

Aug 23, 2020 | Mickey Klink

The Lord Has Afflicted Me

[This is an imperfect transcript from a pre-recorded sermon. Our volunteers work hard, but we appreciate your grace.]

[Ruth 1:19-22](#) 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. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" 20 She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; [\[a\]](#) call me Mara, [\[b\]](#) for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 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?" 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 harvest.

Good morning, Hope Church! We are continuing our series in the book of Ruth, this short little book. This beautiful story that teaches us about God, and about life, and about family, and about commitment, and even directs us, as all of scripture does, to see the person and work of Jesus Christ. We want to remember that, as we look through every Biblical book to see the parts and light of the whole (and the whole is ultimately the love of God made known through Jesus Christ), we know that this book is ultimately about a woman named Ruth. She's the great grandmother of King David, in the line of Jesus Christ himself - that is so powerful! The text is showing us and taking us there.

Let me pray as we jump into the last part of chapter 1 in the book of Ruth today:

Father, thank you for your Word, which ministers to us. Father, thank you that, like the meals that we eat - we may not remember the majority of our meals, but they feed us and life is sustained by all of these meals that we eat and easily can forget the details, Father so too, with the the truth from your word, we are regularly feeding on your word. Thank you that you're feeding us. And while we may not remember every particular feeding, we have been sustained and we have grown because of the meat of your word. We ask for you again to minister a meal to us from the end of chapter one in the book of Ruth. Thank you for this medium of connection for those who are unable to gather with us in our outdoor services on Sunday morning. Thank you that we can connect with one another through this technology. Father, minister to us by your Spirit, through your Word. I pray in Jesus' name, amen.

We've been in this first chapter with this story of this family, with Elimelech and his wife Naomi, and their two sons, "sickly" and "failing." Those are the translations of the words of their names, the meaning of their names. They moved in a famine to Moab. The two sons married two women, Orpah and Ruth. The father, Elimelech, dies, and the two sons die. Naomi, as we looked at last week, said to her two daughters-in-law she had seen that the Lord had been bringing her, calling her, to go back and be faithful to him. She's heading back to Bethlehem to the land of Israel. She encourages her daughters-in-law to remain with their people and their gods and their religion. Orpah, the one daughter-in-law, kisses her mother-in-law and stays in Moab. But Ruth clings to her and in verses 16 and 17, as we talked about last week, made this

powerful claim and even conversion language of commitment not only to Naomi but also to her people and her God.

And the story continues in our short text today. Verses 19 to 22 look specifically at their return and teach us things about suffering at the feet of the Almighty God. I want us to feel and see the nightmare in which Naomi finds herself. I don't think it could be something where we just kind of are reading the story and kind of looking for a couple of bullet points to highlight. I think we need to picture the scene that has been unfolding before us. A famine strikes Naomi's homeland and her husband (and whatever way she was involved), her husband decides to move the family from all she knows, even from her God and her faith. Her sons marry two Moabite women, something forbidden in the Old Testament. It's not a gray issue. It's not kind of a jagged line, it's a straight line that is forbidden. In fact, did you know that in the Old Testament the children of those of mixed marriages between unequally yoked of different faiths, the children were to be cursed and banned for 10 generations? That's 400 years! Think about the weight of that on Naomi! As she looks at the decision that she and her husband had made to leave the God of Israel, that her sons have now made in marrying two Moabite women, then on top of that, I want you to feel and to think about the nightmare that followed. Not only does Naomi lose her husband, but she loses her two sons. Picture her for a minute, standing at the third grave site of her second son, just picture her standing there. I'll never forget, it was a few years ago when I performed a graveside funeral for a mother who'd lost a young son. I will not forget on that cold, I believe it was a February, morning, standing at this gravesite and seeing this, at this time, in this scenario, this small, little casket, and hearing the cries of a mother who was grieving from deep inside for the death of her young son. I cannot forget the sound of her cries as we stood there, the few of us gathered at this graveside. I think we need to have that kind of an image in our minds, as we think about Naomi. Not just some Bible character, kind of removed from reality, but a real flesh and blood woman who has walked away from her people, the home that she knew, the family that she had in and around Bethlehem and Israel. A woman that had left the covenant God that she had committed to and been raised in. Her sons marry those where her grandchildren are to be separated from the people of God for 10 generations, and then she loses her husband and both of her sons. At least as the Bible explains it, this is the greatest human suffering. Not only does she have no present hope, in the sense of ability to have an income or house, but there's no future, there's no future, there's no children and grandchildren. Have you ever been that deep in pain and suffering? Maybe some of you feel like you're there now. I want to show you from this text this morning, how this text teaches us about the suffering that we experience. In fact, for the rest of our time this morning, I want to just talk about two things this text teaches us about the suffering we experience and show you how, from this account of Naomi, God is teaching us about how he is engaging and participating in our suffering.

Now, look at the text with me. So the two women, that is, Naomi and Ruth, verse 19, went on until they came to Bethlehem. This is, again, where Naomi was from. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, they were shocked. Uh, we don't know exactly what stirred means. Were they joyous? It doesn't sound like the word that they would use, there'd be other words that would be used. Were they upset? Were they shunning them? In one sense, here comes Naomi with her pagan daughter-in-law, after she herself had left the covenant. Even the women exclaimed, it says at the end of 19, can this be Naomi? The question is almost, is not maybe necessarily, one of recognition, but shock - that she would even have returned. Again, remember the word Naomi, the name Naomi means pleasant. So when she hears this question, is that you, Naomi? Meaning, is that you, pleasant one? She responds now out of the context of what she's experienced. She says, don't call me Naomi, that is pleasant. Call me Mara (again, which means bitter), because the Almighty has made my life

very bitter. In the Hebrew, the name she gives for herself and that last word, bitter, would have been the same word. She's explaining what she means.

She goes on in verse 21- I went away full (meaning, I had my husband and I had my sons), but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi (or pleasant)? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. Now, it would be easy to think that God was to blame. It'd be easy for us to think, when things go south, when suffering comes (legitimate, not just a small thing), but when we feel an injustice or we experience an injustice in the world, we get angry - and it would be easy for us to get angry at God, and it would be easy for Naomi to do the same. She didn't just have one bit of suffering. She had been wiped out; her home, her husband, her sons, her future. Naomi doesn't even want to see herself as having "pleasant" as a descriptive of her person, or her life. She prefers to be called "bitter." Now, be careful when she says this, listen to what she says. "Don't call me Naomi," verse 20, she says, "call me Mara" (or bitter). Naomi is not saying, "I am bitter." Nor is she saying that, "the Lord has made me bitter." What she's describing is that her life is filled with bitter experiences.

And I want you to notice something else that the text reveals. God's word is teaching us, even through this dialogue that Naomi is having with these townspeople in Bethlehem, about the nature of how he interacts with his people. Naomi knows full well that God is deeply involved in what she has experienced. Look at the harsh, descriptive ways she speaks about him - "the Almighty has made my life very bitter."

That's pretty direct; she didn't say the word "allowed" or "permitted" - as we often like to do in our kind of loosened God, distant from us, he's just kind of this cosmic creator, almost like a deistic God - he creates, but he's aloof.

She's not saying "allows" and "permits" - she's saying God made my life very bitter, verse 21. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. The Lord, verse 21, has afflicted me, has brought misfortune upon me. Four statements strongly imply that God is involved. How are we to think about that? I think that, even in those phrases we can make this first statement about suffering in our experiences - that we can neither blame God for our circumstances, nor remove God's purposes from our suffering. We can neither blame him nor remove him, and clearly Naomi has not removed him. Naomi knows full well that the Lord is involved. In fact, just scripture alone makes that clear.

The Lord is involved in all things. He is sovereign and he reigns, and there is nothing that he is not intimately involved in. As intimately involved as God is in the creation of the world, he is in sustaining it. The same power, the same intricate involvement in creation, is sustaining all of the world. Naomi knows that, and scripture clearly knows that. That is why she is right to include him in the details.

This is what we keep bumping into in the book of Ruth - that the sovereignty of God bumps into the mysterious reality, that we just don't always understand the "why" and we don't always see the purposes. We just simply know that the Sovereign King is intimately involved, but we don't necessarily understand what he is doing. And it would be easy to throw blame at that moment, and we would be wrong. We know this from scripture as well. The rest of scripture explains this and we know that it's not as simple as "this is simply a consequence of your sin." It's not that simple.

Remember John 9, when we went through that as a church, the disciples see a man born blind and they simply say, "Hey Jesus, this is easy - who sinned, this guy or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus basically says it's way more complex than that. In fact, Jesus punts it into the mystery when he says it is for the purpose of God's glory. Meaning, whatever God was doing in the intimate way he's involved in the brokenness of that blind man's life, was ultimately for something good. If that is true with a blind man, if Jesus is teaching us that in John 9, God's word in numerous places is teaching us the same thing, even in this particular text.

We cannot draw overly simple equations between the suffering of this woman and the sin of her or her family. If it were her sin, it'd be a little easier to cope with. It's not that simple. And who deserves anything but punishment? What human ever deserves anything but punishment? Who can say, "I am blameless and holy and righteous?" We are all children of Adam. We are all slaves to sin, not righteousness, so who can say "well, that particular sin" rather than just the sinful state we are in? It's not that simple.

God is not that simple. He is too majestic. He is too infinitely wise in his providence to be reduced to a simple formula. In fact, if anything, if we're going to hear Naomi rightly, here's what she's saying - "Why, Lord?" - like she's speaking in the language of lament. We went through Lamentations recently as, providentially, this pandemic was starting, and we talked about that being a lost art, and I hope now, with the spectacles of lament, we will see how throughout scripture God's people, in the midst of brokenness and suffering, learn how to lament. *Do not call me pleasant. Call me bitter for the Lord has afflicted me. Why, Lord? I trust in you. Help me.*

Now, if you want a clue as to how I'm framing what Naomi is saying as ultimately a hopeful grieving, I want to give you one. If you look carefully at verses 20 and 21, you will see that one important word is used twice and the word is "Almighty." In fact, the first time she explains, and the last time she explains, what the Lord has done to her, she calls him "The Almighty." "The Almighty has made my life bitter." "The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." Almost like a frame, her first and her fourth statement regarding what the Lord has done to her, she uses that phrase "Almighty." Naomi calls God - The Almighty.

The Hebrew word some of you may have heard - el Shaddai. Although an exact meaning is difficult to determine, its use in the Old Testament would give this kind of definition: the el Shaddai, the God Almighty, is the one who turns brokenness into blessing. Now, please do not hear that as some prosperity gospel statement. As if, ultimately, all God's purpose, like a magical genie, was to give her a new husband or to give her a new son. Not at all! When God is the el Shaddai, a word that means this "nourishing mountain" - if that isn't a contradiction - when he is the el Shaddai, the one who turns brokenness into blessing, he is not simply just giving us earthly material blessings, he himself is the gift.

You know where that term "el Shaddai" is used the most? It's used about 48 times in the entire Old Testament. Thirty-one, or about two-thirds of the uses, come from one book, the book of Job, a book of suffering. And twice, in just a couple sentences, Naomi cries out to el Shaddai, the Almighty.

When we trust, in God Almighty, el Shaddai, we leave the explanation and the responsibility for our bitterness with him. We lament to him with this hopeful grieving and we leave it with him. Only el Shaddai can take my sin. Only el Shaddai can take my sin, and other people's sin, and a broken world on top of it - and bring healing, can bring good, can bring blessing, not just in my life but in the life of others.

That's the first thing we learn from this text. We can neither blame God for our circumstances, nor remove God's purposes from our suffering.

The second and last is this: our suffering and God's purposes are mysteriously woven together, accomplishing what is ultimately for the good of many and the glory of God. Now, I'm speaking a bit ahead of myself, as the book of Ruth will explain this further, but let me just explain that a bit.

When we suffer, we instinctively ask, "Why me, Lord? Why me?" It's not an unfair question, though, to be fair to God, it cannot remain on us. We must know that God's purposes, which are connected to God's sovereignty, which is directing all that happens, even in the mystery, that it goes beyond just you or me. For example, if we only had Ruth chapter one, we would think this story is about Naomi. I mean, Ruth has been a minor character, she's barely been involved. The entire first chapter has been about this one woman who lost a husband, who lost two sons, who gave back a daughter-in-law, and even in the commitment her other daughter-in-law Ruth gave to her, it was Naomi who was the one that had all the main parts and gave fruitful response to return to God. This book you would think would be called the book of Naomi, but it's not. It's called the book of Ruth. Why is it named after Ruth? Because Ruth's conversion is part of the explanation for Naomi's pain. See, God had a purpose in the midst of suffering, where he was not only going to do good work and bring blessing and care and healing and protection and provision to Naomi, but he was going to use that exact suffering to take a Moabite woman named Ruth, to bring her into the fold of God's covenant people, to bless her abundantly, and literally through her to lead to the person of Jesus Christ.

None of us could have fathomed that kind of purposefulness. None of us could have seen how God was thinking not just this particular meal, or this particular year, or even this particular generation, that God was envisioning generations down how we would be reading the gospel of Matthew and see the name of Ruth in chapter one, as part of Jesus's genealogy. That we would know full well that because of the suffering and the context and the use that God made of the life of Naomi, that all of that is possible.

That's why I say our suffering and God's purposes are mysteriously woven together, accomplishing what is ultimately for the good of many, and the glory of God. That's exactly what Jesus was saying to his disciples in John 9, and that is exactly what we need to believe. Notice how our text ends, verse 22, "so Naomi returned" from Moab (this is like ending scene 1 of the book of Ruth), Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem. And how does scene 1 end, in the midst of this horrific example of life? They arrived just as the harvest was beginning.

It's just hard not to see that as a bit of a sunrise in the midst of a very dark moment. Remember we talked about last week, Romans 8 28, "for we know" Paul says "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purposes." God purposes are mysteriously woven together with our sufferings, accomplishing what is ultimately for the good of many and his glory. Christians, the Lord almighty, el Shaddai, is your God. He is the one who turns brokenness into blessing, and he does so through the mysterious intermingling of his providential control over our lives. And not just ours, but the world around us, so that our failures, our suffering, and the brokenness of our world, and the sins of others against us - all of that cannot thwart God's perfect purposes. That is ultimately not only for our good, and not only for the good of others, as we're seeing in the book of Ruth, but also for the glory of God.

I sat a couple days ago, just this week, with a family that's going through such difficulty, such suffering. It was one of those meetings where I sit there and my human side just wants to give pure words of comfort and to just try to save them. "It's gonna be okay," like any of us would want to do with our kids or our grandkids. I just wanted to say to this couple, I wanted to say it was going to be okay. I just wanted to say it, but I couldn't say it. It was bigger than me, it was bigger than them. I sat there sitting in their front yard - they were on the patio, I was right there, just off the patio, sitting whatever number of feet away from them. I was looking down at the ground wanting to say more, just crying with them, praying with them, knowing that their suffering is great, it's beyond what most of us have had to deal with, and I just wanted to stop by and say, "I'm sorry that you're suffering." I wanted to tell them about el Shaddai, the Almighty, who turns brokenness into blessing, but not in some way that removes or just immediately quick fixes, as if God is a genie. But I wanted to say to them that God is the one who has purposes that we can't even understand. I want to encourage them to trust in el Shaddai in the midst of their suffering, so we just talked and we cried and we prayed and, in that, hopefully we hoped in God.

Brothers and sisters, what Naomi is experiencing is not far removed from what many of us, many of you, are dealing with, and I exhort you this Sunday morning here in August of 2020 to trust in the Almighty God. Even the God who, in the words of Naomi, has brought and allowed, the God who has afflicted me, is el Shaddai, the Almighty, who alone turns brokenness into blessing. And he will do so not only for you, but also in ways that you may not know for generations, in the lives of people around you who watch and see how you trust in an Almighty God and in nothing else, ultimately. And not only that, but even in the midst of your suffering, the purposeful God may be glorified, which is ultimately the goal, and the purpose, the highest purpose, of our lives. May you trust in God Almighty this week, in your circumstances, in these days.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for the gospel you've ministered to us, the truth that comes from your word. Thank you, Father, that you are the God Almighty, that you've given us this name and this character trait of yourself, that you are the God who turns brokenness into blessing. Father, you're not a genie or a butler or a therapist, you are a purposeful God, and I pray that you help us entrust our sufferings, our grieving, our laments to you and in hopeful grieving and groaning. Father, be with those, like that family I mentioned that is suffering so deeply right now, that, by your spirit, you would comfort them in their pain. Father, I pray for other families that are dealing with loss and suffering. Help them to trust in you, Father, when they don't understand the what or the when or the why, may they trust in the Who - the Who, the el Shaddai, the Lord Almighty. Father, may that be true for all of us, in big and small ways, and may your glory spread to all the nations. And may you use our lives to display your goodness and your grace to others around us, Father, even in our suffering. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.