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Who Do You Trust

Ruth

Prayer: *Father, I again come before you this morning. I thank you for your word, I thank you for what you have given us. Again, I just thank you for the pronouncement that this body, this church is part of an essential part of our culture, Lord, just praise and thanks be to you for that recognition. We pray this morning for your Holy Spirit's presence, your Holy Spirit's grace, your Holy Spirit's power to be able to look into your word, to be able to see what you have for us there and to again make it of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we are back in the book of Ruth and when we last left Ruth she was stunned in amazement at Boaz's response to her request. Ruth along with Naomi had left Moab, they had made this long journey back to Bethlehem and they arrived there childless, homeless and penniless. Naomi was still overwhelmed with grief at the loss of her sons and her husband and coming back to her native Bethlehem no doubt had probably made a bad situation even worse. In addition Ruth and Naomi are starving. This is ancient Israel

and these newcomers have no resources whatsoever or so they think. Ruth tells Naomi that she's going to glean in the fields and unbeknownst to her but clearly known beforehand by God, she just happens to pick a field belonging to Boaz. She arrives at the field to glean and promptly asks the superintendent if he would let her glean along with the reapers in an area that's usually reserved for them that's way off limits to gleaners. The superintendent brings this unusual request to Boaz and surprisingly and graciously he agrees. Going even further he offers her protection as she gleans in the choicest part of his field along with the refreshment of his drawn water. Ruth, the ultimate outsider, suddenly gets invited inside by virtue of Boaz. And so much of what is actually taking place here goes right past us because we're not really used to what goes on in an agrarian society. One commentator attempted to put this into a 21st century setting of an office rather than a field. And he said Ruth as a Moabitess is a complete outsider and she's instantly invited not just into the office but into the select area around the water cooler where the upper level of management congregates and this is of course overwhelming to Ruth.

We pick up on Ruth 2 starting at verse 13. *Then she said, "I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants."* And at mealtime Boaz said to her, *"Come here and eat*

*some bread and dip your morsel in the wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. Now notice that Ruth is -- she's no longer eating with the gleaners, she's sitting beside the reapers now at the communal meal. Boaz hands her what just might be the very first substantial meal she's had in quite a long time. And for the first time in a long time she's not only able to eat until she's filled but she also has some leftovers. And we learn later of course that the first thought in her mind is to bring some of these leftovers home to Naomi. I mean this is all so overwhelming considering the heartache and the tragedy that Naomi and Ruth had grown used to but the blessings continue. It says: *When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."* So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. That's about a five-gallon bucket full of grain. It's something that would probably take weeks to glean.*

And again this is a stunning development for Ruth and for Naomi. I mean imagine approaching somebody asking them to let you work in their restaurant so that maybe you can eat what's left on the plates as they come in and then have the owner of the restaurant

invite you to come in for a meal, giving you in fact more than you could possibly eat along with enough additional food for perhaps a month. I mean you've been literally starving and you know that your companion Naomi is not only starving but deeply depressed. So now you've eaten your meal and you're on your way back and you're bringing an already cooked meal along with supplies that will make hunger a thing of the past. Verse 18 says: *And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied. And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, "The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz."* Suddenly a light goes on not only in Naomi's brain but also in her spirit as well. She instantly decides that she had been mistaken in her belief that God had forsaken her. I mean you have to remember now even when things were at their worst, Naomi never denied her faith in God. I mean she always believed that God was still there and that he was there ruling over her. She simply had concluded that she had lost his love, had lost his blessing. If you remember her statement as she's entering into Bethlehem: *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?" I mean Naomi's statement may well have been bitter and may well have been completely mistaken but it was still a statement of profound faith. God was extremely real to Naomi. He just ceased to bless her or so she thought. But all of that changes when Ruth walks in through the door with this enormous blessing from Boaz. Verse 20 says: *And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!"* And in the same way that Naomi's life had been turned upside down by tragedy, it is now being turned right side up by this incredible blessing. Now the God who had been absent in Naomi's life had suddenly reappeared. Well the fact is God had been with Naomi all along both in blessing and in tragedy but Naomi could only see it in blessing. Ruth didn't just happen to step into Boaz's field by accident and she didn't happen to find favor with Boaz by good fortune. Naomi instantly reverses her opinion that -- quote -- *"The Almighty has brought calamity upon me"* and she acknowledges that it was the hand of God working in her and Ruth's life that had made these events take place. I mean Naomi's just received the best news she's heard literally in years, and her first reaction is to instantly thank God for his provision through Boaz. *"May he be blessed by the LORD whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!"*

Well this raises a question that I want to address this morning and it has to do with where God was not when things were going well, but when things were going quite badly. Is the God -- quote -- *"whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!"* is he still present when bad things happen? I mean had God forsaken Ruth and Naomi and just now remembered them? How many requests do you think Naomi and Ruth sent up as their husbands were dying? How many times do you think that Ruth and Naomi wondered why God was afflicting them when in reality no such thing was happening? You see Naomi is just like all of us. She sees the hand of God quite readily in blessing. She has a much harder time seeing it in struggle. And here's what we have in common with both Ruth and Naomi. We too see God's hand of blessing in a very limited way. I mean when things are going well we can easily say with Naomi, *"Blessed be the LORD whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!"* But what about when things are not going well? And anyone who has lived on this planet for any length of time knows that stuff happens. You know that bumper sticker that puts it far less politely, it puts the bottom line that you are going to go through this life and at some point in time have bad stuff happen.

Naomi's response to the hard times that she experienced was open and honest but it fell short of the legendary words of Job. Job said after his fortune and his entire family were destroyed in one

awful day: *The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.*" Now we know in Job's case it went from bad to worse. *Job 2:7 says: So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in ashes. Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.*

Job represents our worst nightmares when it comes to bad things happening. He's lost his family, he's lost his fortune, he's lost his health, and now he's losing his wife as well and yet still it says he did not sin with his lips. So you wonder how in the world did Job manage to not sin with his lips? I mean it seems like even God finds this extraordinary. While everybody wants -- nobody wants Job's circumstances, seems like everybody does want his ability. It's an ability to sinlessly handle the very worst that life can throw at us. You know we often talk about David and Goliath as this classic mismatch but I suggest to you the greatest mismatch in the universe was this fallen sinner named Job who's going mano-a-mano with Satan himself. And in the very end by the

glory of God Job got blessed abundantly and it was Satan who wound up with a mouthful of gravel. And again nobody, nobody wants Job's circumstances but wouldn't you want the ability to respond like he did? I mean there are two very different ways to respond to the fear, not the actual thing but to the fear of bad things happening. One is to believe the myth that my faith in God is going to grant me some kind of magical protection from trials and tribulations, and again that's a very popular myth, it's the myth that undergirds the prosperity gospel and afflicts the gospel today and that myth works. It works up to and at least until things start to go bad. It works as long as we don't experience any genuine trials and tribulations, and when they have finally do come, those folks rapidly descend into bitterness and unbelief.

But there's another way. And the other way is to believe that God will give us the grace that we need to get through whatever life throws at us, from simple difficulties to Job-like terrors. One of these is a myth that will collapse when tested. The other is God's promise for us. *Isaiah 26* says: *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee.* And so we ask, okay, how do I do that? *Proverbs 3:5* says: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.* Well there you go. I mean, do you see how easy it is? Whenever you have a

trial, whenever you have tribulation, just trot out some Bible verses and speak them out loud up into the air, pretend that you believe them and all of your trials will go mightily away. Is that really the way it works? We know that's not the way it works. You see, it's not Bible verses alone that make for freedoms, it's the truths that they are proclaiming that we have to explore and understand that gives us the promise of God. I mean imagine the freedom it would give you to no longer be terrified that bad things are going to happen, the freedom that comes from a trust rooted not in our own understanding, but in God's.

When God tells us that we are not to lean on our own understanding he's actually inviting us to embrace his understanding, and to do that we have to go to his word. I mean we ask ourselves, do you really believe Romans 8:28? It's our most famous scripture. *God causes all things to work together for good to those who love him and who are called according to his purpose.* I mean I think it goes without saying that we believe that verse. But I'm not sure we fully understand it. I mean we may all be in agreement that God does indeed superintend even the bad things in our lives for good but I think we often misunderstand God in his definition of what "good" really means. I mean if I were to ask a dozen or so people this morning what does it mean for God to take every single thing in your life and make it work together for good? I mean what

"good" is God actually talking about there? And I suppose that we would be divided in our answers. You know some folks would say, well, to be able to get through this virus and still maintain my health. Some other folks might say, well, to see my kids launched safely into the world. Others might say to get through my golden years not plagued by financial or physical blows. I don't think anybody would think that those are extravagances, that they're beyond the pale. I mean we're not talking about health, wealth and prosperity here, we're simply talking about the ability to get by. But what if God wants far more for us than that? What if God's idea, what if his intention is to bless us in ways that we are not at all prepared for? I mean Naomi was clearly prepared for one type of blessing, a roof over her head and food in her belly and a hope that the future would be able to have both of those things. I think we could say that that was Naomi's idea of what good was, I mean, especially after losing both of her sons and her husband. But what if God decided that his blessing for Naomi would include a Moabitess connected to her for life through the death of one of her sons? What if the blessing also included a return to Bethlehem in abject childless poverty? And what if God's blessing for Naomi included lots of parts that we would consider anything but blessed, parts that we might consider cursed. I mean I've said it many times because we have access to the back of the book. We know what God's intentions are for Naomi and Ruth. We know that

God is going to make Ruth an example of the ultimate outsider being taken into the ultimate inner circle based on nothing other than the graciousness of God. Ruth the Moabitess is invited into the line that will produce the Lord Jesus Christ. And as blessings go, you couldn't get much higher than that. But the pathway to the blessing was marked with all kinds of stress and struggle and heartache that looked like anything but a blessing.

I mean I want to go back to that verse that we all rely on, I mean, I know I certainly rely on to encapsulate the way we relate to all things, good and bad, happening in our lives: *God causes all things to work together for good.* That's a given. What is unfortunately way, way up for debate is our definition of "good" verses God's definition. Not getting sick is good. Having healthy, well-adjusted kids establishing their own households, that's good. Being able to go on to your golden years in peace is good. But is that the same good that God is talking about when he tells us that all things work together for good? The answer is no. You see God reserves the right to define just what his definition of good is and he does so very specifically in the very next verse, *Romans 8:29.* It says: *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the*

firstborn among many brothers. See that little word "for" in verse 29, it links God's definition of good to one thing in particular. It's being conformed into the image of his Son. That's a huge qualification. And once you've qualified the definition of "good," you change the ground rules significantly. And what God is saying here is that if you are one of his own, that is to say if you are called according to his purpose, then God is going to shape and mold everything in your life with one goal in mind, and that is to conform you into the image of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Well now on paper that may sound fine. Who doesn't want to be more Christ-like? Well the problem is not with the goal. The problem is with the process. You see Jesus Christ was shaped and molded by things that God will often use to shape and mold us, and primarily those things involve things that we don't see as blessings. Scripture says that Jesus learned obedience through suffering. *Hebrews 5 says: Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.*

Well the question is how could Jesus be made perfect if he's born already perfect? Well there's a difference between being born without sin and being perfect. I mean Adam was born without sin but he was also unperfected, that is he was untested. Given the opportunity to be perfected by a test, he failed miserably. And

Jesus is the second Adam. He was also born without sin but he was tested repeatedly, from the formal testing he endured in the desert against Satan himself to the testing he received day in and day out as the flawless Son of God, bringing liberation and life itself to the very people who hated him for doing so. And whether it was the Pharisees or the Sadducees or the simple unbelief of the crowd, Jesus was tested and perfected every day of his ministry, and it was his testing that perfected him.

Let me give you a very mundane example of how that works, of what I mean by the term "testing." You know most of you know I've been a cabinetmaker all of my life and I'm connected to woodworking in one way or another for many, many years. And over the years I frequently turn things on wood lathes. And for 40 years now I've been making bowls and other objects on a wood lathe, having been largely self-taught. And I recently discovered what is to me a very brand new technique in wood turning. It's a riskier way of wood turning. It can produce much better results when it's mastered but far more spectacular failures when it's not. I mean it's a different way of doing something that I've been doing for 40 years and I'm learning it by watching You Tube videos. So I'll watch three or four of these videos and I think, okay, I think I've got this technique down and then I go to my wood lathe and I fire it up and I test out my new knowledge and practice and I quickly learn

sometimes with spectacularly bad results that I failed the test. So I realize I need to go back to the videos, I need to study them some more and then try again. That's how I perfect my technique as a wood turner. And now to apply that to something far more important, apply that to how God works all things together for good in our lives, much of it through testing, a lot of which involves suffering. And what God is doing there is perfecting our ability to trust him. What God is aiming to produce in our life is a life lived full of faith and trust like Christ had. And Christ did it perfectly. His goal on earth was to perfect through trial, struggle and difficulty, his complete obedience for and love for his Father. That was more important to him than life itself. And that's why he said: *"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."*

There was an incident in John 4 where Jesus is having this conversation with a woman at the well, and you all have heard about that conversation. He's sitting down and he's talking to her. Well the disciples were not there because they had gone into town to get food and so we pick up on *John 4* as the disciples come back with their food trying to figure out what Jesus is about. It says this: *Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone*

brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." Jesus is basically telling us that he sought out God's testing for him. And what Jesus did perfectly God is still perfecting in our lives, as imperfect as they may be.

See Naomi's a picture of you and me. She can see God quite readily in the blessings that Ruth's been given through Boaz but she can't bring herself to the place where she can see what God has peeled back the curtain for us to see and that all things in her life including the death of her sons and her husband and her poverty and her inglorious return to Bethlehem, they were all working together for her good and God's glory. What God wants us to realize is that every one of us has our own unique story and that every one of these stories has God's fingerprints all over it even if we can't see it at all right now. *Romans 8:32* says: *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?* To put this in street vernacular, God is saying this, for crying out loud I gave you my Son. If I'm willing to give you my Son, do you think I've earned the right to be trusted to give you whatever you need? Are you willing to trust my judgment rather than your own?

What God wants for us and from us is the ability to radically trust

him even when the reasons for doing so seem nonexistent. Consider what he says in *James 1:2*. He says: *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* Now understand that joy is not happiness and testing is never fun. Joy is an absolute conviction that God is good and that he's completely in charge no matter what, and testing will tell us whether or not we actually believe what we think we believe. God wants our testing to make us steadfast and perfected in the technique of trusting him. And "perfect" doesn't mean flawless, it means complete. It's me practicing my wood turning lessons to the place where I've perfected my technique, except it's far more important than a woodworking technique, it's literally a way to look at life itself. Are we steadfastly committed to trusting God when everything else goes south? Or like Naomi, are we far more likely to see God as abandoning us or punishing us? Please understand I'm not picking on Naomi. I mean we all tend to have our Naomi moments where either our trust in God evaporates or at the very least like Naomi, we maintain our faith but we believe we just lost God's blessing. I'm simply pointing out that she represents exactly the way all of us think. God is present in our blessing and he's pretty much absent in our trials, and God wants to wean us away from that kind of thinking. And

that's why God is at work perfecting our technique of trusting in him and that's why sometimes that perfecting work is painful. But it's not like God has exempted himself. I mean Jesus Christ as our perfect brother modeled for us that very same level of trust. Listen to what *1 Peter* says. It says: *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*

So what was the source of Jesus' ability to handle life's trials? It was his ability to continue entrusting, to entrust himself to him who judges justly. I mean life gives us lots of lessons in trusting God in difficult times. We oftentimes fail, sometimes spectacularly. And when we do fail, we go back to the book. In this case it's not a You Tube video but it's the scripture itself. And we recognize that God is about the business of using every event in our life, good or bad, to mold us into the image of his Son. Folks, that's why we're on this planet. And I've said this many, many times before but every one of us is uniquely here to bear a unique image of Christ. You can't bear my image of Christ and I can't bear yours. And to the extent that we bear, each of us, our unique image of Christ is to the extent that we glorify him

and that inevitably includes suffering. This is how Paul puts it in *Philippians 3*, he says: *I want to know Christ -- yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.*

I don't want to suffer. I have no interest whatsoever in suffering for suffering's sake, but there's a huge difference between suffering for suffering's sake and suffering with an end and goal and purpose in mind, and that is conforming me into the image of Jesus Christ. Now if God has designed every single event in our life to conform us into the image of his Son, what does that look like? Well just look at how God perfected obedience in Jesus. Again *Hebrews 5* says: *Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.* And again the question can be asked how could Jesus learn obedience if he's born already perfect? Well John Piper says of Jesus: "'He learned obedience' means that Jesus moved from untested obedience into suffering and then through suffering into tested and proven obedience."

He goes on to say: "If you think about it, if you are good enough, you can learn a new task without failing." And of course in my woodworking days I couldn't do that. I tried and failed. He says:

"And the new task that Jesus had to learn every hour, especially at the end of his life was: Can I endure this suffering that I have never experienced before, this new obedience that I have never performed before in the history of the universe? Can I learn and do this perfectly without failing, without falling into unbelief and murmuring? And the answer of Hebrews is yes. He could and he did. He learned obedience in what he suffered, and he never, never, never failed once in the process of perfect learning, proven, tested obedience."

Jesus had learned obedience through suffering. And when that suffering had reached its peak in the greatest test Jesus would ever undergo in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was highly prepared. I mean three times he asked his Father if he would let this horrific cup of the cross pass him by and three times his Father said no. He was on the very cusp of that great event where God himself would come down to earth and live out his life flawlessly, perfectly, and then bring that perfect life to the cross in order to exchange it for our lives of sin so that we could, by faith, claim his righteousness and stand before a holy God not with my righteousness but with his, by faith. That was the test he was perfected in.

And on the very same night in the very same place Peter also found

that he would be undergoing a test as well. Christ would succeed and Peter would fail. Christ had been fully perfected and Peter had not. Christ still had much work to do in perfecting Peter. And after his ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit continued that work. It's the very same work that the Holy Spirit was doing in Naomi, the very same work the Holy Spirit is doing today in us. I mean Naomi made many mistakes in her life. Leaving Bethlehem with her husband was probably a mistake. Certainly allowing her two sons to marry outside of the covenant community, another mistake. Her bitter denunciation of God's care for her as she enters Bethlehem, another mistake, and yet it never changed God's plans for her or his love for her. In fact the only thing that ever changed was Naomi's understanding of that love. I mean it waxed and it waned depending on her circumstances. She saw a loving God only in affirmative answers to prayer, and that's a mistake all of us make all of the time when life becomes painful.

As Fred mentioned, Ravi Zacharias died last week. He was an incredibly powerful evangelist slash apologist who spent his entire life sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. And guess what? It afforded him no magical protection at all. Two months ago he began to complain of back pain only to find out that he had a rare and incredibly aggressive cancer that overwhelmed and took him within two months. I love what Ray Comfort said in commenting about

Ravi's death. This is what he said. He said: "God doesn't promise us a smooth flight through life itself but what he does promise us is a safe landing afterwards." And God is about the business of using life itself to perfect us in the same way that he perfected his Son and oftentimes that makes for a very choppy flight in our life. What Ravi now knows is what Ruth and Naomi have known for centuries, that the landing isn't just safe, it's glorious and well worth the pain of being perfected.

Now if Jesus who brought you and I to glory was made perfect through suffering, why wouldn't God be at the same work perfecting, his image bearers, that's us? And what God wants for us is the joy that comes from radically trusting in God's perfecting work in us. It's what we fix our eyes on when we have our own Naomi moments. And like I said, nobody wants Job's circumstances but it seems like everybody should want his ability to sinlessly handle the very worse that life can throw at us that only comes when we perfect our ability to see God's fingerprints on every single event in our lives, the good, the bad, and yes, the confounding because God says: *Thou will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee.* Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for Naomi, I thank you for her humanness. I thank you for her example. She is just, she's one of us. She

reacts the way we react. She's very quick to thank you in blessing, very quick to forget you in trials or to blame you in trials. And Lord, we're not picking on Naomi. That's us. That's exactly who we are. I thank you, Lord, that you are about the business of testing and perfecting us, be made in the image of your Son. I thank you for that unique image that every one of us bear. And I pray that you would give us especially if things are dark and things are tough and we find ourselves in the trial, that you would give us the grace, the strength and the wisdom to realize it's all part of the process. Lord, I thank you for the fact that life itself may consist of a very, very difficult flight, but we are all looking forward to an incredibly safe and glorious landing. And I praise you that that was because of your blood shed for us, and I thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.