

## Session 2

### By Alistair Begg

Announcer:

Well, let's thank Render for the good job they did and leading us to the Lord and thank you guys. We welcome our visitors. We know there are a whole bunch that we're here this morning that will be here tonight and tomorrow, and although we'd like to think it's because we've been here all these years, many of them have listened to al-istrabadi on the radio. And so they're here and we're delighted you are for our guests. We do not have we probably run out of the programs, but just talk with a friendly student next to you and they will show you the way the schedule goes.

And that will be that will suffice. And that's about as good as they're going to be able to do. I want to thank you, the students, for your great attitude. I apologize for the for the the the elective time, not the electives. They were wonderful. I apologize to four hundred students who could not get in. So the spirit of God spoke directly and said, do something about that. Here's what we're going to do. Those in John Hutchison's elective will move to Sutherland.

That's good, because that opens up 200 more seats. It's also good because we have been assured that tomorrow they will turn the air on and suddenly it was amazing. It was amazing. But

actually, five five students said they lost three or four pounds and they'd been trying to do that for some time. But you're saying, well, what happens with the Dunns? I'm glad you asked. They will be moving right down here into the gymnasium. We will also be using card readers so that it will go much more quickly. We just I just apologize. That was an oversight. We could easily have handled that and we didn't. But your attitude was so wonderful. And so if Dr. Cook asks, just say no, that was it was swell and then I can keep my job.

All right. Thanks. Thank you. Thank you. Because I'd hate to leave Biola and go to work for a living. He said yes. The discussion this evening is a continuation, we are we are extremely fortunate that in this corner of the world we have a place that commits ourselves to the study of the word of God. The actual statement, our mission statement from that goes back sixty six years talks about the clear, bold proclamation of the word of God and application of the word of God.

And we have a servant of God who will boldly proclaim that the spirit of God will stir our hearts. But if I understand in my theology is correct somewhere along the line, it's to trigger our initiative and our wills to respond and say just what we've been singing, that we will be men and women of God. Alister Begg come please, and continue with Sister Ruth and the story. And let's welcome him back shall we?

Begg:

Well, good evening, it's nice to see you. And if you have your Bibles, can I encourage you to turn again to. Let's just read from the 16 verse again, shall we? But Ruth replied, Don't urged 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, 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. But Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her. She stopped urging her.

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? Don't call me Naomi. She told them, call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away for the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me. So Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by Ruth the Moab for daughter in law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. Well, before we conclude chapter one, let's pause and that's going to help an.

So, Father, it is the evening time. And the light of day has gone. And we are in a familiar place for many of us. And it's possible for us at the very routine of our gathering here could double for us the sense of expectation that we have in desiring to hear far beyond the voice of a mere man. At the very voice of God, through the word of God, by the spirit of God. And so this is our earnest plea, it's our genuine expectation, it's our distinct longing. And we pray that you will bless to us our consideration of the Bible now, for Jesus sake, amen.

Well, we said this morning that this story is set against a backdrop of civil strife, national upheaval, international concern. It's a story of ordinary people dealing with the ordinary events of life. And if you paid attention to it, even if you read ahead, you would recognize that here we have a group of individuals who are tackling the issues of family life. The possibilities of marriage, the nature of bereavement, the challenge of relationships, not least of all, how to deal with your mother-in-law, which, of course will become a pressing issue for many of you as time goes on.

It is, as you read the story, a story of purity. It's a story of innocence, faithfulness, loyalty, duty and love. And it is all set within the context of a God who knows and cares who provides and who sustains. And here in the humdrum events of life, we find God at work. We realize we're reminded that God, who has all of the world to be concerned with, who overrules even all the affairs of the nations, remember, as the prophet says, that the nations are to God as the dust, the fine dust in the balance, they are to him a drop in the bucket in terms of the vastness of who God is, even the grandeur of a nation as rich and as significant as America still fades in obscurity.

And while God is concerned for all of these great, huge cosmic events, still, as we look at the story of Ruth, we realize that he is interested in the ordinary events of the ordinary lives, of

people like Elimelech and his boys, his daughter in laws and so on. It's a good reminder to us, and I hope you will take this away as a constant refrain in studying these chapters, that in the ordinariness of life, God meets with us. Therefore, we do not need to go, as I said this morning, and repeat it for emphasis sake, we do not need to go constantly in search of the unusual and in search of the spectacular. Most of your lives will be fairly routine for most of the time.

Marriage is routine for most of the time. Your work will be routine for most of the time.

Therefore, if you and I do not learn to live for God in the routine events, in other words, if we make our journey with God all about the search for the dramatic and the significant and so on, then we will be destined to a roller coaster ride which will despirit not only ourselves, but also all who are in our company. Philici, who is a commentator and theologian, writes, Tell me how lofty God is for you and I'll tell you how little he means to you.

That could be a theological axiom. The lofty God has been lofted right out of my private life. If God has no significance for the tiny mosaic pieces of my little life and for the things that concern me, then he does not concern me at all. Now, clearly, he is not suggesting that we are endeavoring to bring God down to our level. He has a clear view of the transcendence and magnificence of God, but he's saying there is a real danger in the journey of our Christian experience that when we like to talk about God as being so far removed from us, we may remove him from all of the practical details of our lives. And yet God indwelling us by the Holy Spirit is everywhere with us all the time.

[He] Drove in the car to this event tonight, sits with you here, knows where you're going next. Will go there with you. Was in the shower with you. Was in the bathroom with you. God is your constant companion. You cannot evade his presence. Psalm 139 makes that clear. And so the interest of God in the lives of these ordinary men and women should encourage each of us in light of the fact that we too, are just ordinary.

Now, added to that, we saw in the earlier study this morning that Elimelech had probably made a bad move in heading out to Moab, that all of the nature of God and the provision of God was wrapped up in the land of God. And yet we said that he chose essentially pragmatism over faith and he headed out. He perhaps had a discontented and distrustful spirit. But the rest of the story, as we see now and indeed in the intervening three chapters, the rest of the story amply illustrates the fact that God's providence is not hindered by man's foolishness.

The fact that you and I are daft. The fact that you and I do stupid things, the fact that you and I have made dreadful mistakes and will make other dreadful mistakes, does not somehow or another interfere with the providential care of God and indeed the ultimate joy in the family as we see them here and their place in history? Because for those of you who know your Bibles,

you know that Ruth is in the lineage of Christ. Jesus is born from the direct lineage, which is Ruths in the marriage, which follows just to go ahead.

And so the wonderful, amazing thing about it is this, that this individual was not free from foolish conduct and yet the providence of God overrules even our mistakes. Now, that is not to legitimize stupidity and wrong choices and a dumb response to the Bible, the kind of wrong side of Romans sic. Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? No, that would be a ridiculous way to go about things. But the tremendously encouraging thing is this, and some of us have already, in the short journey of our lives and found ourselves up against enough stuff that would have lasted a lifetime for people.

And the evil one comes to us again and again, and he tries to take us back to the garbage can of forgiven sin and he tries to take us back and lift the lid and poke around it in and introduce it to us as if somehow or another he may bring us down. And we have to tell him, listen, smutty face, C.S. Lewis referred to him. You just go back to hell where you belong, because God, my sovereign father and friend is able even to cover by his providence my mistakes.

Now, there were three words this morning in a very bright group, but most of you have forgotten the word No one was. Famine, famine, but if you like famine, that's all right, that's OK. Sorry, I

didn't mean to insult you, but there again and the second word was bereavements. Very good.

Don't forget that Hardar in the middle: bereavement.

OK, and the last word was return. See a tremendous group. Mind you, it wasn't exactly daunting as a challenge, was it? Small gains, but important gains. So we've got the outline and we have only one word to add to it, which I hope you'll be encouraged to discover. It goes from famine to bereavement to return to arrival. And this evening, in this brief study, we're just going to deal with the arrival.

OK, and then I believe those questions and answers, and I think that's completely voluntary. So. Probably the two people that stay, we can go get a coffee somewhere, and I'm hopeful that one of them will be my daughter and the other one will be my son. And then I said and their questions are all about money in any case. So it's the answer is a flat out no and. OK, so any hope that Naomi may have had of slipping back into Bethlehem quietly was short lived is striking thing, isn't it, when you read the text here that the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem and when they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred.

Must have been quite a town a. Imagine the headlines in the newspaper, The Bethlehem Gazette, two women arrived in town. Now there's an event to. But you see, this again is the difference

between where we live, our lives and village life. If any of you come from villages that are small enough, then you understand this. As a boy, we used to take family vacations away up in the north of Scotland, in the black isle.

For those of you who golf near dawn, which is a wonderful golf course near Nairne, and there were three little villages that were contiguous with one. Another one was called Shandwick and one was called Balen Tau and one was called Hilton. But there was no they just ran right into one another. And although the whole distinguishing feature lasted for about two and a half miles, you know, it was very, very wrong to suggest that somebody who came from this four hundred and forty yards actually belonged to the people who lived in the next four hundred and forty yards because they came from Hilton.

And Hilton wasn't Schmendrick and Chenda. It certainly wasn't balanced or, you know, so that when you came down the hill, the people who were at this end of the village could see you coming. And by the time you came down and passed the harbor and made your way along to the caravan site or the trailer park or whatever you call it, by the time which you can tell what kind of vacations I enjoyed as a boy, but that I endured as a boy. And by the time we reached the caravans, they had a, well, a welcoming committee. So where did these people come from? How did they know we were here? Because in village life it doesn't take much. And all of a sudden the arrival of any stranger is immediately conveyed, rapid fire down the line.

And that's what would have happened in Bethlehem. Immediately the stir goes around because there's not a lot going on. And somebody would see there's two women just showed up. Well, the fellows would be interested for a start. Well, are they married or single? What are they? The bazaar keepers will be looking around mainly because they were bazaar and they would be saying to themselves, well, who is this? And so they're asking one another. I think that's Naomi. She lost weight. No, I said I thought she looked a little heavier than the last time I saw her.

Where's her husband? He doesn't have her husband with her. What happened to our boys? Who's the girl with her? They see the girl with there's a widow. Are they both widows? And that's the kind of thing that would be going on. So in the arrival, no possibility of slipping in quietly and people eventually meeting in the street and say, it is you, Naomi, isn't it? And notice her reaction in verse 20 while it is me, but don't call me Naomi anymore.

Naomi means pleasant, but I'd like you to call me bitter. You see, there would be something about walking back into this little town after being gone for 10 years, wouldn't you ever been away from anywhere that you loved for a period of time and gone back? You go back into those familiar places. You realize why Lennon and McCartney were able to capture something so poignant when they write the song In My Life, you know. There are places I'll remember all my life.

Though some have changed, some for good and some for better, some have gone and some remain. All these places have their memories with lovers and friends that I recall and so on, and we all understand that. You go back to the old familiar haunts, and if you've lost loved ones, then what happens is when you go back down that same road that leads to the part where you sat with your spouse or where you visited with your friend, all of those wonderful memories come back upon you, which, of course, in one moment brings you a great surge of joy.

And yet at the same time brings you a blanket of disappointment because you realize that things can never be the same again. There is no going back to where we were and back at the same place. But he's not here. This is where I took my boys to the park. But my boys are dead. I had never anticipated you would have said to himself this kind of return. I thought that I'd be coming back here and I'd have my grandchildren and we would just have a wonderful reunion.

And so the people come to you and say, it is you, Naomi, isn't it? And she says, well, it is me, but I would rather you didn't call me Naomi. I would rather you called me Myra. And I'll tell you why. She says, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. Isn't that a striking phrase to sing the song here, that that song? You know, it's kind of like a golden oldie of of scripture songs now.

But El Shaddai, you know. Some of you remember that I don't know if you do or not, but, you know, El Shaddai, El Shaddai, nobody knows what the Hebrew is at all, but it sounds good out loud. El Elyon, Adonai, age to age. He's still the same by the power of the name El Shaddai out today as you praise him and lift him high El Shaddai, usually. Usually it. Well, this is a nice feeling and I'm feeling good. You know, El Shaddai and help me in my test and everything else. Well, this is the same. This is the same thing here. She says El Shaddai has made my life very bitter. That's interesting statement, isn't it? But it's an honest statement. Because what she's saying is this she has lived on the dark side of God's providence. What does that mean? You say you take an old hymnbook and go and look for the hymns of William Calford.

You call them Cooper. But what is O.W. spelled? Count, OK, if you put PR after it, what do you have, Cowper? OK, so how on a wide world you get from Cowper to Cooper the same way that you get from Colin Powell to Colin Powell? You're Colin. We don't want to talk about Colin. We can talk about you understand why Mark Twain said this is two nations divided by a common language. When you declare your independence, you should have declared independence from the English language and been honest about it.

That's chapter three of my latest book, *How to Make Friends of College Students and Influence Them in Their Lives*. All right. And Cowper writes a number of great hymns. Cowper spent a number of months of his life in a psychiatric hospital. He's the chap who wrote God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. Judge, not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face.

And there's no attempt here on the part of Naomi to make God look good. Naomi would not have been very interested in the openness of God theology of the last two or three years, just a resurgence of an old notion. He doesn't need somehow or another to try and clean up God's character for him, she simply says God is providentially overruling in the affairs of life. She would have been happy, presumably with the distinction that the reformers made between the prescriptive will of God and the permissive will of God and attempt to make it absolutely clear that God is not and cannot be the author of evil, but that ultimately she's right when she says El Shaddai has made my life very bitter.

Because he is the one who gives life and he is the one who removes life, the same says that all the days of my life were written in his book before one of them came to be. So he called Elimelech out. He called her sons out. And in doing so. Through secondary causes. Still. He was sovereign over all. Her honesty is quite striking, not only here, but before up in verse 13. It was

better for me, more bitter for me than for you, she said, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me.

There's no hiding of her feelings nor pretending that she isn't angry nor attempt to sweep it all aside with a stiff upper lip or to make false affirmations, that all feels well. Again, I want to say to you young people, nothing is served in our culture by presenting your Christianity that is full of inane grins and superficial sighs. It won't cut ice in our culture. They just think you're a loony and they may well be right, because the fact of the matter is, all of our days and all of our journeys are impregnated with all kinds of experiences.

And they're not all in our experience of them on the plus side of the column. Verse 14 we saw it earlier, they wept in kissing each other, they said goodbye. She went back to her gods. She says, go back with her. She says, I don't want to go back with her. I want to come with you. And the tears of the women in that scene are a reminder to us that God gives tears. I say to one of my daughters, you know, don't use up all your tears, honey, you're going to need them because there will be times in your life where you're going to need all these tears.

So don't use them up because your bicycle has a flat tire for crying out loud. You know, we can deal with that. Don't use any of your tears for this because there will come a day when you'll

need those tears. If we honest that are some things in life which seem unbearable. There are some circumstances in life which seem unjust. And there are some questions in life which remain unanswered. Look at verse 21. Let me explain to you, she says why I said you should call me Mara because my life is Bitter-full.

I went, which is the Hebrew translation, literally, but empty brought me back Ioway. I went out full and I've come back empty. Now, you'll notice that she doesn't attribute her circumstances to chance. Her honesty is more than matched by her theology. The Lord has afflicted me, Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me. And Shaddai, simply as a reminder to us, as Alec Matear says, of the God who is at his best when man is at his worst.

But look at how she deals with her pain. Look at the framework of it. She says, I've gone through famine. That's why we left. I went into Moab, I've gone through bereavement. My husband, my boys. I've gone through partings, I've left one of my daughters in law behind, I will never forget the pain of that parting at face questions, I find myself in a parent's helplessness. But I know that God is the God who provides, therefore I can leave both the explanation and I can leave the responsibility for this bitterness within.

Now, I'm not sure, as I said, maybe it was yesterday morning to the seminarians, I'm not sure that we have a theology of suffering. And evangelicalism, and at least no one has any good. I mean, you can sell many books writing about, you know, what a wretched life it is, you know, if I don't want a book on that, and that's why when the towers fall down and when the boat begins to leak and when the wheels fall off our wagon.

And our friends say there's no what do you do now? We'd just like to fast forward to the next page, you know, or rewind the tape, we don't know what to say. Because we signed up for this Jesus thing as if somehow or another he put all the difficult stuff in the small print. You know, you can never see Jesus with the tough stuff in the small print, could you? He says, listen, unless you're prepared to die to yourself to take up your cross every day and follow me, you can be my disciple.

If you love your parents more than you love me, you can be my disciple. If you love your boyfriend more than you love me, you just can't be my disciple. That's heavy duty. Of course it is, and here all these years before foreshadowing that kind of commitment, we found the statement of Ruth. Now, essentially, I think if you'd gone to her home and you found that she was playing tunes on her stereo, you'd find that she had some old Andre Crouch eight tracks. You know, for those who are old enough to remember Andre Crouch. And he should be fine out there in the kitchen and be going through it all, through it all. You know, I've learned to trust in Jesus. I learned to trust in God. Through it all. Through it all. I've learned to depend upon his

word. When I was your age, I thought life went on forever, I thought only idiots fell off their motorbike till I fell off.

I thought that I thought that nothing could happen to you when you were on vacation because you were on vacation. And I thought that everybody's parents died, you know, at a good old age, they drag their feet up on the bed and fell asleep. That was until they came knocking on my door and said, your mother died after my mother died. She's only forty six years old. She said she di she had a massive heart attack last night at nine o'clock.

No, I said. And. Now, that's that's that's an interesting shadow just come across my 20 year old path. The lord today has made my life very bitter. It doesn't feel pleasant. Some of you have been there. You may have lost colleagues right here in the student body. You don't have to dance around here. Just go to your Bible. Because there's two possible ways to get out of it. One leads to wholeness and security and one leads to insanity.

God, I do not understand this. And I'm so stinking mad that I'm going to remain angry for the rest of my life. OK, fine, live in your own bitter dungeon. Or God, I don't understand this. But I know that you are my heavenly Father. That you make no mistakes. And that your purpose for me is so vast and so all consuming that even the bad stuff. Even the disappointments, even the pain. Is

working for the good that you have planned for me. And I have to say to you young people that to move from the theoretical to the actual. Is part of the painful journey of life. And we don't want to go and seek it, but it will come our way.

Verse 22. Naomi returned from Moab, accompanied by Ruth, the more the tests, her daughter in law. One little verse and the narrator brings the chapter to a close, it's wonderful writing, incidentally, for those of you who are doing English and want to write stories, perfect symmetry. You will notice between verse one and verse twenty two. There's one. In the days when the Judges ruled there was a famine in the land and off they went, verse 22. So no. Naomi returned from Moab, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Finally, Bethlehem is living up to its name. Although the chapter has been mostly gloomy and if we'd been making a movie of this and some of you do make movies and we hope to see them one day. And you have to put soundtrack's behind them. I think the soundtrack behind a lot of this, at least for me, of course, because I was into Celtic stuff before Celtic stuff became hit. OK, so I'm allowed. I grew up with Celtic. I grew up with me not only because the Irish said the bagpipes to the Scots as a joke and the Scots never got the joke. And so we've been playing them ever since. But I mean, they are that the background music to so much of this stuff would have been would have been in a minor key.

You know, it would have been it would have been in and I you know, all that stuff. But but if it's in a transition, we wanted to show where this thing was going. We wanted to say that through the mist covered hillsides where we get this view of Naomi and our daughter in law coming back into Bethlehem, that suddenly there's a there's just a ray of sunshine piercing through the clouds. And so the backing track goes from and it goes and it just picks up. It just goes from the minor to the major. It just begins just starts to go that way as an indication of what is coming.

That's, I think, what you need to see in the scene. That's the kind of thing you need to feel. Isn't that a ray of sunshine coming through here? We say in all of the gloom of this? Yes, it is. Can you see the fields of barley? And [singing] "I took a walk. With a friend of mine. Among the fields of barley, dadadadada" you see see, she would have liked that song. It would have it would have made her weep a little bit because of Elimelech, because he was in there. But she would have had memories like that. You see, she's a real person the way you're a real person.

Do you understand this? Do you read your Bible like this? Let me rephrase that. Do you read your Bible? Father. Help me get me here. Where Ruth is. When God is at work, even hopelessness can be the doorway to fresh starts and to new opportunities. Now, I'm going to stop now because I'm about as hot as I've been in a long, long time, and some of you are about to die of heat exhaustion. And this is how I want to finish.

The thing that has been most striking to me in looking at Ruth for these studies is and you would note this recurring emphasis, but is the ordinariness of it all. And when you read Chapter one and you think back, for example, the verse six, that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them. What I want to say to you when you walk out into tonight and into the darkness of tonight. Do not miss the hand of God in the simple stuff. Food on your table. Friends in your company. Good books. Great art. Fabulous sunsets. Amazing storms. Coffee that tastes. An obituary in The New York Times that makes sense [audience laughter].

So that in all of the experience of our lives. We are not moving, as it were, from the sacred into the secular, from the secular into the sacred, but we are taking a journey in which all of our days and all of our deeds under God are good for someone and they are good for something. And we're not saying to ourselves all the time, if I could only get out of this place, you see, if I could only alter the circumstance, if I could only get her or change him or fix this, THEN once I get all of that together, then I'll be, you know, going on with God, you know, then that would be where I need to be.

Listen. This existential moment is all you have, and if you are not living for God in this moment, you are not living for God. And if you are waiting for the time when the famine is gone and

when the lights are flashing and when it's firework displays, then you will wait a very long time. Therefore learn a lesson from this lady. Read the chapter until it dawns on you. And don't miss the little things, because in the simple gestures, and in the apparently inconsequential things, God is sustaining and guiding you. Till one day he dispels all of the darkness. And He takes you into the presence of Christ.

Let us pray, Father. We want to thank you for this story. And we want to ask that you will make us students of the Bible. It's so wonderful that you have given to us such a vastness in biblical literature. That. The episodes are great and they're. Easy to preach, easier. The Book of Revelations like a gigantic comic book, and we're trying our best to figure it out. But we thank you for these fantastic stories, history. Real people. Facing real circumstances. Taking life head on the good, the bad and the ugly. And through it all, proving again your amazing grace, your wonderful faithfulness and your abiding love.

But I pray that as heads hit the pillow tonight. That there will be young men and young women. Who are, as it were, just caught up afresh in the wonder of your redeeming. And your sovereign protection. And that the fears and the faltering, the failures, the disappointments, the anxieties about illness, about health, about loved ones, all of those things. May not be regarded as. Intrusions. But maybe welcomed his friends so as to enable us to trust and follow you. Here are prayers. Forgive our sins, fellows, afresh with your spirit. We pray. What we ask it in Jesus name. Amen

[Applause]

[break in tape] It would be really easy to take a few minutes, dismiss and stay in here. The reason we can't is because the staff is on a schedule. So they're going to be getting this room ready. No problema. It just so happens that across the street, upstairs in the suburb, about 20 minutes from now, just time to stretch and move. Come on across and join us for the question and answer. We'll find room for all who want to be there. See you there. Thank you.