

# Hope despite bitterness

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[ 0 : 00 ] The more alert amongst you, or at least those who are both alert and were here last week, might have noticed that we covered most of these verses last week as we saw there the cost of faithfulness that Naomi presented, we saw the natural reaction from Orpah, and we saw the supernatural response of faith from Ruth. So this week we'll be focusing on the last few verses that we read just there as they arrive into Bethlehem. So focusing on verses 19 to 22 and the attitude of bitterness from Naomi that is described in those verses and also back in verse 13. Naomi comes and says, don't call me Naomi, call me Mara.

Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me? Most of you will, I'm sure, have a footnote in your Bibles next to Naomi and next to Mara that point out to you that Naomi means pleasant and Mara means bitter or bitterness or something like that. This is an instance of the way in which names in the Bible mean something. Now most of us might be aware of what our own names mean, but few of us, I guess, will be able to go around the room and say, your name means this and yours this and yours yours this and yours this. And yet for the people at the time, because the names were much more everyday words in many cases, most of them knew what the names meant, what the significance of them was. And so it's not uncommon to find instances of people changing their names, either changing them themselves or having them changed for them by the people around them or indeed by God. And so we have Jacob being renamed to be Israel. We have Abram, exalted father, becomes Abraham, the father of a multitude. The name change means something significant. And those instances we see God change Abram's name as part of his declaration, as part of his promise to him that he will be the father of a multitude. So when Naomi comes and says, don't call me Naomi, call me Mara, this is a deeply significant thing. She's saying to those around her, my fundamental character is not what you think it is. I've changed over the time I've been away. You think it's right to call me pleasant? I am not feeling pleasant. I am feeling bitter. So Naomi is self-confessedly bitter. And bitter not only for the sake of her daughter's-in-law, as we saw in verse 13, but for her own sake as well. She is a bitter woman. And she's blunt about the fact that God has brought her to this point, that it isn't some abstract force, that it isn't just fate, but rather God is involved. Now to my mind, in Naomi's attitude and in her behaviour, there are both commendable points and aspects that are not so good that cause us concern. And so I propose to take each of those areas in turn. And then once we've done so, I guess we can then come to a verdict. So then the good. What is good about how Naomi acts?

How she behaves, the attitudes that she shows. The first thing to say is, it is entirely reasonable that she thinks her situation is bad. Calamity is not an overstatement for where she finds herself. She's lost her husband, she's lost her sons, and now even she's lost one of her daughters-in-law. A woman who she clearly loved, given how she treated her back in the earlier verses. This woman who left home due to a famine is now faced with the prospect of a life which will have perpetually that uncertainty about where the next meal is going to come from. She is in a desperate situation. With no one to provide for her needs, she's going to be reduced to scavenging and barely scraping by, if even that.

[ 4 : 35 ] It is not an overstatement to say that calamity has come upon her. I think we can sometimes be tempted to talk down the seriousness of our suffering, can't we? We don't like to admit that we are struggling sometimes. And so we say things like, well there's plenty worse off than me.

Or, it's not that bad really. Or, I mustn't grumble. Well that's not how Naomi acts, is it? And I suggest it is not how we should act. Verse 20, the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

It is not a healthy thing to diminish the significance of our suffering. The fact that there are people in worse situations, yes it can sometimes help to give us a little bit of added perspective. It's part of the tapestry of what we see. But it's not the whole. And we shouldn't pretend that the fact that there are people in a worse situation means we aren't genuinely suffering. The pain of the situation that you are in is not less just because somebody has a greater pain. Pain is real. Difficulties are real. Secondly, Naomi is unswervingly committed to the sovereignty of God. At no point does she come anywhere close to suggesting that anything that has happened to her was outside of God's control. She knows he is there. She knows he has his hand on the situation. Verse 21, the Lord has testified against me. The Almighty has brought calamity. It is God who has acted. It is God who is involved in her life.

[ 6 : 25 ] It is not outside of his control. We cannot wriggle out of the discomfort of why God allows things like this to happen by suggesting that God is powerless to do otherwise. We cannot say, well other forces are at work and they are warring against God and he can't fully restrain them. No, Naomi is right. This has happened to her within God's sovereign control. God is in charge. Now I can see why people end up wanting to argue that God is doing the best he can but cannot ultimately fully restrain evil. I can see why people want to let him off the hook there, if you like. That desire to embrace the sort of absolutely loving God who wouldn't ever let anything like this happen if he could do anything about it. I get why you want that. I get why that is an attractive picture of God.

However, the problem with that picture of God is that ultimately it offers us no hope at all. What is the point of praying if God is not powerful enough to bring about his purposes?

What is the point of trusting in God if he loves for everything to be great but he can't make it happen? What is the point? Where is my confidence that everything works for the good of those who love God if God isn't powerful enough to bring that good?

In a desire to magnify God's love, what people have done is diminish his power and so made God toothless and irrelevant to our lives.

So it is highly commendable that Naomi is nowhere near this trap. Naomi knows that on some level it is the Almighty. It is God himself who has brought this about.

[ 8 : 32 ] Her unswerving commitment to the sovereignty of God is commendable. Thirdly, there is something very commendable about her honesty.

Not for her, the generic fine thank you when she's asked how she's doing, when her neighbours call out to her in greeting. Her attitude is not everything's great.

She doesn't hide how she feels. She doesn't hide it from herself and she doesn't hide it from those around her. She doesn't sweep aside her experience and pretend it isn't happening. Excuse me.

This is not stoicism. This is not a stiff upper lip. And despite our cultural background, I think there is surely something that we can learn from this.

Because God's word does not for a moment encourage us to repress our emotions. God does not commend to us a life of pure logic.

[ 9 : 31 ] We are not Vulcans. God does not make us like that. God intends that we experience the breadth of emotion. And we have no licence from God to pretend to ourselves, to pretend to those around us, to pretend to God that we aren't feeling the way that we are not feeling.

Like Habakkuk's cry of dismay to God, there is something commendable in the fact that Naomi is willing to say to people, life sucks. This is horrible.

I hate it. This is wrong. It is commendable that she is willing to be that honest, to say this is not right. It is a very sad thing for us that we as a society seem to have largely forgotten how to mourn. Yes, it is true that for the believer, the sting has been taken out of death.

Death has no victory. Yes, there is sometimes a place to gently say to someone, weep no more. We no longer need that.

[ 10 : 40 ] But much more often, we go too far the other way and we try to deny the pain of parting. We try to tell ourselves that it shouldn't hurt and therefore it doesn't hurt.

But it does. And it should. The life tragically cut short should be mourned. The pain of being parted from someone who you have grown to love over years and years and decades is real.

For Naomi, the pain of her husband's death is real. The pain of the death of her sons is real. The pain of parting from her daughter-in-law, never to see her again shortly, is real.

It is commendable that Naomi is honest with herself and with others about how she is feeling. So, commendable elements in Naomi's attitude and behaviour that she has genuinely suffered, that she is committed to God's sovereignty and that she is honest about her experience and her feelings. Which brings us then to those aspects which are less commendable than bad. And the first thing is that I think there is an extent to which, tragic though her situation is, she makes it worse than it is. [12:08] She makes it look worse than the reality. Because she doesn't notice any of the good things that are there. Any of the good that she does have.

It's true that she doesn't have the fullness that she went away with. But to describe herself now as empty, verse 21, is not entirely accurate, is it? What does she still have? Well, she still has her life. Her husband doesn't. Her husband died. She's still alive. That is a thing to be celebrated.

She has in front of her an opportunity. She's coming home. She's coming back to people who know her and to whatever extent are more likely to be inclined to take care of her than where she has been.

She has Ruth. She has this woman who has said to her, Where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God.

[13:10] Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried. She has this woman who is utterly committed to her. That is not emptiness.

I don't imagine it would have been much fun for Ruth to be stood beside Naomi as they came in and for Naomi to be so utterly abject in her despair.

And Ruth's standing there thinking, Is this nothing to you? Do you not care that I'm here? Naomi oversteps the mark. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, Naomi still has God.

God is still on her side. And whilst that can sometimes be difficult to recognise and to acknowledge, Naomi ought to still be able to do so.

She should still be able to look and say, I know God is there. I know that God cares for his people. Secondly, Naomi talks about God, but doesn't talk to God.

[14:20] In numerous places in the Bible, the Psalms especially, suggest that it is perfectly okay to speak the way that she does. But they also suggest that it is a shame that she's saying this to other people and not saying it to God.

Commentator John Goldengate says, Don't complain to other people. Be sure to complain to God. He's big enough. He can handle it. There is something true in that.

God is big enough to handle our dismay. God is big enough to cope with your feelings of, God, what are you playing at? God is able to take whatever you can throw at him.

This is like, you know, when Obadiah decides that he's going to come and attack me. There isn't any real threat there. God is not threatened by the worst that you can throw at him.

God is not scared of you. When Job discusses his situation with his friends, he's talking to his friends. He's talking about God.

[15:28] He's addressing the points that they make and he's answering their questions. And yet, as he does so, he shifts into crying out to God and saying to God, Why have you done this?

Why have you let this happen? He wants to address his concerns to God directly. There is something much more commendable in that. Now, I don't necessarily want to make too big a deal of this, given that this isn't the lengthiest story in the world.

It's possible that Naomi is spending hours each night crying out to God in prayer and that just isn't recorded for us. But honestly, I find that unlikely.

This story is too well written, is too carefully crafted for that. Twice we are told of Naomi's bitterness and twice she lays the blame for her situation at God's door.

And in neither of those cases does she come to God and inquire of him or come to God and make requests from him. So it is commendable that she believes God's in control, but she doesn't seem to make the connection that comes out from that.

[16:41] She doesn't seem to realise that if God's in control, that means she needs to be talking to God. The logical result of God's sovereignty is prayer.

It is a fundamental outworking of our doctrine of providence. If we worship a God who provides for his people, if we worship a God who is in control, then it is logical that we come to him with our prayers.

Prayer isn't just a psychological exercise that changes something in our own heads. Prayer is coming before the God who is there. Prayer is coming to the God who cares. Prayer is coming to the God who rules, the God who provides, the God who determines all things. That is the nature of the God who invites us to come and to make our requests to him. The God who is able to do more than we ask or even imagine. What a profound shame that Naomi's response to her circumstances doesn't make more space for prayer doesn't depend more on asking God to intervene but rather grumbles behind his back about what he has allowed to happen to her.

[17:59] Thirdly, there is no evidence here of a desire to move on from her attitude. She doesn't seem to be working to change her perspective from bitterness to joy.

Resentment is setting in. This isn't just a passing dismay but rather an attitude that she is embracing. It's true that by chapter 2 and verse 20 her attitude has changed dramatically and she can speak of the God whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead but that comes after a major change in her circumstances.

That comes after they've had an abundance of food provided for them. So that isn't rejoicing despite the situation but rather rejoicing because things are starting to turn around.

So it looks like at this point she is entrenched in her bitterness. To my mind when we talk about the commendable honesty that she has one of the implications of that should be beginning the process of changing that attitude not embracing it.

But here Naomi is saying call me Mara for the almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. To change your name to do so in the society that puts great stock in your name does not sound like a desire to move on to me.

[19:27] And bitterness cannot be must not be an attitude in which we are content to dwell. The attitude that Naomi shows is not the same as others in the Bible who suffer greatly.

All but one of the psalms of lament reach some kind of resolution. The psalmist comes and pours out his heart to God and describes his difficulties and yet by the end of the psalm has almost always come to the point of saying and yet I will praise God has come to a point of turning back to him. That is a much healthier model for us. And the same is true of Job when he is greatly afflicted his attitude isn't one of bitterness towards God but rather he says naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Job continues to display that kind of attitude throughout the book whilst Job mourns whilst we might even say Job comes to the point of despair despite that he continues to affirm throughout blessed be the name of the Lord.

So three good points three bad points what is our verdict? is Naomi's behaviour commendable or reprehensible?

[20:58] Is she a model for us to follow or a cautionary tale to be avoided? Now I guess you're probably hoping for a nice straightforward answer. I certainly was when I sat down to prepare this sermon.

I was hoping we'd work our way through and we'd come to a nice clear cut decision but I haven't. My conclusion slightly like a cop out though it sounds is complicated.

It's messy. It is like that sometimes. People are messy. We're messy. Situations and our responses aren't black and white.

Naomi does do some good things and Naomi does do some stuff that is not at all good. And we are the same. We're faced with situations.

We're faced with mess and complication and usually aspects of our response are good and aspects of them are not. Maybe someone asks you a tricky question and you give a great answer to it.

[22:02] You can lay out all of the theological reasons why so and so is true but the way you do it is snappy or arrogant or ill-tempered.

Well there's good there and there's bad too. Or the times when you know what's the right thing to do and you do go and do that thing but you have a good grumble about it while you're doing it.

Well there's good there and there's bad as well. Situations are messy. And here is Naomi. So one way to do all of this.

circumstances will sometimes be outside of our control. Things will come up in our lives that we cannot fix.

That we cannot make it all okay. And there is no sin in being faced with a difficult situation. Of course there isn't. But what is our responsibility is how we respond to that situation.

[ 23 : 10 ] It is possible to respond to great trials sinfully. And it is possible to respond to great trials in a way that commends the gospel to those around you.

That does God's name honour as we see your attitude. Therefore here are four things that I suggest to you in our response to great trials.

Number one decide commit yourself to the fact that in trials you will trust. In trials you will trust. This is a decision that we can make now to trust our faith and doubt our doubts.

That when the trials come we will not allow them to shake us. That that firm foundation, the certainty that we have in the things that we have been taught will not be torn away by the torrents of the situation in which we find ourselves.

Decide that in trials you will trust and lay the foundations to enable you to do so. Secondly, find Naomi's example in that if you are feeling bitter now, if you are feeling a little bit resentful towards God, if you are feeling hard done by, be honest about it.

[ 24 : 35 ] Be honest to yourself that you are feeling that. Be honest to God and yes even be honest to other people. Be honest about how you are feeling but do not be content to stay there.

Apparently a minister by the name of Alexander White used to tell his congregation that the victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings. And he's right.

suddenly we don't expect to just have an unending sequence of joy and triumph in our lives. We know that's not reality.

It is a series of new beginnings. Naomi is about to make a new beginning. And with God it is never too late to start again. Never too late for the new beginning.

You have never gone so far away that he will not welcome you back. You have never become so bitter that God can't take that and deal with it and be willing to call you a friend once more.

[ 25 : 41 ] Thirdly, talk to God not about him. Talk to God about how you're feeling. Talk to God about how you feel about him. Tell him that you're disappointed with what's happening.

Tell him that you can feel yourself becoming bitter and you don't want to be. Talk to God not just about him. Fourthly, in everything give thanks.

1 Thessalonians chapter 5 and verse 18. In everything give thanks. This is not always easy to obey, is it? This is not an easy thing to do.

But the reality is that obeying this command is the best antidote against a bitter and critical spirit. To take every situation and declare, I will give thanks.

The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Again, in Philippians chapter 4 and verse 4, rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice.

[ 26 : 52 ] Not easy, but it is what God calls us to do. And that determination that in trials we will trust, that in every situation we will give thanks, that in whatever we find ourselves in, we will rejoice, that is the antidote to a bitter and critical spirit.

The final thing that I hope will help you to do some of those four difficult things. our Lord Jesus helped his disciples to see their confusion in a new light and from a different perspective.

When they asked Jesus why is this happening about the suffering of that man who was born blind, Jesus turns their questions around. He turns their question into what purpose, what is the goal of this?

And so they're not told the immediate cause of this man's pain, but they are told what we might call the final cause. Jesus says that the works of God might be made manifest in him.

John chapter 9 verses 2 and 3. And the same is true of Christ's own sufferings, isn't it? The immediate cause is sinful humanity, and yet the final cause is that the works of God might be made manifest, that God's purposes might be accomplished.

[ 28 : 25 ] What's the immediate cause of Naomi's suffering? Well, we don't really know, do we? What is it that meant that these things needed to happen? But what is the final cause?

Well, so that Ruth will come with Naomi back to Bethlehem, so that Ruth will meet Boaz, so that Ruth will give birth to Obed, and so that she will take her place in the ancestral line of King David and of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God has a purpose here. Naomi's suffering is not meaningless. What is the immediate cause of your pain? Well, I don't know.

But what is the final cause? That the works of God might be made manifest in you. God has a purpose and a plan. Why is this sermon titled Hope Despite Bitterness?

Well, if the book of Ruth is the story of God's providential provision for ordinary people in an ordinary place, where is his provision here in the face of Naomi's bitterness?

[ 29 : 31 ] I think there is a very deliberate glimmer of hope right at the end of the passage that we read. Not only here have they returned to Naomi's native land, but verse 22, they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

On one level, it's just a marker of time, it's just when they happen to come back. And yet, in a story that starts with a famine, in a story where the presenting problem is, how will these women eat?

To come home at harvest time is significant. To come home at harvest time is a glimmer of hope.

This is evidence of God's provision for Naomi and for Ruth.

And the fact that the narrator includes this detail, I think, is a deliberate indication that there is hope even in the face of Naomi's struggles and bitterness.

Despite her bitterness, despite how she has suffered thus far, despite her questionable attitude, God is still making provision for her. God's providence has not let her go.

[ 30 : 34 ] God's providence will not let her go. God is big enough to take her bitterness and still provide for her. let's pray.

Lord God, thank you that in the messiness of our lives that you come and you encounter us there.

That even when we are tempted to bitterness, when we are tempted to come to you in complaint and in dismay, Lord, thank you that you are big enough, that you are able to take whatever we can throw at you and that you do not leave us in that situation.

That you offer us hope, that you offer us a future. Lord, would you give us confidence in your goodness, confidence in your design for our lives, such that we might weather the storms of the difficulties that we face, such that we might not become bitter and twisted inwards, but such that we might shine as beacons for you, that as we respond to the circumstances we face, we might honour you and give you glory and cause others to give you glory because of how we say to you, the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. Amen. So we conclude with a song of hope.