

Naomi: From Empty to Full

Following Her Road from Loss to Restoration

The book is named for Ruth, but it begins and ends with Naomi. The first chapter is the story of everything she lost. The last scene is Naomi with a baby in her lap, and the women of the town saying, “There is a son born to Naomi” (Ruth 4:17). If you want to feel the full weight of this book, follow her. This resource traces Naomi’s road from empty to full, with an eye toward anyone who is walking through loss right now.

What Her Name Means

Names carry a lot of meaning in this story. Naomi means “pleasant.” Her husband’s name, Elimelech, means “my God is king.” Their hometown, Bethlehem, means “house of bread.” So the book opens with a painful irony: a famine in the House of Bread, and a woman named Pleasant who is about to walk through the most bitter years of her life. When she finally comes home she asks to be called Mara instead, which means “bitter” (Ruth 1:20).

What She Lost

Ruth 1:1-5 covers about ten years in five verses, and nearly every verse takes something from her:

- **Her home.** A famine drives the family out of Bethlehem to Moab, a foreign country with foreign gods.
- **Her husband.** “Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons” (Ruth 1:3).
- **Her sons.** “Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband” (Ruth 1:5). Neither son left a child.

Notice how the writer describes her at the end of that list. She is no longer called by name. She is simply “the woman.” In that world, a widow with no sons had no one to provide for her, no one to speak for her in legal matters, and no way for her family’s name to continue. Naomi had lost the people she loved and, with them, her security and her future.

Grief That Tells the Truth

Naomi does not hide how she feels. On the road she tells her daughters-in-law, “the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!” (Ruth 1:13). When she reaches Bethlehem and the women ask, “Is this Naomi?” she answers:

“Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty.” (Ruth 1:20-21)

Three things are worth noticing.

- **The Bible lets her say it.** No one corrects her. The writer does not add a comment telling us she was wrong to talk this way. Scripture makes room for honest grief, here and in many of the Psalms (see Psalm 13 and Psalm 88).
- **She is still talking about God.** In two verses she names Him four times. She believes He is in charge of her life even when she cannot understand what He is doing. Her pain and her faith are in the same sentence. That is not unbelief. That is what faith often sounds like in a hard season.
- **She came home.** What turned her back toward Bethlehem was hearing “that the LORD had visited His people by giving them bread” (Ruth 1:6). Hurting as she was, she moved toward the place where God was at work, not away from it.

What She Could Not See

Naomi says she has come home empty. But read the very next verse: “So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess her daughter-in-law with her” (Ruth 1:22). She was not alone. Standing beside her was a young woman who had just vowed to stay with her until death. And the verse ends with a quiet detail: “they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.”

This is not a criticism of Naomi. Grief does this to all of us. It narrows what we can see. The writer is simply letting us notice what Naomi could not yet notice: God had already placed the beginning of her restoration right next to her, and the harvest was about to start.

The Turn

Naomi's words about God change in a single moment. Ruth comes home from her first day in the fields carrying far more grain than anyone should have been able to gather, and she mentions the name of the man who helped her: Boaz. Naomi answers:

“Blessed be he of the LORD, who has not forsaken His kindness to the living and the dead!” (Ruth 2:20)

The word translated “kindness” is the Hebrew word *hesed*, the loyal, covenant-keeping love that runs through this whole book. In chapter 1 Naomi was sure God's hand was against her. Here, for the first time, she sees that His loyal love never left. Nothing about her losses had changed. What changed was that she caught a glimpse of what God was doing.

From Grieving to Giving

By chapter 3, Naomi is no longer only receiving care. She is giving it. “My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you?” (Ruth 3:1). Back on the road from Moab she had prayed that the LORD would give her daughters-in-law “rest, each in the house of her husband” (Ruth 1:9). The two Hebrew words, “rest” and “security,” are closely related. Naomi is now helping to bring about the very thing she once prayed for.

That is often part of how God heals. He turns our attention toward someone else who needs us. And when Naomi has done all she can, she knows how to wait: “Sit still, my daughter, until you know how the matter will turn out” (Ruth 3:18).

Full Again

In chapter 1 the women of Bethlehem asked, “Is this Naomi?” In chapter 4 the women gather around her again, this time to bless God (Ruth 4:14-15). They call the child “a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age.” They say that Ruth, who loves her, is “better to you than seven sons.” Then: “Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him” (Ruth 4:16).

Naomi does not say a single word in chapter 4. The woman who had so much to say in chapter 1 simply holds the baby. The arms she called empty are full.

Empty (Ruth 1)	Full (Ruth 4)
A famine in Bethlehem	A harvest gathered in, and bread on the table
Three funerals in a foreign land	A wedding and a birth at home
“Call me Mara” (bitter)	“Blessed be the LORD”
“The LORD has brought me home again empty”	A child laid in her lap
No husband, no sons, no heir	A daughter-in-law “better to you than seven sons” and a grandson
The women ask, “Is this Naomi?”	The women say, “There is a son born to Naomi”

There is a small thread connecting the two columns. When Boaz sends Ruth home from the threshing floor with grain, he says, “Do not go empty-handed to your mother-in-law” (Ruth 3:17). The Hebrew word for “empty-handed” is the same word Naomi used when she said the LORD had brought her home “empty.” Without knowing it, Boaz answers her complaint with a gift.

What Naomi Never Knew

The book ends with a family line: Obed became the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David (Ruth 4:17). As far as we can tell, Naomi never saw that. She did not know that the baby in her lap would be the grandfather of Israel's greatest king, or that many generations later, in her own hometown of Bethlehem, Jesus would be born from this same family (Matthew 1:5-6, 16).

Her story was part of something far bigger than she could see, even on her best day. The same is true for us. We see a small piece. God sees all of it.

An Honest Word for Those Who Are Grieving

It would be easy to read Naomi's story as a promise that every loss gets a happy ending in this life. The book does not say that, and we should not either. Obed did not replace Elimelech, Mahlon, or Chilion. Naomi's joy in chapter 4 was real, and so were the three graves in Moab. Being full again did not erase what she had lost.

What Ruth does promise is this: God's loyal love does not let go of His people, even when they are sure His hand is against them. He was at work in Naomi's life during the years when she could see no sign of it. If you are in chapter 1 right now, you are allowed to say so, to God and to the people around you. And you can know that chapter 1 is not where He stops writing.

Questions to Think About

1. Naomi told God and her neighbors exactly how she felt. Is it easy or hard for you to be that honest in prayer? Why?
2. Naomi said she was empty while Ruth stood right beside her. Is there someone or something God has placed next to you that grief or worry has made hard to see?
3. Naomi's healing included caring for Ruth's future. Who might God be asking you to look out for?
4. Naomi never learned how far her story reached. How does that change the way you think about the ordinary, unseen parts of your own life?

All Scripture references follow the New King James Version (NKJV) unless noted otherwise.