

Full to Empty

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Date: 15 July 2018

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[0 : 00] Good morning. It's my joy to bring God's Word to you again today. A reminder that we're in a series on the book of Ruth, and we are going to be starting here again in Ruth chapter 1, finishing the chapter at verses 19 through 22.

I was reminded this week as I spoke with several of you, you shared with me how challenging it is at times to listen to the story of Ruth.

Because as we've talked about, it's a book about suffering, and so for many of us, it brings up memories that are hard and sometimes difficult, perhaps memories that we would rather not think about if we didn't have to.

And it also got me thinking that some of us grew up in families where hard things were never talked about. And I was reminded that here, as God's family, we have to talk about hard things.

We have to talk about suffering and the things that happen to us in this world because that is the reality of life. It's the reality of life in a world that has been broken by sin.

[1 : 09] That we live in a place that is bleeding and broken because of the results of our rebellion against God. And so we want to talk about hard things, not because we enjoy them, but because we know, remember, we've talked about that God, as a loving Father, longs for us to be wise.

He longs for us to be wise and prepared for the things that will face us as we walk as his children in this world. And so if you're suffering right now, remember that this book is for you.

It's a reminder of how God thinks about suffering. And it's a reminder of his steadfast love to us in the midst of it. And if you're not suffering, remember that if you live in this world long enough, you will one day.

And if you're not suffering right now, all you need to do is look around the room, people beside you and in front of you and behind you. And you will see people that are suffering right now.

And so as God's people together, as one community, as one family, we want to be able to talk about hard things. Because God has given us the opportunity to do that in his word. And so again, we're in Ruth chapter 1, starting at verse 19.

[2 : 24] Remember that God tells us that his word is more precious than gold. Even the finest gold. And that it is sweeter than honey.

Even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb. And so we're going to go there right now. We're in Ruth chapter 1, starting at verse 19. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.

And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, Is this Naomi? She said to them, Do not call me Naomi.

Call me Mara. For the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full. And the Lord has brought me back empty.

Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me? And the Almighty has brought calamity upon me. So Naomi returned.

[3 : 27] And Ruth, the Moabite, her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. Please pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Dear Father in heaven, We thank you that you are a good and loving Heavenly Father. And so you haven't left us alone as orphans in a merciless universe.

But you've come and you've spoken to us in words and ways that we can actually understand. And so we ask that you would come and help us this morning. That you would clear our minds.

That you would open our eyes. That you would unstop our ears. And that you would soften our hearts.

That we could see and hear and believe and understand everything that is written about you

in your word.

We ask this in the name of your Son. Amen. If you remember several years ago in February of 2015, if you were watching popular culture even a little bit, you are familiar with what is now known as the dress.

[4 : 43] And if you remember the dress, it was an image that showed up on the internet of this one dress from Europe that was unlike any other picture of any other dress.

Because depending on who you were, you saw one of two different things. When some people looked at the dress, they saw a dress that was blue and black.

And when other people looked at the very same picture, they saw a dress that was white and gold. And so it became this internet fascination as people tweeted and retweeted and posted about which of the two they could actually see.

And there was debate about which was the true color of the dress. And why was it that people were so confused? About 70% of people would see, I believe it was the blue and the black, 30% the white or the gold.

I might have that backwards. You might have to flip that number. But it wasn't even half and half. And so it was even more confusing why some people would see one and some the other. The story highlights an issue that we're going to see in this passage as well, that we can look at the very same thing.

[5 : 57] Two people can look at the same event, the same situation, the same facts, and come up with a very, very different interpretation. We can look at the same situation and come up with a very, very different interpretation.

And if you follow the story of the dress, which became its own hashtag, if you want to look it up, you can just search hashtag the dress. And scientists tried to figure out why it was that people saw such different things.

And I don't think it's completely conclusive even now, but part of it is that this picture was unique because it was challenging to understand the circumstances. Was the picture taken outside or inside?

Was it taken in natural light or fluorescent light? And because it wasn't clear, different people's minds answered that question in different ways. And based on the assumptions, based on the interpretations that were made, your mind, without even realizing it, came to a conclusion.

Took incomplete data and came to a complete conclusion. We're going to see the same issue happening with Naomi. Naomi has a set of very challenging circumstances in front of her.

[7 : 13] And she's not completely sure what's going on. In fact, we might even say she's decided based on incomplete information what is going on.

She doesn't know the whole story. She doesn't know exactly what's happening, why it's happening, but she has decided to come to a conclusion. We see in the past, we know that she had left her homeland.

She left the land of Israel to go to the land of Moab because there had been a famine. And while there, she had lost not only her husband, but her two sons. And so we saw in our first week, in verses 1 through 6, that even when tragedy strikes, God is still in charge.

And then we saw last week in verses 6 through 18 that when tragedy strikes, it's the responsibility of God's people to come alongside each other. But here the question is a little bit different.

It's not the question of whether God's in charge. And it's not the question of whether or how we should come along those who are suffering. But instead it's the question of whether God is good.

[8 : 32] Whether he's loving. Whether he's still with us in the midst of suffering or he's abandoned us. And so it's not a question about his control, about what he can do. In fact, Naomi's going to refer to him here in verse 21 as the Almighty.

She knows that God has all the power. The question is, why has he not used it in a different way? She comes back to the town of Bethlehem in verse 19.

Remember we saw in our very first week in Ruth that Naomi had heard that the famine that had caused her to leave her homeland was over. And she was heading back with her daughters-in-law in hopes that there would actually be a place for food there in her homeland.

And as she comes back, remember we know that she's been gone for over 10 years. Because we found out in verse 4 that after the marriage of her sons, they lived in Moab 10 years before their death.

And so we can understand the surprise and the shock of other women in the town in verse 18 and 19. As she comes back, they say, is this actually Naomi? It's been over a decade since they've seen her.

[9 : 45] And they're experiencing the same reality that she is, that when she left, she had a husband. And when she came back, she did not. And so is this the same person with such a dramatic change in circumstances?

Is this Naomi? We talked a couple weeks ago about the importance of names. Remember the name of Elimelech meant, my God is king. The name of Naomi means pleasant.

It's another irony of names in the midst of this story. And she says, do not call me Naomi, so do not call me pleasant. Call me Mara. Because she no longer feels pleasant, instead she feels the meaning of Mara.

You might see a note in your Bible there that it means bitter. And so because of the circumstances in her life, she who was pleasant is now bitter. Her response to the events is one of bitterness.

And we find out why in that same verse, in verse 20. For the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.

[11 : 09] Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me. So don't call me pleasant. Call me bitter.

Because once I was full, but now I'm empty. Have you ever felt like you have gone from full to empty?

It might be a photo album emptiness. For some of us, when we look back at photo albums, we see pictures of people who are no longer with us.

Maybe it's pictures that are not even in photo albums, but frames in our house that remind us of what once was, but isn't anymore. Maybe it's not pictures of people who were once with us, maybe it's pictures of people that are.

Maybe you're a parent, and you look back at pictures of your children when they were young, and you see smiles on their faces, and you see them playing so well together, and you wonder, where did those smiles go?

[12 : 20] And why can't they get along anymore? Why two decades, three decades later, have things changed so much? Maybe you have pictures together of you as a family, and you used to spend time in holidays, and you see those, and then you think, why now?

Why now do I only receive an email sometimes? And even then, it's not always a kind one. Maybe it's not a photo album emptiness.

Maybe you once had work that you felt was purposeful and powerful. People called you with questions, and they wanted answers, but your phone doesn't ring anymore.

Maybe it's a financial fullness. Maybe when things broke in your house, there was a time when you would just fix it. You would just buy a new one.

You wouldn't ask any questions because it wasn't a problem. But now you wonder how you're going to scrape together the money that you need for the problems that you have. Maybe it's your body.

[13 : 34] You used to be able to do all sorts of things and all kinds of energy you had. And now you wonder, where did all that energy go? Where am I going to get the energy that I need for the tasks that are ahead of me?

Wherever you are in life, I think many of us can resonate with Naomi here. There's places where we have felt full that we are now empty.

And so that's where the dress becomes so important. How do we interpret going from full to empty when we don't have all the information?

How are we going to interpret going from full to empty? We see the answer that Naomi has here.

Remember I noted last week that she could have had a career as a lawyer. She does the same thing in verse 21. You notice the nouns and the verbs here.

[14 : 43] I went away full. Full. But the Lord brought me back empty. I went away full but the Lord brought me back empty.

So the fullness Naomi is giving to herself but the emptiness to the Lord. And there's a sense in which she's right in the sense that God is sovereign over everything. He controls the whole world. But she goes beyond that because she uses legal language here. The Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity on me. And so it seems as if Naomi is giving an indirect accusation against God here.

That somehow he has brought her to court. He's testified against her and he's decided that she has been found wanting. That he's going to bring suffering into her life perhaps because of some way that she's failed.

Something she's done that is wrong. She believes that God is against her. There was a time when God was perhaps for her but now he's dealt her this hand and he's dealt it to her in such a way that she can't even address him.

[16:01] You notice that she doesn't cry out to God. She doesn't even say what the psalmist says in Psalm 13. She doesn't say how long oh Lord. She doesn't say why God. She speaks about him in the third person that he has done this to her.

It sounds in a sense that either she believes that God has given her what she doesn't deserve or he has given her what she does deserve but she doesn't know why. There was a courtroom there was a scene in which she was tried but she wasn't even there to defend herself.

She wasn't there to know what her crime was. So she fills in the blanks. She fills in the blanks for the information that she doesn't know.

And we do the same thing as well do we not? Perhaps we've experienced suffering and we believe that like Naomi God is actually against us.

That we have some secret sin that we're unaware of he's opposed us for it. And it's important at this point to differentiate between different types of suffering. There is suffering in this world that is the result of sin.

[17:09] There are times where we suffer direct consequences for things that we have done. There's times we suffer for things that other people have done. And then there's times we suffer just from the general sin and brokenness that is in this world.

And there's no indication here in this passage that Naomi has done anything wrong. There's no indication that she has sinned in some way to bring this on her. But instead this is a child of God who is struggling to understand, struggling to interpret what is going on in her world.

And so perhaps some of us have decided that, that God's against us. There are some of us who have decided perhaps this means that God doesn't exist anymore. Or that if he does, he's not worth worshipping.

He's not worth coming to church for. That if God has taken us from full to empty, then why should we sing his praises? perhaps some of us have decided that God is sovereign and so we're not allowed to grieve.

We're Romans 8:28 kind of people. We say God works all things together for good. And so I'm not going to try to interpret this. I'm just going to move on. And there's some truth to that.

[18:27] That's true. But we also need to balance Romans 8:28 with Psalms like Psalm 13 where the psalmist cries out and says, how long, O Lord? How long are you going to forget me?

That it's right to cry out to God and tell him that we're in pain. We need to balance Romans 8:28 with Psalm 88, which is the psalm of lament where the psalmist cries out to God and it's the one psalm of lament that doesn't end with crying out praises.

Instead it ends with friends forgetting and abandoning. There's all kinds of different ways that we respond to suffering. So don't hear what I'm not saying. God is sovereign and in control and we take comfort in that.

But it's also good and right to cry out to him, to argue with him, to ask him why. Here Naomi seems to have already decided. Perhaps we respond like Naomi in that we're bitter.

Bitterness is deciding that what has happened to us is unjust. We don't deserve it. And that is going to be the focus of the rest of our life. You can spot a bitter person from a mile away not just because they lack joy but because their bitterness has become the thing that is most true about them.

[19:49] When you meet them they're quick to tell you about every bad thing that's happened to them. when they walk around all they can repeat to themselves is what's been done to them.

Every unjust thing that's happened and we see that becomes this self focus. Naomi shows this to us. She can't see anything else that's going on around her because this bitterness has consumed her completely.

It's all about me for Naomi in this moment. and it would be tempting to just criticize her for that. And yet any of us who have suffered something like this know how challenging it is in the moment to focus on anything else.

Maybe for some of us it's not an interpretation but a lack of interpretation. We've decided we're never going to look at photo albums again. so that we don't have to think about it and we don't have to face it.

Maybe we bury ourselves in activities. We keep ourselves so busy that we don't have to think about it. We don't have to contemplate going from full to empty. Maybe for some of us we found ways to numb it.

[21 : 16] It's easier to have another drink, to take a drug, worse than it is to face the pain of this world.

And so this question of interpretation stands before all of us. When tragedy strikes, how are we going to make sense of it? How do we interpret what feels like at times swirling waters around us? Remember we asked before, is God still the king? is he still in charge? When the land of bread has no bread and God is my king, is dead. We saw yes, God is still the king, he's still in charge. But here is God still good? Is he against me? Has he forgotten me? Is he a king that's still in charge, but a king that is distant and removed and far away?

And so maybe that's our response, that's our interpretation, it's anger at God. We've decided that it wasn't fair, it's not the way our life was supposed to go, and so we have this belief that God owes us something, and he hasn't delivered.

[22 : 38] I believe the dress was actually blue and black. that there were some people who saw the correct interpretation and some who saw the wrong one, based on what they filled in with the data.

One interesting thing that I read was that people who are night owls and people who are early morning people have a tendency to see it differently. Early risers have a tendency to see it as white and gold, and people who stay up late at night have a tendency to see it as blue and black, because those people have trained their eyes to different types of light.

So if you get up early in the morning you're more likely to assume that light is natural light, and if you stay up at night you're more likely to assume it's not. And based on what your mind assumes you're going to fill in that data.

And so the question is what's true and what's false? false. Let's look again at Naomi's statements here in this passage. What's true and what's false?

What's true is verse 20. God is almighty. God is in charge and in control of all things. Naomi gets one thing right, and the one thing she gets right is that God is in control of everything.

[24 : 10] He is the almighty. But she gets a lot wrong as well. She says here that God is against her, that he has dealt bitterly with her, and that he has brought her back empty.

And yet what else does Naomi have? Remember we saw in verse six that coincidentally, or maybe not so coincidentally, just as she needed to return, that's when the famine ended in Israel.

And even though she told her daughters-in-law to go back, God provided Ruth for her. That God in his never stopping, never giving up, always and forever love, had provided Ruth to show that same love to her.

And so when she comes back, she's not coming back by herself. We see even more hints here as well, because it tells us in verse 22, so Naomi returned, and Ruth, the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned from the country of Moab.

Remember Ruth? She was a Moabite, not an Israelite. and yet she returned with Naomi. And Naomi has two problems, one that she is defenseless, but another that she's without food.

[25 : 49] And how does this chapter end? And they came to Bethlehem, the house of bread, at the beginning of barley harvest.

of all the times that Naomi could have come back, a woman without resources for food, she comes back by God the Almighty's providence in a time when food is plentiful.

And as we'll see in the next chapter, this is the time and the opportunity when widows would be able to glean and gather food from the fields without charge. And so Naomi has experienced tremendous tragedy, but she is not completely empty.

And God is not against her. In fact, it is God in the midst of all of this who is providing and guiding and leading Naomi.

And in the midst of her self-focus, and in the midst of her bitterness, God meets her not with the curse she expects. He meets her not with a word of rebuke for her unbelief.

[27 : 07] He meets her not with turning his face away from her. But God meets Naomi in the midst of her suffering with his grace. Because God is not against her, but for her.

he hasn't given up on her, but he's remembered her. Even when she can't see it. When I was growing up, my, remember I started a couple weeks ago by asking, why do your parents tell you stories? stories. When I was growing up, my dad would tell us stories about his time as a Boy Scout.

And the one that stuck with me maybe the most is he shared with us about the time when he had to get his lifeguard merit badge, his water merit badge.

And he learned about the reality of trying to rescue someone who's drowning. And he told us that when someone is drowning, their perception of reality is skewed.

[28 : 17] And that when you try to rescue them, they'll push you away. In their flailing, in their desperation, they're tempted to believe that the lifeguard is not for them, but against them.

And so if you want to be an effective lifeguard, you actually have to approach from behind so that someone who's drowning can't see you. Because otherwise, what may happen is that both you and them will go down.

Because they're not going to help you in the midst of that. Because overwhelmed by the threat that's in front of them and the struggle that's right before them, in the middle of them, they're surrounded by water.

That's all they can see. they can't understand that this person who's come to them is trying to help them. Brothers and sisters, when it feels like we are drowning in life, it is our temptation to push God away from us.

But God, in the middle of all of it, showing us his grace, is actually the one coming to help us reach the top.

[29 : 34] God is the one who is coming to rescue, even when it seems like it's the opposite. And so we began with this question, is God still good in the midst of suffering?

is he still for us? One pastor asks this very question and he answers it this way. He says, we don't know why God allows these things to happen, but we know why not.

We know it's not because he's given up on us. And we know it's not because he doesn't love us. And the reason we know is that when we doubt, we can look and see that he put his very son on the cross to die the death that we deserved and to endure more suffering than he will ever ask us to do.

And so when we're drowning, when it feels like everything around us is sinking, we can know and believe and trust that it is God who is helping us come to the top.

Please pray with me. Dear Father in heaven, we thank you that in the midst of our temptation to bitterness and our temptation to despair, fear, that you don't hold it against us, and that even when we take our eyes off of you, you never take your eyes off of us.

[31 : 24] We ask that you'd remind us of it, you'd encourage us, and you'd enable us more and more to see you and to praise you and to know you, even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

We ask all these things in the name of your son. Amen. Amen. Amen.