

“Two Responses to Tragedy”  
Ruth 1:6-22

FCF: Inevitability of hardship and heartache. But how do we deal with it?

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Because of the faithful love of the LORD towards His own,  
(magnet) we must never draw our conclusions from our painful circumstances.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Some of you have heard me say from time to time that one of the more vital aspects of peacemaking is understanding the inevitability of conflict. That is, it’s not a matter of “if” we will have problems between us but “when.” So, that being the case, we then have to ask ourselves, “*How should we respond? How will we deal with it?*”

Expanding that principle a bit more broadly, given the fact we live in such a fallen world, we have to then anticipate hardship and heartache. They too are inevitable. It’s not a matter of “if” we will suffer and struggle but “when.” I know I don’t have to tell you that. But we ought not to be surprised when such times come. So again, that being the case, we have to ask ourselves, “*How should we respond? How will we deal with it?*”

**SCRIPTURE READING:** Ruth 1:6-22

**PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

The story is often told of the tangled threads on the back of a tapestry, pointing to how much of life’s experiences seem to us nothing more than a tangle of unrelated colors, loose ends, and unravellable knots. It is only when the tapestry is turned around and the other side is made visible that those same threads are seen to form the pattern, the design, the purpose that was there all along. In a sense, two realities making but one story.

That story is often told because it is so true. And it is just what we see set before us in our text. It opens (READ Ruth 1:6-7). What was Naomi leaving? Remember where we left off last week. It was “*the days when the judges ruled*” and “*there was a famine in the land.*” It was the worst of times. Elimelech had taken his wife and sons into Moab. And there he and, eventually, his sons died – leaving his wife, Naomi, a lonely widow in a foreign land. This then had proven to be the worst of mistakes.

From that place she returned to Judah. Why? “*The LORD had visited His people and given them food.*” It wasn’t just the turning of the weather, the upswing of the economy, or the stabilization of the political scene. It was the LORD’s mercy. And that mercy drew Naomi back. But in what state was she returning? This is the vital point to consider. Naomi looked at her circumstances and then drew her conclusions. But was that all there was to consider? Was there not more? Remember the tapestry. For Naomi the colors seemed askew, the ends loose, the knots tight, the hardships and heartaches raw. And at this point, a choice was set before her – one of two basic responses. One would lead to bitterness. The other would lead to peace. It is those two responses we need to consider. And one simple reality as well. Because of the faithful love of the LORD toward His own, we must never draw our conclusions from our painful circumstances. For there is more to the story, more going on. So much more.

**I. NAOMI: GOD IS OUT TO GET ME**

That said, let’s consider the first of these responses to the hardships and heartaches of life – “God is out to get me.” This is embodied in the words of Naomi.

**A) What She Said**

Look with me at vv.8-14 and let’s look carefully at what she’s saying.

**1. Explanation**

There is a repeated command, “*Go, return.*” Such is the hopelessness of Naomi’s state that she wants to free her daughters-in-law from any obligations to her and commits them to the LORD and His HESED, His faithfulness, His loving-kindness. They protest. She then takes aim at their resolve with a series of rhetorical questions and hypothetical cases. The womb that had provided husbands for them once before would do so no more. And even if it could, could they wait? “*Go home, my daughters!*” Such is her argument. And then also the accusation. “*The hand of the LORD has gone out against me.*”

## 2. Implications

That is, “*He has treated me as His enemy, as His adversary. To follow me would be to harm yourself. The LORD is against me. That is why this happened. He is against me.*”

### B) Why She Said It

A heart-wrenching scene. But let’s unpack it a bit more. Why did she say this?

#### 1. What was commendable

What’s driving this? Understand there are commendable things to her response. She’s concerned for these young widows. She sees God as the primary mover – the Creator and Sustainer of all things. And there’s a good if not gritty honesty in her expression.

#### 2. What was not

Those things were commendable. But others were not. Yes, she recognizes the sovereignty of God. She sees His rule. But not His goodness. And then, with this brutal logic and arguments, she encourages Orpah and Ruth to see the same. And all the while, she was desperately blind to the evidences of His goodness, the manifestations of His HESED and His provision, right before her – these two young widows, especially Ruth.

She saw His rule. But not His goodness. Look at v.15 and how she encourages Ruth to go back to the gods of Moab. Why? Look at vv.20-21 and how she uses the two names of God. The Almighty (Shaddai) and His supreme power have made her bitter. The LORD (Yahweh) and all the relational connotations with that had made her empty.

Or go back to how she responds to Ruth’s plea, one of the most stirring outpourings in all of Scripture (**READ Ruth 1:18**). Nothing but hard, cold deafening silence. Then later, as they enter Bethlehem, and her response to the women of the town (**READ Ruth 1:20-21**). Empty? What is Ruth? Less than nothing? Oh, Naomi, what has happened to you?

She saw His rule. But not His goodness. And so she was blind to His provision.

#### *Illustration:*

Hers was a myopia of the heart, a near-sightedness, a visual impairment of the soul. So pained, so skewed in her perspective, she could see nothing and no one else. Now that’s hardly unheard of. In fact, the name she takes to herself, “Mara,” has some interesting history to it. Think back to the exodus. No sooner had the LORD rescued His people from slavery and showed His great power in the crossing of the Red Sea, they began to grumble (**READ Exodus 15:22-24**). All they could think of was their thirst.

#### *Application:*

But let’s not be too hard on them. Or on Naomi. Consider ourselves. Consider how quick we are to do the same – measuring God’s goodness by our circumstances. If we deem things to be well, then He must be good and we can trust Him. If we deem things to be less than that, then He must not be good and we cannot trust Him.

“*His hand has gone against me. He’s testifying against me.*” How prone we are to forget that, truly, the LORD never testifies against His own (**READ 1 John 1:5-9**). His judgment upon us has already been poured out in full measure upon His Son. So much

so, in fact, that He would then be unjust to now condemn us. Oh, if you are His, if you have given yourself to Christ, His hand is not against you. Look not to your circumstances to gauge His goodness, His HESED towards you. Look to the cross.

## II. RUTH: GOD IS STILL WITH ME

Naomi saw only her circumstances and then drew her conclusions. The author wants us to see something else. Yes, this world is full of pain, sin, and death. And God's people are not immune from it. But that doesn't mean He has forsaken or abandoned us.

Here we need to consider Ruth. She had lost too. And yet, instead of saying, "God is out to get me," she recognized that "God is still with me." In utter contrast to Orpah, who followed Naomi's logic and counsel, left and is never heard from again, Ruth defies all conventional wisdom and does the unexpected. Look at her response.

### A) What She Said

In utter contrast to Naomi, what did she say? (READ Ruth 1:14b, 16-17).

#### 1. Explanation

You can imagine Ruth, having clung to Naomi (reminiscent of the "cleaving" of marriage in Genesis 2), letting go and looking Naomi in the eyes, committing herself to her, vowing that nothing, not even death, would separate them. Each phrase upping the ante.

#### 2. Implications

In essence, she was committing "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health." Utterly throwing her lot in with Naomi, utter surrender and self-sacrifice.

### B) Why She Said It

Now why? What was driving this? There is really but one way to read it.

#### 1. The fact of her conversion

Ruth gave herself to Naomi because she had given herself to Naomi's God. It was the fruit of her faith. She had turned away from her old gods and towards the one true God.

#### 2. The means of her conversion

But how had this come about? What means had the LORD used to bring about such a startling conversion? Not likely through Naomi. In fact, it was really despite Naomi. Bitter people don't make the best evangelists. Likely, it was through reports of what she'd heard of the LORD's work on behalf of Israel as they had moved into Canaan.

Based on what she'd seen and heard, however much or little it was, she then took this great step. But as great a step of faith as this was, it was really no blind leap.

#### *Illustration:*

For there was nothing blind about it. It was the most rationale decision that could have been made. She had come to know the LORD. Not to say she had come to know Him exhaustively (which is impossible) but that she had come to know Him truly.

Which is something akin to any other great commitment we make. How much do you know when you accept that job offer? How much do you know when you make a major purchase? How much do you know when you move to a new place? Likely many true things. But not everything. Let me bring marriage into this again. How much do you know when you say your vows? You're promising things of a total and timeless nature. You're going to need forgiveness. And faith as well. It's not a blind leap. It's a step based on what you've learned, based on the true knowledge you have thus far. All this was true for Ruth the Moabitess. And it's true for us all these years later as well.

#### *Application:*

There's so much encouragement to be found here. The LORD reached the heart of Ruth despite the failures of Naomi. In fact, it would prove to be through Ruth that the LORD would provide for Naomi. Such encouragement here for us. He is so faithful.

But with the encouragement comes exhortation. We are to walk as Ruth did. Saving faith is not an academic exercise. It must be lived out. It's real and it's to be lived out in the sphere of reality. The shape that takes might well take us down unexpected paths and defy "conventional" wisdom. It might well involve identifying with, loving and caring for, stubborn and ungrateful people. But such does the grace of God. Such does the grace of God for us. And such does the grace of God through us.

### CONCLUSION:

Back to where we started – because of the faithful love of the LORD towards His own, we must never draw our conclusions from our painful circumstances. For there's so much more going on, more than we can possibly see. Consider the tapestry. Consider this scene from "Signs," the movie alluded to at the beginning of the service. Graham Hess has suffered great loss and struggled intensely with his faith. The invasion of this alien force brings this to a head – not just in a theoretical fashion but in very personal way when his son Morgan is attacked by an alien who sprays a poisonous gas into his face. Now, you need to know Morgan has asthma. And the stress of all this has brought on an attack. Graham carries his son out into the yard and lays him down in the grass and begins to say, just loud enough for us to hear ([READ quotes](#)), "*That's why he had asthma. It can't be luck. His lungs were closed. His lungs were closed. No poison got in. No poison got in. His lungs were closed. His lungs were closed.*" To those gathering around, he pleads, "*Don't touch him...Give him a minute...Don't touch him...Don't. Don't.*" And then the extraordinary happens. Morgan wakes up, coughs, and says, "*Dad? What happened? Did someone save me?*" To which his father, with tears welling up in his eyes as he pulls his son close, says, "*Yeah, baby, I think someone did.*"

Someone did. And does. Our conclusions should not come from our painful circumstances. For our conclusions are so often so very wrong. Consider this line from William Cowper's hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" ([READ 4<sup>th</sup> stanza](#)):

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*

The LORD's HESED, His faithfulness, His enduring loving-kindness, is so real, so rich that we dare not judge Him, our circumstances, or His hand in, over, and through our circumstances by "feeble sense." Think back to Naomi. Even in the midst of all she had gone through, the LORD was providing for her in ways she could not imagine.

And for us. For the LORD's provision of Ruth leads to and points to a greater provision still yet to come – Jesus. Jesus. He is the ultimate "*God is still with me.*" He is the ultimate demonstration of God's love and the ultimate means by which He would bring us back from our own wanderings from home. Jesus is the One who was empty because He emptied Himself for our sake. He truly walked into the valley of His Father's abandonment and being against Him, taking the fate that was truly bitter which we deserved, that we might then be full, that our spiritual famine might come to an end.

Our conclusions should not come from our painful circumstances. The LORD's love towards His own is a faithful love. And there is so much more than we can see.

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Because of the faithful love of the LORD towards His own,  
(magnet) we must never draw our conclusions from our painful circumstances.

“Signs” is the story of the Hess family of Bucks County, PA, who wake up one morning to find a 500-foot crop circle in the middle of their cornfield. Graham Hess (played by Mel Gibson), his brother Merrill (played by Joaquin Phoenix), and Graham’s two children, Morgan and Bo, watch TV news reports with growing alarm as they learn that the crop circle in their cornfield is similar to others around the world – all the products of an alien invasion force. On the TV screen they see fourteen lights in the night sky over Mexico City, visual evidence of the invaders.

Merrill turns to Graham, a former pastor who has lost his faith, for some comfort. *“Some people think this is the end of the world,”* Merrill muses. *“Is it true? Do you think it could be?”*

*“Yes,”* Graham flatly replies.

Alarmed by his brother’s response, Merrill questions, *“How can you say that?”*

*“That wasn’t the answer you wanted?”* Graham asks.

Full of fear, Merrill demands, *“Couldn’t you pretend to be like you used to be? Give me some comfort.”*

Graham explains, *“People break down into two groups when they experience something lucky. Group number one sees it as more than luck, more than coincidence. They see it as a sign, evidence, that there is someone up there watching out for them. Group number two sees it as just pure luck, just a happy turn of chance.”*

*“Sure there are people in group number two looking at those fourteen lights in a very suspicious way. For them, the situation is fifty-fifty. Could be bad, could be good. But deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they’re on their own. And that fills them with fear. Yeah, there are those people. But there’s a whole lot of people in the group number one. When they see those fourteen lights, they’re looking at a miracle, and deep down, they feel that whatever’s going to happen, there will be someone there to help them. And that fills them with hope. So what you have to ask yourself is what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, sees miracles? Or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or, look at the question this way: Is it possible that there are no coincidences?”*