

Do Not Call Me Naomi, Call Me Mara; Ruth 1:18-22

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We are all familiar with the phrase, and that phrase, as soon as I say it, you'll know exactly where it comes from. From the passage, it's the phrase bittersweet. We know what bittersweet means. It's just this mixture of sweetness and sourness, this mixture of something pleasant along with something sad.

And if there ever was a bittersweet moment, it is, of course, the moment in which sweet Returns to the land of bread and no longer wants to even be known as sweet, but now she wants to be known as bitter. She is indeed the personification of bitter sweet. And so it's to her return that we begin to look this morning.

We will begin our passage in the section that ends with the last verse right before what's probably a subheading in your Bible that occurs before verse 19. But let's begin from verse 18. So we read from verse 18. And when Naomi saw that she, meaning Ruth, who had just completed this most beautiful of departure speeches saying, I depart from my land from my gods.

Your God is my God. Your people are my people. I will go to the grave and rest beside you in the grave. She just finishes that. And then. We read that when Naomi saw or perceived or understood that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. I take that to mean that the rest of the journey back to Bethlehem was done in more or less silence as though both women just no longer had anything to say after all that had occurred.

So they make this trip back to Bethlehem. The journey would have been a long one, an arduous one. And as they make this trip back to Bethlehem, I picture in my mind just a journey of two women that's made in silence with in which they just don't know what else to say. And they are perhaps just occupied with their own thoughts.

Their own thoughts are racing through their minds and they're so filled with all the events and how everything has come to this point that that is what dominates the journey back. I picture as they're journeying that Naomi is probably elderly enough that she. Needs Ruth to help her along, perhaps in some parts, parts of the journey, maybe stepping over some, some creek beds or over some rocks or whatnot.

She probably needs some help because she just said earlier that she's too old to remarry. We will know later on in the story in chapter two that she does not go to the fields to glean the barley so Leads us to believe that she's too old to harvest in the field. So perhaps Ruth is having to help her along, but she's doing so in silence.

And just think for just a moment of what's going through the minds of these two ladies, these two ladies have now lost everything. Ruth, let's think of what's probably going through her mind as she's journeying. She's thinking of what is, what is this life that she's going to. Who are these people that she's going to find there?

Will they receive her? Will they accept her? Will they scorn her? Will they hate her? Will they abuse her? Will they assault her? What will they say? As soon as they see her, they will know that

she's a Moabite from her appearance and from her dress. And she is leaving the land of Moabites. From which she knew everything.

Her whole life is now being left behind her. She is indeed, as she said earlier, leaving everything to accompany Naomi. The land from which she grew up in, all of her childhood memories, all of her friends, her family. She left her family to marry into the Israelite family years ago. Yet now she leaves them for good.

She will never see them again. And she's lost her husband, and she's lost her children. Her brother-in-law, and she's lost her father-in-law, but she's also now lost something else. She's lost now a sister-in-law, as has Naomi. So she has now indeed lost everything, seemingly, that she could possibly lose.

And as she travels along on this arduous trip, she has to be thinking, what does life have in store for her in this new home in Israel, in Bethlehem? Not to mention the fact that she is now just beginning upon this new life, this new life of conversion, because on the trip is when she professed this new birth, when she professed this faith and this devotion to Yahweh, the living God.

So now she begins this new life on the trip to Bethlehem. What a way to begin a new life. of walking with the living God, with the almighty God, to begin that life in such a position of not knowing what lies ahead, what lies in the future. Will they be able to eat? They have no house to go to, they have no possessions, they have no resources, they have no money.

Will they be able to eat? Where will they sleep? What will the people do? How will they treat them? So many unknowns are going through Ruth's mind. And then think for just a moment of what's going through Naomi's mind as she makes this trip back to Bethlehem. She too has lost her husband, she has lost both of her sons, and she too has now incurred a new loss of a daughter in law that she will never see again.

She's leaving behind a decade or more of pain and toil and trouble, possibly humiliation and embarrassment, but nonetheless it's still a decade of her life. Even leaving behind bad experiences can be sad and problematic. And so she leaves all of that behind on her way back now to Bethlehem. What will the people do when they see her?

How will they receive her? Because what do people do in a famine? Particularly, what do God's people do in a famine? They help one another. And what did Naomi do? She left. She left the famine to them. She left to look out for number one. She left to make sure that they went to where food was, leaving behind family, friends, the village from which she grew up in.

Not only did she grow up in that village, but we learned last week that a Elimelech and his family goes to way, way back even to before the time that it was known as Bethlehem. And so she's returning to this small village where memories are long and as she returns She's got to be thinking what will the people think of me?

Will they be angry? Will they still hold a grudge to me for leaving them and going to the land of these pagan gods? Or will all that be forgotten or will the people that I knew in Bethlehem even still be there? Because she did leave in a famine. Maybe they've died. Maybe she'll get back to Bethlehem and no one will know her.

And she will know no one. And she will have no place to stay, no shelter to find, no food to find. All these questions must be hanging heavily in Naomi's mind. Plus, the burden of Ruth. Because we all can relate to how it feels to sense that burden of someone who's depending upon you. Yes, Naomi is Elderly, and yes, she probably can't glean in the fields and work now, but nonetheless, here is Ruth, who in a real sense is going to depend and rely upon her.

Most of us can relate to the fact that, that when there comes this, the stresses of just providing and making a living and making the ends meet, that all those stresses are exponentially multiplied with the number of mouths that you have to feed. And so now the burden is added onto Naomi that here is Ruth and yes, she's younger and stronger than me, but nevertheless, this is my home and it's going to be kind of up to me to find a way to make ends meet.

So they make this journey saying no more. Verse 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. So they create quite a stir as they enter into this small village of Bethlehem. If, uh, you've read anything about Bethlehem, or perhaps if you, uh, know someone who's gone there or gone there yourself, Then what I am told about Bethlehem, that even though it is one of the most significant places in all of redemption history, of course, our savior was born there.

Of course, Rachel is buried there. David is from Bethlehem. David was anointed king there. All those things took place, giving it enormous spiritual significance in redemption history. Nevertheless, being so important in redemption history, it is still to this day a tiny little place. I'm told that those who visit Bethlehem go there and see everything there is to see rather quickly, and then that's all there is to see.

Because just like in the time of Jesus, just like in the time of Ruth and Naomi, Bethlehem was this tiny little village, and we know how it is. Everybody knows everybody's business. Everybody knows who's there and who's not there and everybody knows what everybody's been up to and all the skeletons in people's closets.

And so here comes Naomi back and we find that not only is she remembered but she causes this stir among them and they see Naomi coming. You can imagine the questions. Is this Naomi, we read. Is this really her? That looks like Naomi, but you know, she's changed. She's changed because suffering can change a person.

The lines on her face are probably deeper, probably more of those lines, particularly the worry lines, the lines on the brow, the lines in the corners of the eyes, and the corners of the mouth are deeper. The mouth is sagging down. Now the wrinkles are more prominent. The hair when Naomi left perhaps was this dark jet black.

Now perhaps it's solid white, and she's a bit stooped over, and she's a lot thinner. And she has this air about her, this air of heaviness, and this air of sadness. Is this Naomi? The Naomi that we knew? A decade ago, the one who was happy and always willing to joke around with, is this really her? Is this Naomi?

Is the buzz that's going around? You can just hear the stir that's going around. Verse 20. And she said to them, do not call me Naomi. Call me Mariah. For the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. So that's now the third time that we have read that word bitterly. We read it twice here in verse 20. You can see it one time there.

The other time you see it, It doesn't look like bitterly bitter because it is left as mirage translated as a proper name. But that's just the Hebrew word for bitter. She says, call me Mara because the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. We read it again back in verse 13 when Naomi says to the two ladies, return, go back for the Lord has treated me with exceeding bitterness.

He has been exceedingly bitter to me for your sake. So return. So go back. So now that's the third time that we have read of this bitterness. And she comes back. Saying with this little speech here. Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara for the Almighty. The Shaddai has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away fool 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. So Naomi returned and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter in law, with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. So there's a number of things for us to begin seeing here.

In order to see them, let me just now begin showing to all of us the author's, one of his favorite literary techniques. We talked last time just about the literary Beauty and value of the story of Ruth. It is widely renowned as not just a precious Bible story, but also a story of particular literary skill.

And one of the techniques or the tactics that the author is going to use is something that we've seen before elsewhere. In fact, as we pause in our study of Mark, it's something that we see often in Mark, and that is Mark's, Mark's, uh, tendency to, we call bracket, or sandwich, or put these episodes together, and what he does, he takes this with stories, with episodes, and he'll take two episodes and sandwich them together.

He'll begin telling of one episode. interrupt himself to tell of the other one and then come back to finish telling of the first. And as we've seen that this is his literary technique, we see what it is doing for the reader because it takes the reader's focus and it takes the reader's attention and it just draws it in like a funnel.

Well the author of Ruth is going to do something very similar, only not with episodes and stories. He or she will do it with phrases. And so let me begin showing us how the author will use these phrases to use them as maybe frames or brackets or parenthesis around sections of the passage in order to draw our focus and draw our attention into what he or she wants for us to see.

Now, don't worry if you say, I have never seen that. Don't worry, because you don't have to see it. You don't have to recognize this in order for it to do what the author intends for it to do. As you read, you naturally, the reader naturally is drawn where he wants your thoughts to go, even if you don't see what he's doing.

But I'm just going to point this out so that we can follow his train of thought. So he's going to do this in our passage three times today. And the first time we see this, these two brackets, the first one occurs in verse 19. So verse 19. I'm sorry. Now, the first one is going to occur. We're going to look back at the first one in verse one.

Look up at the beginning of chapter one, verse one. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land and a man of Bethlehem and Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he

and his wife and his two sons. Now look down to the end of the chapter and we'll see the other half of the bracket.

Chapter one in verse 22. So Naomi returned and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter in law with her. Who returned from the country of Moab and they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvests. So you see the two brackets there, the two parenthesis, so to speak, the two frames. Verse one, there was a famine in the land and a man of Bethlehem and Judah went to Moab.

Verse 22, they returned from Moab and they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of a feast. You see it? You have Moab, Bethlehem, and then Famine Feast. And so what the author is doing, it's like he's taking these two brackets, he's using his words, his phrases to say, zero in, think about this as one thought.

This is one thought that I want to express to you. Think of chapter one as this one expression of thought, which includes, Setting the tragedy, setting the trip to Moab, setting up the deaths and all that, and then the decision to return, the proclamation by Naomi, I've got no resources for you, the dedication, the devotion of Ruth, and then the journey back.

All that is bracketed together, and we see that because it begins by saying there's a man of Bethlehem who went to Moab because there's no food. And it ends by saying, they came to Bethlehem from Moab because there was food. So we're to see that and think, and again, to recognize that it is unimportant completely, but just to see that this is how the author is directing our thoughts into that.

So we now see that this is sort of the larger context that he's setting, the larger context of this is what's happened in Naomi's life to bring her to this point. This is the past. This is the baggage that she has with us. And this is what has occurred between. Her and Orpah and her and Ruth in order to set up this entrance into Bethlehem.

Because when they enter into Bethlehem is when the story in earnest really begins. So that's the first thing that we see there. But now let's focus our thoughts and let's sort of zero in at the second set of brackets. All right. So we see that begin in verse 19. So now you'll probably see this right away.

So verse 19. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And. When they came to Bethlehem, then you look down to chapter one in verse 22 and we'll see the other half of the bracket. So Naomi returned and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter in law with her, who returned from the country of Moab, and they came to Bethlehem.

It's unmistakable, isn't it? The same phrase three times. They came to Bethlehem and so those phrases, they came to Bethlehem. Think of it in your mind as the author is doing this and he's saying this right here. Let me just draw you in. Let me just draw your focus right here. I want you to see that between these two brackets.

Here's what I want to show you. What I want to show you is Naomi's heart. What I want to show you is the place where she is at spiritually. We saw a little bit of her heart before. We saw a little glimpse into her heart before, as we saw that she has this, uh, love and concern for Ruth, And for Orpah, and she tells them to go back, but she's foolish and how she tells them just return to your gods and we see something about just her sadness and her brokenness of heart.

But we really haven't yet seen where she is at spiritually yet. Now the author is saying, let me show you exactly where she's at. And he brackets this in sort of brings our focus in. So as they return, the larger set of brackets has them returning. And as they return, we're told that they return from the country of Moab back to Bethlehem for the barley harvest.

So let's think for just a minute before we zone in on Naomi's heart right now. Let's think for just a minute and how the whole story is, uh, set up for us to see as they leave the house of bread because there is no bread. Now they come back to the house of bread because they're hungry. Not only is there bread, but we're going to see that there is bountiful bread.

There is abundant bread. We're going to see that as a story plays itself out, particularly in chapter two, that the barley harvest this year is particularly abundant because Ruth is going to gather an excessive amount of bread. that from the leftover gleanings. We'll see that next week in chapter two, but as they return here for the barley harvest, let's just think for just a moment about what the barley harvest means.

The barley harvest was the first harvest of the year and the barley harvest took place rather early. Early in the year, it took place around late April, early May timeframe. And so if you know anything about harvesting, you know, that a harvest that occurs in April, May is a very early harvest. It takes place a few weeks before the wheat harvest.

Now, the barley harvest being the first harvest of the year. is always viewed by the Israelites as something of an indication of what the rest of the harvests will be. If the barley harvest is poor, then that's a pretty good indication that all of the harvests that year will also be poor. If the barley harvest is good, that's another indication that the rest of the harvest can be expected to be good as well.

So the barley harvest being the first harvest of the year also coincides with something else. It coincides with a feast called the Feast of Harvest or the Festival of Harvest. Anybody know the other name for that? Pentecost. Pentecost coincides, it is the same thing as the Feast of Harvest or the Festival of Harvest.

Pentecost occurs 50 days after Passover. And so the Feast of Harvest, is intended by God to be this celebration in which one of the three celebrations of the year in which Israelites were supposed to come to Jerusalem. And as they come to Jerusalem, there's this big festival that celebrates what the first harvest of the year, because the first harvest is what is telling them.

Will we have a good year this year? And if the harvest is bountiful, then that gives them abundant opportunity to celebrate to thank God and praise God for the in gathering of the abundant harvest of barley. Now, Pentecost also has a connection for us that we all know very well that takes place in the New Testament.

Acts chapter 2 and verse 1, what occurs at Pentecost? is tongues of fire, the giving of the spirit. And that takes place specifically in the context in which Jerusalem is filled with what foreigners, because they all come to Jerusalem for the festival, for the feast of harvests. And that's why the tongues are so important because in all their languages, the gospel is spoken and it's heard.

And it is the in gathering of the tongues. Harvest is the in gathering of the gentiles. It's the in gathering of the church that all coincides with the festival of harvest, which is the in gathering of the crops. And so you see the connection. You see why Jesus will use the analogy so often of things such as the harvest is plentiful.

Pray to the Lord of harvest that he would send laborers to because the harvest is plentiful. And so you see his train of thought there. You see his connection just as the festival of the harvest is celebrating the in gathering of grain. So also the Pentecost celebrates the in gathering of Gentiles, but now we have a Gentile.

Coming to the land of promise. You see, this is truly the beginning of what Pentecost means. It is the in gathering of the Gentiles who are be grafted into the family of God. And here comes Ruth and here comes Naomi and they are coming in right here at Pentecost at the barley harvest. Now, another thing that we recognize about the harvest time and is this is probably something that's rather difficult for most of us to relate to because none of us have ever lived in a truly agrarian society.

Generations ago, we were more agrarian than we are now as a whole. And there are still many of us that have lots of ties to agrarian lifestyles and that sort of thing. But that's not to say that we are truly an agrarian culture. We aren't, and we haven't been for many, many generations, but those who live in a truly agrarian culture will tell you one thing, and that is that the absolute most joyful time of the year is.

Harvest, because harvest literally means the difference between will we eat or will we be hungry for another year? And so the harvest time, particularly if it's a good harvest, is the most abundantly joyful time of an agrarian community of the whole year. That's why the Festival of Harvest was such a joyful festival.

So here comes Naomi and here comes Ruth. The picture of sadness. Particularly, Naomi, the picture of brokenness, the picture of sadness, this picture of distress. And here she comes into the picture of joyfulness. It's a picture here of the way we're child of God coming back. into what is going to be the one of the most important themes of Ruth, which is the significance of the community of faith.

She comes back into the community of faith and she in her brokenness and in her sadness is coming back to be joined back together with a joyful band of people at harvest time. So she comes back. Now let's change our focus now and let's go back to this second set of brackets. 19 verse 19 to verse 22 and they came to Bethlehem and they came to Bethlehem.

So the author saying, take your attention, take your focus because in between these two brackets, I'm going to show you Naomi's heart. So here's Naomi's heart. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred up because of them. And the women said, is this Naomi? She said to them, Do not call me Naomi, call me Moriah, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

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? I've always thought as I read that passage, what about Ruth? I mean, she's standing right there and she has left everything to pledge herself.

And think of the consternation in Ruth's heart as she too enters into this city of Bethlehem, this town of Bethlehem. Strangers, every face is a stranger. Not only that, every face is a foreigner. And she herself stands out like a sore thumb. By her dress, by her appearance, she's clearly a foreigner. And as she stands here beside Naomi, Naomi is the only connection that she has.

She hears these words from Naomi, And

you can't help but to think what Ruth must have thought at that moment. As Naomi says to all the people, all of her old friends who still remember her, who grew up with her, relations, kinspeople. And Naomi didn't have to say this. They could have said, is this Naomi? She could have answered, yes, it's me. I'm back, and I'm glad to be back, and left it.

But no, she wants to take it further. She wants sympathy. She wants to take it further. The Lord has done this to me. He took me out full, and He has brought me back empty. He has brought me back afflicted. And at the moment that she says that, every eye in the crowd around her goes from her to Ruth. It's as though she's saying, I'm Behold the affliction of God.

Do you want to know what it looks like to be afflicted by God?

Now, all that I have is this Moabitess. Now, that's not what Naomi means. We know from last week that Naomi's affection for Ruth is genuine and deep and pure. But nevertheless, the words out of her mouth are, you want to know what it looks like to be afflicted by God?

When this is all you have? That's what it looks like to be afflicted by God. The hurt that Ruth must have experienced in that moment. You know what it's like just in that moment of being introduced to a whole group of new people. You have one friend that's introducing you to a whole group of new people and it's like those first few moments are sort of tense and you are really hoping that your introduction is To those new friends will be one that's helpful and favorable, one that sheds good light on you so that you can make a good impression.

And here's that one. Meet my affliction, old friends, old family, old kin. Meet my affliction. This Moabitess woman, that's not what she meant. But that's what she said. You know, sometimes it is those who are most devoted to us that we hurt the most, particularly as we are desiring sympathy. Sometimes it is those who are closest to us that we help, that we hurt the most.

I can't also help but think in that moment when we get to chapter two next week. We're going to see that what chapter 2 is all about is that chapter 2 is showing us a picture of God the Father. Boaz is a picture of God the Father, and Ruth is a picture of God's people. But here in chapter 1, Ruth is not, in this moment, a picture of God's people.

I think she's a picture of God. Do you ever think that God perhaps feels something like this as he himself is perfectly devoted to his people as he is faithful to his people and his people so often are so faithless to proclaim testimony? Oh, I just had to scrape through this thing by the skin of my teeth.

Oh, this was hard. Oh, I had to really, oh, this was, this really took it out of me, but I got through it the whole time. God is there saying, I got you through this. I did this for you. So perhaps there's something of a picture of our Lord there as Ruth humbly and quietly stands beside Naomi. I went away fooled, but the Lord has brought me back.

Empty. But now look back up at verse 20 again. She said to them, do not call me Naomi. Call me Mariah for the almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. So what we begin to see here is that Naomi, first of all, Naomi has a commendable, There's something very commendable about Naomi's theology, and we should see that first because what Naomi says is not what we would say.

Because what we would say would be something akin to this. We would say something like, yes, I'm back. And these, these last 10 years have been very difficult. The Lord has allowed. Uh, he has allowed Malon and Killian to die. I prayed for them, but God did not answer that prayer. There was just this sickness that we couldn't overcome.

There was this thing that we couldn't overcome. There was a shortage of bread there. There was this episode of violence when some people ran over Malon with a chariot. There was this other thing that happened to Elimelech, whatever it may be. We would say something like that. But notice how Naomi does not say that at all.

Naomi does not say, here I am all alone, and you know, Elimelech, we, we, we just, there was this really bad situation. He just got really sick. There was no doctor around. We just couldn't help him. We prayed, but the Lord didn't deliver. Instead, she says quite plainly and quite clearly, my theology is this. The Lord did this.

This is the providence of the Lord. This is the hand of the Lord that has done this. to me, that has caused this bitterness to me. The hand of the Lord has taken Elimelech from me, the hand of the Lord has taken Malon from me, the hand of the Lord has taken Chilion from me, and the Lord has left me bitter.

Now that word bitter is a strong word. We find it over and over in our Old Testaments to describe something that is perhaps ingested, put into the mouth to drink or to eat. And we find that it's not what it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be something sweet, but instead it's something toxic. It's something acidic.

It's something alkaline. It's used to describe. The hardness of life. For example, Exodus chapter one, verse 14, the Egyptians made their lives bitter with hard slavery, with hard service. Exodus 15 and 23. When they came to Moriah, they could not drink the water of Moriah because it was bitter. Therefore it was named Marah.

It's spelled there with an H on the end, but it's the same word. It's the word for bitter. The water that we came to, we were parched. We were thirsty. We came to this water expecting refreshment. And we found bitterness. We put it in our mouth and we found that it was not sweet. It was not refreshing. It was instead bitter.

It has with it this, this sense of expecting something good, but then you take it and you put it in your mouth and you find surprisingly that it's something bad. It's not what you expected. You know that feeling when you put something in your mouth and it's not what you expected it to be? Like you're expecting Cool Whip and you find sour cream and it's like that's not at all what I was expecting.

And it's sort of revolting for a moment because you were completely expecting a different thing. Or you put something in your mouth and you and you're expecting it to be refreshing. You're

expecting it to refresh you and, and revive you. And you find not only is it not refreshing, it's repulsive. That's the sense here.

That's the sense that Naomi said. The, the, the best thing I can relate, relate this to, um, I'll tell you a quick story. Hopefully it's not going to nauseate you too badly. But the best thing I can relate this to was an experience that happened to me, uh, some years ago in the Marine Corps. And that was it.

Officer Canada School in Quantico, Virginia. One of the things the Marine Corps is well known for is our obstacle courses. And we had some, some dandies there at Quantico, Virginia. One of the obstacle courses included this large area that, uh, just, uh, to use the term generously, included something that you might refer to as a body of water.

It was really, really large. A swamp is really what it was. It was just a murky, nasty, big body of water. And in this, it had lots of culverts and pipes and you had to navigate through these and many times you just, you, you had to sort of go through these pipes upside down, you had about this much. Air between the top of the murk and the, and the pipe and you had to go through.

And so you were just immersed in this stuff that was called liquid. Now there was a rumor that was going around and I believe this rumor was completely true. The rumor was that there was a busted sewer line underneath the swamp. And the reason that rumor existed was because of the smell of what was in the water, or you And so this you can imagine now that sort of the smell that this just nastiness.

So we were doing this course one day and heat July heat. It was just even Northern Virginia was just nasty, nasty hot. We get done and we have time to get some water. And so, as you know, Um, they sit in World War II, so the canteens aren't metal, they're, they're thick plastic now. So I take out my canteen and take this big guzzle of water, and one swallow went down before I realized that it was partially liquid and partially solids.

And then, of course, and I look and my canteen was cracked wide open and had been filled with all that. Stuff. That's the best thing that I can relate this idea of bitterness to you think that you're about to be refreshed and instead you find repulsion. That is the sense that Naomi says, I thought that the Lord would refresh me.

Instead, what he gave me was poison.

I took the canteen of the Lord and I put it to my mouth and I found that it was disgusting. I looked to the Lord for my strength. I called out to him, Lord, I need your refreshing waters. And all he had for me was another death of another son.

So don't you dare call me sweet.

Don't you dare call me pleasant.

Because the Lord, your God, the Sovereign Almighty, has done this. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt like that? You needed the refreshing waters of God so desperately. And what he gave to you wasn't refreshment, but bitterness. One more tragedy. When you thought that the last one was the worst, that's where she is.

That's where Marah is. That's where Naomi is. And she lays all of this plainly and correctly on the doorstep of God because she professes that is the providence of God that has done this. What we could call something like the dark side of God's providence, because you see, we as Christians today, I think that we generally have a very large misconception of the providence of God.

We see the providence of God as when he provides those good things for us, when he provides something to deliver us, when he provides something that's needed, some sort of blessing. When we barely miss the car in the intersection that ran the red light and we just barely miss it. Oh, thank you, God. Thank you.

Or when the job offer comes through at the last minute and we so desperately needed it. Or the check comes just in time to pay the bill and go get some groceries. And we think rightly so we think, God, you provided, you are my provider. You are my Jehovah Jireh, but you see, that's only 50 percent of the providence of God, because if we believe that the Bible teaches very plainly and very clearly God's sovereignty over all things, then it also means that all those things that you regard as tragedy, as calamity, as suffering are just as much the providence of God as the As was the narrow miss in the intersection, as was the desperately needed bonus in the paycheck.

And this is the view that Naomi has. She understands fully what the prophet Isaiah will say in chapter 45 and verse 7, where God says, I form light and create darkness. I make well being and create calamity. I am the Lord who does good. All these things, she sees something that we so often don't see or refuse to see.

And that is that the providence of God sometimes looks like cool, refreshing water. Sometimes it looks like alkaline water. Sometimes the providence of God looks like tragedy and calamity and loss and destitution and desperation. But it is the nevertheless. The loving, caring providence of God from his point of view that is providing what is needed in order to bring blessing to us.

But from our perspective, it looks just like Naomi is looking at her life and saying, what a disaster. I asked the Lord to deliver me from this, and all he did was give me more of it. Does anybody know where the Bible says that God works in mysterious ways? You might know where the Bible says that. Of course, it's a trick question.

The Bible doesn't say that. That's nowhere in the Bible. It's one of those common misconceptions that the Bible says that God works in mysterious ways. But nevertheless, even though the Bible never says that, that is a biblical principle. God does exist. Work in ways that are mysterious to us. But the phrase God works in mysterious WA ways does not come from the scripture.

Instead, the phrase God works in mysterious ways comes from the English poet and him writer William Cowper. Anybody ever heard of William Cowper lived in the 18th century? He has quite a story to tell if he were here to tell us his story today. William Cowper, I guess maybe the highlight, if I can give you one highlight of his life, was he came to know Christ in a mental asylum.

A mental asylum in the 18th century. Just imagine the scenario of a mental asylum in the 18th century. That was the context in which he came to know Christ. He was committed to that asylum after attempting surgery by drowning. He became friends with John Newton. We all know of John Newton, Amazing Grace, and that sort of thing.

He served as sort of a mentor and a friend to William Cowper. But William Cowper was a particularly gifted poet and hymn writer. His most well-known hymn was one, I don't think I've ever heard it sung, because it is an old one, but it is, the name of it is, God works in a mysterious way. Look at the words to this.

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm, deep and unfathomable minds of never-failing skill. He treasures up his bright designs and works. His sovereign will ye fearful saints, fresh courage. Take the clouds. Gee, so much dread are big with mercy and shall break and 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 better, 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.

You see, Naomi's problem that we'll get to in just a minute is that she is trying to be God's interpreter. William Cowper could tell her from centuries in the future, could say, You can't be God's interpreter. He is his own interpreter. And when you attempt to interpret what he's doing, you will do so in error.

You know what that's like? Have you ever been there? Have you ever tried to interpret what God is doing? Don't. Don't. Because when we try to be his interpreter, we are almost assuredly to go astray. But look with me at this one phrase. It's up a few lines. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace behind a frowning providence.

He's he hides a smiling face. What a beautiful way to put that behind a frowning providence. Providence means God's providing his gracious and sovereign, providing to his creation what his creation needs and God's providence here. Cowper says. Is sometimes a frowning providence that when you look to the face of the one who is providing, what you see is a face that appears to be frowning at you and saying to you, Oh, you want refreshing water.

Here's another tragedy. You want deliverance from your circumstances. Here's another bout of suffering. But as Cowper will say behind that frowning providence is a smiling. But if that frowning providence is all that we trust. If that is where we get our idea of God's care for us, then the frowning providence will be all that defines our life.

Look at how Naomi now defines her life. In fact, she redefines herself. She renames herself. Her identity becomes her tragedy and her tragedy becomes her identity. Don't even call me pleasant anymore. Call me bitter because that's now who I am. Her life has now been defined by her deepest tragedies. Have you ever known someone who is defined by their deepest tragedies?

Have you ever known someone who suffered greatly in the past? And maybe it was decades ago. Maybe it was multiple decades ago, but the suffering was real. It was true. It was genuine. It was a deeply low moment. You Maybe they were abused by a spouse. Maybe a family member was murdered. Maybe they had this strange disease, this sickness that came upon them that no one could explain that took from them their health.

Maybe they lost a child, whatever it may be. But now that tragedy has now become who they are. And everyone that they meet, everyone that they get to know, real quickly, they learn. And every

social media post has to go back to their tragedy and you got to relive it and you got to relive it and you got to relive it over and over and over.

That's Naomi. Naomi is now saying, you will never talk to me without acknowledging what the Lord has done to me. Every time you call my name, you're going to acknowledge that I'm the victim of what God has done to me. You see what Naomi does is she's saying, God is picking on me. God is not fair to me. And she's taking all of her sin and all of her sinful attitudes and all of her low sinful thoughts of God.

And she's putting them on God's doorstep. And they're saying, this is your fault because you did this to me. Oh, I still acknowledge your sovereignty, but you did this to me. And so therefore, My sinful attitudes are ultimately your fault. It's a way of excusing herself from the liability of her own sin.

And the same thing is often happening with those in our lives that we might know that can never ever go past some sort of tragedy that occurred to them years and years and years ago. It's the same sort of thing. It's this ultimate victim hood mentality. This, this ultimate, we know how that works in society.

The victim mentality. It's taking the victim mentality to God and saying, God, I will evermore relate to you as the victim. I'm the victim. You're the victimizer. And by so doing, Naomi is perceiving now all of her life through the lens of bitter, and she's now perceiving God through that same lens. This is how God treats at least me.

He may not treat you that way, but this is at least how he treats me. And so now she sees God in this way. And so in the moment of suffering, in the depth of her suffering, Naomi is struggling with the same thing that every one of us in the room will struggle with. And this, this is this, when you're suffering is greatest, that is when your battle to maintain the right thoughts of God is the hardest, when your struggle with suffering, when you're.

When your tribulations are the greatest, when your losses are the greatest, when your disappointment is the deepest, that is when your theology is attacked the most. And so many Christians will have a rock-solid view of God, a solid theology of God when things are right. When things are going well, but when the bottom falls out, when the wheels fall off the car, when you, when, when life has got you back up against the wall, that's when your theology of God comes under attack.

And that is when many Christians who would never say such things of God, when things are going right, will find themselves repeating things about God that they never would have let themselves think. When things were going well, and we all know what it's like to be there to be there in that place where you've asked God to deliver you when you've asked for deliverance from this or from that, and it doesn't seem to be coming, and then you excuse yourself into thinking thoughts of God that are beneath them that are lower than him.

That is when your theology is under the attack the greatest, and that is when you must be the most diligent to protect what you know to be true about God. What you have learned to be true about God, when the sea was calm, that is what you must take into the storm, because you won't learn it in the storm.

You won't gain it in the storm. In the storm, all you can do is rely on what you learned when the sea was calm. This is why temptations come so strong and so prevalent during times of suffering. Is there any coincidence? In Matthew chapter four that after Jesus had fasted 40 days and 40 nights, that's when the tempter came to.

Is there any coincidence? Is there any coincidence to the story of the disciples on the storm in the sea? And it's that moment when their life is most precarious. It's that moment. Is there any question to the principle in Job chapter 2 and verse 9 when Job's wife will say to him now that all of this calamity has now come upon you, you still hold fast to your integrity?

Why don't you do this? Why don't you curse God and die? It is those times when we feel like God has let us down. It is those times that low thoughts of God will sneak in and even come out our mouth. And for many of us, those times will pass once the suffering passes, but not always, not always. There are those Christians who enter into times of suffering and allow their thoughts of God to be lowered and they stay there the rest of their life.

There are a great many Christians who were faithful parts of faithful members of God's community of people and something happened in their life and it made them bitter and they haven't seen the inside of a church in 30 years and they still blame God for that. It wasn't their fault. It was God's fault.

So, in those moments, it is particularly important to prevent, to rely, to rest upon the rock, to cling to the rock that you knew in the calm. Because that rock that you knew in the calm, he's now obscured by the waters, and the wind, and the waves, but he's still the same rock, and he's still in the same place, and he's still the only thing that you can stand on.

Even though you can no longer see it, like you could see it in the storm, because when you let those thoughts, those low thoughts of God come into your heart during those times, it's like little bits of poison. It's like a little tiny, little, little tiny bits of poison. You know, it's like taking a big glass of water, big, tall glass of water.

And then some, somebody saying, you know, here's, here's this nice big glass of water, but, but in that little, in that, in that water, there's. There's two or three molecules of cancer, but go ahead and drink it up. And you'd say, no way I'm not putting that in the same thing with low thoughts of God. Don't let them come in times of suffering or times of great, great temptation.

But she says, I went away full and the Lord Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me as the Almighty has brought calamity upon me. So there is Ruth's commendable, commendable, uh, theology as she sees the, the, the, the sovereignty of God. And she recognizes the providence of God is something far more than just a Christian's version of good fortune.

The providence of God is far more than just God does good things for me when I need them. The providence of God is he directs all things. But the problem with Naomi's theology, what is lamentable about her theology, you see, her theology is both commendable and lamentable. What's lamentable about her theology is this.

Though she has perception of the sovereignty of God, though she recognizes God's hand, she has nonetheless lost sight of the goodness of God and to understand the sovereignty of God while losing sight of the goodness of God is deadly to your faith. Let me say that again to understand and

believe upon the sovereignty of God while losing faith in the goodness of God is deadly to your faith that leads to something like determinism or fatalism.

God's going to do what God wants to do. There's nothing I can do about it. God's got it out for me, and he's just going to do what he's going to do. I can't change nothing. I'm just going to live my life. That's determinism. That's fatalism. That's what we are led to when we believe upon the sovereignty of God while forgetting the goodness and the kindness of God.

Look in your notes at Job's word, Job's words in Job chapter 1 and verse 21. Job said, Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. You hear the sovereignty of God. The Lord gave, the Lord took away. It's all God. His hand is in everything. But then you see Job's heart.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. He hasn't lost sight of the goodness of God. Now Job's going to struggle with that, but nevertheless, Job still maintains the sovereignty of God. And the goodness of God together, the kindness, the love, the mercy of God towards his people. Job still maintains that together.

Job could have some helpful words to say to Naomi. He could say, now, sister, you have got to believe in the kindness of God. I know that his providence looks like tragedy. I know it looks like cruelty. But you've got to believe in the goodness and the kindness of God. If not, that will shipwreck your faith.

So Naomi has to be taught of the goodness of God, the compassion, the mercy of God. She's got to be taught that. How is Naomi going to learn that? How is she going to see God's compassion and God's kindness? And those things that look like tragedy. How's she going to see that? Well, that's where the author will use the third set of brackets.

And so he's going to use yet another set of brackets to draw our attention without our even noticing to draw our attention to the means that God will use in order to teach Naomi. In my sovereignty, even when it looks like bitterness, it is still the loving discipline of the Lord. So how will God do that?

Take a look with me in verse 19 and we'll see in verse 19, the first bracket. 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 here it is. And the women said in the story of Ruth, there's two times that the women talk.

Now, the story of Ruth, we're going to see is sort of this unfolds. The women are a metaphor. They're a picture of the people of God, the congregation of God, the covenant community of God's people, the covenant community of faith. And so there's two times and exactly two times in the story that the women speak.

The first time that they speak is right here. And verse 19 and the women said, is this Naomi that serves as the backdrop for Naomi's diatribe against God? The women said, is this Naomi? And that that they're sort of the background for then Naomi vomiting out these low and unworthy words of God. God's the one he's just treated me with such bitterness.

God has been unfair to me. God's picking on me. He's been unkind to me. And the women don't say anything else. They're silent. As Naomi sort of goes on. With this tirade, so to speak about God, but the next time that the women speak will be found all the way in chapter four. So you're going to flip over to chapter four verses 14 through 17.

So here we come again against the second time in verse 14. We read this then the women said to Naomi. So now the same group of women the women said to Naomi and here's what they say Naomi is not allowed to speak. She's not given the opportunity. Now the people of God will speak. The women, the people of God will speak.

And here's what they say. Blessed be the Lord who has not left you this day without a Redeemer. And may His name be renowned in Israel. He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age. For your daughter in law who loves you is more to you than seven sons. And she has given birth to him.

Amen. Then Naomi took the child laid him on her lap and became his nurse and the women of the neighborhood gave him a name The women named the son Do you know the significance in the Old Testament of naming a child? And it's not Naomi who names the child. It's not Ruth It's not even Boaz that names the child.

It's the women who named the child Obed who then Yeah, he's the then the descendant of of Jesse's the father of Jesse, who's the father of David of King David, the women name him Obed, and they give him a name saying a son has been born to Naomi and they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

So you see there, the brackets, the women said the women said the first time the women said, is this Naomi? And then outcomes the diatribe against God. The second time the women said, and Naomi doesn't say anything. And here are the women say. He shall be named Obed for he is the father of the king and gracious has the Lord been to you and loving and kind has the Lord been to you.

He has nourished you and he will feed you in your old age He will care for you and he has given you this daughter in law the one you maligned in chapter 1 He has given you this daughter in law that's better to you than seven sons. You know what the word number seven means in scripture? It's a highly metaphorical number that means perfect and complete.

In other words, Ruth's love for you is perfect. Her love is a perfect, complete love. And he's done all of this for you. You hear the voices of the people of God. So here's the point. Here's what the author is saying with these brackets. Naomi will be brought out of her pit of self-pity and despair in the context.

Of the people of God. It is the context of the people of God, the community of God's people, the covenant of faith, the covenant of God's chosen people. It is within that context that Naomi's heart is turned from bitterness back to sweetness. Her focus is changed from self to God. Back to God. Her perception of God is changed from one who is unfair to me, to one who has been so gracious to me.

You see, Naomi has been in a spiritual spiraling down for a decade or more. Because she's been in Moab. She's been separated from the people of God. She's had no fellowship with God's people.

She's had no reinforcement from God's people. She's had nothing from God's people to come along to her and say, Remember the mercies of the Lord.

Remember what he has done for you. His name is good. And even though it may not feel like that, Naomi, remember his goodness. She's not had that for a decade. And do you see the place where she is when she and Ruth come limping into town, the very picture of destitution, the very picture of weariness and brokenness and spiritual poverty.

And she comes among the celebration of God's people. And then she says, I want none of this. You guys can be happy. Enjoy your barley feast, but I'm just going to, I'm just going to, I'll be over here in the corner feeling sorry for myself, but it takes God's people to come around her to jerk her up by her collar and say, you will remember that God is good.

You see, in those times of suffering, when the night is the darkest and when it seems the most hopeless and we want to allow those things To enter into our thoughts and even come out of our mouth that are unworthy of God, that are untrue of God. What do, what do we often do? You know, when you know someone who is really going through a hard time and you hear them say things that you just, they're just not right.

And, and you know, okay, it's the sadness. It's the sadness speaking. You know what I'm talking about? What do we do? Say nothing. They'll be okay. They'll see through this. God will bring them through this. One of the points of Ruth is this. Here's what God's people are to do. No, you will not malign our God. I am not making light of your tragedy.

I'm not making light of your circumstances. But you will not malign our God because he is good and all of us are here to testify to his goodness. We are here to testify. to name your offspring the father of the king because we know of his goodness. You've lost sight of that now, but we're here to remind you of that.

You see, this is one of the central points of the story of Ruth is the importance, the need, the significance, the necessity, the non-dispensability of God's covenant people. If you want to be like Naomi, Separate yourself from God's people. If you want to be a spiritually barren desert like Naomi, if you want to think of God as the one who treats you with bitterness, who treats you unfairly and your sin really belongs at his doorstep, then just do like Naomi and just leave the people of God and just stay away from the people of God.

But if you want to be the Naomi of chapter four, then you must never leave God's people.