

# Naomi

Preached by Phil Kayser at DCC on 2021-10-24

## Introduction - overview of where we are going

In our through-the-Bible series I gave an overview of the whole book of Ruth that touched on a lot of themes that I will not develop today. Instead, I want to focus very tightly on a biographical sketch of Naomi, the mother-in-law of Ruth. Everyone tends to focus on Ruth and what a great gal she was - and we will look at Ruth in the future. But I think there is a lot we can learn from Naomi - a woman that disillusioned, broken, and depressed women can definitely relate to - and hopefully learn from. She had a hard life. But we will see that it was God *Himself* who brought those hard things into her life to discipline her and to draw her away from her formal Christianity and into a deeper walk with God. And she struggled and resisted God's lessons for quite some time. So I debated on whether to even include her in this series on Women of Faith. She was definitely a marginal option. Should I really include Naomi when she was so bitter and disillusioned?

### I. Naomi was a woman of faith, however weak her faith was

But we have seen that every woman of faith had her struggles in life. And Naomi's struggle was never to cast off her faith. I am convinced of that. There is strong evidence that she retained her faith in God all through her time in Moab, and she certainly had a deep love for her two daughters-in-law that was obviously reciprocal. Even Oprah wept at the thought of leaving Naomi. There was something that was still attractive about Naomi. They were a very tightknit family. So her struggle was not in the area of believing in God or love or devotion to her family. Her struggle was a deep despondency and bitterness that had crept into her heart when God took away what might have been equivalent to what we speak of as the American Dream. Her American Dream became a nightmare. But before we look at that despondency, let me prove that she was indeed a woman of faith.

#### A. Her decision to return to Israel was not purely economic - it included Yehowah (1:6)

In chapter 1, verse 6, we see that her decision to return to Israel was not purely an economic decision. She knows that it is *God* and God alone who withholds blessing from a nation and grants blessing to a nation. And it says, "she had heard in the country of Moab that Yehowah had visited His people by giving them bread." LORD in all capital letters is Yehowah, God's covenant name. And it is significant that she ascribes the deliverance to Him. God had afflicted Israel prior to the time of Deborah and Barak, and as they cried out to Him, God not only delivered Israel from Jabin the Canaanite, but also from the famine He had inflicted upon the land. There is a lot in that word "visited." She knew that God's favor had returned to Israel and she wanted to return to her roots as well.

## B. She prays that Yehowah will deal kindly with her daughters (1:8-9)

And though her advice to her daughters in verses 8-9 is really bad advice - basically telling them to go back to the godless homes of their parents in Moab, she wants Yehowah to go with them and to bless them as well. She is giving mixed signals. But look at the faith in God that's mixed in with the bad advice. Verse 8 - "Yehowah deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me." Verse 9: "Yehowah grant that you may find rest..." She is recommending finding rest in the wrong place - in a Moabite husband, but at the same time she inconsistently knows that Yehowah is the source of true rest.

## C. She prays the Lord's *chesed* upon her daughter-in-laws (1:8)

In verse 8 she also prays for the Lord's *chesed* upon her daughters. "Yehowah deal kindly with you" means may Yehowah's *chesed* rest upon you. *Chesed* is God's covenant faithfulness, mercy, love, and grace all mixed together. She believes in that. And it's not the only time she refers to God's *chesed*. The Hebrew indicates that she acknowledged that God's *chesed* had been ministered to her through them. She is not so depressed that she is blind to God's mercy and goodness. She is a woman of faith who values God's *chesed*. She is naive in many ways and has secular ideas mixed in with her faith like a lot of modern Christians do, but she does have faith.

## D. Though rather naive in her theology (1:11-13), she does try to reason from the Levirate law of Deuteronomy 25:5

In verses 11-13 she shows a rather naive approach to Deuteronomy 25:5 (the Levirate law) - as if that was the *only* option for these girls. It wasn't. So she is obviously a somewhat shallow in her thinking here. But hey, she does believe that law, and that law will come to play in her thinking in chapter 3.

## E. She submits to the Lord's discipline in her life (1:13)

In verse 13 she seems to submit to the Lord's discipline in her life. At least she recognizes that *God* has brought these trials. She says, "for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of Yehowah has gone out against me!" She feels badly that they are suffering because of God's discipline of her. (Which, by the way, shows that she also recognizes that the motives that she and her husband Elimelech had were not entirely pure when they left Israel. Otherwise why the need for discipline?) But she does see God's covenant hand in her life. Whom the Lord loves, He chastens. What she lacks is a perspective that all of this was intended for her good. But you know what? Depressed people *often* need others to help them to see straight. But even though she is not thinking very clearly, she has not abandoned God.

## F. She knows her trials have come from God's hands (1:20-21)

Another hint is in verses 20 and 21. Even though her statement is couched in negative words, it still shows that she believes her trials have come from God's hand. She isn't *responding* to those trials very well, but at least she *ascribes* all sovereignty to Yehowah God. She says, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." In verse 21 she adds, "Why do you call me Naomi, since Yehowah has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?" When God disciplines His children, we would hope for more humble responses, but at least she acknowledges God's sovereignty in her life and His discipline in her life. That's a good thing.

And by the way, we are not that much different. How quickly do we respond with repentance and faith to God's disciplines in our lives? How often do we obey James in counting it all joy when God afflicts us? When God devastates your investment, or health, or family relations, do you do as Job did and immediately worship Him? When we point the finger at Naomi, at least some of us might have some bitterness-fingers pointing back at ourselves. It is very hard to let go of bitterness when you have gone through enormous pain or have lost everything.

If you glance at verses 20-21 you will see that Naomi *wanted* to be called bitter. What's with that?!! That may seem odd, but it's not uncommon for a depressed person. She felt she had a right to be bitter. And in my four decades of counseling I have encountered numerous people who don't want to let go of their bitterness. They nurse it even though it is eating them alive. They nurse it and feed it even though it is a monster out to destroy them. We must fight against bitterness and fight for joy in the Lord.

It's not enough to have a faith that goes to worship, that acknowledges God, that has devotions, that talks about God, and that does all the right things, and yet is still bitter. There is something wrong with our thinking or our relationship to God if we allow ourselves to become bitter. We must have a faith that believes Romans 8:28 is true for us. Ruined expectations without a proper theology can lead us to disillusionment and bitterness *even when we have faith in God*. That's the point of preaching on Naomi. Faith must daily embrace the promises of God, be thankful for the disciplines of God, and worship God for who He is, not just who we want Him to be. Naomi would learn that, but at this point she struggles with that.

## G. She knows blessings come from Yehowah (2:20)

And yet, through it all she still acknowledges Him. In chapter 2, verse 20, she knows that blessings come from the Lord, and she prays that God will bless Boaz. Some bitter people wish everyone was as miserable as they are. At least she was not like that. When some people see a person who is rich, they don't want to pray that God would make them richer. When they see a person who is joyful, they don't want to pray that God would bring them even greater joy. But against the inclinations of bitterness, Naomi does so. She prays blessings. That's good. It shows God's grace was still at work.

## H. She believed in Deuteronomy 25 (chapter 3)

And as strange as her advice to Ruth was in chapter 3 when she tells her to lie at the feet of Boaz (definitely not advice to be imitated), that whole chapter shows that she took seriously the Levirate law in Deuteronomy 25 and in Leviticus.

Obviously she was not a *model* woman of faith. It really took her daughter-in-law, Ruth, to ignite a faith that would bring her out of her depression and make her trust God fully. But she does illustrate how God takes self-sufficient Christians down and humbles them so that God can once again lift them up.

## II. Naomi - a Christian woman who has lost everything

So let's look next at how this woman of faith was humbled by God. There was a *reason* why she was depressed and bitter. Obviously there is never an *excuse* for disillusionment and bitterness, but we can certainly understand why she got there (given human nature). She was a woman who had lost everything.

### A. She lost her dream farm (1:1; 4:3), but at least they left with a lot of money (1:21)

If you compare Ruth 1:1 with Ruth 4:3, you will see that Elimelech and Naomi had a very sought-after piece of farmland. If you study the topography of Israel you will realize that *all* the farms around that area were so productive that the village was called Bethlehem, the House of Bread. But Elimelech's farm was probably a dream-farm for Naomi. They had no doubt been prospering much like Boaz was. But Elimelech made some bad decisions. A little more than a decade earlier, Jabin the Canaanite had started oppressing Israel. But when Israel was not repenting, God added a famine to the mix. And Elimelech made a decision that seemed logical. He anticipated that these problems would not go away soon, and while land was still expensive, he sold his farm and took his money to seek his fortune in Moab. He probably thought that he was smart and was keeping one step ahead of the problems. But whatever his plans were, they didn't work out very well.

### B. At some point she lost her husband's investment nest egg (1:21)

If you skip down to verse 21, you will see that this verse hints that Elimelech lost a pretty significant investment nest egg. In verse 21 Naomi says, "I went out full, and Yehowah has brought me home again empty." Hubbard's commentary points out that the word "full" means, "Her life lacked nothing"<sup>1</sup> when she left. Contrary to the opinion of many, they

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 125–126.

didn't leave Israel destitute and starving. He was a shrewd prepper who anticipated that facing famine under Jabin would be difficult, so he left Israel in about 1282 BC.

And all the historical evidence seems to show that they already had tight connections in Moab - probably through his previous business contacts. He probably did some trading in Moab. And they continued to depend upon those tight connections when they emigrated to Moab. Josephus says that they were prospering so well in Moab that the sons were able to marry well. Other ancient sources show that his tight relationship with the king made him and his sons governors in Moab. None of the ancient Jewish histories depict Elimelech as poor. Quite the opposite. He was associating with the upper strata of the land. Several ancient Jewish sources say that Ruth was a descendant of the Moabite king, Eglon - perhaps a granddaughter. Let me quote one ancient source that shows their social level. It says that Elimelech and his sons were "lords from Bethlehem of Judah, and they came to the country of Moab and they were governors there" (TgRuth 1:2). Now, since all of that is non-Biblical history I don't want to be dogmatic about the *specifics* of how they prospered, but this text clearly says that they went out full or prosperous.

But all that was somehow lost. She says, "I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty." The family was running on fumes when they arrived at Bethlehem. And they had no land to return to. That's why Ruth went out gleaning in the fields. Somehow this nest egg had completely evaporated. To have a sizeable investment nest egg evaporated with nothing but debt left on the land would be hugely disappointing.

### C. She lost her husband (1:3)

And to make matters worse, verse 3 says that she lost her husband. We aren't told how he died, but death by any means would have been a major blow to their dreams. His connections would have been a key to their success in Moab. Moab was not a bad place to live. It was productive, the language was related, it was not one of the Canaanite nations to which all contact was prohibited, and the people at that time were friendly. They may have had big plans for prospering in a new business there, but it all came to an end with the death of her husband and her two sons shortly after the marriages were entered.

### D. The political marriage to two princesses (1:4,15) didn't pan out since both sons died (1:5)

If indeed the ancient references to Ruth being a daughter or granddaughter of King Eglon are true, and if those same histories are accurate when they say that Elimelech and his two sons were governors and married for political reasons, then it shows another compromise that was made by Elimelech - marriage for financial gain more than marriage in the Lord. Now, it is true that he could have justified what they were doing since both women converted to the Jewish faith. Orpah must have converted at least formally because verse 15 says that she *returned* to her gods. To return to her gods when she left Naomi implies that she had switched gods when marrying. Before marriage she must have been converted to true faith outwardly. So it does appear that both women adopted the religion of Israel, with Orpah only doing so formally, and with Ruth truly putting her trust in Yehowah.

But if the marriage was for the purpose of furthering their economic opportunities in the land, this too was lost when the two men died. The wives would no longer have the political leverage of their husbands. Verse 5 says, “Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.” With the loss of the men of the family, all their economic plans were completely shattered. In verse 12 she says, “I am too old to have a husband,” perhaps implying that she was past menopause.

### **E. She lost her confidence in the Lord’s favor (1:20)**

But it wasn’t just money, business, husband, position, sons, and fertility that she lost. This chain of providential events made her lose her confidence that God really cared about her. In verse 20 she says, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” This is the opposite of Romans 8:28. She didn’t think that all things were working together for her good. Quite the opposite. She began to think that God was somehow against her and nothing was working out right.

### **F. She lost her pleasantness and became bitter (1:19-21)**

And as a result of looking at God’s providence through negative eyes, she lost her pleasantness and became sour, snarky, and bitter. Naomi means pleasant, whereas Mara means bitter. Even women of faith can become bitter if they do not handle God’s providences with the grace that Ruth did.

### **G. She pushed away the very people whom she loved (1:7-18)**

The last indication of her depression and negative thinking is that she tried to push away the very people whom she loved and who were willing to help her. Down through the years of my pastoral ministry I have seen people do this. It’s very irrational behavior, but these are people who are acting more out of emotion than they are out of Biblical reasoning. They might think that they don’t want to be a bother or a burden. But it is counterproductive to push away the people that they need the most. I think Naomi is trying to look out for their good. Both Orpah and Ruth would have had a hard go of it in a foreign land, so she thinks it would be in their best interests to find a Moabite husband. They say, No. “Surely we will return with you to your people.” They are willing to turn down the wealth of their upper strata families. But Naomi in her grief doesn’t want them to be bothered and pushes them away.

Orpah does go back to her family in verse 14, but Ruth clings to Naomi. Ruth would not leave the God whom she had come to love and would not leave the only other Christian that she knew on planet earth. She would rather face the risks and challenges of life in a foreign land than to leave God or to leave her mother-in-law. And her beautiful statement of faith in verses 16-17 is a rebuke to the low spirits of Naomi. I believe it was Ruth who helped Naomi to begin more consistently to live as a woman of faith should. We’ll look at Ruth’s words in our next sermon, but I’ll just read them for now. Verse 16:

Ruth 1:16 But Ruth said: “Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your

God, my God. 17 Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.”

I hate to think of where Naomi would have been if she had been successful in pushing Ruth away. But Ruth knew better than to give a depressed person what they wanted. She was going to provide Naomi with what she needed and to help her to move forward in faith.

### III. She began to grow in faith

And Naomi did grow in faith in the rest of the story. Ruth was the best thing that could have happened to Naomi. Ruth was able to see the bigger picture. She had her priorities straight. She was able to speak hope into Naomi. She was able to take the kinds of actions that needed to be taken. And as a result, Naomi began to grow in faith.

#### A. By seeing the proactive faith of Ruth (2:2,4ff)

She grew in faith first of all by seeing the faith of Ruth in action. In chapter 2, verse 2, Ruth asked permission to glean and tacks on a positive note when she says, “after him in whose sight I may find favor.” She is looking on the bright side, and that immediately gives Naomi hope. She says, “Go, my daughter.”

We aren’t told why Naomi didn’t glean herself. Perhaps she was sick, or the trip had taken a toll on her strength. I have recently come to believe that Naomi is serving the landlord in some way in exchange for the room they are living in. Otherwise I don’t see how they could have had a room in town to live in. But she is encouraged by Ruth’s proactive faith. And in a bit we will see that Ruth really modeled that depressed people need to serve in order to get out of their funk.

#### B. By seeing God’s generous provision (2:17-19)

Naomi also brightens when she sees God’s generous provision in verses 17-19. Now, it obviously came through the hard work of Ruth, but it was still clearly God’s generous provision.

Ruth 2:17 So she gleaned in the field until evening, and beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. 18 Then she took it up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. So she brought out and gave to her what she had kept back after she had been satisfied.

In our next sermon we will see that an ephah was somewhere between 29 and 50 # lbs of barley (depending on which of the only two references to an ancient ephah that we adopt). Either way, no one could have gleaned that much barley without the landowner being very generous.

#### C. By seeing the faith of Boaz (2:4,19-23)

But the faith of *Boaz* stirred up the faith Naomi as well. When you hang out in a community of faith it can be contagious. So she would have heard from Ruth’s reports about the blessing in verse 4 - “Yehowah be with you!” And the answer of the reapers, “Yehowah

bless you.” And she would have heard how Boaz had protected Ruth, provided for her, and had instructed her. This all gets reported in verses 19-23. Let’s go ahead and read that. Beginning at chapter 2, verse 19.

Ruth 2:19 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.”

Ruth 2:20 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.”

Ruth 2:21 Ruth the Moabitess said, “He also said to me, ‘You shall stay close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.’”

Ruth 2:22 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.

One of the worst decisions that Elimelech made was to go to a place where there were no Christians - Moab. Just because there were good economic opportunities there was not a good enough reason to relocate. And I think that preppers nowadays need to realize that. The community of faith must be a higher priority.

And Naomi’s decision to go back, however awkward and uncomfortable that return might have been, was the best decision she could have made. She needed a community of faith. Those in isolation struggle the most with discouragement, depression, bitterness, and disillusionment. And Naomi’s instruction for Ruth to stay close to this godly man and his entourage and his influence was also wise. Too frequently people make economic decisions that don’t factor church and the Christian faith into the decision at all. But we have been seeing that coals that are scattered die out, while coals that are grouped together retain their fire for a long time. Of course, bitter and depressed people don’t *want* to be in the community of faith. It’s out of their comfort zone. But it really is the best place to be - especially if you have no believing family.

#### **D. By appealing to God’s law on behalf of Ruth (2:22-3:18)**

Naomi also appealed to God’s law on behalf of Ruth. Though the custom of Levirate marriage seems strange in our eyes, it was a means of promoting covenant succession. Since I will deal with that under the Ruth sermon, I won’t do so now, other than to say that Naomi was trying to reason biblically.

#### **E. By blessing others (2:19-20)**

And in verses 19-20 (that we just read) she blesses others. Blessing others and being thankful are two disciplines that help to turn despondency into joy. I have found thankfulness and blessing to be absolutely essential to conquering bitterness. And they are both a good means of fighting against other forms of negative thinking.



## F. By patience (3:18)

But the patience she exhibits and encourages Ruth to show in chapter 3, verse 18, also shows growth in faith. Chapter 3, verse 18:

Ruth 3:18 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."

Sitting still is easier said than done when huge issues are at stake. It takes faith to do so. It takes trust that God really is for us and that He can handle all of our circumstances. So all of these things we have gone through are hints that Naomi was growing in faith.

## IV. She began to grow in joy

And as a result of her growth in faith we see her growth in joy. And both faith and joy have the opportunity to grow in the community of faith. Where previously she pushed people away when they wanted to help, we see her gladly receiving the ministry and service of others. That too is a healthy sign.

### A. Through the generosity of Boaz and Ruth (chapter 3)

For example, in chapter 3 she joyfully receives the generosity of Boaz and Ruth. Pride has a hard time being ministered to, and it is a sign of humility when you can be joyful in both being ministered to as well as ministering to others. Humility builds that inter-dependence with others whereas pride tends to promote self-reliance and isolation.

### B. Through the blessing of others (4:14)

In chapter 4, verse 14-17, we have the joy she receives through the verbal *blessings* of others.

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! 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."

We need to get better at praising and blessing one another.

### C. Through the spiritual nourishment of Boaz (4:15)

In verse 15 the same women allude to the spiritual nourishment that Boaz will bring to not only Ruth, but also to Naomi. As the Kinsman Redeemer, he would have acted as a pastor in their lives.

And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age...

Naomi needed someone to wash her in the water of the word and to nourish her spiritually. In my sermon on the book of Ruth we saw that the whole book points to Jesus, our ultimate Kinsman Redeemer. Boaz was a type of Christ. But he could also literally point to the

coming Messiah through His discipleship. He would be a restorer of life and a nourisher of life. And there was much that needed to be restored since Naomi had developed some pretty bad habits of thinking and speaking. And being in submission to a godly authority figure can be a blessing when you are depressed and not thinking clearly. Actually, I think it is good even if you aren't depressed. I think it has been good for my mom to live with us and good for us, our children, and our grandchildren to have her close.

#### **D. Through the faithfulness of Ruth (4:15)**

The same verse says, “for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.” Ruth’s love and faithfulness would be a boon to Naomi and would no doubt bring great joy to Naomi in the coming years. And they are helping her to realize how good she has it. Ruth is better than seven sons. Many elderly men and women sit in wheel chairs watching TV in a nursing home - isolated and abandoned. It’s a tremendous blessing when Naomis can be under the protection of a Boaz and Ruth.

#### **E. Through serving (4:16)**

But verse 16 gives yet another thing that would help Naomi keep out of depression, regret, and disillusionment - and that is service. Service may seem like an odd thing to require of a depressed person, but it is absolutely essential to true healing. It really is. Verse 16 says,

Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him.

She became a baby-sitter. Service is essential for those who have gone through a season of bitterness, depression, or disillusionment. When pain comes our way it can easily paralyze us and make us unable to make good decisions or act. Sometimes people just want to curl up in a ball and hope the world goes away. But Naomi once again serves. She does what she can. Now, she may have been serving the landlord of their apartment all along while Ruth gleaned. We aren't told. But certainly *this* verse highlights the importance of service even in old age. And sometimes that service has to transition (as the elderly get more feeble) into prayer, counsel, and writing, or other things that do not require physical strength. But throughout our lives we can and should serve.

#### **F. By regaining a vision for the future (4:17ff)**

The final thing that would bring her joy would be that she regained a vision for the future. Hopeless people need to learn how to regain hope. She would have no way of knowing that King David and Jesus would be descended from Ruth’s baby, but she could know that her line was not cut off and her property would not go to a stranger. Those two things by themselves would give her a vision for the future.

The wording of verse 17 may seem odd. Instead of saying, “A son has been born to Ruth and Boaz,” it says, “There is a son born to Naomi.” Childless Naomi is now the legal parent of Obed and the foster-mother of Obed to carry on her line. And the reason it is worded this way is because Boaz acted as redeemer for Naomi’s land and for Ruth’s first husband, Mahlon. It was a combination redeemer relationship. A seed had been raised up for both.

And both land and seed point forward prophetically to Jesus, who would inherit the earth. This ceremonial law was a symbol pointing to Jesus.

Even the name of Obed speaks to what Naomi had been changed for. His name means “one who serves.”

## V. Final thoughts

And that reversal is just one of many reversals in this book. I’ll just list six of the most prominent reversals that have been noticed by commentaries:

1. First, Naomi’s deep sorrow over the tragedy of death gives way to remembering the blessings of God upon both the dead and the living in 1:8 and 2:20. Our memories should not primarily focus on what was lost (that’s a way of getting bitter), but our memories should focus primarily on God’s goodness to us in the midst of our losses. Naomi realizes that even in Moab there had been plenty for her to be thankful for - especially for Ruth.
2. Second, seeking rest in the wrong source in 1:9 is replaced with seeking rest in the right source in 3:1. Our souls seek for rest, but true rest comes through Christ, our Kinsman Redeemer. We tend to find rest in all the wrong places. Naomi realized God’s definition of rest was best.
3. Third, the pleasant Naomi of chapter 1:2 was changed so easily into the bitter Mara of 1:20 and then reversed again by grace into the pleasant Naomi of chapter 4:14-17. And this to me shows that bitterness can automatically happen if we are not careful, but reversing bitterness takes grace and work. A bitter person does not have to stay bitter forever. But to reverse that you are going to have to fight for joy. And your true friends are going to refuse to call you Mara or find bitterness as your identity. None of the neighbors were willing to call her Mara.
4. Fourth, Naomi left Israel thinking she was full (when she was really not *spiritually* full), and she returned to Israel thinking that she was empty (when she was fully blessed with Ruth), and then Boaz and Ruth made her realize how full and blessed she really was (3:17). And the application I get from that is that satisfaction comes from right focus, not from perfect circumstances.
5. Fifth, leaving God’s people ended up sucking Naomi dry and being restored to God’s people restored her joy. There is a connection. We should never underestimate the benefits of a godly community of people.
6. The sixth reversal people note is a reversal of barrenness to fruitfulness. But interestingly, Naomi’s fruitfulness was not literal. Instead it was enjoyed vicariously. The ability to find joy in another person’s success is a wonderful ability indeed. That change in focus can also remove bitterness.

So there are six wonderful reversals in Naomi's life. Let me end with four more applications from Naomi's life.

First, refuse to draw negative conclusions about God or your life in the middle of despair. It's very tempting, but don't do it. Remember that your story is not yet finished. He who has begun a good work in you will continue to work on the tapestry of your life until it is finished as a beautiful work of art. So refuse to draw negative conclusions about God or your life when you are in the middle of a time of despair.

Second, refuse to become a Mara - a bitter person. Learn to praise God and thank God for everything He brings into your life, knowing He is working it together for your good. Now, obviously, Ephesians 5 does not require that we be passive. We can petition God for changes in our lives, *but while we do so, we must also be thankful*. Ephesians 5 says, "giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." That thanksgiving for all the difficulties God has trusted you with will preserve your heart from becoming a Mara-heart.

Third, some of life's greatest blessings come through great risk. Naomi took great risk in traveling the dangerous roads to Israel. That was a 7-10 day trip through difficult terrain with the potential danger of bandits. She also took the risk of being judged by her former neighbors who might have thought poorly of her for leaving in the first place. But some of life's greatest blessings come through great risk.

Finally, entrust yourself and your children to your Kinsman Redeemer, Jesus. Though you are weak, He is strong on your behalf. Though you may feel poor, He is rich and has already blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3). Though you might lack wisdom, James promises He will supply all the wisdom you need if you ask in faith.

Let us learn to avoid the negative characteristics that led pleasant Naomi to become Mara, and let us imitate the godly characteristics that flowed from faith and that turned a Mara back into a pleasant Naomi. Amen.