

We had been living in New Jersey for about three weeks and were wanting to try out different things to get the “East Coast” experience. We both grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, and honestly, New Jersey was a complete mystery to us. Some friends recommended that we eat at a diner, for diners are a real East Coast experience. We had never even heard of a diner, much less eaten at one.

One of the best in the state was just down the street from where we lived, so we walked hand in hand until we came to this large chrome covered building with large neon letters proclaiming. “The Princetonian Diner.”

We were immediately greeted at the door and escorted in to the beautiful dining area and were seated at a small table right in front of the electric fireplace. The hostess was very professional, and very proper. She pulled out our chairs for us, unfolded and gave us our napkins, handed us each a menu and gave us a rundown on the breakfast specials. Wow, this was a very nice place. So this is the East Coast experience.....

And, then what happened is hard to describe, but I will try. All I can say is, perhaps, if you have lived in certain parts of New Jersey, this will make sense to you.

We were sitting next to a party of four. A waiter appeared at their table and asked, “So wadda yah have today?” Three of the four guests gave their breakfast orders, but the fourth had a question about one of the items on the menu and apparently wanted to make some sort of a substitution, one menu item for another menu item.

The waiter suddenly, and out of nowhere, went ballistic. He yelled at the guest, “Don’t give me any of your blankety blank blank blank (I’ll let you use your imagination there) just give me your blankety blank order!”

The response of the man giving the order was, “Blankety blank blank blank!”(Again, I’ll let you use your imagination) In a moment the two men were standing nose to nose screaming obscenities at each other. The man trying to order turned over his chair, the waiter threw down his order pad, a few more obscenities were exchanged and the waiter stomped off to the kitchen.

Katie and I were aghast.

Even more astonishing was the fact that when we looked around at the other patrons in the diner, no one else had taken any notice of what had just occurred. They were going on with their meals and their conversations as if nothing had happened. It was absolutely amazing.

To our surprise, a woman immediately appeared at the table next to us, picked up the pad off the floor, calmly took the breakfast order, the offended man picked up his chair gave his order - and that was that. We both thought, "What kind of place have we moved to?"

As Katie and I were marveling at what had just happened right in front of our eyes, we heard a voice say, "So, wadda yah have today?" - And standing at our little table, was the same waiter who just a few moments before had the loud confrontation with the table of four next to us.

We stared at each other, completely at a loss of how to respond....then we both blurted out at the same time, "I'll have a number one, and a cup of coffee."
No harm came to us that day.

We were strangers in a strange land.

Naomi and her husband Elimelech have moved from Israel to Moab, they too are strangers in a strange land. Here in this new land they are confronted with one disaster after another, why? Have these two believers done something wrong? Have these two believers somehow turned their back on God?

Things start off bad, and then things get worse, and then things get even worse. First a famine hits the land, in their day a famine would be a major economic disaster (sound familiar?); A famine ruins the family livelihood, so they adjust by taking a dramatic step, they move to a foreign land in an attempt to get their life back together. But instead of things turning around the family experiences funeral number one, funeral number two, funeral number three - and to add insult to injury, there are no grandchildren for Naomi - the family line is now at an end and would cease to exist, there was no worse curse for a family from Israel in the day, there was nothing that would cause more emotional pain than the lack of grandchildren.

Why does Naomi tell her old friends from home to call her Mara? It is no secret. Naomi's life is filled with bitterness. Naomi means, 'pleasant and lovely' while Mara means 'to be bitter.'

This morning, some of you will need to imagine yourself in a difficult situation like Naomi's; For others here, there is no need for imagination as you have lived through a situation like Naomi's; Still for others here today, Naomi's situation is child's play next to what you are experiencing right now in your life.

Again I ask, have these folks done something wrong? Have they somehow turned their back on God and God is now throwing all He has at them? When we as believers have our lives turned upside down, when we as believers have our lives go from bad to worse, does that mean God is against us, does that mean God has turned some sort of judgement upon us?

Well, what does chapter one of the book of Ruth say?

Some will assume that tragedy in our lives means God has moved against us --- not necessarily so. Just because bad things happen in your life does not mean God is against you, and likewise, just because blessings are now in your life, that does not necessarily mean God is with you.

We could assume that Naomi and her husband Elimelech are cursed because they leave Israel and go to Moab, a land of unbelievers. They move from a land of believers to a land of unbelievers. But are they cursed This is not at all the case. The plains of Moab are an area in what currently is the country of Jordan where there is more rainfall than most of the surrounding area. The plains of Moab are about 70 miles from the town of Bethlehem. At this time in history the Israelites were stronger than the Moabites so it would be easy for an Israeli to move into Moab and settle down.

Would God curse Naomi and her husband for moving into an ungodly nation?

Does it say such a thing here in Ruth chapter one?

No, it does not.

In the book of Genesis we see that Joseph brings his entire family into the ungodly nation of Egypt and instead of being cursed, Joseph's family was blessed. Even the family of Jesus flees to the ungodly nation of Egypt and is blessed there rather than cursed. God uses these places that are ungodly, these places that are far from morality, ethics and faith, to keep his people safe, until He can release greater blessing upon them. God is God here in this church and God is God everywhere in all of creation. God has full power here in this church, and God has full power everywhere in all of creation. God is with this family, wherever they may go. Go is with you, even in the worst place you may find yourself in.

Many times we are brought to a difficult place in our lives for, as impossible as it may sound, we are brought to a difficult place in our lives for safe harbor. Many times we are brought to a difficult place, where we stay for a time, so that we may be open to what God has for us next in our lives. Sometimes we are brought to a difficult place and all the analysis in the world will never reveal to us why we are in such a difficult place.

There we are, in a difficult place.

This family is brought into an ungodly land, and there is death, death, and more death. All seems hopeless, all appears hopeless, but this family, even though it is just a remnant of what it once had been, this family, they are still here, they have survived. Now I don't know, but perhaps if they stayed in Israel, things could have been worse - but all that is just speculation. This is what has happened in their lives - tragedy.

We could assume that Naomi and her husband Elimelech are cursed because they allow their two sons to marry Moabite women. We see repeatedly Israel fall away from worshiping the Lord when the men of Israel become involved with women of other nations. So perhaps Naomi's family is cursed because of the marriages of their sons to the Moabite women Orpah and Ruth.

Let us be careful here. The prohibition against intermarriage of foreigners is all about faith, and faith alone. The Israelites would fall away from God as a matter of faith, not as a matter of intermarriage. In the ancient middle east pagan families would follow various gods. The idea was that these people would hedge their bets. If they worshiped several gods, then they had a greater chance of blessing. More gods = more chances of blessing. When the pagan wife's household gods were brought into the husband's house, this was

the root of apostasy. Once these gods entered the house it was then only a matter of time that the husband would then follow these gods as well.

Typically after a marriage, when the pagan wife moved into her husband's household, she would bring with her what were called household gods. These were family gods who she believed had served her father's family well, and so she would bring them into her new home, hoping for a blessing in her new life. These household gods were very small, about the size of those little green army men we used to play with as children. Most were made out of brass and were sometimes covered with silver or gold. They could be purchased at the local market very in large quantities. Usually they were placed at the threshold of the house to ward off evil spirits from entering the house.

Moses first wife was Midian, and his second wife was Ethiopian. Joseph's wife was Egyptian. Many of the people who enter Egypt with Jacob's family were not Hebrew and many of the people who left Egypt with the Hebrews were not Hebrew, they were of different nationalities - but they married into the Hebrew nation. The prohibition is not JUST about intermarriage, it is about faith. Is this family is not cursed because of intermarriage?

Does it say such a thing here in Ruth chapter one?
No, it does not.

Again, life is hard, even for good people. The book of Ruth, doesn't tell us why, it just tells us, tragedy after tragedy happened to this family.

We could assume that Naomi and her husband are cursed because the Moabite women are childless - they are cursed because of some unseen sin. The same was said of Sarah the wife of Abraham - those who said such things were wrong. The same thing was said about Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist - those who said such things were again, wrong.

In the Israeli culture of the day, a woman who was unable to have children was considered to be cursed by God.

Does it say such a thing here in Ruth chapter one?
No, it does not.

There is not a word of this family being cursed.

Be careful about making assumptions about God causing this or God causing that, because assumptions are just that, assumptions. The book of Ruth does not explain why this string of tragedies occurs to this couple. The book of Ruth does not point to this or that as the cause of their troubles, here we simply see that life is grim for Naomi - it is so grim that when she returns to Bethlehem, her old friends do not recognize her. They don't recognize her because she has had such a hard life that she has aged beyond here years. (verse 19) "Can this be Naomi?"

The grief of Naomi's life has literally drained the 'pleasantness' out of her body.

Who could blame Naomi for her bitterness? Like many of you I have seen family members and friends stricken down by cancer and other health issues. I have seen people who are better people than I could ever hope to be, slowly be eaten away by cancer. I have seen people who have more faith than I could ever hope to have, hit again and again by tragedy. It is so hard NOT to feel some sort of bitterness or resentment when wonderful, faithful people have their lives turned upside down.

Look, in some ways it does not matter who or what caused life to be so terrible. Life is what it is. Tragedy and death come into our lives. People die, good people die, godly people die. I have seen more than my share of such things.

Now it is true that the story of Ruth takes places in the time of the Judges, when there was no king of Israel and a leader, called a judge, would rise up from among the people and lead them. And, it is true that the book of Judges tells us that God brought famine into the land of Israel at various times because of the evil that the people of Israel had fallen into. But good economic times fall upon both the good and the evil, and hard economic times fall upon both the good and the evil as well. Here, in the Book of Ruth it does not say that the famine came upon Naomi and her husband because they had sinned - they are simply caught up in the famine.

Why life has gone wrong, we don't know, but it sure stinks, doesn't it?

I was at a reception following a funeral I had just overseen. The family had the worst of all possible things happen - a three month old child had suddenly died. The little girl was

as healthy as could be when her mother had put her down for a nap, and half an hour later she was found dead.

A woman approached me at the funeral reception and stated with absolute certainty, "Obviously the baby died because of some sin of the parents."

Another time I was visiting a family in the hospital and their little boy was absolutely perfect! The baby was so happy it was as if he was laughing with joy. The nurses were astonished with how beautiful this child was. He was perfect in every way.

Two days later this little boy became unresponsive - had had a genetic muscle disorder. By the end of the week, again I was at a reception following the little boy's funeral. Again I was told with absolute certainty, "The child died because of the sin of the parents."

I have done a number of funerals for infants, and every time - every time - some jerk, presumes to magically know why bad things happen.

"The child died because of the sin of the parents"

Really?

So, you're telling me that Billy Graham has Parkinson's disease because of some great sin in his life?

Give me a break!

We have tragedy in our lives, and we may never, never, know why.

The book of Ruth is silent on why tragedy befalls this family - Do you know why? Because the book of Ruth is not about what has gone wrong. The book of Ruth is about a God of redemption. God is a God of the impossible. God is a specialist in the unfeasible, in the impractical, in the nonviable, in the unworkable, in the unthinkable, in the unimaginable, and, in the inconceivable.

In the life of Naomi, and in your life, it is not about how you got where you are - it is about the redemption waiting for you around the corner.

Listen, we have three more chapters ahead of us in the book of Ruth and let me tell you, our God is not the God of the dead, He is the God of the living. Our God is not the God of what has gone wrong, our God is the God of absolution, recovery, forgiveness - our God is the God of redemption.

How did this family get to where they now stand with all this tragedy? Who knows? Is it their fault - the text doesn't say - perhaps it is their fault - but at this point it doesn't matter. Notice no blame is assigned, no reasons are given - WHY? This is not about their past, this is not about your past - THIS is about your future - THIS is about the redemption waiting for you....

The worst has come to pass for Naomi, but redemption is waiting in the wings.

Notice in verse 6 that Naomi has given up, her life is at an end. She tells her daughter-in-laws to go home to their mothers, she tells them to go and get a new life. She says mothers instead of fathers. In this cultural context the house of the father means protection, the house of the mother means to find a new husband. In that day it was the mother who would find the husband for the daughter. So Naomi is releasing her daughter-in-laws, telling them to get a new life, for there is no hope in a life with her.

When they protest, Naomi responds with hyperbole' saying that even if she had two new sons, the situation would be hopeless for grandchildren. See, in other words, so many tragedies have happened in Naomi's life - she sees no possibility of anything positive left.

Naomi can see no future - but, little does she know that redemption is just around the corner.

Here we see a hint of what is to come. Look at verse 16 and 17, 'But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.'"

This my friends, is nothing less than a declaration of faith. This my friends is nothing less than a vow of faithfulness.

Remember how I said earlier that a pagan wife would bring her household gods into her husbands house - and there lies the root of falling away from the faith. But here, by this vow, we see what is truly in Ruth's heart. Ruth walks away from her pagan life, she walks away from her false beliefs, she walks away from false faith and walks into the real faith, she walks away from false gods and into the realm of the one true God.

Now this is very poetic, and very well written, in fact, it is pure genius how Ruth expresses herself. But, look carefully, and you will see honest real faith in action here. Here, right here in verses 16 and 17 we see an awesome definition of what faith is.

This may be the most powerful statement of faith in the Bible.

Does Ruth expect things to go well when they enter Bethlehem?

No, of course not.

Ruth expects more of the same. She expects poverty, she expects tragedy - she expects death. So she says it flat out: "Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried."

Ruth expects - death.

Wow. Look at that! Such a faith!

Ruth intends to follow the Lord God, no matter what happens in her life.

If there is tragedy she will be faithful.

If there is death, she will be faithful.

Come what may - she - will - be - faithful.

Even if life never gets better, she will be faithful.

Such a faith is rare. Such a faith is incredible. Such a faith was placed in her heart by God himself.

The last word of chapter one sums it all up for us there in verse 22 - the word is, 'beginning'.

Naomi sees life as over, but this is just the beginning.

This here is not the end, this here is the beginning. Anyone, however hopeless things may seem, is redeemable.

The plans that God has for Naomi and Ruth!

Let me end with a word of encouragement.

This past year may have brought you three funerals and a famine. This past year may have brought you a long list of things you would rather forget about, things that you dearly wish would have never happened. However, like Ruth and Naomi, you are still here. Like Ruth and Naomi, God is not finished with you yet. Why things have happened in your life they way they have happened - I haven't a clue.

But, I do know that Jesus Christ is the God of redemption. Jesus is the God of the unfeasible, the impractical, the nonviable, the unworkable, the unthinkable, the unimaginable, and, the inconceivable.

Stay with us for the next three weeks and see how God redeems the lives of two broken women. Stay with us, just for the next three weeks, and see how Jesus WILL redeem what you see as unredeemable.