



### **Ruth 1:19-22**

#### ***“Shouldn’t I Be Bitter?”***

19 Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

20 But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

21 "I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

If you have ever had your hopes and expectations suddenly dashed, or experienced an unexpected loss, then you have probably experienced the feeling described as bitterness. It’s a complex emotion, it is not sorrow, or anger, or despair, even though it contains elements of all of them. And bitterness, tends to be a lingering emotion that colors all of your other experiences. For instance, if something has made you bitter, you can be surrounded by good things and yet not see any of them as good. Bitterness does to life what starting dinner by dumping a bottle of lemon juice on your food would do to the taste of your meal, it doesn’t matter what the food was to begin with, it’s going to taste bitter.

Now even the great saints of the bible are not immune to bitterness in the face of disappointment and loss. Jonah felt bitter and angry when exactly what he feared came to pass and God used him to bring repentance and deliverance to the enemies of his people, Job confessed that the tribulations he experienced from the hand of the Almighty had made his soul bitter. Bitterness comes upon them when they consider their present circumstances, even though they know that God is the one who has caused the events that have made them bitter. There is almost always a myopia at work there that doesn’t allow them to see much beyond their loss and disappointment. They can see as far as *what*, but they just can’t see beyond that to *why*.

Naomi certainly makes no attempt to hide her bitterness in the verses we have just read, she goes so far as to make it her nickname. And we can certainly understand why she is feeling bitter.

She and Ruth have finished their journey to Bethlehem, this is the first time Ruth has ever been there, but Naomi is returning to her home town, the place she left ten years before. When she went out, she left with her husband Elimelech, who was certainly no pauper, and also her two sons Mahlon and Chilion. They packed up their household goods and went off to Moab, where they heard there was food. Naomi left Israel full, both in the sense of temporal supports, and also in the sense of hope. She had hopes of a new life, of a happy home, of growing old with her husband, of being surrounded by grandchildren, maybe even great grandchildren, and of watching her family prosper.

Now all of those hopes are dashed. Her husband is dead, both sons are dead, there are no grandchildren, and everything they owned is either sold or mortgaged. At this point even her clothes

must have been relatively tatty. She has outwardly changed so much that the women folk of the town (you have to remember, it's the barley harvest, the men would be working in the field) ask each other "Is this Naomi?" Could this really be the same woman who went out a decade ago? No doubt she looked a little like those men who went off to war in 1861 decked out in brand new uniforms with buttons shining in the sunlight, so full of confidence, who returned home years later in rags and defeat without even so much as a button for they were made to cut them off their uniforms.

So when people tentatively call out to her "Naomi?" which mean "pleasant" she says "Naomi? Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara" which means bitter. And she is sure she knows why, *El Shadai* the mighty God of Israel has dealt with her very bitterly, Yahweh has brought her home, but he afflicted her so terribly that she has lost everything. She is as she puts it *empty*.

Now before I say anything else, I do want to make clear that Naomi is worthy of our commendation for something very important. She has not lost her belief in God, or in his sovereignty. And that is important, so often when people go through a painful loss or disappointment, they end up so angry they will no longer even recognize him.

Ted Turner, is notorious for his atheism and attacks on Christianity, a while back he shared in an interview that he was raised in a Christian household and used to believe in God. What had caused him to turn from that was the sickness and death of his younger sister. When he was 15, his 12-year-old sister developed terminal lupus, which over the course of five years, destroyed her body and her mind.

**Turner Said: "I prayed for [her] an hour a day, She used to go around the apartment and run into the padded walls and say, 'God, I'm in such pain; please let me die.' My family broke apart. I prayed so much. She said, 'God, please let me die.' She couldn't say a whole lot of things, but she would say, 'Teddy, you're my brother. I know you. I said, 'How could God let my sister suffer so much? She never did anything wrong. She was 12 years old. At that time, I was going to be a missionary. I was going to dedicate my life to what I really believed ... But my religious faith got shaken. I mean, I prayed an *hour* a day for my sister."**

Now we don't know they died, because the narrative doesn't tell us, but it is probable that Naomi had to watch as her husband, and then both of her sons got sick, suffered, and then died. And I think it is highly probable that she too offered countless prayers for their lives. She probably even got to the point of saying "*O Lord, please take me, instead of him!*" especially when it was her last son who was expiring. So in that sense, she went through the experience that drove Ted Turner to deny the existence of God THREE TIMES, and yet at the end she still knew He was there.

Naomi also did not do what so many Christians have done in those circumstances, which is to retreat to a place where he couldn't possibly have caused their pain. They say to themselves, "this was terrible, a Good *and* Almighty God would never have caused it, I know He is Good, therefore He must not be Almighty." So bad stuff just happens and God can't stop it, all he can do is sympathize, and so they say "*He knows how I feel, because He lost His own Son, in a similar tragedy.*"

Naomi, doesn't do that, she doesn't rob God of His sovereignty either. She knows that the God who is there is also *EL SHADDAI* which means the *ALMIGHTY* one. *All of my afflictions were caused by the Almighty.* That is as I said commendable, may God grant that we have more believers who like Naomi persevere in the faith in spite of loss without altering what God teaches so it doesn't offend them.

Naomi still sees those things, but there are still at least three things that she doesn't see:

**1) Her bitterness has blinded her so she can't see certain blessings around her:** She says the Lord has brought her home again “empty” she has *nothing*. So what is Ruth? Chopped Liver? You have one of the greatest professions of faith and declarations of unswerving loyalty given by Ruth to Naomi, something that as one commentator points out “we frame and put up in our houses” and use in countless weddings. And yet its no consolation to Naomi, the Lord is against her, therefore all that she expects is that Ruth will suffer with her. She is also once again back in the place of blessing, the promised land, which brings me to my other point.

**2) She also does not yet see that God is still a loving father and that his chastening is always for our good:** Had Naomi remained full in Moab, what would have happened? Would they ever have returned to Israel? Probably not. God’s chastening hand has brought her back to Covenant community to the land where God is worshipped in His tabernacle. She also would never have had the incredibly important place in redemptive history that she did. She would have missed out on the far greater blessings that she is about to inherit. All she can see at the moment is terrible loss, and makes everything else bitter.

**3) Naomi’s biggest problem though, as C.S. Lewis put, was not that she was too easily disappointed but too easily pleased:**

What did Naomi and her family leave Israel to find? More food. And she is bitter because in the process she lost all of the things she valued most, her family and her possessions. She forgot, what Ruth’s declaration should have reminded her of, that the greatest blessings are not possessions, and family, and food. Why should she have been reminded? Because Ruth was giving up all of those things for the most important thing of all: ***A Relationship to the Living God and His People***. Ruth gave up those things, because she knew that to go with just Naomi and to be poor in Israel, worshipping the true God, was better than to be Rich and to have large family but to be worshipping a false God in Moab.

It’s fitting actually that Naomi calls herself Mara because it reminds us that that it frequently happens that God’s people fatally disorder their priorities this way. After Israel was delivered from Egypt, we read in Exodus 15 that they went three days into the wilderness and they came to a place called Marah because the water there was bitter and the people immediately started complaining against Moses, what shall we drink? God delivers them from bondage by squashing the world’s greatest superpower and parting a sea so that they can walk through it, and barely three days later, “*we’re all gonna die because the water is bitter! What are we going to drink out here?*”

From that point on, its all bitter grumbling over food and water, and it “was better in Egypt” and a complete lack of trust in God. Comparatively small things are what they want and the lack of them makes them willing to turn away from the great promises of God. ***They want not too much but too little – As C.S. Lewis put it:***

***“Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased.” (The Weight of Glory)***

God's people have a right to grieve sore losses in this world, but we never have a right to be bitter, because for the believer those sore losses are not God's afflicting, but his chastening, and he chastens us a loving father chastens a child because he loves us. The author of Hebrews after he tells us that God's chastening is a sign of his love encourages and warns:

Hebrews 12:11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

12 Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees,

13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.

14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; *lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;*

Brother and Sisters, the chastening you receive, can either be used for your good or your evil, the difference will be the attitude of your heart under that chastening:

*“Note, It well becomes us to have our hearts humbled under humbling providences. When our condition is brought down our spirits should be brought down with it. And then our troubles are sanctified to us when we thus comport with them; for it is not an affliction itself, but an affliction rightly borne, that does us good. So many calamities have been lost upon you if you have not yet learned how to suffer.” – Matthew Henry*

Therefore brothers and Sisters, *Eph. 4:31 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.*

Let not loss and disappointment not lead you to bitterness, rather let it, as it did with Ruth, be that which shows you the emptiness of all that is in the world, and let it be something that causes you to flee to Christ for salvation and for solace. Spend time in those moments reflecting on the fact of Romans 8:28 “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” You may not know how those things will work for good at the time. Naomi didn't, the Wives of the five missionaries killed by Alca Indians in the 1950s didn't, but God does. And He is weaving all of those painful strands of your life together into a tapestry that when it is completed will be beautiful.

Christians, you may, you will lose the things of this world, but you can never lose salvation or the presence of Christ, or His supervising care, and therefore you can never really be impoverished.