

Bitter Comes Home

Jason Abbott

About seven years ago, I was in my hometown visiting when I heard a voice behind me call my name. I turned around and found myself standing before a guy who looked familiar, but not “call-my-name-out-in-the-middle-of-a-store” familiar. He looked like he could be my age but, at the same time, like he could be much older than me as well. This guy looked like he’d lived a hard life.

What ensued was one of those awkward moments. All of you know precisely what I’m talking about. There’s a moment of uneasy silence as you frantically search for a name to greet the person with, but instead you say something like: “Hey, man.” or “Wow, look at you. What’s going on, guy?” All the time hoping that the person will say something which will help you finally find a name. Something to save you from the awkwardness!

To this guy’s credit, he graciously identified himself to me. And, I apologized for not knowing his name. And then we had a good talk.

Friends, something like that is taking place in this morning’s text of Scripture. Naomi and Ruth find their way back to Bethlehem, and the whole town is stirred up. The women of this little town—women who’d certainly once known Naomi well—find her familiar yet also changed. She looks different. She looks tired and worn-out. Naomi looks like she’s had a hard go of it.

Let’s read the passage together and see what happens.

Ruth 1:19-22

¹⁹ So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?”

²⁰ “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

²² So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

There are three parts to this little section. There is (1st) **the stir** when Naomi and Ruth arrive. There's (2nd) **the speech** that Naomi gives explaining her situation to everyone. And, there's (3rd) **the hope** that the author ends this short section with—a hope that points us to God's provision and love.

Let's look at each of these three parts in turn.

1. **The stir (v. 19)**

If you can remember back two weeks ago, I made the case that Naomi's family wasn't simply any old family from Bethlehem. Rather, they were a leading family of the town and, really, in the nation of Israel. They were likely descendants of Caleb, the great hero who with Joshua led the people into the Promised Land.

So, when she comes back to town alone—no husband, no sons, just Naomi with a strange foreigner—there is a great stir among the people. She's been humbled. The mighty have been laid low. The people take notice.

Well, in literature this is called peripetia. It's a term used to describe a reversal of fortunes or of circumstances. Now, in the Bible there are many examples of this, and what's interesting about those examples is that the Lord is always given credit or responsibility for them. It doesn't matter if it is a positive or a negative change. God is sovereign over it. He is Lord over all things.

Let me give you some examples—both a positive and a negative one.

- When Job runs into all his infamous troubles, they are never characterized as bad luck. Read through the whole book. You'll never hear anyone call what Job encounters bad luck. His three miserable friends basically argue that God has given him these trials because he's done something very bad, and Job argues he's innocent and, therefore, God must have other reasons for giving him the trials. So, when it comes to Job's transformed situation, from either perspective, God is responsible.
- Or, think about Paul's conversion. He went from persecuting Christians—dragging them to prison and having them executed—to planting churches. This was a drastic reversal or change. And, the early church was stirred-up

by it. Who was responsible for this peripetia moment? The second member of the Trinity—Jesus Christ. He is the God over Paul’s change.

These kinds of transformations stir things up; right? When they happen to us, they make us question if they’re bad or celebrate if they’re good. When they happen to others, we wonder what has happened to the person. And, this is what’s going-on in Bethlehem when Naomi comes home humbled. The whole town begins to wonder. They begin to ask—“Can this be Naomi?” (v. 19).

Now, there’s nothing wrong with such questions. Yet, when questioning turns to speculating, we can easily begin to sin. We can easily begin to dabble in gossip. When we imaginatively fill in the blanks, we open-up the door to lies and half-truths. And, God is clear about his distaste for this. He condemns it throughout the Bible. In fact, Jesus is very clear that for such gossip there will be an accounting in the end. He warns us about this.

But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken (Matthew 12:36).

Friends, in what ways are you speculating about others? How are you filling in the blanks? How are you stirring up mistrust and rumors in others? Don’t do it! Hear Jesus’ warning! Don’t go-in for empty talk!

Well, I do wonder if such empty talk wasn’t being whispered here and there around Bethlehem. Maybe that’s what warranted the explanation from Naomi?

2. The speech (vv. 20-21)

Listen to what she says to the whole town. Listen to her bitter testimony.

“Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (vv. 20-21).

There’ve been some famous name changes throughout history; haven’t there? You probably don’t know Mark Sinclair Vincent but you do know his new name—Vin Diesel. You may not know who Victoria Adams is because you better know her as Posh Spice. (By the way, did you know Madonna’s real name is actually Madonna and Prince’s is actually Prince. *No kidding!* Of course, Prince did change his name

to The-Artist-Formerly-Known-As-Prince. So there's that.) Anyhow, in our time, we change names to sound catchy. But, that wasn't true in Naomi's day.

In the ancient Near East, names meant something. They were chosen carefully by parents and changed intentionally by those who bore them. And, that's true here. Naomi is making a statement by changing her name to Mara—by changing her name from “pleasant” or “lovely” to “bitter” or “sad.” That's Naomi's message to us all. The Lord has taken away what's pleasant to me and provided what's bitter to me. This is a raw and honest confession from her.

In my opinion, one of the most destructive things we do in the modern church is sidestep or steer clear of these kinds of raw and honest moments. They're awkward and uncomfortable and hard. So, we avoid them at best or we condemn such things as expressions of faithlessness at worst.

Friends, I have encountered so many people who have experienced tragedies like Naomi did, yet as they begin to ask honest questions about God's responsibility, they're ignored or patronized or shunned for doing so. Their frustrations with God aren't addressed. They aren't consoled or cared for in the middle of their confusion and distress. This type of treatment is the antithesis of the character of Jesus Christ. It's the antithesis of the gospel. This is contrary to the church's mission and calling. It's ugly and destructive and unbiblical.

In fact, when you read through God's Word, you find these honest expressions in the Old and the New Testaments. You find people wrestling with God's purposes. You find people crying-out to the Lord with bitter emotion. The Bible is chalked full of these raw and honest moments. Friends, they are there—in the Word of God—because the struggle is real. Life in a sinful and fallen world is often hard and tragic. The Bible is honest about this.

And, here's the good news. Jesus doesn't ignore your questions or your pain. In fact, Jesus came for just this reason. He shouldered human suffering and tragedy. He faced ridicule and betrayal. But, more than that, Jesus endured the wrath of God and was forsaken, so that you wouldn't have to be forsaken.

Friends, when a Naomi enters into our presence, we are called to embrace her. That's what the church is here to do. We are called to walk with her in her suffering. We are called to cry with her in her pain. We are called to wrestle with the questions

she has and help her seek the Lord in the midst of those questions. It's messy work. It's hard work. Nevertheless, it's the work Christians are called to do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had this type of deep vision for our Christian fellowship. This is what he said about it.

The Christian... must bear the burden of a brother. He must suffer and endure the brother. It is only when he is a burden that another person is really a brother and not merely an object to be manipulated. The burden of men was so heavy for God Himself that He had to endure the Cross. God verily bore the burden of men in the body of Jesus Christ. But He bore them as a mother carries her child, as a shepherd enfolds the lost lamb that has been found. God took men upon Himself and they weighted Him to the ground, but God remained with them and they with God. In bearing with men God maintained fellowship with them. It was the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the Cross. And Christians must share in this law.¹

As First Free looks to the future, this is its calling. This messy ministry is it. Churches are not called to be flashy. Churches are not called to be service providers. The church is a gathering of people who worship Jesus and tell others about Jesus, especially as they love and care for one another in the midst of all their flaws.

It's my prayer that the Naomis of this world will feel embraced at First Free—that this church will be known for its love and compassion and patience for broken and hurting people. Amen? Amen.

Well, finally we come to the last part of our passage.

3. The hope (v. 22)

Our author tells us at the beginning of this section that Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem. Next, he tells us that Naomi makes her bitter speech to the entire town. And lastly, he seems to just repeat that they arrived at Bethlehem. It's seems strange. Why does our author repeat himself?

Look at the last line with me again.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, 100.

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning (v. 22).

There is so much in this verse. Consider what we are being shown right here. We see not just one widow but two. Both their lives have been turned upside down. Both have lost loved ones. Both have lost financial stability. Both have lost dreams. We are shown a desperate pair. Where will they sleep? How will they make a living? What does the future hold for them? There are so very many unanswered questions before Naomi and Ruth.

This is the first thing our author shows us, but there's more to this little picture. Almost as an insignificant sidenote, we're told by the author that the two arrived—"as the barley harvest was beginning" (v. 22). Why the sudden interest in farming? Why does this matter?

Well, there's really not just two characters in this scene. There's also a third—Israel, the covenant people, God's bride. Do you remember how their story began? Do you remember the waywardness of Israel?

- "In the days when the Judges ruled" (v. 1)—a dark and disobedient time! A time when everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes.
- "...there was a famine in the land" (v. 1)—God is disciplining his people! God is calling them to repentance. Will they listen? Will the Lord relent? Will he show them grace and forgiveness? Is there hope?

Naomi and Ruth come looking for hope. And they enter this town, Bethlehem, just as the barley harvest is beginning, just as the Lord's blessings are being realized, just as hope is dawning upon Israel. One commentator explains it in this way.

...one almost senses a delighted, slightly smiling narrator thinking, "What a coincidence! They arrived just in time for the barley harvest!"²

Friends, there is no coincidence. God is there. God is bringing the land to life. He is the God of renewal, rebirth, restoration, and resurrection. Israel is learning this.

² Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ruth*, 131.

Israel is experiencing this. There is hope still for Naomi and Ruth with such a God, with such a Redeemer.

The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God... abounding in love and faithfulness... forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin (Exodus 34:6, 7).