

Lesson 2: The Theology Of Naomi

Ruth 1:6-13, 19-22

Prayer Requests:

Memory Verse: “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”

Text: Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread. Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each to her mother’s house. 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 in the house of her husband.”

So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, “Surely we will return with you to your people.”

But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go – for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!”

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

And she said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law

Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?”

But she said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Monday

I want to focus this week on verses 6-13 and verses 19-22, and reserve verses 14 to 18 and Ruth's beautiful response to her mother-in-law until our next study. Ruth's speech is so marvelous that I want to make certain that I have plenty of time to deal with it. And so, this week we'll look at these three short speeches of Naomi.

As we do so, I want us to ask the following questions, "What is the theology of Naomi?"; "Is it right or is it flawed?"; and, "If it is flawed, in what way is it flawed?" In this way I hope to bring this passage home to us and sort of set it on the street where both you and I live. Because you will remember that we said last week, "If the story ended at verse five, then a person might rightly be able to ask, 'Where is God in all this sorrow?' and 'What good can possibly come out of all this pain?'"

Have you ever known anyone who gave the same answers to the problem of grief and pain in their life as Naomi does?

Naomi had answers to those two questions. Her answer was first that God had caused all of her sorrow, "The hand of the Lord has gone out against me!" "The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." "The Almighty has afflicted me." And secondly, she could see absolutely no good coming her way through the trials and tragedies of her life, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara." In other words, "There is nothing pleasant about my life. I was once full. I am now empty. There is only bitterness left for me." Those are Naomi's answers at the end of chapter 1 to the problem of pain in her life.

So let's start moving through the text now beginning with verse 6. "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread."

Verse six begins with a little ray of sunshine in the darkness. God is intervening in the way of providing His people with food. It is God who ultimately stocks the shelves in the supermarket and God is restocking the house of bread, Bethlehem. And word gets back to Naomi of this blessing. So she makes up her mind. No longer will she live as an alien in a foreign land. "I'm going home," she says.

Verse seven tells us, "Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah." It was appropriate for the daughters-in-law to accompany her; and, Orpah and Ruth did not question their responsibility toward their aging and bereft mother-in-law. They

One common response to pain and heartache in life is atheism. Why is that?

prepared and accompanied her for some distance down the road. We're not sure exactly how far.

But at some point, having come to Moab as an alien herself, Naomi undoubtedly recognized all of the problems and difficulties her daughters-in-law would face if they accompanied her all the way back to Bethlehem. Added to this were the rather dismal prospects of either of them ever finding other husbands in that place or living any kind of normal life other than one of great poverty caring for a lonely old woman such as herself. She doesn't want that for them. She would spare them that grief, if she could.

And so nobly setting her own interest aside in favor of their's, Naomi finally breaks the silence and verse 8 and 9 tell us, "And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go, return each to her mother's house. 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 in the house of her husband.'"

In saying these things Naomi releases each of her daughters-in-law from all obligation to herself and their lost husbands and urges them to return to their own families, remarry and start over again. Also, in giving her daughters-in-law this blessing, Naomi begins to unfold some of her understanding about the nature of God, her theology if you will. And there are three very specific beliefs of Naomi that we see here:

1. God exists. Most basically, it is plain that Naomi believes that God exists. Now I don't want to just gloss over this fact, because it is often a temptation, especially for those who have undergone serious trials to simply throw up their hands, take up the mantle of the fool according to Psalm 14:1 and say, "If God truly existed, then none of these things would be happening." And they take pain, calamity, tragedy and the existence of evil in the world and use them as an excuse for unbelief. Much to her credit, Naomi does not do this, in spite of her personal tragedy.

What is interesting to me, is that often you'll see people using this excuse, who have never even suffered a tenth of what Naomi did. Tragedy for them is more of an academic thing than an existential reality. And what amuses me is how they will still continue to complain about suffering in the world, which completely belies their assertions that God doesn't exist. Because if there really is no God and everything is just bouncing around by random chance, then a person really has no

ground to complain about anything. Suffering should only be a problem for those who believe in God, not atheists. And yet they continue to complain as if they didn't really believe in their heart of hearts the theology they express with their lips, which is of course the truth of the matter.

What is the answer though? Why do we experience pain, suffering and evil in this world? Does the responsibility for evil lay at God's feet or someone else's? (James 1:13-15).

Why does a good God allow a fallen world to continue with its attendant natural disasters, poverty, hunger etc.? (Romans 8:19-25).

Tuesday

In Naomi's first speech recorded in chapter 1, we see not only that she believes God exists, but also she evidently believes:

2. God's power is without limitation. Now this seems like a rather blase and commonplace truth to us, but in Naomi's time this is a fairly radical idea. In the ancient near east it was commonly believed that gods were limited in their authority to the nation's borders and people. But here, Naomi assumes the authority of the God of Israel over all things, an authority that extends beyond the nation's borders and into the land and homes of the Moabite people who worshiped Chemosh. Now that isn't so radical for a Jew, though it would be radical for a Moabite

Is anyone outside the reach of God's power? Is anyone beneath God's concern? Why not?

or a person from another nation at that time to think such a thing. But what is entirely radical for a Jew is the thought that God might actually look beyond the Jewish people to love and bless and care about the situation and future of these people who were definitely not Jews and who had historically even been the enemies of the Jews. Thus, Naomi in her prayer for her two daughter's in law casually tosses aside two common conventions of her day that were assumed to limit God's authority: geography and race.

Not only that, the third idea that unfolds here is related to the second and it is this:

3. In His power, God is capable of showing great favor and concern for the poorest and neediest of people.

Naomi hopes that the Lord will give "*Chesed*" – "deal kindly" in the NKJV – with these women. This is a key theological term throughout the entire Bible and definitely in the book of Ruth. It is a Hebrew word that cannot be translated effectively with one English word, because it wraps up in itself all the positive attributes of God's love: faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, loyalty etc. In short, it refers to acts of mercy and lovingkindness that go above and beyond what is called for under the circumstances up to and including the application of special covenant blessings (e.g. Lev. 26:3-13; Deut. 28:1-14).

Naomi recognizes the acts of lovingkindness that Orpah and Ruth have given on behalf of the dead, her deceased husband, her two sons, and herself in verse 8. In fact, her praise presents these two women as models of grace and she hopes that God will look on this and grant them "rest" (*natan*), security in the homes of new husbands. She wants them to be spared a life of insecurity, want and restlessness and desires that they enjoy peace, permanence and a deep satisfaction and sense of well-being in new homes. Moreover, she believes that God may very well concern Himself with these two poor needy Moabite widows and actually do such a thing.

So far Naomi's theology is looking really good.

The text continues, "So she kissed them ...," – She's setting them free now. They're free to go. No more ties to Naomi and her family – "and they lifted up their voices and wept." Alistair Begg says, "Exactly what you'd expect from a bunch of women." He said that, not me, I just couldn't help relating it. Then the Scripture says, "And they said to her,

‘Surely we will return with you to your people.’ It’s a statement born of emotion, we don’t know yet how serious it is for them, but we’re about to find out.

Where did this faith come from? How is it that Naomi believes that God exists, that His power is without limitation and He might actually concern Himself with these poor and needy widows from a cast off people?

Wednesday

What kind of arguments does the world use to convince you to follow its way?

After the daughters-in-law beg Naomi to let them stay with her, she begins her second speech, where she uses three arguments in an attempt to get them to be more reasonable about this whole thing:

a. The first argument is essentially: “It doesn’t make any sense. You will have absolutely no prospects for the future if you stay with me.” She says, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands.” In that culture, to have a husband and a son meant security and well-being. If they clung to Naomi, it would mean no husband and no children. They had much better prospects in the homes of their own fathers. Staying with her simply wasn’t the sensible thing for them to do.

b. The second argument was for them to be realistic about themselves and their own desires. Naomi, creates a fanciful hypothetical situation, “If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands?” The answer to Naomi seems obvious.

While she was elderly, passed the age of childbearing and had

Do these arguments seem reasonable? Why or why not?

no real possibility of remarrying, even if she wanted to, none of these things were true of them. And even if this wasn't true of her and Naomi could get pregnant that very night with a son, would they really wait 16-20 years to marry again, when they themselves might very well be passed bearing children? In other words, Naomi assumes that Orpah's and Ruth's true desire at that point in time is to remarry and so she says, "Let's just be real about this whole thing. It's okay for you to remarry. It's okay for you to pursue that dream and that happiness, but it's not going to happen if you stay tied to me."

c. Naomi's third argument is a little more startling. She says, "the hand of the Lord has gone out against me!" In effect she is saying, "Besides, you don't want to be with me. It not such a good thing to be with me. God is not working good in my life but harm and affliction. And it grieves me for your sakes, but if you stay with me, all I have to offer you is sorrow and affliction."

Upon what kind of reasoning does faith rely?

Now these arguments are persuasive for one of the daughters-in-law. Verse 14 tells us, "Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her." Orpah does the only sensible thing from the world's point of view. She takes her leave and goes back home. Naomi evaluates the decision rightly in verse 15, "And she said [to Ruth], "Look your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; [now that's hitting the nail on the head, that is the heart of the matter for Ruth personally, but Naomi in her bitterness and grief is missing it] return after your sister-in-law." She finishes.

After this, Ruth does something utterly extraordinary, indeed far more radical and extraordinary given her own time and culture than it would be in our day; and she makes a speech that is rightly set off in your margins as a poem, a speech that is absolutely incredible in every way. We will look at it in detail next week. But suffice it to say that it leaves Naomi speechless; and when she hears the oath and sees the determination of Ruth's face there is nothing more that she can say. So she stops speaking to her and they go down the long and dangerous road to Bethlehem, two women alone.

Thursday

The city of Bethlehem was buzzing. The Holy Spirit skips over the journey and in verse 19 we arrive in that small village. The word

Have you ever gone home again after a long time away? What was it like?

translated “was excited” is the Hebrew word *wattehom*, which means in this context “hummed” or “buzzed.” Now if any of you have ever lived in a small town you know what this is about. Big news travels very fast in such places and little news travels very fast as well. Within minutes the entire community is stirred up with the news of Naomi’s return without Elimelech, without Mahlon, without Chillion and with a strange young Moabite woman at her side.

You can imagine the scene for Naomi. She walks over that last suddenly familiar hill. She walks past that suddenly familiar little turn in the road. She sees the old familiar trees and the roofs of her hometown as they come into view. As she enters the village there is a flood of memories: “That’s where my parents and grandparents used to live. There’s the field where I used to run and play as a little girl. Over there, that’s where I met Elimelech for the very first time. Here in the square, here is where we took our vows together and were married. Down that street is where we lived and there, over there is where Mahlon and Chillion used to play as little boys.” So many precious memories, memories which used to be cherished but have now turned painful.

Then the familiar faces of old friends begin to appear, full of wondering and curious. Naomi realizes that the years have not been kind to her. She bears in her body and face the weight of much sorrow and hardship. They are not certain of her, but there is something familiar. The question begins to circulate among the women that are gathered in the square that day, “Is this Naomi? Can this possibly be Naomi? Is this our old friend, the pleasant one?”

All of it is too much for this poor woman. She is overwhelmed and breaks down in front of her old friends and neighbors. Very likely in tears she cries out to the assembled women, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” The adjective bitter in Hebrew is *Marar*. Naomi drops the final letter, making it more feminine and turns the word into a new name for herself. Then she explains the reason for her bitter weeping, “I went out full and the Lord has brought me home again empty.” Elimelech is dead. Mahlon and Chillion, my boys, are dead. I am empty. I have lost everything. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

Now we can only imagine how the women must have responded to this cry and brokenness. They must have immediately surrounded her and

gathered together in compassion and weeping at this news. Whatever property Elimelech and Naomi used to own was long since sold, we find out from chapter 4. So somewhere they found a small room or hut belonging to one of her neighbors and installed the poor women to weep and grieve alone. They gave them whatever kindness they could.

How would you respond to someone with Naomi's complaint? Is this even the moment for reasoning, or is something else required?

But let's consider this cry of Naomi as it further demonstrates her belief in God. Naomi accuses God of four things:

First, He has dealt very bitterly with me. She uses a verb tense in Hebrew here that shows direct causation. So there is absolutely no doubt in anyone's mind, where Naomi puts the blame for her circumstances. God has directly and personally caused her bitterness.

Second, He has brought her home again empty. He has brought her home in grief and sorrow and her devastation is all the more profound because now she is back in the place where she had previously been so blessed and full.

Third, she says that God has testified against her. In other words, God has taken the witness stand, spoken against me, and I stand before you guilty and judged. Naomi doesn't intimate any reason for this anywhere in the book. Perhaps, like Job, she doesn't even know a cause.

And fourth, God has afflicted her. Again in the same verb tense, God has brought great distress and misery upon her.

These words from Naomi bring out two more facets of her theology, her understanding of God. They are these:

4. In His power, God is almighty and exercises sovereign providence over all things. Naomi calls God "Almighty" twice, Shadai. And in His almightiness God is sovereignly responsible for and in total control of all things. It is not a matter of chance. It is not simply bad luck. It is the "hand of the Lord" verse 13 and the "testimony" of the Lord, His word, verse 21 that has brought these things to pass.

What is providence? The doctrine of God's providence has to do with His *preservation*, His *concurrence* and His *government* over all creation.

It is so detailed that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from His will (Matt. 10:29) and even the hairs of your head are numbered by Him (Matt. 10:30). God as Creator and Sovereign rightly has power and authority over all things, even calamity such as Naomi's. Isaiah 45:7, "I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these *things*." Lamentations 3:38, "*Is it* not from the mouth of the Most High That woe and well-being proceed?" Ephesians 1:11, "... according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will ..."

Naomi gets this; and she also gets something else:

5. In His power, God's sovereign providence can be very hard on even His children. "He has afflicted me," She says.

Amos 3:6, "If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid? If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done *it*?" "If hurricane Katrina slams into the city of New Orleans, has not the Lord done *it*?" Amos asks us.

So this is Naomi's theology. Let's look at it all together now:

- 1. God exists.**
- 2. God's power is without limitation.**
- 3. In His power, God is capable of showing great favor and concern for the poorest and neediest of people.**
- 4. In His power, God is almighty and exercises sovereign providence over all things.**
- 5. In His power, God's sovereign providence can be very hard on even His children.**

Now let's ask the question. According to what God has revealed of Himself in the Bible are these things true? Not according to Oprah's conception of God, not according to process theology or other modern unscriptural innovations, but according to what God has revealed of Himself in His word is Naomi right in her assessment of things? As far as it goes, is her theology correct?

The answer, Beloved, has to be yes. God is sovereign even over the acts of wicked men. “For of Him and through Him and to Him *are* all things...” Romans 11:36 says and we could look at literally dozens of other Scriptures. Naomi’s understanding of God is biblically accurate when we compare her words with other Scripture. But if this is the case, then we simply must ask another question, “What is wrong? Why isn’t this helping her to cope?” Or to put it another way, “What’s missing from her conception of God? What is it that Naomi doesn’t get? What is the flaw in her theology?” We’ll answer that question tomorrow, but take a stab at it right if you like:

Friday

The problem with Naomi’s theology, Beloved, is that it stops short of truly understanding the character of God. She’s right in her thinking as far as it goes. But the problem is that her thinking doesn’t go far enough.

She doesn’t ask, and these is a very helpful questions, “What is God’s motive in afflicting me? Why has God brought me into this bitterness?” And she doesn’t ask, “What makes the difference between God’s blessing and affliction” (numbers 3 & 5 above)? “Is it works or something else? Or more importantly, are the two always distinct or even easy to see with human eyes? Is it possible that bitter providence could actually become great favor for the children of God?”

Asking these kinds of questions and looking beyond the surface of her circumstances with the eyes of faith, **this** is what makes Naomi fundamentally different from Joseph, or Isaiah, or Paul, or James, or ... dare I say Ruth, herself, who willingly embraces hardship and defies the advice of her grieving mother-in-law. Why? So that she may take refuge under the wings of the Lord God of Israel, the very God who has brought all this hardship to pass.

Who else endured bitter providence, and how did he/she interpret it?

Consider these statements from those who endured bitter providence:

Joseph: “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive” (Genesis 50:19-20).

Isaiah: [Jesus Speaking] “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me ... to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness ...” (Is. 61:1-3).

Paul: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). “And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

James: “Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord – that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

God is the God who “gives beauty for ashes.”

Had Naomi understood this clearly and embraced the glorious character and redeeming love of God in her heart, she could have added a sixth element to her understanding. Namely this:

6. In His power, God will redeem all things, including the hardship He has ordained, to work grace and kindness toward those who take refuge in Him.

Indeed, He will work even an eternal weight of glory for these, His children. But Naomi has missed this in her grief and long years of sorrow and hardship. She has forgotten the lessons of her forefathers and the lesson of the Exodus. She has forgotten the message of the Passover after all those years in Moab. In the faithless years of the Judges when everyone did what was right in their own eyes, she held on to the Sovereignty of the one true God in her heart, but she missed His redeeming love.

Think about the rays of sunshine and grace that she has already missed. God has given her grace in ending the famine that drove them out of the country. God has given her grace in being able to hear this news through some means. God has given her grace in granting the ability and the opportunity to make the return trip. God has given her grace in the commitment and pledge of her daughter-in-law Ruth. God gave her grace in the journey back to her homeland. And has she really returned to Bethlehem empty? What about the person standing right there next to her, a daughter-in-law who will turn out to be better than seven sons to Naomi.

No, she is not empty. She has wonderful grace right in front of her and cannot see it. But will she? Yes, because God is about to take a whole freight train of grace and plow a hole right through her life with it. Naomi, the poverty stricken widow from backwater Bethlehem is destined to become a grandmother of kings. She will have a noble role in the greatest story of all creation. God is about to shatter all of her small conceptions about the way He works in this world to bring about His wonderful purpose and show forth His glory. And she will be able to sing in heaven:

Hymn: 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 treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye 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 every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

Words: William Cowper, 1774
Music: Dundee, Scottish Psalter, 1615