



Time to Reflect

- Can you think of moments in your life when you stepped into the unknown? What helped you as you undertook your particular journey?
- What impacts you the most about Naomi's return to Bethlehem and the reception that she received?

Last week we focused on Naomi and her daughters-in-law – Ruth and Orpah. We reflected on God's gracious provision and we were reminded of some of the reasons why it is important to remain faithful to God. This week's passage is concise but it challenges us to think about the nature of the human heart, as well as the reality of frustration and how it can be overcome.

"Ruth 1 ends as it begins – by talking about bread. It begins with a mention of a 'famine' in Bethlehem (v1)...and it ends with mention of the beginning of the 'barley harvest' in Bethlehem (v22). This change of circumstances is owing to God's intervention: he 'visited his people,' providing them with food (v6)."

(Tony Merida, *Ruth For You*, p45)

Specifics

- As our passage begins, we are reminded that Naomi and Ruth are on a journey. Their destination was Bethlehem (v19). Interestingly we are afforded no details relating to this journey.
- This would have been a physical challenge as the route could have been as much as seventy-five miles long. The journey would also have been emotionally taxing, especially given Naomi and Ruth's bereavements.
- For Naomi, in particular, there was also added complexity in that she was returning home. Her heart would have been filled with memories of the past and also some concerns about the future and the present. Naomi was returning to Bethlehem very different than she had left.
- Tony Merida offers an interesting analysis of Naomi's situation when he suggests, **"There are some similarities between Naomi's return and the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).¹"**
- Naomi did, certainly, leave her known home and moved to live in a foreign land. The experience didn't turn out as she had expected and she also faced the prospect of having to return home. It should, however, be noted that there are some significant differences between the two episodes.
- It is easy to feel somewhat sorry for Naomi as she journeys back home. For Ruth, this was also a challenging journey. Moab was her home. She had spent her whole life there and now she had taken a massive step into the unknown, committing herself to live in a place that she knew nothing about.
- As we read (v19b) we encounter the moment when Naomi arrived home and our attention is quickly drawn to the local women of Bethlehem.
- The whole town was stirred because of Naomi and Ruth, and the local women exclaimed, **"Can this be Naomi?"** After ten years away, Naomi's arrival home certainly created a buzz!

¹ Tony Merida, *Ruth For You* (The Good Book Company, 2020), p45.

- We get the sense that this was the sort of town where everybody knew everyone else. Interestingly, the word that is translated as 'stirred' actually means '...to throw into disorder or confusion.'
- Why was there such a reaction? This gets us thinking about the very nature of the human heart. For some of the local women, maybe they were joyously celebrating Naomi's return. They had grown up with her, lived beside her, and spent time with her. Now, after ten years, they are glad to see her.
- However, the nature of the human heart requires us to explore another explanation. Perhaps some people were judgemental and smug. They wanted to know all the details about what had happened to Naomi. Why was she back? What had went wrong? This is almost the celebration of failure.
- From a spiritual and more positive perspective, there is a third explanation to the reaction that we read about in (v19b). Merida writes, *"It is also possible that the women of the town have heard of all that she has been through and are concerned for her. Perhaps they sympathise with her and pity her."²*
- The nature of the question that the local women asked reveals to us that they were genuinely surprised to see Naomi back in Bethlehem. After ten years she may have changed physically. The passage also reveals that she had emotionally changed (v20-21). She was now a woman filled with sorrow. Additionally, Naomi was relationally changed as she suffered the loss of her husband and her sons.
- Faced with such a buzz and stir when she returned to Bethlehem, Naomi responded with transparency and candor. She outlined her situation with honesty and revealed that she felt she should be called 'Mara' as opposed to Naomi.
- The name 'Mara' is noteworthy in the history of Israel. For example, remember how the Israelites grumbled against God at a place called Mara (Exodus 15:22-24). They couldn't drink the water at Mara because it was bitter.
- Note how Naomi looked back and drew lessons from the past. Merida reflects, *"Naomi here reflects the heart of her ancestors; she complains about her situation, failing to see the grace of God in her life."³* Naomi attributed her life experience and her pain to God.
- Last week we reflected on the place of lament and we see it once again in this week's passage (v21-22). It is interesting that Naomi never reflected on her decision to leave Bethlehem for Moab, or of allowing her sons to marry Moabite women. She didn't engage in deep and meaningful spiritual self-reflection.
- Naomi felt that she left Bethlehem full but returned empty (v21). Yet this wasn't the case. Remember how she left because there was a famine in the land (v1).
- She did have her husband, her sons and the hope of lasting security. Maybe this is what Naomi lamented losing. Perhaps these are grief-laden words (v20-21).
- Yet, through it all, Naomi is no atheist. This is not lost on Merida as he concludes, *"She may not be seeing things clearly, and she definitely does not see things completely, but she at least sees God in her situation."⁴*
- Naomi still recognised the hand of God at work in a human life, even if she didn't fully comprehend the breadth and depth of His ways.
- Our passage ends by drawing our attention to Ruth – who is named as Ruth the Moabite for the first time (v22). This name will be used repeatedly through the remainder of the Book of Ruth.
- As chapter one started with famine, it ends with the beginning of the barley harvest. There is the offer of hope, after all the challenges and desperation we have encountered. This is a massive signpost of what is yet to come.

² Merida, *Ruth For You*, p47.

³ Ibid, p48.

⁴ Ibid, p49.