



Naomi

HER NAME MEANS

“My Joy” or “Pleasant”

HER CHARACTER: Suffering a threefold tragedy, Naomi refused to hide her sorrow or bitterness. Believing in God’s sovereignty, she attributed her suffering to his will. But her fixation on circumstances, both past and present, led to hopelessness. A kind and loving mother-in-law, she inspired unusual love and loyalty in her daughters-in-law.

HER SORROW: To have lost a husband and two sons in a foreign land, far from family and friends.

HER JOY: To have returned safely to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth, who would eventually rekindle her happiness and hope.

KEY SCRIPTURE: Ruth 1; 4:13–17

Monday

HER STORY

*S*he stood like an old tree twisted against the sky. Though Naomi could see for miles from her vantage point high on the road that led from Moab to Judah, she could glimpse nothing at all of her future. She thought about robbers, rumored on the road ahead. What more, she wondered, could possibly be taken from her? Her thoughts strayed to the past.

Moses, she knew, had been buried somewhere in these mountains. But his people and hers had moved west into Canaan centuries earlier. Would she, too, be left behind, prevented from ever seeing her kinsfolk again? Was God so displeased with her?

Ten years ago, she and her husband, Elimelech, had lived happily in Bethlehem. But the city whose name meant “house of bread” suddenly had none, so they had migrated to the highlands of Moab to escape the famine. Then Elimelech had died and her sons had married Moabite women, whose race had descended from Abraham’s nephew, Lot. Plenty of women lost their husbands. Like them, she would find a way to survive. But then she had suffered the worst grief a mother could—outliving her own children.

Now Ruth and Orpah, her daughters-in-law, were the only kin she had in Moab. Loving them tenderly, she felt their widowhood as a double grief. Together they had cried and comforted each other. The three women finally decided to leave Moab for Bethlehem. But once on the road, Naomi’s misgivings outran her craving for companionship. It wasn’t right for young women to forsake their families and friends for so uncertain a future. What chance would they, widows and strangers, have in Bethlehem, even now that the famine had run its course?

“Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home,” she told them. “May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

But Orpah and Ruth insisted, “We will go back with you to your people.”

“Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up?”

The three women embraced, tears streaking their cheeks. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Ruth clutched Naomi and whispered fiercely, “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.”

The old woman’s stubbornness was no match for the younger woman’s love. And so Naomi and Ruth continued on to Bethlehem. After so long an absence, Naomi’s return created a great commotion in the town, and all the women welcomed her, saying, “Can this be Naomi?”

“Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara [meaning ‘bitter’], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

Naomi could not see past her suffering. Like many of us, she may have felt as though her tragedies were punishment for her sins. Yet had she known the blessings in store, she might not have felt so hopeless. Instead, she may have compared herself to the tree that Job so graciously describes:

At least there is hope for a tree:
If it is cut down, it will sprout again,
and its new shoots will not fail.
Its roots may grow old in the ground
and its stump die in the soil,
yet at the scent of water it will bud
and put forth shoots like a plant.

Job 14:7–9

Though she didn’t know it, the scent of water was in the air. Naomi’s life was beginning again, her story still unfolding.

FAMINE

*P*ictures of the bloated stomachs and empty eyes of children dying of hunger hover in our minds long after the television is turned off. Famine today, just as in Bible times, is the great destroyer of the weak—of helpless children and defenseless elderly. The cries of mothers unable to save their hungry children echo throughout the years, a painful reminder of our dependence on the earth for our sustenance.

There are two rainy seasons in Palestine—October–November and March–April. When rain didn't fall during these two periods, famine resulted. Famine could also occur when hail or insects destroyed the food supply or when invading armies devastated crops in order to bring a captured people into submission.

Throughout Scripture God seemed to use famine to bring about his purposes. Deuteronomy 28:22–24 gives a vivid description of the famine that would come if God's people disobeyed him. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all left Palestine because of a famine in the land. The events of a worldwide famine brought Joseph's father, Jacob, and his brothers to Egypt, where they eventually became the slaves of the pharaohs. In the book of Ruth, Naomi and her husband fled to Moab because of a famine in Israel, and, through their flight and its subsequent events, God brought Ruth into his holy plan as an ancestor of his Son, Jesus.

In the New Testament, Jesus predicted that famine would be one of the signs of the end of the ages (Matthew 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11). In the book of Acts we learn that a believer by the name of Agabus foretold a severe famine (Acts 11:28); the next verse then reveals the opportunity this gave the believers to share with each other.

In one of Scripture's most somber prophecies, Amos told of the time when God would bring about another sort of famine: "I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD" (Amos 8:11).

In the past, God had always listened and responded when his people cried out to him, but Amos told of a time to come when their cries would be met with a frightening silence.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” asks Paul. “Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” (Romans 8:35). But then Paul answers his own question with that wonderful believer’s cry of victory: Nothing, not even famine, will ever separate us from God’s love.

HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read Ruth 1:1-22

1. Describe what you think the family of Elimelech and Naomi may have been like.

Keep in mind the meaning of their names: Elimelech (“my God is King”), Naomi (“pleasant”), as well as the meaning of their hometown, Bethlehem (“house of bread”). _____

2. How is this family similar to or different from yours? _____

3. Choose three or four words you think would describe what Naomi experienced here?

4. What kind of reception do you think Naomi expected upon her return to Bethlehem with her Moabite daughters-in-law? _____

5. If you have ever faced a totally unclear future, what did you learn from that situation?

6. What do these verses (8-18) reveal about the relationship that Naomi and Ruth had?

7. If you have a daughter-in-law, how could you be a Naomi to her? _____

8. Was the Lord at fault for Naomi's circumstances? Was he at fault for her bitterness over them? _____

9. Describe one situation for which you have held or do hold bitterness? _____

10. What is more important in life: Your circumstances or your reactions to them? Explain your answer. _____

11. Who was at fault for Naomi's circumstances? Naomi? Her husband? God?

Explain your answer. Who controlled Naomi's response to her circumstances? _____

12. If you suffered what Naomi suffered, would you be bitter? Why or why not?

13. What would it take for you to love and trust God in Naomi's circumstances?

God's faithfulness to restore to fullness an empty life is revealed more in this story of Naomi than in any other biblical account. The famine and hunger that drove Naomi and her husband and sons away from Bethlehem are finally replaced with full harvests and bread baked from grain gleaned in the fields. The anguish of losing her husband and sons is replaced with the loving care and concern of her daughter-in-law Ruth, who is "better to [Naomi] than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15). And Naomi's empty mother-arms are filled with the son of Boaz and Ruth. She is no absent grandmother; the Scriptures say Naomi took Obed and "laid him in her lap and cared for him" (Ruth 4:16). (We'll hear more about this grandson in the next chapter.)

Like Naomi, we may have trouble recognizing God's goodness and his faithfulness at times. But he is still with us no matter the circumstances.

Promises in Scripture

The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

—RUTH 4:14–15

*Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter,
you will restore my life again.*

—PSALM 71:20

*I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten....
You will have plenty to eat, until you are full,
and you will praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has worked wonders for you.*

—JOEL 2:25–26

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

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.

—RUTH 1:16–17

- REFLECT ON:** Ruth 1.
- PRAISE GOD:** For creating us with the power to form deep and lasting relationships.
- OFFER THANKS:** For the variety of friends God has given you.
- CONFESS:** Your tendency to be too busy to pay attention to your friends or too preoccupied with your own concerns to take time for theirs.
- ASK GOD:** To make you a more loyal and loving friend in the year ahead.

Lift Your Heart

*T*hink about someone with whom you used to be especially close. Perhaps time or distance has eroded the friendship. Wax nostalgic as you recall the great meals, oddball jokes, late-night conversations, or crazy adventures you shared. Wouldn't it be great to have that person back in your life? Pick up the phone or write a letter to renew the friendship. If the other person seems willing, invest some energy rebuilding the relationship in the year ahead. Let your memories form a foundation for your friendship, but don't stop there—get busy making new ones. If she's nearby, have her over for a meal or a fancy dessert. If not, exchange family photos. Stay in touch by email. If you can afford to, you can even meet halfway for a weekend excursion.

Lord, thank you for the blessing of friends who, by sharing their lives with us, double our joy and halve our sorrows. Help me to cherish the friends you've given me and to become the kind of friend others will cherish: a woman who listens, encourages, and keeps confidences; a woman who knows how to laugh and how to cry, who is loyal, forgiving, and loving.