

Looking into a Broken Heart

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We're glad you're with us tonight as we return to the study of the book of Ruth with a message tonight that I've titled "Looking into a Broken Heart," and that's what we want to consider as we look into Naomi's broken heart as she enters into Bethlehem and I think that by the time we're done this evening, that you're going to have some clear concepts and some clear principles to help you think through some of the difficulties in your own life.

One of the wonderful things about biblical principles are that they're not specific to particular circumstances. I don't need to give you, "Well, here's what you do if you're having troubles at work or if you're having troubles in your marriage or if you're having troubles with our shins or whatever." We don't need to think in such microscopic terms. Biblical principles transcend our circumstances and give us guidance that the Holy Spirit can take and apply to each of your lives and in each of your hearts even though your circumstances are all very much different. So that's one of the wonderful things about teaching the Bible without a desire, without a conscious intent to try to target a particular audience or a particular need. God is so powerful, his Scriptures are so rich and profound and the Holy Spirit is so wise and effective in his work in our lives that we can teach Scripture and know that God will use it in each of your lives without our even trying.

One of the things that I often hear and heard from someone in Colorado. If you're watching, Bob, this is about you in Colorado. I get comments from time to time where people say, "That message was just for me," as if it didn't matter to anyone else. Well, what's funny is that you hear that three or four times about the same message and I don't have the heart to tell people it wasn't just for you. But what that shows you is simply the way the Spirit of God takes his preached word and uses it in the lives of his people. So every time that we come together, I have the expectation that God will use his word in your life and every time that we come together, you should come with a sense of expectation and anticipation that God has something for you in whatever text we turn to because God uses his word to bless his people and that's why we teach God's people God's word here at Truth Community Church. We believe in the power of the word and it's a delight to turn to it.

Well, last week here on Tuesday night, we saw Naomi and Ruth on the road to Bethlehem, as it were, and it ended up with them arriving in Bethlehem and we saw that

Ruth turned from the only people and gods that she had ever known to follow the one true God. Look at verse 16 with me just by way of reminder. You see such a beacon of light in Ruth's testimony and her expression of faith, her expression of repentance, although she was a foreign woman. She said to Naomi, "Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me." So Ruth, what we saw last time, these are words expressing her faith and her repentance. The object of her faith was not Naomi, but the God of Israel, Yahweh. She says, "That God will be my God," and she identifies with the covenant name Yahweh there in verse 17. So we see a preview of Gentiles being brought into the people of God with Ruth coming to saving faith in this manner through the testimony of Naomi.

Now, humanly speaking, disaster had fallen on Naomi and yet, as we saw last time, far beyond the realm of human comprehension, far beyond the realm of anything that was manifested in her lifetime even, God had not abandoned Naomi. His purpose was glorious and he used this encounter with Ruth in order to further the line which would ultimately lead to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in human flesh. We understand all of that in hindsight. At the time they're on the road to Bethlehem, they didn't realize the significance of what was happening but Ruth had grown up in the darkness of idolatry and as the Lord would have it, she became an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's just incalculably glorious what God does when his providence is at work and so we thank him for that but we understand it all in hindsight but for tonight, what we need to be mindful of is this: that Naomi didn't see any of that. She didn't have the benefit of the light that we now have as Scripture unfolds what happened in subsequent days as a result of her encounter with Ruth, but Naomi didn't have the benefit of any of that when she turned to Bethlehem. And you can see in the passage that I read earlier that she was pretty discouraged, in fact, she uses the word "bitter" to describe her then present experience.

Look at verse 19 and 20 with me. Scripture says that, "they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them," because of Ruth and Naomi, "and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Don't call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.'" Well, here you're seeing the expression of a broken and a bitter heart, really, by her own words, by her own testimony. What I want to do this evening is just to take a little bit of time to kind of probe into Naomi's heart and what she's saying here and at the end of that time as we just go through the narrative to look at three principles that would help us respond well to sorrow. And whether you're in sorrow now, whether you've been in sorrow in the past, or whether sorrow is still ahead for you, sorrow is inevitable, even in the Christian life. It's just inevitable that we're going to face times of sorrow and that doesn't need to scare us or intimidate us or to do anything to make us shrink back from pursuing the Christian life. We just take advantage of an opportunity like this to prepare ourselves in advance so that we know what to do when the time comes, or if you're here with a heavy heart tonight, to give you some things that you can latch onto very practical

in nature that will give you a sense of how to respond. So I'm delighted that you're here with us tonight to be able to enjoy this time together.

Let's just look at the narrative very quickly here in verse 19, they came to Bethlehem and when they had come to Bethlehem, they enter into the city, it says, all the city there, verse 19, "was stirred because of them, and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?'" Well, you know, when you think about what that's saying and picture the scene there as it's playing out, it tells you something about Naomi's prior life. Years before they ever went into Moab, somehow Naomi was someone who was known in the city and after the 10 or more years had passed, she was still remembered and so it gives us a sense that when Naomi and Elimelech left Bethlehem in some manner, they were prominent people. Prominent enough to be known. Prominent enough to be remembered 10 years later when she shows up and they say, "Naomi is back," and people respond to that. The city was stirred. The women were buzzing with excitement. There was a hum about their return and yet there was some kind of hesitation over what they saw. "Is this Naomi?" Perhaps the hardship of the intervening years had aged her in a way that you and I can understand. You know when people go through really hard times and you can just see that they are aged. Whatever you think about politics, it's very common as you observe the youthful pictures of men who enter into the office of US President, by the end of their term they are grayed and you put the pictures side-by-side, the weight of their responsibility has taken a physical toll on them. It has weighed on their countenance. I was with a man who has gone through some very great hardship over the past 18 months or so and I saw him for the first time and he walked into the room and it looked like he had aged 15 years in 15 months.

Well, you know what that's like and it's possible that this is what they were saying, "Is this Naomi? She doesn't look too good. She doesn't look too good." Perhaps that's what they are saying when they say, "Is this Naomi?" Perhaps it's something completely different. Perhaps it's an expression of disbelieving joy. "After all these years, Naomi is back! It's so good to see her. I never thought we would see her again. Is it really Naomi? I need to pinch myself!" Scripture doesn't explain exactly what they meant, what was motivating them, but we see that they were surprised to see her. Something about it surprised them and they couldn't quite believe what they were seeing, and for our purposes here tonight, it's just enough to recognize that they knew her in the past. They remembered her years later. It says something about the imprint of Naomi's life on them beforehand. They knew her and in some manner welcomed her back to the city after being gone for so many years. The text notes the buzz but it doesn't explain what's behind it.

Now, what's interesting as you read on is that Naomi was in no mood for a celebration. She wasn't looking for confetti and a tickertape parade to welcome her back. She was in no mood for frivolity at all. Look at verse 20, "She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.'" Now, she's saying, "Call me by another name." Now, in our culture that sounds kind of strange and why would you do that? Why would you change your name? We don't go and change our name. I don't show up and ask you to call me Fred and you don't show up and ask me to call you

Susan unless your name is Susan, but I don't think there are any Susans in here but that has nothing to do with the text so let's move on. But in that culture, names were sometimes changed in order to reflect changed circumstances and you know this even if you haven't really paid particular attention to it in Scripture to think about it this way, but you know abundant examples of this from your reading of Scripture. In Genesis, God changed Abram's name to Abraham. He changed Jacob's name to Israel. Daniel to Belteshazzar. That wasn't at God's instigation, that was at the king's instigation when they were in Babylon, but you see this pattern of names being changed. This was common in that ancient culture.

What Naomi is saying is, "I want to be called by a different name," and she's referring to the fact that the name Naomi expresses the idea of pleasantness. There is a joyful satisfying aspect to her name in terms of the way that that name was understood back then. Mara is a Hebrew name by contrast that expresses bitterness. So Naomi, as she's being somewhat welcomed here, there is a welcoming committee for her, she shows up and she deflates the party. She takes the oxygen out of the room and says, "Don't call me Naomi. Call me bitter because the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me." Look at it there in verse 20 with me again, "She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.'" She shows up and she's making a declaration, "My circumstances have changed. I am sad. My circumstances are bitter to me. This is the life that God has given to me and understand that I'm coming a different woman and it's kind of sad as I show up here tonight or today," whenever they showed up.

Now, what is she saying here? You know, this sounds kind of brash, doesn't it, to our ears. She says, "Call me by a different name for," because, verse 20, "the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." And notice what she's doing here; we want to pay particularly close attention here because we're going to come back to this later at the end of the message. She uses the name Shaddai to refer to God and it's an expression of his might, it's an expression of his power, and what she's saying is, "My circumstances have changed and God is the author of my changed circumstances. God has assigned a portion to me that is sad and bitter in my life." Now, I don't believe that she's accusing God of injustice here. She's not making an accusation of moral evil against God. Rather, she's simply acknowledging his sovereign control over her life and saying, "My circumstances reflect what God has done, what God has appointed for me, and it's a bitter and I'm sad and it weighs on me heavily. My heart, my friends, is broken. My heart is heavy as I come back to Bethlehem tonight."

And she says, look at verse 21, she goes out and she gives some further explanation of exactly what she's referring to and why her heart is bitter. She says, "I went out full," referring back to when they left Bethlehem to go to Moab. When she says, "I went out full," she's not saying that, "We went out rich in material prosperity." They left because there was a famine. They left because they felt like they needed to find sustenance in another land. So she's not saying that, "I went out as a rich and prosperous woman," in a material sense, all she's saying is, "I went out with a husband and with two sons. I had my family and I had my man and I had my sons with me and I went out and everything that

makes a mother's life rich. Everything that makes a woman who's committed to her family meaningful." She says, "I went out with that and I come back without it. The men are buried. Their bones are back in Moab." So she simply means that when these ladies in Bethlehem last saw her she had a husband and two sons, now she comes back empty-handed. Those men are gone.

She comes back. She's saying here in this verse again, note this for later discussion, she's saying, "I'm coming back alone. I'm empty," and it's as though from Naomi's perspective, it's as though she is being punished. She says there in verse 21, "Why do you call me Naomi," why do you refer to me by a name that means pleasant, "since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?" She says, "It's like I'm being punished. It's like God himself took the witness stand against me in a court of law, testified against me and then in his role as Judge, declared the penalty against me as well." She says, "the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me," and she is attributing the fullness of her circumstances to the hand of God. It's very sobering. It's kind of depressing, isn't it? I'm sure the buzz of the ladies kind of died out and they said, "Well, this isn't much fun," but, you know, this echoes what Naomi had said earlier.

Look at verse 13, when she was talking with her daughters. You get some insight into her theology here when she was bidding Orpah and Ruth to leave, she said, "Would you refrain from marrying? Would you wait until my sons were grown? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." So she sees her circumstances coming from God, they're difficult and she interprets that as God being somehow opposed to her in this time of her life.

Now, it's interesting with how dark Naomi paints the picture. Again, look back at verse 21 there just to keep this fresh in your mind, or verse 20, "the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me; the LORD has brought me back empty. He has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me." There are actually some commentators who interpret Naomi as expressing hope in this part of the story. What they say is that she's referring to God's sovereignty, she's referring to his might and power, and so she's actually expressing the fact that God's in control here and that maybe it will get better in the future, is the way that they try to interpret it. Well, let me say this: I will not break fellowship with anyone who holds that view. This is not so important that we need to attach a whole lot of significance to it and I am sympathetic to any impulse by anyone to cast a biblical character in the best light possible if the evidence is somehow ambiguous. I don't like Bible teachers who come and consistently are critical of biblical characters and saying, "They should have done this or they should have done that," and just taking a negative view of the people that God worked through and recorded his history through them. I don't like that. I don't think that's a healthy manner of interpretation for us to stand in judgment of biblical characters if the record is at best ambiguous. We need to be very careful about that. These were the people that God worked his purposes in his redemptive history through.

But here with Naomi, I have to part with that sympathetic view of what she's saying here. Whatever else we say when we read these verses, when you read this passage, you don't read this passage and get the idea that she's filled with hope, do you? That she's optimistic. She's not presenting an optimistic view here. She's not filled with hope looking forward, she's talking about her present circumstances. She sees it as from the hand of God and she's not talking about tomorrow. She's saying, "What I've got right now is bad and this is what the Lord has given to me and it hurts and I'm bitter about it. Call me bitter," she says. That is not a triumphant perspective and so I have to differ with those commentators who try to put a positive spin on what she's saying here, but what can we say about it? She is recognizing divine sovereignty so we'll give that. We'll put that mark in a favorable column. She recognizes God's sovereignty and so there's at least some element of truth to what she's saying, but the truth has not comforted her heart. The truth has actually turned her into someone who is discouraged.

Here's the thing, beloved, and this gets really personal really quick, actually, because I've heard over the years people says, "Well, you know, God is sovereign in this," and there is this sense not of hope that an appeal to sovereignty brings but rather one of resignation of spirit that says, "God is sovereign and therefore I can't do anything about it and I just have to carry on and be in the weight of this circumstance but God is in control here, even though I don't understand and it's really, actually, making me a bitter person in my life." That seems to be what we're seeing here with Naomi.

Notice this, mark this, beloved, this is really, really important: what we're talking about here goes to the very spinal cord of your spiritual life. I mean, we're going right to the nerve center that makes every spiritual muscle move which forces your heart to beat. Everything is wrapped up into what we're talking about right here. It's that important. Whatever we say about Naomi's view of divine sovereignty, notice that it did not comfort her with prospects of a brighter future. It simply tortured her over her existing circumstances.

One of the commentators that I appreciate on the book of Ruth said this and I quote, and listen carefully to what he says. He says, "Naomi may have come back home in faith but hers is a flawed faith. Unable to see human causation in Israel's famine and in her own trials, the woman the neighbors greet is a bitter old woman. She does, indeed, ascribe sovereignty to God," but watch this, "but this is a sovereignty without grace, an omnipotent power without compassion, a judicial will without mercy." That's a mouthful but basically what he's saying is that Naomi is viewing God's sovereignty in isolation from his other attributes. She just attributes the control of God and it's not really much different from simply saying that, "This is what fate has assigned me to," fate being an irrational nonexistent force that is blind in its application and just forces circumstances into a particular way without regard to the person whom it affects. That Naomi, her view of divine sovereignty has led her to a point of bitterness. Listen, beloved, if your view of divine sovereignty leads you into a spirit of resignation, of discouragement and giving up, then you haven't begun to understand the wonder and the glory of divine sovereignty. You're not thinking about it rightly at all as we will see in just a few moments. But

Naomi here, while she's anchored in divine sovereignty, she's missing an awfully lot about the character of the God that she says that she knows.

Well, verse 22 here. The chapter closes with a summary statement that kind of wraps up the first chapter for us and brings the circle back into focus here. Naomi is not just at the gates of Bethlehem as this closes, she's now in Bethlehem and this is what the final verse of chapter 1 emphasizes for us, "So Naomi returned." In this manner. I have completed my description of the return of Naomi to Bethlehem here. "So she returned," in thus manner," verse 22, "and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab." Then he adds this final sentence, "And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest." That's going to become important and kind of sets the stage for a transition into chapter 2 which we will look at in days to come. So there is this summary in verse 22. It provides an additional fact about the barley harvest which places this time, roughly in our calendar year around April, maybe early May, and prepares us for what is to come later in the book. So our story has been advanced. We see what happens in their arrival at Bethlehem. They are greeted. Naomi is remembered and we see something about what's going on inside Naomi's grieving and broken heart.

Now, as we've done in our earlier exposition of this book so far, I want to ask a question and it's this: what can we say about this portion of Ruth in terms of what it means for our lives? We're going to work on the assumption that Naomi's faith was real but it was flawed; it was immature; it wasn't complete; it wasn't yet perfected. We could say that Naomi's faith really at heart was just like yours and mine, that our faith isn't perfect, that our faith is also flawed perhaps in different ways, but what can we say about a living faith that was real but flawed in Naomi's life and how can we assess what's going on with the benefit of hindsight and further revelation that Naomi did not have available to her? What can you and I look at in Naomi's life and what can we take away in terms of how we respond to our own sorrow and our own broken hearts and our own difficulties? You know, sometimes it's acute difficulties in that they're sudden and they're pressing and they're right now. Sometimes it's chronic and it just lasts over time and there is just the grind of it. It's not that there's one particular crisis, but just the grind of a particularly difficult situation that has no end date in sight. How can we, wherever we're at on that, how can we respond?

Let me just say this by way of perspective. I just want to acknowledge and put out a measure of bias that I know that I have whenever I discuss these topics and dealing with people who are discouraged. There are some whose bent is to try to rebuke the one who is discouraged, "You need to pull yourself up by your bootstraps or don't you remember who God is?" and it becomes a matter of chastisement and scolding them for being discouraged. I don't like that approach. I don't think that's a good way to deal with people who have a broken heart. I'm very sympathetic having gone through my own dark nights in years gone by. I'm very sympathetic to how difficult it is and the weight that it brings to bear on a mind and it's just hard to find any place to get a foothold to stand and you're struggling and it's discouraging and you don't want to be like this but just day after day, it's really hard. I get that and I understand that and I'm sympathetic to it. So I view Naomi with sympathy even though we say her faith was flawed at the time.

So here we're not looking to pick at Naomi and say, "Look, she should have seen this, this and this," rather we just want to take having looked into her broken heart, we want to say, "What can we see that would help us going forward?" That's our goal here tonight and we're about to say, we say with sympathy to those of you that are struggling and yet we believe that this is what God would have you to hear and that can shift and leverage your perspective into something that is more positive and fruitful and encouraging for you. There is really no doubt about that.

So I just want to give you three things that we see from Naomi here, perhaps, certainly things that she failed in that can give us the grounds to succeed in our own lives going forward. What are we going to say? First of all, here's a first point of application: find reasons for gratitude despite your hardship. Find reasons for gratitude despite your hardship. The New Testament tells us, "In everything give thanks for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus," 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

Now, what can we say about Naomi here? Let's take another look at Naomi and then try to figure out something that you and I can apply to our own lives. Here's what Naomi said there in verse 21, look at it with me, "I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty." "The Almighty has afflicted me. I am empty and I am afflicted." Okay, I know what she means by that. The men in her life are gone, but to say she's empty, is that true? That's not true. That is not a right thing for her to say. God had taken the men in her life away from her but had he left her utterly alone and utterly deserted? No. Not at all. Nothing is said in this but the text gives you the picture as though Ruth, her daughter-in-law, is standing at her elbow as this is being said. Naomi was not alone. She didn't have what she wanted maybe, but what she had at her side was a daughter-in-law who said, "I will abandon my people to be with you. I will give my life in devotion to you." And in the clouded chaos of her mind, Naomi apparently overlooked that and discounted and dismissed it as if it didn't even exist.

That's not right. If she had been thinking properly she could have said something like, "You know, the Lord brought me back and I don't have my men but I am grateful that at least Ruth is with me." That would've been right. Naomi could only say that she was empty by ignoring several things that were right in front of her. Let me give you three right there on the text. 1. A city full of women welcomed her back and welcomed her back to the Promised Land. She was coming back to her homeland and a city full of women form the welcoming committee to meet her. "Naomi, we remember you! I can't believe you're back!" She says, "I'm empty." Well, not really, Naomi. Understand what you're saying. I sympathize with the sorrow of your family loss but you're not thinking truly when you say in such absolute terms that you have nothing. That's not true. As we already said, she had a faithful daughter-in-law at her side. It wasn't the blood relation that she had mentioned but God had given her a sister in the faith to accompany her on her journey back home who had pledged her loyalty to her, who loved her, who was with her to help take care of her. Naomi, before you say you're empty, you need to look over at Ruth. Had she known the truth about Ruth, she would realize that an ancestor of the Messiah was at her elbow pledged to meet her every need. She wasn't truly empty, she

just wasn't seeing it for what it was. Finally, they arrive back there at the end of verse 22, they arrived at the time of the barley harvest. So there was food just ahead and so there's material provision. There is spiritual provision through the relationships with these women going back into the Promised Land. There is relational provision with Ruth. She wasn't empty. Ah, I know that the sorrow was controlling her tongue when she spoke but that wasn't right.

Well, let's you and me, rather than turning this into a council whereby we arraign Naomi at the bar of our own thoughts, let's you and me pivot from Naomi to our own situations here. Here's what you need to do tonight in the midst of your affliction. Yeah, your difficulty may be severe and it's troubling and we don't diminish that. We sympathize. Scripture says to weep with those who weep; that's not what we're talking about here right now, though. We're talking about how you internally in your own heart assess your circumstances and move beyond the despair and discouragement and the introspection into something that is more productive spiritually. How do you do that? Well, you need to take some time to look around and look at your situation with a new perspective and say, "Okay, this is hard but where are the tokens of favor that I can give thanks for and rightly acknowledge the provision of God?" Do you have food? Do you have covering? Paul says in the New Testament, "With those, we'll be content." Do you have some family? Do you have some friends that will share in your sorrows and your joys, even though other things are difficult? Other friends have abandoned you and betrayed you? If you have that, can't you at least give thanks even if it wasn't the relationship that you wanted to be present in your life? Naomi didn't have her husband and her sons with her, has God supplied someone else who is a faithful friend? Well, can't you give thanks for that? It seems like you're alone in life, but if you're here and you're any kind of part of our church family, there's 200 people in this body that care about you.

You're not alone and so you need to take yourself at hand and say, "Okay, I need to step back from my protestations of despair and I'll at least give thanks, this won't make the big thing go away, but I'll at least give thanks for these littler things that I see." That's a right way to respond, to give thanks to God. Every one of you, I say this in love, I say this to help you, not to scold you: every one of you, your affliction may be difficult but there are tokens of God's favor all about your life and you need to honor God and to respect him enough to acknowledge those tokens even in the midst of your sorrow. That's the only right thing to do. Naomi should have said, "I'm thankful that we're here in the harvest. I'm so sorrowful but Ruth is here and, ladies, it's good to see you too," rather than simply ascribing a bitter circumstance to divine sovereignty and say, "Call me bitter because I don't like life right now." You and I should rise above that, shouldn't we?

Secondly, I love this next one. You and I have the benefit of knowing what comes ahead in chapters 2, 3 and 4. We know that Ruth meets Boaz and they get married and they have a son and Naomi gets to hold her grandson and then that son starts the line that leads to David that leads to Christ. We get to see everything; we have the benefit of knowing the end of the story in a way that Ruth didn't. But do you know what? Think about it with me here. Put yourself in Ruth's circumstances knowing the full story and say to yourself this, "If Ruth had only known what was going to happen, she wouldn't have felt that way.

If God had just shown her ahead of time, then there wouldn't have been all this discouragement." Well, look, it's the same way for you in your sorrow. There is unfolding of God's goodness that's still ahead of you despite your present sorrow, despite your present family circumstances. There is all kinds of goodness ahead that simply hasn't played out in time for you yet. We know that's true because God says that "he works all things together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose."

So what do we say about it? I nearly forgot to mention the point here. Here's the second point. The first one was: find reasons for gratitude despite your hardship. Look around and give thanks for the tokens of God's favor that are right there around you now that perhaps you're overlooking because you're focused on something negative. But secondly, oh, this is so important! Do not judge providence prematurely. Don't think that you understand the outcome of your present circumstances and declare it to be a bad bitter providence because you don't know that. Naomi's bitterness clouded – watch this, so very important – Naomi's bitterness clouded any perspective she had that God might restore her fortunes in the future. She left no room in these expressions that are recorded for us in Scripture for future grace; for future mercy; for future blessing that God might have in store but hasn't been manifested yet in the present.

Listen, beloved, think through the Scriptures with me. Did not God restore Job's fortunes in chapter 42 of Job? Yeah, at the beginning of the book he lost his family, he lost his health, he lost his wealth. He lost it all and suffered miserably under the hand of miserable counselors; suffered miserably physically; was tortured by trying to work out the divine purpose in his life and during that time it was very, very dark for him, but was that the end of it? Did Job not serve a God who restored his fortunes in the end? Was his sorrow not simply for a time to serve God's purposes but God's favor and blessing was shown at the outcome of it all? Think about our Lord Jesus Christ suffering in Gethsemane, praying urgently, "O God, let this cup pass from me." The intensity of the moment so great that he's sweating, as it were, drops of blood. "Father, please." Then the Roman soldiers come and they carry him off and they scourge him and they crucify him and he breathes his last and he's pushed into the tomb and laid out lifeless and the stone is rolled over the entrance. Dark time. If you were to stand in the midst of that moment and say, "This moment exhausts the purposes of God. It's over for Christ. He's dead. He's buried. What can we other than this is one dark night with no hope to come."

That isn't how it turned out, was it? The burial was simply a passageway to the resurrection, to ultimate triumph, to displaying his glory and his resurrection for 40 days and then ascending back to his throne room in heaven where he still reigns in glory, interceding for us, one day to return in glory and triumph and righteousness. His death, his crucifixion, wasn't the end of the story. The purposes of God had sorrow and pain and suffering and substitution for us for a time, but it wasn't the end. This is God's pattern, people, beloved. This is what God does. He brings his people through sorrow for a time to sanctify them, to humble us, to teach us to look dependently to him, but he is never doing that simply to inflict sorrow upon you with no greater good purpose in mind. Let us never think such meager thoughts about God like that.

Look, almost every one of you in this room believes in the sovereignty of God. Naomi did. She said, "The Almighty has afflicted me." Well look, beloved, if God is Almighty to afflict you and to bring suffering into your life and sorrow into your life that seems to shatter your world and he has the power to do that and the prerogative to do that, don't you think that he also has the power to deliver you from it eventually when it comes time and it pleases him? That he has the power to do that? If he can bring Christ from the grave, surely he can deal with your lesser situation and bring good and blessing to you even though you're suffering right now, can't he? On what basis then, do we allow ourselves to be enveloped in a darkness that admits no light of hope? That's not right. God is worthy of more trust from us than that.

So what you and I need to do when our heart is broken is this: in light of who Christ is, in light of who God is, trusting in his love and goodness and mercy, you and I should aim for a spiritual life that has an element of triumphant hope even when there is nothing external that seems to prompt it. God is worthy of that. That is the only right way for you to respond to the grace that saved you from your sins is to say, "Yes, Lord, this is really hard and I don't hide it and I won't pretend it's anything different, but I look beyond what I can see to what you have revealed in your word and the way that you have dealt with me in the past and, Lord, I unconditionally trust you to bring me out of this affliction when you deem it right. And when you act in this way, Lord, I know that it will be good and it will be joyful and I'm going to let that future joy flavor the way that I respond to my difficulty now." We walk by faith, not by sight, and our faith is not simply a blind subjective feeling that it will get better by and by. No, the object of our faith is the triumphant Lord Jesus Christ who loved us enough to suffer and give himself up for us in offering to God to pay for our sins.

Oh, beloved, whatever else you do, don't judge providence prematurely. Hasn't Scripture already revealed to you what the outcome of your sorrow is? 1 John 3:2, we will see him face-to-face; we will be like him for we will see him as he is. That's the outcome of every one of your sorrows, face-to-face with a glorious loving Savior. Well, you know, when these glorious truths from Scripture start to break into our hearts and start to shape our perspective, all of a sudden rather than working to try to find hope, you have to start working to cling to your despair because this just so powerfully overwhelms every other consideration: the goodness of Christ; the hope of our future reward; being with him forever. The worst of it for us in this life is temporary. The longest of it is temporary. The depth of it ends in the highest glories of blessing that mind cannot conceive.

We've been richly blessed, for God to choose us and to bring us into his family; for God to set his eternal love upon us. Beloved, whatever else you do in response to it, when life gets difficult, don't judge providence prematurely. Don't say that God has dealt with you bitterly because on the authority of Scripture, I promise you that the outcome for you as a Christian will be good. It could be no other way. God doesn't deal with those that he loves any differently. God doesn't save us in order to afflict us. He's like a father, Hebrews says. Sometimes he has to discipline us. We need the hardship to expose our remaining sin and to humble us and to teach us not to love this world and to love God and our future hope more than anything that happens in this life. We need that and the only

way that it comes is through affliction, but the motivation of God in it all is always for your good. It will always turn out well for you in the end.

So guard your lips as you describe your present troubles. How can you do that? How do we enter into that realm? Well, this brings us to our third and final point: bring the full character of God to mind. Bring the full character of God to mind. We said, first of all, find reasons for gratitude despite your hardship. Just look around you and see there are reasons to be grateful even if they seem small in comparison, at least give thanks for the small things. Secondly, don't judge providence prematurely. Thirdly, bring the full character of God to mind.

You know, the prophet Jeremiah in Lamentations 3 was describing the fall of Jerusalem and it was brutal what he was seeing and there was destruction and mayhem all around and he spends five chapters describing his reaction to it. But in the middle of it in Lamentations 3:21-23, he says something that we base one of the great hymns of our faith on. He says, "This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness." He says, "Why do I have hope? It's not prompted by anything around me that I see because this is really bad, but I have hope because I remember that the Lord's faithful love never ends. His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. Oh, I have hope after all because I have remembered who God is."

So Scripture would teach you, call you, command you, not to let your perspective be governed by what you see and feel in the moment, but let your perspective be defined by the unchanging grace and compassion of God. Beloved, he will always vindicate your trust. And I look back on the episodes of my life that were particularly sorrowful, discouraging and all of that, I wish that in the midst of those times, that I had exercised this more and displayed it more than I did. Set your goal, beloved, set your goal not to see your circumstances change but to define your goals by something completely different, to say, "I am going to take this sorrow as a challenge to display the spiritual virtues that are noble and are befitting of someone who has been saved by the grace of Christ in my life. Let that be your goal rather than looking for the next solution to come to your earthly difficulty. Say, "My whole aim in life is different now. I want my inner man to respond in faithfulness to the glory and mercy and lovingkindness of God and this earthly stuff, secondary."

Let me just say this last thing, beloved: the climactic assurance that you have that God's intentions for your life are always good is what? The cross. The cross of Jesus Christ establishes for all time that pure, gracious, loving intentions that God has for his people. Honor the cross, honor Christ by recognizing that he voluntarily laid down his life for you to save you, to redeem you, to forgive you, and that that was unprompted by any merit in you, but totally an expression of his good grace. Remember our suffering Savior on the cross and say, "I cannot possibly question his love. I can't possibly question the goodness of his intentions for me. Who lays down his life like that for a friend?"

Scripture says that God demonstrates his own love toward us in that, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," Romans 5:8. Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" It's conclusive, isn't it? There is no arguing with this. There is no rejecting it. That's how great what God has done for us is when it's on right display and what you are to do as a Christian is to let that conclusive, unanswerable display of the love of God start to shape and form your whole perspective on whatever it is that you're going through. You view it from the perspective of the love and the sacrifice of the cross, rather than through the earthly difficulty that you're facing.

Beloved, he who spilled his blood for your soul surely has the highest intentions for your life, even if the clouds of trial, for a time, obscure the sun from your sight. You don't question when a storm comes into our area and there is rain and it's overcast. You don't suddenly start to say, "Well, do you know what? I bet the sun disappeared. I just know that this dark cloud means that the sun is gone from the solar system and it no longer exists." No, you don't even begin to think that way. You would be laughed out of the room if you started to talk that way. Well, beloved, to a greater extent, how wrong is it of us when earthly trials come to wonder whether God's intentions for us are good or not? The cross is behind it all and we respond to that.

So, beloved, what we're saying here is, as we're concluding, what would I want as a pastor for someone, a member of Truth Community Church, someone who identifies with our church? What would I set for you as an aspiration in your spiritual life? By all means, affirm the sovereignty of God in every existing waking moment that you have in your life, but understand and equally be convinced of, that God exercises his sovereignty according to his other attributes of his love and grace and mercy. His sovereignty is not an abstract, arbitrary exercise of authority that he just does whatever he wants to do without regard to what it means for you and me. He exercises his authority in full consistency with his love and mercy and grace which he supremely demonstrated at the cross. Your life is in the hands of a sovereign God. Yes, the circumstances may taste bitter for now. Yes, that is not the end. The outcome will be determined by these wonderful gracious attributes of his goodness and that goodness is where we rest our hope.

Let's bow together as we pray. Take a moment, if you would, knowing many of the afflictions that weigh on your heart right now, take a moment and just think through these things in your own heart. Can't you find at least a couple of things to give gratitude and thanks to God for despite your hardship? Just a couple? Lord, we thank you for those tokens of your goodness. Have you been guilty of judging providence prematurely. Have you shown a lack of faith that God would exercise his power to bring you out of your sorrow in his time in a way that will certainly be good for you in the end? Have you drifted into that? Well, take a moment to repent and say, "Lord, I know you'll exercise your providence for my good. I will surely see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living and I trust you for that even though I don't see it right now." Can't you take a moment to thank God for the greatness of his character? The love of God demonstrated on the cross when Christ lay down his life for your soul? Doesn't that settle forever

whether God loves you or not? Doesn't it settle forever the outcome of your existence that you will one day be with Christ in paradise? Isn't that enough to cheer your heart?

Father, we calm our hearts before you tonight. Give us grace to live for another day. Give us grace to trust in the fullness of your revelation. Give us grace, Father, to have a clarity of mind and heart that knows what it means to give thanks in all things. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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