

Pastor Tom Mortenson

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Naomi's Agony

Ruth 2:1

Prayer: *Again Lord, we just want to open up with a word of prayer. Father God, we just praise you and thank you for the privilege that we have of gathering together, for the privilege that we have of opening up your book. And once again we are back at the book of Ruth and again, Lord, my prayer is the same as it is each week. I pray for your Holy Spirit, Lord, without your Holy Spirit we're just looking at words on a page that are lifeless. And so I pray that your Spirit would guide us, that you would give us the ability to plumb the depths of your word to make it of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well as we said, we are back in the book of Ruth, the Moabite daughter-in-law of Naomi. If you recall, Naomi and her husband Elimelech driven by famine have left Israel some ten years prior and moved to Moab, a city founded by the incestuous son of Lot's daughter. Moab was known as being an arch enemy of Israel's politically, militarily and most importantly, theologically. It was the city ruled by Chemosh, a monstrous God who demanded human

sacrifice. Well Naomi and Elimelech settle into Moab and their two sons wind up marrying Moabite women. Not only had Naomi's two sons married outside of Israel's covenant community, they had also chosen to marry women who were some of Israel's most bitter enemies. Well after ten years in Moab, Naomi's life turns tragic; she loses both her husband Elimelech and her two sons. And she hears through the grapevine that the famine has ended in Israel and she decides that her only hope is to return to Bethlehem. The only people she has left of her original family are her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Orpah decides to return to her country, her people, and her roots, and Ruth has a moment of crisis that turns into this lifelong commitment to God and his kingdom when she insists that nothing but death will ever separate her from Naomi and her God. Ruth embraces and accepts the gift of faith. And last time we looked at what genuine faith was and we saw that Ruth's response fit our definition perfectly. Ruth had accepted a God-given gift, it was characterized by a certainty of conviction, and it produced appropriate action. It was Ruth and not Orpah who had the gift of faith and it was Ruth who forsook everything in order to accompany Naomi on her trip back to Bethlehem.

We spoke at great length of all the fuss that was made by the town folk as Naomi returns and Naomi's bitter response. We left off just as the author of the book of Ruth who again many people think

was the prophet Samuel, as he introduces us to a figure who appears at first to be the main character. This is the start of chapter 2. It says *Ruth 2:1: Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. Well his name may as well have been Prince Charming. In fact most commentators treat the rest of the book of Ruth as a Cinderella type romance in which Boaz plays the role of the heroic rescuer while Ruth plays the role of the rescued.*

And before we get too far into this next phase of the story of Ruth, I want to revisit Naomi. I want to go back to the end of chapter 1 to the commotion that occurred when Ruth and Naomi finally make it back into Bethlehem. Let me just pick up. This is *Ruth 1:19. It says: 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?" She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, 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?" 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."*

Naomi is clearly a broken person and she's not at all inclined to hide it. And we spoke at length about her Naomi moments in a previous message but this morning I want to flesh out just why she became so bitter. You see it's far too easy to put our 21st century Western worldview into interpreting the story just as a simple romance when there's many other factors that point to a different way of looking at it. And what is especially helpful is to look at this story from a woman's standpoint. I mean after all it is a story about two women. And it may just be that things that leap out for a woman are things that are very easy for a man to miss. And I say that because I stumbled upon a woman named Carolyn Custis James who's written an excellent commentary on Ruth entitled *"The Gospel of Ruth"* subtitled *"Loving God Enough to Break the Rules."* Her perspective on Naomi struck me particularly because she made what I had first thought was an outrageous statement. She said she felt that Naomi had out-Jobbed Job. And this is the way she put it. She said:

"I never connected emotionally with Naomi's losses until I heard her compared to the legendary sufferer Job. That got my attention. Until then, her sufferings seemed to serve as props to set up the real drama -- the love story between Ruth and Boaz. In my eagerness to get to the part where Boaz enters the narrative, I stepped over a shattered Naomi and, in the process, missed the real

power of the story -- a story of a woman's struggle with God."

Well it turns out that Miss James discovered a gold mine in seeing the scripture that way. And it's only when I began to examine her claims about what Naomi actually lost that I started to get a feel for what Naomi had actually gone through. I mean it brought her to a place where she could no longer bear to be called by her former name, "Naomi" or "pleasant" while insisting to be called "Mara" or "bitter." And I recognized that it's easy to see her return to Bethlehem as simply one of bitterness and guilt, I mean, she had after all left Bethlehem with her husband Elimelech and gone to a city that defined itself as an enemy of Israel's. Her two sons Mahlon and Chilion had clearly broken Israeli law by marrying Moabite women but it's only when you begin to look at Naomi's situation from the standpoint of her loss as a woman do you begin to realize why Naomi was so thoroughly crushed, and it all starts with why they wound up in Moab in the first place.

You know Naomi and Elimelech were in Moab for some ten years but again, it's very easy to miss why when we're coming from a place of plenty such as North America. You see they were driven out of Bethlehem to Moab because of the famine. I mean this wasn't a couple deciding to move to Florida because they liked the sunshine. This was a family deciding for better or for worse that their very

survival depended on leaving everything that they knew and moving to a place that clearly was not going to welcome them with open arms. I mean I've never personally been in a place that would be openly hostile to me based solely on where I was from, but that's what it was like in Moab. The good news for Naomi was she was not going to go into this foreign place alone, at least she had a family. She had achieved what was for her a woman in her time and her place, the mark of significance. It was proof positive that she had worth, that she had value, that her personhood was genuine. She had been able to produce not just one but two sons for her husband Elimelech. And again, we in the 21st century have no sense at all of what that time and place said to a woman who was unable to produce male babies, but even a quick glance through the scriptures would point out that a woman incapable of producing sons was a woman of no value whatsoever.

Listen to what Carolyn James says. She says this: "In patriarchal cultures, sons are prized. Daughters are not. A daughter leaves to build another man's house. But a son will carry on his father's name, build his father's house, and inherit his father's wealth. A man must have a son. If his wife let's him down in this, his family will press him to discard her -- either by divorce or polygamy -- and find another wife who can produce a son. His relatives depend on him to perpetuate the family name and solidify

them economically for another generation. He depends on his wife to save his honor and preserve his name. If she fails, he will do whatever it takes to fulfill his duty and protect himself. The same desperate quest for sons dominates the landscape of the Bible. Hannah didn't pray for any child. She wept and pleaded for a son. Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel, were in an all-out war to see who could produce the greatest number of sons for their husband. Dinah, the one daughter mentioned, is Leah's disappointing seventh child -- the girl who cheated her mother out of the crowning achievement of producing seven sons. When the aging Elizabeth finally conceives, she recalls her decades of barrenness as a time of public "disgrace" or "shame" from which God has finally delivered her. Her words reveal the inescapable stigma and mental anguish attached to childlessness."

Well as we all know, today is Mother's Day and it's a day to celebrate and honor the incredible task that mothers have. Ask any man who's ever had to do a mother's job for more than a few hours, ask any of my sons how it goes when they are forced due to circumstances to do their wife's job as moms and housewives even for a few hours or a day or so. I mean to a man they will tell you, oh, no, thanks, too hard, too demanding, too difficult for them to do at a sustained level. I do believe that God has given very a specific and extraordinary giftedness to women for the task

of mothering, and I honor every mother who undertakes that task. But at the same time I also grieve for those women whose wombs have been closed by God for reasons that only he knows. Time and again that's how scripture refers to infertility. It says God has closed the womb. And we've certainly seen in scripture God's inscrutable ways of closing the wombs of women that he viewed highly. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Elizabeth, Hannah, all of them were loved by God but called at least for a time for childlessness. In Sarah's case it was up until the age of 90.

Karen Swallow Prior is a professor of English at Liberty University. She's someone who struggled for years with God closing her womb. She had this to say about her infertility in an article entitled *"Called to Childlessness: The Surprising Ways of God."* She says: "The contributions God has allowed me to make to the church and the world are contributions specific to being a woman, and, further, a woman without children. I believe that the church and the world need more of the particular gifts that infertile (and childless and unmarried) women (and men) can offer. I can't help but wonder how different the church and the world would look if infertility were viewed not as a problem to be solved, but a calling to serve God and meet the needs of the world in other ways. Looking back, I realize how my husband and I navigated these decisions apart from meaningful guidance from the church, despite

our continuous and active involvement in small, conservative congregations over those "be fruitful and multiply" years. The unspoken assumption from everywhere seemed to be simply that Christians are to marry and have children, and when difficulties arise, it's a problem to be solved, one step at a time wherever the next step leads. Even my Christian Ob-Gyn assumed we would take the next logical step in treatment. We were the ones who had put on the brakes and ask ourselves what was God calling us to do -- and what he was not calling us to do. Sometimes God's calling is not one we want. Yet, obeying that call is the only thing that will bring us true and lasting joy. Recognizing my childlessness as a call of God has transformed the way I see my whole life and the work of the Lord in it. For many years, my desire was to be a mother. My desire now is to be the woman that God calls me to be. No more. And no less. If the church has made an idol out of a certain mold, then we are hindering each other from finding and following -- confidently and contentedly -- God's calling on our lives even when, or especially when, that calling doesn't fit the mold."

You see, being a mom, as wonderful as that is, is not what defines your value as a person. Being a child of God is what our value ultimately comes from. I mean our culture and most cultures do give special honors to mothers. But third world cultures today and

in that world that Naomi and Ruth occupied, they don't honor women, they subjugate them. They demand and they demand still that married females produce not just children but male children even though it's the male who provides the factor that decides the sex of the child. Well Naomi had crossed one major bar that existed in her culture, it was the one thing that gave her life value -- she was able to produce sons. Childlessness was not something that she would have to face, but that turned out to be the least of Naomi's problems.

You know, scripture can be very cold, it can be very analytical when it's simply laying out facts, it's simply describing something and sometimes those cold analytical facts describe devastating circumstances. Verse 6 tells us: *But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.* Naomi was about to learn how severely her social status was going to change. See, being a widow in our culture oftentimes carries with it a form of loneliness and a form of social isolation. Women learn that their status as individuals often changes drastically once they have lost their husbands. My own mother-in-law, Janice's mom Pat, one of the most extraordinary women I have ever met in my entire life, she became a widow at age 49. Her husband, Janice's dad, died at age 54. Pat used to describe what it was like being a fifth wheel in a social circle that previously was rich and full. Now she had the

distraction of having to raise seven children, but not having her husband gave her times of intense busyness followed by times of intense loneliness. And many widows describe being isolated from previously close circles of friends simply because they now become a sense of -- a sense or a source of discomfort. I mean previously they fit in fine but now as a single person they just didn't quite fit. Well, add to Naomi's circumstance the fact that in her culture and time widows had no standing whatsoever. It was so bad that God knew and responded to the plight of widows. God knew how much widows suffered and so his heart went out specifically to them. The scripture is replete with it. *Isaiah 54* says: *Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.* In *Mark 12* we have Jesus saying this, he says: *"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."* And then in *Exodus 22* it says: *You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.* And you know why God made that law in Exodus? He made that law because widows were so

vulnerable. And you know why Jesus castigated the scribes for devouring widow's houses, it's because widows, well, they made very easy targets. Being a widow in that time and culture meant that you occupied one of the lowest possible rungs that society had. And widowhood for Naomi was far more consequential. Carolyn James describes it this way. She says: *"Elimelech's death hurled Naomi into grief that ebbed and flowed for the rest of her life. But for Naomi, as for other widows with children, there was little time to think of herself or to nurse her own grief because of the pressing needs of her two sons. The death of Elimelech catapulted her into the ranks of single parents -- a daunting task in any era or culture. At least Naomi still had her sons. Naomi's boys were the family future and their mother's glory. In a culture that measured a woman's value by the number of sons she produced, Naomi was a woman worthy of honor for giving birth to Mahlon and Chilion. Her accomplishments in childbirth meant that the Elimelech family line was a sturdy double strand. Even the woes of widowhood were blunted somewhat for Naomi by the fact that she had double insurance coverage for the future -- two sons to carry on her husband's name and to care for her in her old age."*

So Naomi still had two sons, I mean they were her social security. They were her future mentally, physically, spiritually and financially. And we find out within one sentence they're gone.

Verse 5 says: *And both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.* Now the scripture doesn't give us a timeline, it doesn't even mention how it happened but the bottom line is that the worst nightmare Naomi could have ever imagined at any time during her marriage to Elimelech has now come to pass. The unthinkable has now happened. And Carolyn James points out that the comparison to Job sees both Naomi and Job losing their families, their fortunes, and their futures but at least Job had his friends. He had his friends, he had his reputation and he had a chance to rebuild his future. None of that existed for Naomi. Her family, her fortune and her future had gone into the grave with her husband and her two sons. And all that was left for her now were two Moabite women who now also had the status of widows. In addition they had something that the text doesn't point out but it becomes obvious when you just look at it. It's that both Ruth and Orpah had been married for years to Naomi's sons without producing a grandson or granddaughter. In short, Naomi's daughters-in-law, they were not only bereft of husbands but they were also barren as well. In this time and in this culture, it is hard to imagine a more dreadful set of circumstance. And now I look at this, I say, is it any wonder that Naomi in bewailing her circumstance to her daughters-in-law says this, she says this in *Ruth 1:11: "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?*

Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me."

What's the source of Naomi's agony? It goes back to husbands and sons, sons that neither Orpah nor Ruth had been able to bear as well. Naomi makes no mention of her daughters-in-law's closed wombs but it certainly had to hang in the air. They're even more dead weight. I mean even if Naomi could produce a son for Ruth and she did wait for her new husband, there's no guarantee that Ruth could produce a son. After all in ten years she had produced no child. So this is the mental state of Naomi as she's journeying back to Bethlehem, broken, bereft of family, accompanied by her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth who just happens also to be barren. Could there be a more forlorn pair entering Bethlehem? And so it makes perfect sense to hear Naomi begged to no longer be called by her former name "pleasant" and to embrace wholeheartedly her new name "Mara" or "bitter."

Well, as you might expect there's a lot more to this story than this. And so we pick up on after -- we pick up on the story after

Ruth makes her introduction to Boaz. And what we learn is that these women are far more heroic and brave than you'd first think at the first reading of the story. They enter the town of Bethlehem and the chapter ends with this cryptic little note, it says: *And it was barley harvest.* Well chapter 2 opens up with this statement. It says: *Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech."*

This past winter Janice and I went for our Florida visit with my brother-in-law and his wife, Janice's sister. I mean it just so happens that my brother-in-law and I were roommates and best friends in college and we married sisters. So I thought about it, we've been hanging out for almost half a century now. And so we went largely through the Florida panhandle and we just visited a bunch of different towns, we got a sense for what that area of Florida was like. My brother-in-law is a recently retired produce farmer and he has lots of contacts with other produce farmers in other states. And one day we decided to visit one of the farms

that he knew was harvesting broccoli and then processing is it in a packinghouse. Chris wanted to show me how a packinghouse works. So we went there and we got the royal tour from the owner. So after checking out the packinghouse, the owner asked if we'd like to go down to the field and watch them actually harvesting. So we said, "Sure." We went down to the field and we enter the field and everybody just kind of stops and looks at us for a moment to try to figure out who we are. And there's this giant mule train that's working the field. It was 16 rows wide and basically it's a high platform on wheels that's towed by a very large tractor. It's got a dozen or so people, mainly women on it and they're all processing broccoli. And as I said, it's being towed by a big tractor. As it's going down the rows, there's 16 rows and each row has a cutter in it, this is a guy who's cutting the heads of broccoli, and he's trimming them and then he's throwing them up onto the platform so they could process it further and get it ready for market. So in all there's probably almost 30 people working this field. I was just thinking about that, I was thinking, okay, let's go back a couple thousand years, and picture yourself entering into a field where you know no one, nobody. And everyone instantly looks up as you enter the field and they recognize her as a stranger, and she's approaching to glean. There's no boss giving you a grand tour. In fact you're not even supposed to be there because you're not even a member of the nation of Israel. And what's driving you is

literally starvation. There's no food banks, there's no such thing as unemployment or EBT cards or any social network whatsoever. There's virtually nothing. You're not even a part of the nation who had rules set up especially for gleaners. Remember, you're a Moabite. You're not just an outsider but you're a member of the nation known as Israel's enemy. So who says the rules for gleaning apply to you? And again, gleaning is a task reserved for the poor and it was obviously a much rougher crowd. So why in the world should they let you elbow your way in and claim a share of resource that's precious and rare? And worse still, you're a woman. You occupy a lower notch in the lower strata of the social structure, one subject to assault, perhaps even rape. This is what Ruth was looking at when she announced to Naomi that she was going to go gleaning. I mean these are two women who were committed to the God of Israel who appears to be completely absent. And Ruth is brand new, having just committed her life to Naomi and Naomi's God. Naomi herself, well, she's just done what so few of us are willing to do, she has openly admitted that her relationship with God is in a state of utter collapse. The God who has so blessed her with prosperity and a husband and two sons had in her mind completely abandoned her. And now she was willing to admit it and to herself and to anyone else who would ask. I mean, her pain was so great that she no longer cared that her friends welcoming her back to Bethlehem would be welcoming back a broken person convinced that

God was still real but that he clearly had no love left for her. Now have you ever felt like that? I mean have you ever felt like, well, it looks like the jig is up. It looks like what you've convinced yourself about your relationship with God has got to be rethought because life is so hard and God seems so absent, that it's impossible to maintain the idea that God really, really does love me.

Listen to the way Carolyn James puts it. She says this, she says: "Christians are great pretenders. We tell ourselves it's not supposed to be this way for Christians, and so we resort to a cover-up. For the sake of the gospel, we don't want to let on (especially in front of a watching world) that things aren't working out so well. We try to smooth things over for God, send in our best damage control team to deal with these embarrassing questions, and polish up God's reputation. We feel it's our Christian duty to look our best. We can't afford to show our flaws. Let's give the world (and each other) the airbrushed version of ourselves as proof that the Christian life really works. God won't and doesn't participate in this kind of masquerade. If the Bible tells us anything, it is that this world is fraught with perils and hardships."

See it all goes back to two seemingly irreconcilable facts and that

is that life is hard and God is good. I mean common sense tells me you can have one or the other but you really can't have both. And God tells us over and over again that you must have both. And in order to maintain both, we absolutely have to put our trust in him. I mean how many times have you and I experienced the fact that life is hard and then immediately heard in the back of our heads the enemy's conclusion that surely God is not good or present or caring or capable, you can pick any one. I mean they all basically say what Naomi at least had the courage to say out loud in front of witnesses. She said: *"Call me Mara, 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 was thinking about this and one of the things that occurred to me in looking over this and looking at the scripture was that every single cry in scripture that I could find -- maybe there's others that I haven't seen -- every single cry about a God who has abandoned, a God who doesn't care, a God who is absent, it's always aimed at God the Father. I don't recall ever anyone asking or making those kind of accusations to or about Jesus or about the Holy Spirit for that matter. I mean it was Jesus who came to earth specifically to show us how deeply his Father loved us. I mean *1 John* says: *God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent*

his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. And yet it's the Father alone who bears the brunt of our faithlessness. And in the case of Naomi and Ruth, it was rooted in the blindness of temporary pain that could not see that life was hard and that God was good. But once again we recognize that we have the privilege in the book of Ruth of flipping to the back of the book. We get to know that the pain that Ruth and Naomi are in right now is temporary and that it's only setting the stage for a joy that they both can't possibly imagine. And God knows this as well. And yes, he is okay with Naomi, with her grief and her pain and yes, even her indictment of God. And we know that because God has allowed many other indictments given by many other of his children when they too were locked in their own pain, a pain that refused to allow them to say that God is good because life was so hard. And whether it's Job saying: "What have I done to you, Watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your target, so that I have become a burden to you?" Or the prophet Habakkuk who said: How long, LORD, must I call for help and you do not listen or cry out to you about violence and you do not save? Or the psalmist who said: LORD, how long will You forget me? Forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? You see, it's the very writers of sacred scripture that God allowed the privilege of honestly challenging his goodness. I have a hard time believing that it doesn't hurt the heart of God to see his wisdom and power

misunderstood and his goodness denied. The fact is that God loves us enough and he loves truth enough that he gives us the freedom to express ourselves even when we couldn't be more wrong. I mean Naomi had everything perfectly backwards. When Naomi was thinking *the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me*, God was saying: *For I know the plans I have for you* -- *this is the LORD'S declaration* -- *"plans for your welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."* See the fact is God loves us enough to trade our present faithlessness for our future praise and thanksgiving.

You know I was thinking about the new song that we just sang this morning, that song *Is He Worthy* and I was really struck by one of the lines that the songwriter asks. In that song, he says or he asks, he says, "Does the Father truly love us?" and the chorus is, "He does." I was thinking about that. I said we would never ask that question of Jesus. Never. Because we know that the proof of his love is rooted in concrete fact, that 2,000 years ago he went to a cross and offered up his life in exchange for our sins. For some reason we mentally limit that sacrifice to Jesus when perhaps the greater agony is the Father himself having to withhold his hand and subordinate his power as he watches his beloved Son stripped and flogged and crucified on our behalf. Again, *1 John 4:9* says: *God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his One and*

Only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. So whether it's Naomi or Ruth or Bill or Sam or Susie or Mary, the fact is just what John 3:16 has always told us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And as the song we sang this morning says: Is it good that we remind ourself of this? It is. Let's pray.

Father, we just thank you for what you have done. I thank you, Lord, this is Mother's Day and we praise you and thank you for mothers, but I thank you today, Father, for what you have done. I thank you for the love that you poured out on us. I thank you for taking the abuse that we pour out on you. Lord, sometimes it is extraordinarily hard to say life is good -- life is hard but God is good. Sometimes they just don't seem to go together. I thank you, Lord, that you are faithful. I thank you that in the long run, in the long picture, the fact that you love us will be something that will be incredibly self-evident in eternity, and I pray that you would give us the faith and the grace and the ability to recognize that now. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.