

Last week, we heard about the faith of a foreign woman Ruth. As we talked about her faith, we could not help but mentioning her mother-in-law Naomi in her story. Without Naomi, there is no Ruth. So, today we will talk about Naomi, who heavily influenced Ruth.

As with many women featured in the Bible, we don't know many details about Naomi. However, we know that her name "Naomi," meaning sweet or pleasant. After losing all the male relatives in her immediate family, her husband and two sons, she changes her name to "Mara," meaning bitter.

Name changes in the Bible have more extreme significance than simply getting a legal name change, as we do these days. In Biblical times, a name change determines a person's character, life circumstances, and purpose. Often God changed a person's name, but we see people such as Paul in the Bible who may have personally changed their names to reflect their new purpose.

Naomi, now widowed and with no hope for a future, gives herself a new identity of bitterness, "Mara." She especially complains to God about sending her away from the land of Moab, embittered in her new circumstances (Ruth 1:20-21). I think it is worth noticing that Naomi complained to God, not complained about God. Also, it is worth seeing that her complaining goes to God alone, not to anyone else.

When things are difficult and we struggle with *why* questions, we are often tempted to overly spiritualize the situations. When my mother passed away, several pastors told me not to be sad since I am a pastor who preaches about life with the Lord in Heaven after finishing our earthly labor. Honestly, I was so upset with those comments. So, I said nothing but just withdrew myself from the relationship with them.

My siblings in Christ! It is ok to be sad. It is ok to be upset. Being a Christian does not make us be senseless people. We are still humans full of feelings that God has created in us. As the followers of Jesus Christ, however, we ask God hard questions about things we're going through in our lives. Apostle Peter tells us to cast our anxieties upon God because God cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). So,

the same God who tells us to be anxious for nothing tells us to put our anxieties on Him today.

Here, I think it is important to distinguish between complaining *about* God and complaining *to* God. When we complain *about* God, we are stiffening our neck against God and questioning His character. Complaining *to* God shows that we realize who God is, and we come to Him and pour out our hearts before Him, and then we trust Him to act and work—maybe by resolving the situation or giving us the grace to stand amidst the difficulty.

In her difficult situation, Naomi complained to God, not complained about God because she still trusted the Lord that God would continue to be for her. Indeed, God continues to move and provides Ruth a kinsman-redeemer who can essentially help the two widows, Naomi and Ruth, in their destitute circumstances. Furthermore, through the lines of Ruth and Boaz come forth the Savior of the world, Jesus.

When Ruth comes home and tells Naomi about Boaz, Naomi recognizes that God has provided a kinsman-redeemer and walks Ruth through how to propose to Boaz (Ruth 3). Even though Naomi is embittered, she continues to look out for Ruth. She wants Ruth to be "well provided for" instead of poor and with her dejected mother-in-law (Ruth 3:1). This is a far cry from the depiction we often hear of Naomi in sermons. Yes, she changed her name to reflect that she had been saddened by the life circumstances God had given her, but it doesn't stretch beyond how humans typically react while in grief. In the end, Naomi gains a son, and this blessing sustains her through her old age.

Although it appears that Naomi is sulking throughout the narrative, if we're patient and pick through contextual clues, we can see that she has a sweet and caring spirit. We can learn a lot from Naomi about perseverance in giving, especially while navigating difficult circumstances.

The first lesson from the story of Naomi is that God continues to move during hardships. We can often feel abandoned by God when tragedy strikes. Naomi, by no means, had an easy go of things. She loses her husband and two sons in a foreign land and returns to her hometown with no prospects and minimal means to survive.

Even though she complains, God still continues to work in her life as she faithfully journeys forth. And, this same God does in our lives, too, when we face our most difficult seasons. By Naomi opening her heart and life to Ruth and welcoming her to come along to Bethlehem, God redeemed both her and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. In the end, Naomi gains a son, and through her line, the Savior of the world redeems humanity.

The second lesson is that we can still help others in our difficult moments. We can still share what we have while navigating difficult situations. At first glance, we may think that Naomi does absolutely nothing in the story except throwing a pity party for herself and complaining to God about her hard life. But, in her grief, she looks out for her daughters-in-law.

As soon as she catches wind of Boaz, she praises the Lord and walks Ruth through the Israelite customs of proposals to kinsman-redeemers. She really wants Ruth to have a good home and husband. Even before the two of them come to Bethlehem, she tries to send her daughters-in-law away from her to find a new husband. After all, she does not want them tied down to having to help an older woman.

Throughout the story, we see Naomi looking out for Ruth, even in the midst of paralyzing grief.

What paralyzes you these days? What makes you be less than who you are? Covid-19? Your social and economic status? Or Your sexual or racial identity? Whatever that might be, take all of them to the Lord and complain to God about them if necessary. And trust the Lord that God is doing something great with those. Please also know that we are blessed even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death right now because our God is with us and for us. So, my siblings in Christ! Chin up and live boldly by sharing who we are and what we have with others today. Amen.