

COMFORTING THE CALAMITOUS

Ruth 1:11-18

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A couple weeks ago, I was studying in Seattle at my daughter Anne's home. Shortly after we arrived, I was informed of a calamitous event that had fallen one of her neighbors. Just four doors up the street, a father and four-year-old son were walking in the forest just behind their house. As there has been an unusual abundance of rain in West Seattle since October, the ground is quite soft. As a result, a giant tree on the hillside of the forest suddenly fell upon the dad and boy. The father escaped with minor injuries, but the son was not so fortunate. His skull was shattered, but he is alive. He spent most of October in the hospital.

It has been two months since the accident, and the doctors still cannot confirm if there has been any brain damage. At present, the boy spends most of his day in a wheel chair and has some use of a walker. He has an older brother with whom he used to play soccer. It is rather traumatic for the whole family to see such an active young boy sit dully in a wheelchair.

This family does not yet know Jesus. Anne and our four grandchildren are reaching out to them in many practical ways. As you can imagine, the wife and mother has a lot of questions. She is riding an emotional roller coaster. The father, too, is wrestling with whether or not he is to blame. If there is a loving God, how could He allow such a thing?

How do we as ambassadors of Christ come alongside and help people work through such life changing events? This is something we will learn from our study of God's Word this morning.

We are in the midst of a study of the small, four-chapter Old Testament book of **Ruth**. Each chapter can be likened unto an act in a play. Hence, four chapters, four acts. We are in Act 1, in which a crisis, a famine, has majorly impacted the small Hebrew town of Bethlehem. Our story deals with a specific family trying to survive a drought.

In the first scene, covering **verses 1-5**, we learned that our heroine, Naomi, found herself in a crisis that had begun more than ten years earlier. A drought-caused famine drove Naomi, her husband, and two sons to flee their home in Bethlehem and temporarily relocate to the nearby foreign country of Moab, where there was water and available land, which they hoped would provide a temporary place to grow food and survive. It was not their plan to make this move permanent, but to stay there until the famine in Israel was over.

Shortly after they got settled in Moab, Naomi's husband died. Then her two sons married foreign Moabite wives. Ten years after this, her two sons died, leaving her a childless and grandchildren-less widow. Worse, she had no means by which to support herself and her two recently widowed and childless daughters-in-law. At that time, all three women were without men (providers and protectors) and without the hope of ever having a normal life.

In scene two, **verses 6-18**, we see the response of these three women. The first to respond was Naomi, when she got word from Bethlehem that the rains had returned and crops were being harvested. Upon learning of the cessation of the drought, in **verses 6-7**, Naomi committed to returning home. Without any fanfare, farewell party, or mention of their departure, Naomi and the two girls packed up and headed to Israel.

After the three women were well along their way to Bethlehem, Naomi wrestled with the question, "What kind of life could these two 25-year old girls look forward to in Israel as foreigners?" Her conclusion was, "Not much!" Hence, she deemed taking them with her was not in their best interest.

Beginning with **verse 8** and down through **verse 18**, Naomi had three verbal interchanges with her daughters-in-law, trying to convince them that it was in their best interest for the three of them to separate. She would go to her homeland of Bethlehem, and they should return to Moab.

In **verses 8-10**, we have the first verbal exchange between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. She began by blessing them for having been so wonderful to her. Then she told them that they must return home to Moab and their families, because it would be best for them. But, after a great deal of weeping

and tears among the three of them, in **verse 10**, the two girls refused to accept what Naomi had to say. They wanted to stay with Naomi. They did not want to leave her.

This morning, we pick up the story at **verse 11**, with Naomi's second interchange with Orpah and Ruth, her response to their refusal to leave her. You will see that, in no uncertain terms, Naomi strongly disagreed with the girls' commitment to stay with her. She resolutely gave them three logical/practical arguments for why they should return to their families in Moab.

Her first argument is given in **verse 11**. **“But Naomi said, ‘Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?’”**

The writer of **Ruth** presumes that the reader understands the Hebrew law of Levirate marriage, that a widow could marry their dead husband's closest male relative (brother, cousin) so that she would find provision and protection so as not to be unprovided for.

Hence, Naomi's first argument was, “Girls, I've been widowed for ten years. I'm an old woman. What man in his right mind would want to marry me? And even if I found some old blind fool who would wish to do so, what would be the chances at my age that I could even give birth to a child, let alone guarantee either of you that the child would be a son?” The obvious answer to such a question was, “Slim to none.”

Realizing these girls were not going to give up easily, Naomi gave the girls no chance to respond and moved quickly to her second argument, which was to answer the potential question of, “What if you did get married and did get pregnant?” But Naomi argued, **“¹²Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope [meaning hope that should bear another child], if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, ¹³would you therefore wait until they were grown?”**

In other word, “Ladies, are you going to wait around for another fifteen years to marry, when by then you will be forty years old and close to being beyond childbearing years yourself, gambling that I might bear a son for each of you?” Basically, Naomi was calling upon them to be realistic.

This leads to her third motivation for them to return to their homes. **“Would you therefore refrain from marrying?”** In other words, would they restrain their natural God-given impulses for fifteen years, remaining pure until the boys had grown up, to be remarried? Why do that when they would have better chances of finding a husband now, remaining in their homeland of Moab?

Naomi concluded that their decision to stick with her made no sense, and added emphatically, **“¹³No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.’ ¹⁴And they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.”**

Not liking the truth of what Naomi had said, but impressed by the reality of her arguments, Orpah saw that Naomi was right, kissed her mother-in-law to say farewell, and returned to Moab.

I would caution you from concluding that because Orpah agreed with Naomi and left, she was somehow less loyal, caring, or considerate of Naomi than Ruth. From the world’s perspective, Naomi’s case was solid. There was no evidence prior to this that Ruth was more loyal or closer to Naomi than Orpah. There is no evidence that Naomi felt more fondly of one over the other. There is no evidence that Orpah was selfishly ambitious. She was simply agreeing with Naomi, and doing what she had instructed. I suggest that this was not easy for Orpah, hence the emphasis on her weeping.

In reality, Ruth’s decision to stay with Naomi is what’s so unusual. To the spiritually naked eye, Ruth’s decision to stay with Naomi made no sense. The fact that she decided to continue on with Naomi is a sign that the Spirit of God was doing a providential predestined work in Ruth’s heart.

Ruth’s **“clinging”** to Naomi is an expression of loyalty, devotion, and commitment to stay the course and return to Israel with Naomi. This word **“clung”** is the same term used in **Genesis 2:24** of a husband’s instruction to **“Leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife.”** It demonstrates that Ruth was more interested in the needs of others than her own rights or desires to head back to Moab. She was not selfishly ambitious (which is not to say that Orpah was), but humble to the point that she chose to reject the natural

and obvious humanly wise course that most would take; but she chose to take the road less traveled, to serve her mother-in-law.

At this point, Naomi's disposition toward her lot in life is briefly exposed. With her statement, "**For the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me,**" and her declarations at the end of this chapter, we see that Naomi had become a bitter old woman who blamed God for her crisis. She saw herself as a target of God's overwhelming power and wrath.

Why do I say that? For two reasons: The first has to do with the circumstantial evidence that Naomi saw surrounding her situation. To her, the great loss of a husband and two sons, having no male heirs, and returning to Bethlehem destitute is absolutely humiliating. It was not a sign of God's favor toward her, and everyone back home would conclude likewise. They would think that God was not for her, but against her. He had rejected her. This conclusion was not true, which all will learn soon, but for the moment, that's what she believed.

The second reason I conclude that Naomi believed that she was suffering from the wrath of God against her has to do with the expression, "**The hand of the LORD is against me.**" It is used in **Exodus 9:3** to declare God's wrath that had struck Egypt with plagues; it is used again in **Deuteronomy 2:15** to explain God's wrath and the putting to death of a generation of Israelites in the desert; and in **Judges 2:15** it is used to clarify God's wrath against the apostate nation of Israel in the land of Canaan.

Because of this common understanding of this statement, "**The hand of the LORD is against me,**" Naomi has clearly concluded that for whatever reason, God had turned against her. But it was a wrong interpretation, as we will see. So here is a lesson for all of us to consider when we or those near us face a calamitous event: Hardship and distress are not necessarily signs of God's discipline in our lives. This lesson will be driven home with each event that follows in our story, beginning with **chapter 2**.

In **verses 15-18** we have our third interchange, this time between Naomi and Ruth. It produced a new alliance between them. In this third exchange, the tables were turned. Naomi opened with a short statement, but it is Ruth's speech that dominates these verses. We read:

¹⁵Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. ¹⁷Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD [Yahweh] do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.” ¹⁸When she saw she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Take notice of Naomi’s statement about Orpah’s return to her people and gods. It’s significant. It is something that the Hebrew reader of the time fully understood. Within the context of ancient Near Eastern perceptions of national identity, a citizen of Moab would have been loyal to their land, the people, their king, and their gods. Naomi was suggesting that Ruth follow after her sister in being a loyal Moabitess. Ruth’s refusal to do so speaks volumes. It raises the question in the reader’s mind, “Why would she do such a thing?” The answer is part of the message of the whole book: there has been an ongoing major providential work of the Spirit of God taking place in Ruth’s heart for the past ten years. Yahweh has been wooing Ruth to Himself through her relationship with Naomi and her family.

During the previous years of living with Naomi and her sons, she had seen something different about their way of life. Ruth attributed it to their faith in Yahweh. Maybe it was something about the way they spoke of God, as though they could be related to Him in a personal way in their day to day life. Whatever it was, Ruth wanted more of whatever they had, in spite of the challenges this family faced. Ruth’s decision was clear. She embraced Naomi, her people, her land, and her God.

In turn, Naomi realized that this was not a foolish, quick decision on Ruth's part. Naomi sensed that Ruth's swearing an oath by the name of Yahweh, in **verse 17**, was her claiming of Yahweh as her chosen God.

What could Naomi, a believer who had lost her ability to believe that God cared about her, say to the faith declaration of this non-Hebrew, Ruth? Nothing! This older woman, believing she had been rejected by God, could only turn toward home and welcome Ruth's company.

Let's stop at this point, and consider what we can learn from Naomi's calamity and complaint that, because of her hardship, God was against her. As Christians, we will often be with people, like my daughter's neighbors, who suddenly fall victim to a calamity. When calamities strike, people struggle. They want answers. Who is to blame? Is God against me? Why has this happened? How do we minister to those who are hurting?

Unfortunately, we Christians have been pretty insensitive to those who are facing challenges when we admonish them to stifle any complaint, questioning of God, or accusation against God for the situation and replace it with praise and thanksgiving for suffering. I believe we have mistakenly taken the Apostle Paul's admonition to rejoice even in suffering (**Colossians 1:24; 1Thessalonians 5:16**) to mean that any complaint against God constitutes a sign of disloyalty or lack of faith.

I submit to you that the worshiping community in ancient Israel and the early church would at first accept, not stifle, such a complaint and regard it as normal in such a situation. They would not prohibit a believer to express themselves in this manner.

My proof? Consider what the Hebrew faith tradition had taught Naomi. First and foremost, Israelites, at God's instruction in the Law, were to trust in God's protection and care. They were taught that if one sought God's face and trusted in Him, one would expect God to bless. To rebel against God, they were taught, would mean his curse. When the opposite happened, it left the believer confused. It was quite normal for one in that situation to ask God, "What happened?" Oftentimes, they would wrongly conclude that either God was punishing them or had rejected them or both.

Hence, in Naomi's situation, she voiced a traditional statement of complaint: **"The LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me."** (1:21) But had God? There is no statement of evidence of it in **Ruth**. Had God brought down calamity as judgment or had He allowed it for some other good? It's not easily understood. In today's life, as in Naomi's case, each situation needs to be considered on its own merit. But in route to understanding one's situation, it is normal to complain and question.

If you disagree, consider the psalms. Most Christians love the psalms, for they speak to the concerns of our hearts in good times and difficult times. Are you aware that over a third of all the canonical psalms belong to the genre of complaint or lament? More than fifty of the one hundred fifty psalms are written by people who are suffering, complaining, and questioning God about their situation. We seldom read or use these lament psalms in our public worship, but the Hebrews did. Why don't we? We are told in **1 Timothy 3:16-17** that, **"All Scripture is inspired of God and is profitable."** These lament psalms have their place in the worship and life of the faithful believer. But for some reason, we don't recognize that godly people wrote those songs, and God purposefully left them there for our instruction and comfort to help us know that He understands what we are feeling when life doesn't make sense or we feel we are suffering unjustly.

The best-known complaint psalm to most Christians is the one quoted by Jesus on the cross: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** (**Psalms 22:1; Mark 15:34**). I haven't heard of anyone saying that Jesus should not have been complaining! But sometimes we hear that said of other Christians when they are struggling. "Stop complaining and start rejoicing!" In **Psalm 22**, the one afflicted not only complains about treatment by God (**22:1-21**), but also about mistreatment by evildoers (**22:16-18**), and about the shame of the situation (**22:6-7**).

In our passage, Naomi vented her complaint or charge against God. Did you notice that nowhere in the book does God condemn her for doing so, any more than we read of God the Father condemning Jesus for crying out, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** Hence, as God's ambassadors of Jesus, we need to take a lesson from His handbook of instruction on how to properly deal with people in His name. One lesson to apply when reaching

out to comfort those in calamity is to listen and give them time to vent. Don't be in such a hurry for others to get over their pain and rejoice in their suffering. It often takes time for God's truth and perspective to take root in their souls.

Our Biblical ancestors of faith took God's promise of love and care to include the freedom to cry out to their loving and understanding God when they were hurting and confused and felt like they were forsaken of God. Otherwise, why do we have the psalms and Jesus' example? They found that God was not only big enough to handle their anger, but that God often would respond to their complaint, not with a lightning bolt, but with the love and care they had come to expect. We will see that with Naomi.

As a victim of unexplained and seemingly undeserved suffering, Naomi appropriately complained about God's treatment of her. Equally, thus far we note that Naomi did not see that God had answered her complaint by gifting her with Ruth, even before Naomi voiced her complaint. Presently, Naomi was blinded by her grievous circumstances, but she would eventually see that God was using this dire situation to bless Naomi and Israel. But at this dark moment, she did not see it.

Also note that younger Ruth wisely did not say to Naomi, "You should not charge God with unfairly turning against you. You should rejoice in your trials." No, she remained quiet and just listened.

Please understand, I am not ignoring the command in **James 1:2**, "**Consider it all joy when you face various trials**," or Paul's exhortation to rejoice in our suffering. We are to come to a place, in time, where we can do that. But don't demand that others do that as their first response. It is not normal for them to do so, nor does God expect or demand it. It takes time for people to emotionally work through calamities. We were not created with emotions that function like light switches--quickly turn off and on. We are more like some of those newer energy saving light bulbs that take time to fully glow with the light of truth we know.

When we deny Christians the right to complain about their problems to God, we put them in a difficult position. Unwarranted suffering makes us angry, as it did our forbearers in the faith. Like them, we need to attribute unexplained

disaster to some cause. If our sin has directly led to our suffering, then we shouldn't blame God. We must take responsibility for it. If I drive a car while impaired by drugs or alcohol and I injure myself, that's on me. If we are angry, we still mustn't sin.

But sometimes our suffering comes as a result of an inexplicable misfortune, like a tree suddenly falling in a forest. When that happens, we need to acknowledge that God obviously allowed that event, and thus we should give people space to approach God to ask why, and let Him meet them where they are. To prevent or discourage people from taking time to figure things out will only lead to anger.

I recently read one highly respected conservative scholar who suggested the following:

When a believer finds themselves in an inexplicable misfortune, we ought to take on Naomi's dialogue with God. If we do, we may well find ourselves in a much more intense and satisfying conversation with God in the midst of life's most anguishing moments. Besides receiving a potential response from God in His perfect timing, as Naomi did, just such conversation might do more to handle our rage and heal our spirit than embracing the present stance, which refuses to presume on God's promises of care and provision.¹

Second, I would take a lesson from this text and the book of **Job**. Do not be too quick to judge. If you have read the book of **Job**, you know that no sooner did Job bury his sons after their sudden inexplicable deaths, than three of Job's friends came to confront him about his sin which, they presumed, must have been the cause of God's judgment against Job's family. Job was a righteous man, and we learn from the book that the calamity that befell him

had nothing to do with his sin. Later, when Job finally questioned God with “Why me?” God did not judge him for his questioning or for venting a complaint. God used the opportunity to instruct Job about Who He is. When God’s instruction was complete, Job did not immediately receive an answer to his question of “Why me?” He simply learned to trust in an all-knowing God who could provide and protect. It was right after that that God blessed Job and revealed to him the cause behind the calamity, which was the result of a spiritual battle between Satan and God.

But quickly, someone who has read the book of **Job** might say, “The book of Job doesn’t tell us that God told Job about the heavenly battle.” And I would say, “You are right.” But if God never did tell Job, then how was he, the author of **Job**, able to write the first two chapters of his book? Hence, God must have explained to him much later what had previously taken place. Through the calamity, God blessed Job with a greater understanding of his God and life being lived in a fallen world.

Hence, we learn another lesson, this time from Job, which we can take with us as we stand by those who are living in the wake of some human calamity: we are to keep in mind that God uses calamities to draw us to Himself, to teach us of Himself, and to fulfill His purposes. We will see this same lesson come to fruition for Naomi in the book of **Ruth**.

