastes your pain.
- He will use every bit of it to make something beautiful.

- **We can’t control the circumstances of life, but we can control how we respond to them.**
- AND THAT is what faith is — daring to believe that God is working everything for our good even when we don’t feel like it, or see it happening.
- Two different times, Naomi called God “El Shaddai” - The Almighty One. The All Powerful One.
- It’s the title used in Genesis at times when the Lord promised to bless his people abundantly, beyond all they could even imagine (ref. Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11).
- **Naomi KNEW God was Almighty and Powerful, But she FORGOT that He was also gracious and compassionate.**
- She declared His name - El Shaddai, the Almighty One who always provides for His people, but it couldn’t believe it for herself.
- **See it’s one thing to *know* God’s name, but quite another to *trust* that name.**

- Naomi knew the name, but she didn't exercise the faith. And that changes everything.
- She had forgotten who God was. And in forgetting who God was, she had forgotten who SHE was.
- She had lost faith that she could ever live up to her name "pleasant one" again.
- And she was right. She couldn't do anything to live up to that name.
- She would never get her sons back. Her husband was gone. She couldn't control if someone else would want her.
- Her daughter in law was a widowed foreigner. It was an impossible situation.
- But **"what is impossible with man, is possible with God"**.
- **Naomi may have forgotten who she was. But God hadn't.**
- God hadn't forgotten that her name meant pleasant.
- Because, as we will see throughout the rest of this story, right in the middle of the the most bitter circumstances of her life, God was orchestrated every detail in order to restore the pleasantness of hope to this bitter woman.

I'll end with this:

- Are you wearing your suffering like a cloak of identity today.
- What name are you calling yourself?
- And what's the name God calls you?
- Has the painful circumstance of life caused you to forget the name by which you were once called?
- God is wanting to restore that name you. He is wanting to remind you, the name that HE speaks over.
- You may not be able to see it, but maybe there is actually the beginning buds of a new harvest blooming in your life.
- Would you allow God to give you new glasses today so you can see it?
- Would you allow Him to lift your head off of the pain and up to the horizon of hope?
- Would allow Him to speak HIS name over you again.
- Would you allow Him to remove your clock of bitterness and give you Himself instead?
- As the scriptures say, Today you can "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ", and all of who He is.
- Because HE is where you will find your HOPE.
- WE were the hopeless ones in this story.
- But when were the farthest gone, and MOST hopeless THAT is when Christ came to redeem us.
- When we were without hope, Christ came to die for us and raise from dead, giving us eternal HOPE.
- **Our sufferings ARE real, but they are not our identity, because through the suffering and resurrection of Christ, we now have a new identity which will outlast the suffering of this life.**
- Jesus took up our pain and bore our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4). He took our infirmities and carried our diseases." (Matthew 8:17).
- And in exchange He has given us His HOPE!