

NAOMI—GETTING BETTER, NOT BITTER

There is not a one of us who hasn't experienced difficult times in our lives—some of us more than others. And when those times come and we are in the midst of the despair that the storms of life can bring, it's hard for us to see our way. We become like Job sometimes and question why these things are happening, why God has allowed such suffering to befall us. And we can fall prey to something that can end up being fatal, in the eternal sense, unless we quickly address it. And that something is doubt. We begin to doubt God's love for us. We begin to question whether He really cares—whether He will make provision for us to see us through whatever it may be that plagues us.

That's why it is so important that during calmer times—before the storm clouds form, we reflect upon God's Word. In those calmer times, we can think more clearly and equip ourselves to process what is going on when those calamities of life strike.

I mentioned Job and he is one of the classic cases that deal with suffering. But the Bible doesn't limit such instruction to men such as Job. In fact, it doesn't limit such instruction to men at all. There are women in the Scriptures who can teach us plenty when it comes to dealing with those terrible crises in life. And perhaps one of the greatest lessons comes from a woman named Naomi. And in some ways, Naomi gives us even more hope than Job. Job cried out in despair to God because he claimed that he was a righteous man, and as such, claimed he should have been exempt from suffering. But, Naomi's family—and perhaps Naomi herself—engaged in certain illicit acts that certainly would have

prevented her or her family to make any such claim. Rather, many of the trials that she faced were, in part, of her own making.

You see, Naomi was probably a lot more like you and me than Job was. Job was righteous—God even said so. The problem for us is that there are many times during which we are anything but righteous. And, the truth be told, we often get ourselves into messes that are caused by our own bad decisions. This happens with big things that can cause big messes, with little things that cause little messes, and little things that can lead to big messes in our lives.

People are famous for that. People overeat, they smoke or they fail to get enough rest or worry too much—all fairly little things that can lead to some big health crises. Or we create legal crises in our lives by our own doings. We speed down the highway and we get a ticket—let that happen enough times and you lose your license. If you act irresponsibly at work—keep it up and you lose your job. Ignore important relationships and responsibilities in the family long enough and what do you see?—divorce, broken homes, shattered lives.

People, by their own choices, create these messes in their lives. And when they do—well, they sometimes feel so guilty that they are afraid to turn to God for help. And that's why the story of Naomi is so very important to us today. Her story teaches us that that is never the case with God. He is there for us and His love and mercy will never fail those who come to Him with contrite hearts, earnestly seeking forgiveness—even if they are the very ones who created the messes in the first place.

So let's consider Naomi's case. We forget sometimes just how many despairing things were seemingly dumped upon her in rapid succession.¹ First of all, we find that Naomi lived in the time of the Judges and the people of Israel and their leaders lacked any moral fiber. It was then that people who were trying to be faithful would wake up every morning to a world that had turned its back on God. In fact, the Book of Judges ends with the sad conclusion that everyone did what was right in their own eyes—not what was right in the eyes of God.

That's not so very different from the world we wake up in every day. It creates a challenge for us as Christians not to conform to that world. We are confronted with little mini-crises day after day as those around us try to see if we will give into the world or stay true to God. But, God's Word reminds us that no matter how corrupt the world around us might be, God will give us strength to overcome the world and offers to save anyone who earnestly seeks to be delivered from sin and death.² For Paul teaches us: ¹¹ "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. ¹² It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age." Titus 2:11-12 (NIV)

And that's the first crisis situation that Naomi faced—dealing with a world that pressured her to turn away from God. But we have to wonder whether or not Naomi was able to say "'No' to such ungodliness and worldly passions." And as we read the opening verses of the Book of Ruth, it appears that she may have begun to give into those societal pressures. Little by little, she may have

compromised with a worldly view. And each time that happened, she stepped just a little farther away from God—until finally, when a big crisis struck, she turned and God was no longer within her field of vision. And a big crisis did strike—it descended upon Naomi and her family in the form of a famine that arose in Israel.

The introduction to the Book of Ruth explains: ¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Ruth 1:1-2 (NIV) There is something very troubling about these verses because they do not reflect anything remotely like God's people living in faith. God had given this land that Naomi lived in to His people—and Naomi and her husband and their sons were all part of the Jewish people who had been blessed by God with this Promised Land. Yet, at the first sign of adversity, off Naomi and her husband go and turn their backs on God and desert this blessed land. Not only that, they give it up to settle in the land of the Moabites—the hated enemies of God's people. By abandoning the land God had given them, Naomi and her family, basically showed that they didn't trust God to provide for them. And maybe they, along with the rest of Israel needed this famine to teach them to trust God. Throughout the Old Testament, famines were used by God not just to punish His people for turning away from Him, but

to also correct their waywardness by causing them to call upon His name for help—and He would reach out and rescue them.³

That can sometimes be the case even with us today. Yes, although the modern mind hates to hear this, God does, in fact, allow pain and suffering to sometimes enter our lives for the purpose of forcing us to consider looking to Him for help. I want to emphasize that that is “sometimes” the case—it is not true in every case. After all, when the disciples asked Jesus why a certain man was born blind—was it because he had sinned or had his parents sinned?—Jesus corrected them and said neither was the case. He had been born blind so that Jesus could show the power and mercy and love of God by healing him—not for anything the man or his parents had done. Yet, considering the pitiful faith of the people of Israel, and apparently that of Naomi and her husband—there is a good chance that this particular famine was an example of God’s corrective variety of punishment. It may have been exactly what was needed to get the people of Israel to return to God, and rely upon Him. But, famine or no famine, Naomi and her family booked it. They were Moab bound because they had no faith in God to see them through this crisis that had come upon the Promised Land.

Now I understand that the ultimate decision to leave was probably left up to her husband—certainly he was the head of the family in those days. Yet, later on after things had gone very badly in Moab, Naomi eventually returned to Israel and she made a confession that seems to implicate her in the sinful decision to leave Israel in the first place. When she finally came back, friends called her by

name and welcomed her home—“Hi, Naomi, so good to see you after so long.” To this, Naomi responded: ²⁰ **“Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. [“Mara,” actually means “bitter.]**

²¹ **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.”** Ruth 1:20-21 (NIV) Notice that Naomi is bemoaning her chastisement while in Moab—those awful crises that she experienced there. And she attributed these crises as happening by the hand of the Lord. But her words are very different from that of Job. Job maintained his innocence. Naomi isn't claiming any innocent. I suspect there may have been a reason for that. If you read between the lines, it appears that she either actively supported, or at least acquiesced in, her husband's decision to turn their backs to God and head off to Moab. In fact, the Hebrew words that Naomi uses when she said that “the LORD has *afflicted* me”—actually uses a legal term. It could just as easily be translated, “the LORD had *testified* against me”⁴—as if God were testifying against her in court. And when someone testifies in court, they tell what they see. And no doubt God saw what was in Naomi's heart when she and her family abandoned Israel and settled in Moab—and what He saw was anything but faith in Him. The Word of God is true when it says: **“The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt;”** Jeremiah 17:9 (ASV); and **“He who has a deceitful heart finds no good.”** Proverbs 17:20 (NKJV) The heart is deceitful and can fool a lot of people. It can even fool ourselves. But, it can't fool God. It is clear that Naomi

now understood that and was confessing her sin accordingly. But this confession didn't come until much later.

For the time being, the story continues in Moab by telling us that her husband dies in that hated land. Even then, there appears to be no indication that she or her remaining family was making any plans to return to God by re-entering the Promised Land. Rather, Naomi's sons move the family even farther away from God—not spatially, but spiritually—by violating God's laws against marrying pagan wives. And we are given the names of these pagan wives—one was named Orpah, and the other is one that we are all familiar with: The one named Ruth. And after that, we are told that her two sons die—leaving all three of them—Naomi, Orpah and Ruth as widows.

Now I see nothing that indicates that these deaths were actually intended by God as punishments upon Naomi. I suspect that they are more reflective of the fact that Naomi's husband and sons had been given ample time to come back to God, but refused to. After all, Verse 4 indicates that they had been in Moab for 10 years⁵. So, it was evident to the Lord that they wished to stay in Moab. It's one of examples of that old saying, "We need to be careful what we wish for"—for, if they wished to stay in Moab, God made it so they would stay there permanently, albeit in their graves. It's further evidence of the scriptural truth that God will only give us so many chances to repent. Eventually, if people refuse, again and again, to repent of their sins, God will give them over to the sinful desires of their hearts. Romans 1:24 confirms that⁶. And when that

happens, they get the wages that come with sin—death. Romans tells us that too, in chapter 6, verse 23.⁷

And so now Naomi faces one of the most challenging crises of all—the crisis of being all alone. With her husband and sons now deceased, there is no one to provide for her. She is of an age that no one is going to take her as their wife. She is essentially stranded in a foreign and hostile land. Warren Wiersbe in his commentary sums her plight up well when he says: “At the end of that decade of disobedience, all that remained were three lonely widows (Naomi, Orpah and Ruth) and three Jewish graves in a heathen land. Everything else was gone. Such is the sad consequence of unbelief. We can't run away from our problems. We can't avoid taking with us the basic cause of most of our problems, which is an unbelieving and disobedient heart.”⁸

So what could Naomi do? There was only one viable option. It's really the only viable option for any of us—turn back to God. I think that Naomi came to know something about suffering that is important for us to learn. And if you could ask her what that was, I believe that Naomi would tell you that we need to trust God and turn to Him—for He is faithful and true.

King Hezekiah is someone we mention in our Bible Study this past week. Hezekiah was facing a life-threatening illness—like Naomi, bitterness had filled his soul. But, God healed him—not just physically, but spiritually as well. If you could ask him, Hezekiah would tell you: ¹⁷ “Yes, now I see it all—it was good

for me to undergo this bitterness, for you have lovingly delivered me from death; you have forgiven all my sins. . .²⁰ Think of it! The Lord healed me! Isaiah 38:17, 20 (TLB)

Naomi and Hezekiah knew what Paul would later write was absolutely true when he told the church in Rome: ²⁶ **The Holy Spirit helps us with our daily problems and in our praying. . .²⁷ And the Father, who knows all hearts, knows of course what the Spirit is saying as he pleads for us in harmony with God's own will.²⁸ And we know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God and are fitting into his plans.**" Romans 8:26-28 (TLB) God has a plan for your life and it includes ALL that happens in it—all your mistakes, all your sins, even all your pain and suffering—things like sickness, loneliness, death of loved ones, financial problems, family discord⁹—things, that without God, can only make you bitter. The difference is that those who will turn to God and trust in Him, even during those terrible times, don't become bitter—they'll become better.

If we turn to God and seek the strength of the Holy Spirit to overcome suffering, in the end, it brings us closer to God. It allows us to trust and love Him more. We need to turn to Him in those times of despair. That's what Naomi did—quite literally. She turned and headed back to Bethlehem—she came back home. . . to God.

In times of suffering, may we do the same.

Let us pray.

¹ *The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible – Judges, Ruth*, (Chattanooga: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "A. Naomi's Tragic Life, Facing Crisis after Crisis: A Picture of the Need for Redemption, 1:1-5".

² *The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible – Judges, Ruth*, (Chattanooga: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "A. Naomi's Tragic Life, Facing Crisis after Crisis: A Picture of the Need for Redemption, 1:1-5".

³ *The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible – Judges, Ruth*, (Chattanooga: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "A. Naomi's Tragic Life, Facing Crisis after Crisis: A Picture of the Need for Redemption, 1:1-5".

⁴ *NET Bible*, First ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Ruth".

⁵ **Ruth 1:3-5 (NIV)** ³ Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ **Romans 1:24 (NIV)** Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts. . .

⁷ **Romans 6:23 (ESV)** For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe. *Be Committed*, p.17.

⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) p. 195-96.