

Introduction

For many years Paul Harvey’s radio show aired on 1200 radio stations. During “The Rest of the Story”, he would provide backstories for famous people and even for famous events. For example, he told the story of the Dutch purchasing an island from the Canarsee people in the year 1626, for about a dollar per square mile—that’s about \$24 for the entire island in today’s currency. The British would later capture New Amsterdam and rename it New York. Today it is known as Manhattan Island and has some of the most expensive real estate in America—purchased 400 years ago for the equivalent value of a couple burgers and drinks at a fast food restaurant. Some have claimed it was the greatest real estate swindle of all time.

Paul Harvey then reveals Peter Minuet “purchased” the island from the Canarsee natives and while it would seem they had been absolutely swindled by Peter Minuet, the truth is they didn’t even live there. They were visiting the island when they came across Peter Minuet and “sold” him an island they didn’t even own. It may have been one of the greatest real estate swindles of all time. And now you know *the rest of the story*.

There’s something about backstories that we all find intriguing. Whether it’s the fictional character Bruce Wayne witnessing the murder of his parents in Gotham and so becoming Batman or it’s a professional athlete like Michael Oher, who was raised by his mother as she battled addiction and with his father in and out of jail, we all love a good backstory. The NBA Finals are beginning this week and it’s almost a guarantee that in some half-time segment or maybe a pregame segment, they will highlight one of the players who has overcome tremendous odds to play in the NBA. We love to hear *the rest of the story*.

My wife is a StarGate nerd, or as I affectionately call her, she’s my StarGeek. She watches all seventeen seasons of the three shows with the commentary audio track, listening to the actors and directors and such describe in truly excruciating detail how various scenes were shot, which lenses were used, how the actors were feeling, what they had lunch for the other day...That’s a different sort of backstory that she truly enjoys.

Having just finished the book of Judges, we need a backstory. We need a feel-good story about Israel’s first couple centuries in the land, something that is better than human sacrifice, false worship, brutal murder, rampant idolatry, violent war and oppression. We need to see that in spite of the corporate consequences of mass rebellion against God, and in spite of the covenant curses rightly poured out on Israel, and in spite of the entire nation doing what is right in their own eyes, there is someone in the background quietly working to bring about God’s purposes.

It might be tempting to assume I’m referring to Ruth, who is presented as an example of righteousness in this book named after her. If you know the story you may be tempted to think it’s really Boaz, another example of righteousness in the dark days of the judges. Or perhaps Naomi, who is the primary speaker in chapter 1. No, the backstory isn’t about any of these folk. God himself is at work behind the scenes in Israel during the time of the

judges, quietly working to bring about his purposes, even as his own people continue to work against him. We're in Ruth 1.

Ruth 1:1 In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me." ¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." ¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

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?" ²⁰ She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ 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?"

²² So Naomi returned, 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.

Ruth 1:1–22

In Those Days

Normally when I begin a new book of the Bible I preach some sort of introductory sermon—or sermons, as in the case of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In that series we spent the first three weeks in the book of Acts to see the founding of the church in Ephesus and to provide a bit of background—some *backstory*—for the letter. Today we find ourselves in the book of Ruth. It begins with the words “In the days when the judges ruled”. If you would indulge me, please allow me to spend the last *nine months* providing the background for the book of Ruth. Here’s the big reveal: the first 34 sermons in this 40-sermon series have been all introduction!

By now we should all understand what is packed into the words “in the days when the judges ruled”. In those days God’s people were worshiping the Baals and the Ashtarothe, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, the gods of the Philistines. Men raised up to lead and guide Israel back to the Lord offered their daughters in sacrifice. Men raised up to protect and lead Israel into faithfulness made idols and carved images. Men who were supposed to assist the nation in worship of the one true God instead helped establish false worship of false gods. In those days Israel gave their sons and daughters to marry those who worshiped other gods.

When we read that in those days there was a famine in the land, we should not be surprised. Centuries after this the prophet Amos described the sort of famines the text mentions.

Amos 4:6 “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

⁷ “I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would have rain, and the field on which it did not rain would wither; ⁸ so two or three cities would wander to another city to drink water, and would not be satisfied; yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

⁹ “I struck you with blight and mildew; your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured; yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

¹⁰ “I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt; I killed your young men with the sword, and carried away your horses, and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils; yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

Amos 4:6–10

For centuries the Lord had been working to bring about faith and repentance in his people. He allowed the covenant curses to come upon them, curses that included famines and such. If Israel had simply returned to the Lord, they would have received covenant

blessings rather than covenant *curses*. They did not return to the Lord. It's not surprising, then, that in the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in and around Bethlehem of Judah.

Some scholars believe the events in the book of Ruth take place in Gideon's day. Because of the famine—we don't know what caused the famine—because of the famine a man named Elimelech left Bethlehem in Judah and went to Moab. At the very least, this suggests a localized famine. There's no indication of a mass migration to Moab, and if a famine is affecting Judah because of drought it would also affect Moab, which was right across the Jordan from Judah.

Further, the famine lasts several years. This suggests something other than weather as the cause. A drought that lasted that long would not be highly localized. More likely this famine was due to the Midianites invading the land right at harvest, stealing Israel's produce. To get away from the suffering, Elimelech chose to leave the promised land to go to Moab. This happened *in those days*.

Grasping

Elimelech should not have left Bethlehem. Israel was experiencing the Lord's discipline. The right thing to do was to remain in Bethlehem. "Bethlehem" means "the house of bread", but rather than trust the Lord through the difficulty, he took his wife and sons to Moab.

His decision to leave the promised land does not result in blessing. He was grasping for something the Lord was withholding. Israel would have known the reason for the famine. This was not the first famine. This was not the only famine. When Midian was oppressing Israel, the Lord sent them a prophet who explained why they were struggling as they were.

Jdgs 6:7 When the people of Israel cried out to the LORD on account of the Midianites, ⁸ the LORD sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. ⁹ And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. ¹⁰ And I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed my voice."

Judges 6:7–10

It was then that he called Gideon. The reason for their suffering and pain was their sin. This was the entire point of the covenant blessings and covenant curses.

Deut 27:15 "'Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret.' And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen.'"

Deuteronomy 27:15

Here we see the first curse is for worshiping images and idols and false gods. In this immediate text the Lord doesn't say what the curse would entail. Instead of listing what bad things would happen as a result of the curse, we infer from the positive blessings of the covenant what would happen.

Deut 28:1 “And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. ² And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. ³ Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. ⁴ Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. ⁵ Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.
Deuteronomy 28:1–5

If Israel would faithfully obey the Lord and do all he commands them to do, they will be blessed, and here the Lord spells out what this entails. They would be blessed in the city and in the field. That is, their work, whether “city” work or farming, would be blessed. They would be fertile and have lots of children. Their animals would be fertile. Notice also, “the fruit of your ground” would be fertile! If they would be faithful to obey the Lord, their crops would grow! They would have plenty! Instead, the curse entails the opposite of this, hence, there was a famine in the land.

When Elimelech moves his family to Moab, he is seeking to avoid the covenant curse. He grasps for what the Lord had not given, and he ends up dying in Moab. Elimelech, like all in Israel, should have destroyed the altars of Baal like Gideon did. Elimelech, like all Israel, should have chopped down the Asherah poles. Elimelech, like all Israel, should have burned the carved images with fire. This is what the Lord called them to do. This is what he should have done. By grasping for something else, Elimelech ends up dying in a foreign land without gaining what he was grasping for. God’s hand was at work, however. Even in this, in Elimelech’s grasping, God is at work, as he was during the entire time of the judges.

More Tragedy

When in Moab, their sons married Moabite women. Remember, the prohibition against marrying foreign women had to do with foreign women worshiping foreign gods, not with ethnicity. Moses, Israel’s lawgiver, had married a foreign woman. His nephew, Israel’s second high priest, married a foreign woman. Israel’s heroes, both Caleb and Othniel, were themselves foreigners. Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute, joined Israel as a covenant member and married the son of the tribal chief of all Judah. The reason they could is these foreigners began to worship the Lord God of Israel and so were welcomed as the people of God.

These two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, began to worship the God of Israel. It’s hard to speak of “conversion” in that day as women generally worshiped the god or gods their husbands worshiped. It would be entirely natural for a woman who married an Israelite to worship the God of Israel.

The author tells us they lived in Moab about ten years. During this time Elimelech died and her sons grew up and married. They, too, died, so Naomi was without any support structure. She had no one to protect her, which was a role first for a husband and then for sons. While working in the fields of Moab, she hears from someone that “the Lord had visited his people and given them food”. Hearing this, she decides to return home to Bethlehem, to her people.

In verse 8 she tells her daughters-in-law to return to their *mothers'* houses, not to their *fathers'* houses. This is interesting. Normally a widow without sons would return to her father's house where she would be protected and provided for. By sending them back to the homes of their mothers, Naomi is indicating they are free to marry again. In verse 9 she clarifies this: "The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband". To dwell in their mothers' houses would be temporary.

They protest and initially refuse. They insist on traveling with Naomi back to Bethlehem. Naomi protests as well, appealing to the law of Moses. Israelites were required to do what was in their power to maintain family lines. If a man dies before his wife has a son, his brother was to marry his wife and their firstborn son would be the legal heir of the dead brother. Both of Naomi's sons are dead, however. She tells them even if she had a husband and even if she were to become pregnant that night, they would have to wait far too long to marry and both Orpah and Ruth would be beyond child-bearing ages themselves.

Naomi is greatly pained by this. In verse 13 she says it is extremely bitter to her that the Lord's hand is against her. She acknowledges God's sovereignty, and expresses her extreme lament. At this Orpah chooses to return to her mother's house. In verse 15 we see further evidence that she, while married, had turned away from the gods of Moab. Naomi tells Ruth Orpah "has gone back to her people and to her gods", and then suggests Ruth do the same.

Ruth, however, didn't merely worship YHWH in order to get married. She insists Naomi speak no more of her returning to her people or to her former gods. She expresses her covenant fidelity. Wherever Naomi goes, she'll go. Wherever Naomi lives, she'll live. Whomever Naomi's people are, they are hers, too. The God Naomi worships is the God Ruth worships. At this Naomi is convinced and welcomes her along.

When they arrived in Bethlehem they created a bit of a stir. These are the people Naomi grew up with and lived among, people she hadn't seen in ten years. A lot has happened in those ten years and with all the tragedy Naomi has experienced, she has certainly aged a bit. The women of the town said, "Is this Naomi?" They were surprised to see her again.

Naomi, however, is still suffering. Her husband is dead. Her sons are dead. The only one remaining is her daughter-in-law Ruth. She tells the women, "Do not call me Naomi." The name Naomi means "pleasant". Given her suffering, life is anything but pleasant. Life has been quite the opposite. Life is hard. Difficult. *Bitter*. Naomi is bitter. She tells the women, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara". Mara means bitter.

She asks, "Why call me Pleasant, when the Lord has set his hand against me? Why call me Pleasant when the Lord's hand is heavy against me?" With all the tragedy she has gone through, it makes sense she would, essentially, change her name. Don't call me Naomi. Call me Bitter.

Mara

She is not wrong to lay this at the Lord's feet. He has, in fact, brought calamity upon her. Daniel Block explains why she does so.

The cognate noun רָעָה, "calamity, disaster," is often used of calamities sent by God in fulfillment of the covenant curses. Naomi did not hereby ascribe moral evil to God; she blamed him for her disasters and grievous misfortune.

Daniel I. Block, ZECOT

Based entirely on the fact she was an Israelite during a time Israel was in rebellion against God, she suffered the covenant curses along with all Israel. She and her husband had traveled to Moab in an attempt to avoid some of those covenant curses, yet God is God *everywhere*, not just in Israel. There is no indication she and Elimelech were also bowing down to idols yet being part of the covenant people meant they experienced both covenant blessings and covenant curses. Naomi—*Mara*—experiences the full weight of those curses.

Some have sought to criticize her for her lament, assuming she is blaming God from a position of unbelief. God, however, is quite capable of handling her complaint and her sorrow and her pain. Rather than seeing unbelief in her complaint, we see her *faith*.

Naomi, however, is not without faith. Even though she holds Yahweh responsible for her suffering, she does not abandon him. Rather, her suffering drives her back to the place of Yahweh's visitation. He shapes her people's identity and thus her own. She cannot abandon Yahweh, even when she believes he has turned against her. Both her return and her protest express her devotion to Yahweh. She clings to him even though she believes he has turned against her. Naomi thus joins those whose anguished complaints manifest an unshakable commitment to God, one that mirrors the devotion of a Creator who refuses to abandon those who turn away to other relationships.

L. Daniel Hawk, AOTC

Finally, after all these dark chapters in Judges, chapters filled with unbelief, we come to true faith in Israel. God has not abandoned his people. Yes, things are dark during the days when the judges ruled. They remained dark for much of the time kings would rule. In fact, the days would be largely dark until the time the True Light would shine in the darkness and the darkness would be unable to overcome it.

Here we see God working to preserve among his people a remnant who would remain faithful. Naomi—*Mara*—is an otherwise ordinary woman who has experienced tragedy, first in losing her husband and then in losing both her sons. While God has visited his people again and the famine has ended, Mara's prospects for the future are grim. A childless widow has a very uncertain future. Israel was responsible to care for the widow and the orphan; the law of Moses was clear about this.

Even in their harvest, the fruit of their labor, Israel were to leave some behind for widows and orphans, for sojourners to come behind the harvesters and harvest some for themselves. We see this in the law in Deuteronomy 24. Israelites were forbidden from harvesting every bit of food they could. They had to leave the edges of the field for others. They had to leave the corners of the field for others to harvest. It would be quite tempting for an Israelite to not sow as much seed on the edges or in the corners, knowing he himself would not benefit, yet the law was clear: God gave the harvest and so it must be shared.

This was during the time of the judges, however. Who even cared what the law said? Naomi—er, sorry—*Mara* knows she's in danger and she knows the reason. God has stripped every bit of security from her. Why would she expect to find faithful men and women in Israel? The Israelites were the reason for the struggle in the first place.

She knows this. She feels this. This is her lived experience so she tells the women to call her Mara—bitter. Her entire being is wrapped up in this, in her pain and suffering. It's all she knows. She will not abandon the Lord, even though he has brought this about, but she also laments yet another day in her pain. She is, in every way, *Mara*. Bitter.

Naomi

Oh, church! See the gospel in verse 22! She says in verse 20, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara”. Don't call me Pleasant; call me Bitter! Verse 22: “So *Naomi* returned”.

We have numerous examples of God changing a person's name in Scripture, indicating a change in that person's identity. Abram becomes Abraham. No longer was his name “Exalted Father” a mockery, for he was childless. Now his name is “Father of a Multitude”. God was indicating what he was going to do for Abram, now Abraham. His time of waiting for his promised descendants was drawing to a close. The promised descendants would, in fact, come. No longer would Sarai—“*My Princess*” be a blessing to just Abraham; she would be Sarah—everyone's Princess, a blessing to all. She would become the mother of that vast multitude.

Jacob is renamed Israel. No longer is he the One Who Grasps, but the One Who Wrestles with God—and prevails. When he was born he was grasping his twin brother's heel. The time was coming when God would fulfill his promises and he would no longer grasp for them. In our text we see another name change. Don't call me Naomi; call me Mara.

Verse 22, the author, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God, said, So *Naomi* returned to Bethlehem. *Naomi* returned. She felt the bitterness of life, the bitterness of loss, the bitterness of poverty, the bitterness of suffering. This became her very identity so that she told the women she had known for years, “Don't call me Pleasant! I'm not pleasant and life is not pleasant. Call me Bitter, for this is what I am.” God simply says, “So Naomi...”

At the end of it all, Naomi's identity was rooted in the Lord. She belonged to him. She was his in every way. He determined the course of her life and though her life experience may well have been bitter, God calls her Pleasant. Yes, he has led her through great suffering. He was with her in that suffering. It was truly a bitter suffering. She would feel the sting of loss every day for the rest of her life. God steps in and declares this is not what will define her!

Her suffering and pain is not who she is. It is what she has gone through. It is what she has experienced. It is a very present reality in her life, yet God calls her Naomi. Don't hear me saying by calling her Naomi instead of calling her Mara means her life was suddenly sunflowers and daisies. She was still vulnerable, she and Ruth. They were still two unmarried women with no one to protect and provide for them. The days ahead were still days of suffering and pain. God refuses to let that be what defines Naomi, however. He knows the rest of the story.

God knows the 10,000 things he's doing in Naomi's life, and Naomi is aware of three of them. Sadly, those three are the losses of her husband Elimelech and her sons Mahlon and Chilion. What we're seeing in this text is Naomi's perspective is not the one that defines her. Her identity is not wrapped up in the three things she sees God doing in her life. Her identity is wrapped up in all 10,000 things God is doing in her life, and the only one who sees all 10,000 things is the Lord himself, working behind the scenes.

As God himself is about to reveal, he has other things planned for her life, things that will result in her joy and for her good. She is playing a role in God's redemptive purposes in this world and she will soon begin to see a few more of the 10,000 things.

Do you hear this gospel in this chapter? Do you see the good news that is here for you and for me? Church, you and I have spent significant parts of our lives renaming ourselves. So often we allow our circumstances to define us, whether financial struggles or health problems, failed relationships or job loss. We've allowed others to define us and name us, whether for our sexual histories or inclinations or our addictions or our shortcomings. So often we allow the failures of others to define us, for how they've mistreated us or abused us. Many feel alone and abandoned and this becomes our identity. We become *Mara*.

For too long we've let the world define us, to determine our value and our worth. If you are in Christ then you're actively trusting the Lord Jesus with your future; you must also trust him with your past. He was with you through it all—yes, even through your sin. The sinless Savior entered into the muck of our lives and suffered and died in our place, that he might rescue us from it.

Whether we made our own mess or others made the mess for us, we feel it. We feel its weight and we become *Mara*. Then God calls us *Naomi*. God defines us. God is the one who calls us to himself, who gives us an identity. God is the one who determines our value, our worth. Yes, sometimes the path laid out before us is, in fact, *bitter*, yet God still calls us Pleasant.

One day our backstories will be written. Then we will see just how fully and completely God has been working in our lives, often behind the scenes in ways we cannot know until that backstory is written. When we see it we will marvel at the truth that he has never left us nor has he forsaken us. He has been there in the good times and the bad, in our joys and our sorrows, in our successes and our failures, in our victories and in our defeats. Through it all he has never wronged us. Since God determined to pour out his grace and mercy on us, how he sees us has never wavered or changed. Let us rest in his identity given to us.