

CALL ME MARA

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Hebrews 12:1 says, *“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.”* The “great cloud of witnesses” referred to in this verse includes the excellent examples given in the previous chapter (Hebrews 11), those who had faith in God and the good works they did because of that faith. The good examples we have in the Bible are to encourage us to have the same living faith we need in running the Christian race. After reviewing many of those good examples for 31 verses, Hebrews 11:32 says, *“And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets.”* To know and understand the *entire* “great cloud of witnesses” is what the rest of the Bible is for. The Book of Ruth contains some of these, and not just Ruth herself. Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi is another righteous example to encourage us, especially as we see how she handled great trials on her faith. At one point, she was so discouraged that she asked to be called by a new name, Mara.

A bitter time

The Book of Ruth begins with an introduction to Namoi and her family, a husband and two sons, and their journey to Moab to escape a famine in Israel (Ruth 1:1-2). They spent 10 years in Moab, and during that time, Naomi’s husband died, her two sons married women of Moab, and then her sons also died (Ruth 1:3-5). But being driven from her home by famine, spending a decade in a strange land full of idolatry, and then returning home as a poor and childless widow challenged Namoi’s faith and her understanding. When she tried to send her two daughters-in-law away before journeying back to Israel, Naomi said, *“It grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me”* (Ruth 1:13). Namoi then returned home, and her daughter-in-law Ruth insisted on returning with her. Ruth 1:19-21 says, *“And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi? And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?”* In Hebrew, the word “Mara” means *bitter*. This was the name the Israelites gave to the place in the wilderness where the water was bitter (Heb 15:23). In his own great trial of affliction, Job said he was speaking in the *bitterness* of his soul (Job 7:11 and 10:1).

God’s good purpose

Naomi did not fully understand God’s purpose for her trials while she was in the midst of them. But that should not be difficult for any of us to relate to. She also did not have the plain words that we have in the New Testament about God working all things together for our good (Rom 8:28). Suffering for righteousness’

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(continued)

sake is the pathway by which we grow spiritually to be in the image of Christ (2 Cor 1:3-6; 2 Cor 4:16-17; 12:9-10; Gal 3:3-4, Php 3:10-15; Heb 2:10; 5:8-9; Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-9). That is why it is necessary for all Christians to suffer persecution for righteousness' sake (Matt 13:21; Php 1:29; 1 Thes 3:14; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 2:21; 3:9). But God was forming His faithful children in the Old Testament too. And they also grew spiritually by suffering affliction (Psa 66:10-12; Prov 17:3; 25:4). In Psalm 119:67, the psalmist said, *"Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word."* The affliction taught him to keep God's word and not go astray. *"It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes"* (Psa 119:71). He learned God's statutes by what he suffered. *"I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me"* (Psa 119:75). God was good and faithful to give him this affliction to help him grow. Job was being tried that he might come forth as gold (Job 23:10). The Old Testament prophets also foretold that suffering for righteousness' sake would be the pathway of spiritual growth under the New Covenant (Zech 13:8-9; Mal 3:1-4). Suffering for righteousness' sake is how Jesus grew to be perfect (Heb 2:10; 5:8-9). Christ's sufferings are our example to follow (2 Cor 13-7; 1 Pet 2:19-25) so that we can also grow to be spiritually complete like Christ (Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-9). Therefore, we should rejoice when we suffer for doing well (Matt 5:10-12; Luke 6:22-23; Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 12:9-10; Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 1:6; 3:14; 4:12-16). That is the way that Christ's strength is made perfect in us (2 Cor 12:9-10). That is how our faith is purified, and how we grow in patience (1 Pet 1:6-7; 5:10; Rom 5:3-4; Jas 1:2-3).

A happy ending

Once again, that is why we have that great "cloud of witnesses" that we need to follow in running our race to perfection and overcoming sin (Heb 12:1-4). James 5:10-11 says, *"Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy."* Naomi is another example of enduring affliction. Even when she thought God had dealt bitterly with her, she did not stop serving Him. And, like Job, she too came to see the pity and tender mercy of God in the end. God provided a husband for Ruth from among Naomi's kinfolk, and Naomi then had a new family that God used to provide for her. And this is the very family that God made to be the ancestors of David, the royal line of the tribe of Judah, and ultimately of Jesus Christ the Son of God. What happened with Naomi reminds us of what our Lord says in Romans 8:18: *"The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."* And 2 Corinthians 4:17 says, *"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."*