

Naomi, Call Me Mara

*20 But she said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?”~
Ruth 1:20-21*

Today’s study will focus on Naomi in the book of Ruth. Naomi is a secondary “character” in the book, so I will try to focus on Naomi so that we don’t get too deep into Ruth since we will be studying Ruth in May. The main theme of the book of Ruth is redemption, but as we shift our focus to Naomi, we will also see resilience and wisdom.

From Hope to Heartbreak

Read Ruth 1:1-5

1 Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there. 3 Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. 4 Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they [c]dwelt there about ten years. 5 Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.

When we first meet Naomi, she has been through a rough season in her life. During the time of Judges, around 1126–1105 B.C., there is a famine in Bethlehem. Ironically, Bethlehem means the house of bread and praise, but it is from here that Naomi and her family decide to leave. Her husband, Elimelech, takes her and her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to Moab to survive the famine. Here we see that Naomi is an obedient and submissive wife. She willingly goes with her husband and sons to a foreign land in the hope of a better life. However, within a decade, that hope is shattered.

While in Moab, Naomi’s first heartbreak happens, her husband dies, and she becomes a widow (verse 3). Then both her son’s take wives from the women of Moab (verse 4), Orpah and Ruth, which is both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because the hope was that they would have children, and Elimelech’s family line would continue. A curse because they were not Israelite women, and her sons were not supposed to marry women from the surrounding nations according to Deuteronomy 7:1-4:

1 “When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and

the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, 2 and when the Lord your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. 3 Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. 4 For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly.

After 10 years in Moab, Naomi experiences her final heartbreak; both her son's die (verse 5), and she is left with two young widows. In Hebrew culture being a widow without a male heir was devastating. Since the men held the rights to property, the women were left desolate when there wasn't anyone to take on the role of redeemer.

Jewish Law is clear about protecting widows and orphans. In Exodus 22:22-24 the Lord says, "You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless." Furthermore, In 2 Kings 4:1-7 the prophet Elisha helps make provision for a widow in need:

1 The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves."

2 Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?"

"Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a small jar of olive oil."

3 Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. 4 Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."

5 She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. 6 When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one."

But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing.

7 She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left."

Although the law was clear about protecting widows, they were still vulnerable. Naomi was in a foreign land where there might not have been this type of protection for widows. At this

point, Naomi has been left destitute. She and her family left Bethlehem full of hope. They went to Moab to escape a famine with the hope of survival, but in the end, Naomi was the only one who survived, and now was responsible for two young widows. After 10 years in Moab, Naomi was left with heartbreak and bitterness that could have broken anyone. Yet, we see a glimpse of Naomi's resilience in the decision to stay with her two sons after her husband's death even though they married Moabite women. She exhibits further resilience in the decision she makes in the next verses.

Resilient and Wise

Read Ruth 1:6-14

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread. 7 Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. 8 And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. 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 in the house of her husband."

So she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 10 And they said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people."

11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, 13 would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes 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.

Naomi had to make a tough but wise decision to return to Bethlehem and send her daughters-in-law back home to their families (verses 6-9). At this point, Naomi's options are limited. She could stay in Moab with the hope that one of her daughters-in-law finds a new husband and takes her in, return with one of the daughters-in-law to her home and hope that her in-laws would take her in, or return home to Bethlehem. In verse 6 we see that the famine had passed in Bethlehem, so there was hope for survival on that end, but there were other reasons to return home. She knew that under Hebrew law she would be protected as a widow and would have provision in her homeland. It was also where her friends and family were. Although her

husband had died, there was greater hope that someone would take her in and care for her. The idea of home also provided a type of comfort that cannot be measured with words.

Although she deeply cared for her daughters-in-law, she understood that they would have a better chance at survival if they went back home to their families (verses 11-13). Naomi knew that she would not be able to provide a future for them. They would have a better chance to find husbands and remarry if they went home to their families. But Ruth insists on staying with her, and Naomi acquiesces.

Heartbreak brings Bitterness

Read Ruth 1:18-22

18 When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

19 Now the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?”

20 But she said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Naomi’s heartbreak has turned into bitterness by this point, and we see it taking its toll on her in verse 18. She believes that Ruth has a better chance at survival with her own family, but Ruth was determined to stay with her, so Naomi stops speaking to her. The trip to Bethlehem was about 30 miles on foot which took about 7 to 10 days. That is a long time to walk in silence, but it’s also plenty of time to think and pray. Perhaps Naomi stopped speaking out of frustration and was hoping Ruth would go away. She also might have stopped speaking to keep herself from saying something she would regret. Or she was so emotionally spent that she didn’t have the energy to argue with her daughter-in-law.

Whatever the case may have been, Naomi was full of bitterness at this point. In verse 19 everyone is excited to see Naomi return, but she tells them to call her Mara (verse 20). Naomi in Hebrew means pleasantness, but Mara means bitterness. She felt that the Lord had testified against her and He was afflicting her. It’s easy to become bitter and blame God when our own decisions lead to negative outcomes. How many of us have done that in our moments of

weakness? We see Naomi's weakest moment here, but she is home during a time of plenty, the barley harvest (verse 22) and the Lord doesn't stop working even we do.

Hope Restored

Read Ruth 2:19-22

19 And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where have you gleaned today? And where did you work? Blessed be the one who took notice of you."

So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz."

20 Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not forsaken His kindness to the living and the dead!" And Naomi said to her, "This man is a relation of ours, one of our close relatives."

21 Ruth the Moabitess said, "He also said to me, 'You shall stay close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.' "

22 And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, and that people do not meet you in any other field." 23 So she stayed close by the young women of Boaz, to glean until the end of barley harvest and wheat harvest; and she dwelt with her mother-in-law.

The next time we see Naomi, Ruth has been out in the fields gleaning barley after the harvesters as the Mosaic law allows (Leviticus 23:22). Seeing how much she was able to glean, Naomi's hope is restored and realizes that this was no accident; someone took notice of Ruth (v. 19). Moreover, her faith in the Lord is restored as she cries out in verse 20, "Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not forsaken His kindness to the living and the dead!"

There is also a glimmer of hope for a better future as we see Naomi comment that "This man is a relation of ours, one of our close relatives," and instructs Ruth to stay close. Naomi understands that Boaz is a close relation which means he would be able to redeem her, Naomi and her husband's property from before they left to Moab. She can see the Lord working but does not intervene. Unlike Sarah and Rebekah, she holds her tongue, trusts in the Lord and lets the Lord move. She waits until the end of both the barley and the wheat harvest before saying anything to Ruth (v. 23).

Wisdom in Trust

Read Ruth 3:1-5, 18

¹ Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? ² Now Boaz, whose young women you were with, *is he* not our relative? In fact, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Therefore wash yourself and anoint yourself, put on your *best* garment and go down to the threshing floor; *but* do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ Then it shall be, when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies; and you shall go in, uncover his feet, and lie down; and he will tell you what you should do.”

⁵ And she said to her, “All that you say to me I will do.”

¹⁸ Then she said, “Sit still, my daughter, until you know how the matter will turn out; for the man will not rest until he has concluded the matter this day.”

We see Naomi’s wisdom in trusting the Lord and waiting until the end of the harvest to mention the possibility of marriage to Boaz. By now, Ruth has had 4 months (2 months of barley harvest and 2 months of wheat harvest) to develop a bond with Boaz as she worked out the in his fields. She has had time to experience his kindness and generosity so that the idea of marriage to him was acceptable to Ruth. So Naomi instructs Ruth in the cultural custom to offer herself as a bride to Boaz while out on the threshing floor.

Naomi doesn’t command Ruth to do this. She asks Ruth if she can offer her advice to provide security for her (v. 1). Ruth could have said, “No, thank you. I think I have gleaned enough to support us until the next harvest.” But instead, Ruth trusts Naomi and does everything she instructs her. By verse 18, Naomi instructs Ruth to wait and see whether Boaz would be able to redeem her.

Redeemed

Read Ruth 4:13-17

13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. 14 Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a close relative; and may his name be famous in Israel! 15 And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.” 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him. 17 Also the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, “There is a son born to Naomi.” And they called his name Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

By the end of the book of Ruth, Boaz and Ruth are married, and Ruth bares a son. Through this, Naomi is also fully restored. Although Elimelech’s decision to go to Moab ended

in disaster, Naomi's decision to return home and trust the Lord ended in restoration. The immediate blessing to Naomi and Ruth was restoration through the covering of Boaz which is a reflection of Christ's redeeming work in our lives. The eternal blessing was a lineage that leads directly to David then to Christ (Matthew 1:1-17) which impacts our lives daily. Let's remember that when we choose to trust in the Lord, we will not see the full effect of that decision until many years later.

As for God, His way is perfect; The word of the Lord is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him. Psalm 18:30