

SERIES: BOOK OF RUTH
“Famine in the Heart”
Ruth 1:19-22

I’m sure we have all known someone who has suffered a tragedy, trauma, or trial and who then became angry at God because of it. Rather than falling into the arms of a God who loves him/her, she/he extends the arm and shakes it in anger at the One perceived to have either caused the problem or at least not prevented it. Such is the case in our portion of the Book of Ruth this morning. Turn with me to Ruth 1:19-22. READ IT. In this section we learn about famine in the heart. I see three parts to this issue and four applications. There is a Remarkable Change, Raw Emotions, and a Radical Charge.

I. A FAMINE IN THE HEART PRODUCES A REMARKABLE CHANGE, 19.

After Naomi and Ruth had been on the road for some time, they arrived at their destination. Their appearance in town created some interest and commotion. The word used here means *to cause a tumult, roar, anxiety and agitation*¹. It implies dismay over a situation, when people do not fully understand a situation and so make inquiries about it.² The city, and especially the women, were thrown into a peaceable uproar.³ Maybe it was after their first stop at the city well, or a simple inquiry about a place to stay, or the fact that two women were traveling alone, or someone thinking they recognized one of the ladies from years ago, that caused the news to spread quickly that “an old timer” had returned. Whatever it was; as they came into town, the news of their arrival spread quickly, caught the town’s attention, and raised the people’s anxiety about who and what this might mean. Their entrance into Bethlehem caused a stir and excitement, similar to an “old timer” coming into Big Creek.

This caused one writer to comment: *The exclusively female character of this portion of chapter 1 continued, for the whole town of Bethlehem spoke through its women. Their question, Can this be Naomi? suggests that they remembered Naomi....*⁴

I find this kind of an interesting question. Just how are we to understand it? There are several ways to take the question:

1. **There was no change in Naomi.** The women recognized her immediately and were excitedly welcoming her home. This would mean she hadn’t been gone too long and there were no noticeable physical changes. This would be the kind of greeting I gave to Sharla when she returned from Morocco. It had been a year since we had seen her. We met her at the airport and as she walked toward us, I said, “Is this our Sharla?” and promptly gave her a big hug of welcome home. I doubt this was the kind of reception given in Naomi’s case. She had been gone at least ten years.

2. **There was some change in Naomi.** She had grown up and grown older. There were still traces of the younger beauty, pleasantness, and gracious spirit they remembered of her before she and Elimelek had moved. But there were the differences that aging brings with it.

¹ BDB.

² Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. HGK2101

³ Lange, J. P., Schaff, P., Cassell, P., & Steenstra, P. H. (2008). *A commentary on the Holy Scriptures : Book (23)*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

⁴ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:421

Life had weathered her face. They thought they recognized her and just wanted to make sure by asking “Is this *really* Naomi?”

3. **There was remarkable change.** Not only had she been gone more than ten years, grown older, and been changed by age, there was a whole demeanor change in this one who they had known as a bouncy, black-haired, dark-dancing-eyed, beauty. There was a physical resemblance but now they were looking at a worn-out, wrinkled, wounded woman. They *thought* they recognized her, but the physical changes raised some doubts. Their question “is this Naomi?” was one of trying to confirm her identity because **they were surprised that she was in such a condition, without either husband or sons.**⁵

Her reply not only answered their uncertainty but gave evidence of the wounded spirit and raw emotions just under the aged skin. Famine in the heart produces remarkable changes in the body. That brings us to the second factor of famine in the heart.

II. A FAMINE IN THE HEART PRODUCES RAW EMTIONS, 20, 21b.

If you are a student of people you soon learn that what is going on in the heart is often reflected in the face, especially the eyes. Some people are better at hiding their feelings than others, but others wear their heart on their sleeve.

The expression *wear your heart upon your sleeve* means to show your emotions or feelings plainly. It was once a custom for a young man to attach to his sleeve a gift from a young lady he loved, thus displaying his feelings for her. Shakespeare alludes to the practice in *Othello*, where Iago says: For when my outward action doth demonstrate

The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, ‘tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve.’⁶

Instead of making Naomi better, the trials of life had made her bitter....⁷ Notice how her emotional response indicates a famine in her heart.

1. **She wants her named changed, 20.** “**Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara....**” Naomi means *pleasant, sweet, lovely, beautiful, agreeable*. She has experienced enough of the rough stuff of life that life is no longer pleasant, agreeable, or sweet. Her spirit is wounded. She has lost the zip for living. She says change my name: “**call me Mara**” which means *bitter, embittered, grief, or galled*. One of my dictionaries explains “mara” as **bitterness**, anguish, i.e., a mental state of great, intense distress, as a figurative extension of a bitter taste in the mouth (Isa 38:17)⁸ Another one fills in some details: The verb *mārar* is used fifteen times, always with man as subject, never God, unless the verb describes an interpretation given by man to God’s actions and will. For example, Job (and this root plus its various derivatives appear more frequently in Job than in any other OT book [ten times]) complains: The Almighty has vexed my soul (27:2), Hiphil of *mārar*. Similarly, Naomi says, “Do not call me Naomi, call me ‘Mara’ for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me” (Ruth 1:20).

⁵Ward, J. d., & Nida, E. A. (1992). *A translator's handbook on the book of Ruth* (2nd ed.) (19). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁶Rogers, James, *Dictionary of Cliches*, p. 340.

⁷Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1993). *Be committed*. An Old Testament study. Ruth and Esther (Ru 1:19). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

⁸Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. HGK5253

It is interesting to note that the Hebrews expressed tragic, unpleasant experiences in terms of the sense of taste, the bitter. Actually, we employ the same figure of speech in our English language; It was a galling experience; his actions were not in very good taste, I thought; your wife is always so tastefully dressed.⁹

2. **She has raw emotions.** With this outburst of passion her raw emotions are fully exposed. This lets us know how she views herself and her life. She is not happy! She is dispirited, damaged, disgusted, and disappointed with her life. She fills in a few of the details:

- My life has gone from beautiful to bitter
- ... from sweet to sour
- ... from lovely to lousy
- ... from fullness to famine
- ... from enough to empty
- ... from a wife to a widow
- ... from a mother to only a mother-in-law
- ... from wealthy to worthless.

She was a woman with empty hands, an empty home, and an empty heart.¹⁰ So she says “change my name” and call me according to how I feel! Fortunately, the women did not do that. The name change did not take affect. She continues to be called Naomi. “There was a blessing awaiting her back in Bethlehem that would have made the name “Mara” as unsuitable for her as she now supposed “Naomi” to be.”¹¹

But her desire to change her name made me pause and think about that a little. Who else in Scripture has had a name change? Here are a few that I could remember:

Abram [exalted father of one] to Abraham [father a multitude of nations] (Gen. 17:5)
Sarai [my princess] to Sarah [a princess to many = mother of nations] (Gen. 17:15)
Jacob [supplanter] to Israel [one who strives with God] (Gen. 32:28)
Solomon [peace] to Jedidiah [beloved of the LORD] (2 Sam. 12:25)
Simon [shifty] to Peter [rock, stone, solid] (Mt. 10:2)
Saul [desired] to Paul [little, small] (Acts 13:9)
Nation Israel [the nation that strives with God] to a new name

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, And for Jerusalem’s sake I will not keep quiet, Until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, And her salvation like a torch that is burning.² The nations will see your righteousness, And all kings your glory; And you will be called by a new name Which the mouth of the LORD will designate.³ You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, And a royal diadem in the hand of your God.⁴ It will no longer be said to you, “Forsaken,” [Azubah] Nor to your land will it any longer be said, “Desolate” [Shemamah]; But you will be called, “My delight is in her,” [Hephzibah] And your land, “Married” [Beulah]; For the LORD delights in you, And *to Him* your land will be married.⁵ For *as* a young man marries a virgin, *So* your sons will marry you; And *as* the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, *So* your God will rejoice over you. Isaiah 62:1-5 (NASB95)

The believer who overcomes all obstacles in life to a new name

⁹Harris, R. Laird ; Harris, Robert Laird ; Archer, Gleason Leonard ; Waltke, Bruce K.: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. electronic ed. Chicago : Moody Press, 1999, c1980, S. 528

¹⁰Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1993). *Be committed*. An Old Testament study. Ruth and Esther (Ru 1:19). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

¹¹ McGee, p. 57

‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some of the hidden manna*, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.’ Revelation 2:17 (NASB95)

The contrast in name changing is quite noticeable. When Naomi attempted to change her name it was from greater to lesser; when God changes a name it is from the lesser to the greater. Just think about what we usually say about ourselves: “you dummy”, “you can’t do that”, etc. We almost always talk down about ourselves. God, on the other hand, speaks up about us. He says, “you were dead” but “now you are alive”. You were “a sinner” now you are “a believer”. You were “an alien” now you are “my child”. You say “you can’t” but I say “you can”. You didn’t “belong” now you are a “member of My family”. You once were packaged with “old things” now I have filled you with “new things”. When we attempt to “change our name” we show the famine in our heart; when God changes a name about us, He indicates the fullness He has given to us. My recommendation to you is this: *unless God changes your name, don’t mess with it!* Or to put it another way: *only speak about, listen to, and accept the name changes God gives to you.* You will be a better person for it. The LORD has this word for us and Naomi: **“Lo, for my own welfare I had great bitterness; It is You who has kept my soul from the pit of nothingness, For You have cast all my sins behind Your back.”** (Isaiah 38:17, NASB95) Naomi’s famine of the heart was showing through her raw emotional condition. Fortunately, better days and a refilling of her heart were on their way. Better days are coming for all of us. Now that is good news!

The famine in her heart produced remarkable changes and raw emotions. But she is not finished yet. The famine in her heart has one more complaint.

III. A FAMINE IN THE HEART PRODUCES A RADICAL CHARGE.

Have you noticed how quickly hurting people become negatively theological? A person may not spend any time thinking about God, including Him in his/her life, or ever go to church, but when difficulties or trauma enters the life, the finger comes out and God gets the blame. So it is with Naomi. As soon as she has the opportunity to vent, she says “it’s all God’s fault” I’m so miserable. Four times in two sentences she charges God as the culprit for her condition. She uses the poetic A-B-B-A form. You can see it by her use of two of God’s names. She uses SHADDAI, Almighty, in the first and fourth statements. She uses Yahweh [LORD], in the second and third statements. She says:

The Almighty [Shaddai] has dealt bitterly with me (when I was happy)
Yahweh [LORD] has brought me back empty (I went out full)
Yahweh [LORD] has witnessed against me (showing my decisions as wrong)
The Almighty [Shaddai] has afflicted me (unnecessarily and without cause).

Here’s my expanded version of what she was saying: “call me Bitter because the Almighty (who has power to do these things) has dealt bitterly with me while I was happy. I left here with all the good things of life, but the LORD (who is supposed to love me and be in covenant with me) has brought me back to Israel with nothing. Don’t call me Happy, since the LORD, who is supposed to love me, does bad things against me, and the Almighty has caused my pain.”

Eugene Petersen in *The Message* puts her words like this: **But she said, “Don’t call me Naomi; call me Bitter. The Strong One has dealt me a bitter blow. I left here full of life, and GOD has brought me back with nothing but the clothes on my back. Why would you call me Naomi?”**

God certainly doesn't. The Strong One ruined me."¹² She seems to be thinking of and reflecting the truth with which Joshua warned the people: "If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you."¹³ (Joshua 24:20, NASB95)

[Charles] Fuller has described the plight of Naomi in this very picturesque style:

Of the two sexes, the woman is the weaker; of women, old women are feeblest; of old women, widows most woeful; of widows, those that are poor, their plight most pitiful; of poor widows, those who want children, their case most doleful; of widows that want children, those that once had them; and after lost them, their estate most desolate; of widows that have had children, those that are strangers in a foreign country, their condition most comfortless. Yet all these met together in Naomi, as in the center of sorrow, to make the measure of her misery pressed down, shaken together, running over. I conclude, therefore many men have had affliction---none like Job; many women have had tribulation---none like Naomi.¹³

APPLICATIONS: There are at least four lessons to be learned from a famine of the heart.

1. Recognize that God does discipline His children. What I hear next from Naomi is the cry of a child under discipline. No one under the process of discipline and correction likes it. Yet, when God does the hard work of discipline in our lives, we need to work with it instead of against it. If we work with it, we will be BETTER, if we work against it we will be BITTER. The difference is "I". Here is where we apply the verse from Hebrews 12: "and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reproved by Him; For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives."¹⁴ (Hebrews 12:5-6, NASB95) Job himself said, "Behold, how happy is the man whom God reproves, So do not despise the discipline of the Almighty." (Job 5:17, NASB95) When you think God is dealing harshly with you, love Him for caring instead of blaming Him.

2. Recognize that our decisions do have consequences. Sometimes the consequence is distant to the decision, so we will have to remember to connect the two. Then we must accept responsibility without blaming God or others for our condition. I like the short devotional one man wrote: But the next words confess the truth, "I went out full." It was voluntary; she had not been compelled to go, and she was full when she went. "The Lord (Jehovah) hath brought me home again empty." Self-will took her away: grace brought her home (ah, it was home still). Is this not the confession of every restored soul? We may have made many excuses for our departure from God; circumstances were against us, friends became cold, we were misunderstood—ah multiply them as we will, the one reason for departure from God is expressed in that one brief sentence, "I went out full."¹⁴

3. Receive the blessing of the discipline. After she confessed her voluntary departure, she acknowledges the grace of God at work in her life. So the next word is the covenant name, "Jehovah hath brought me home again." We would never come back ourselves. It is only the power of unchanging grace that restores the wanderer; but for that we would still remain in the

¹²Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message : The Bible in contemporary language* (Ru 1:20-21). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress.

¹³ McGee, p. 56

¹⁴Ridout, S. (2004; 2004). *Gleanings from the Book of Ruth*. (21). Pleasant Places Press.

land of Moab. Nor could we be brought back in any other condition than empty. There must be the brokenness suggested by that, to make the soul willing to yield to God's love.

But her condition is a witness of what an evil and bitter thing it is to depart from the Lord—a warning to all against the folly of turning away from the house of plenty.

Dear brethren, look at that poor desolate widow, crushed with apparently hopeless sorrow, her brightness all behind her—and see a picture of the soul that wanders from God. Ah! how many blighted lives, filled with bitter, unavailing regrets are there among the saints of God.

“It might have been,” says the aged man, looking back upon a lifetime of wasted energy and time. Who can measure the loss suffered by those who spend the life in gathering the “wood, hay, and stubble” of this world? Nor is such departure necessarily a moral declension. The world can be very upright, but it makes *widows* of God's people who yield to its seductions.

It is always the time of harvest when the wanderer returns. Ah, let the proud, stubborn will be broken, let there be the words of confession, and how soon will the poor wanderer find the ripened harvest with all its abundance and its joy.

Who but the God of *all* grace could have blessing for His people at all times, no matter how great their unfaithfulness. But in His presence, plenty abides. None can hunger there, and even for *you*, poor wandering child of His, there is more than enough. His voice is ever, Eat, yea drink abundantly, O beloved.¹⁵

4. Remember droughts and famines do end. A famine of the heart will end if we continue to walk with the LORD. A great phrase to remember is “this too shall pass”.

God was going to take this event which was marked with simplicity and pathos, and he was going to crown it with glory and honor. In the eternal counsel of the omnipotent God, this forlorn [forsaken woman with a] Gentile girl, the insignificant village of Bethlehem and the apparently nonessential circumstances which brought them together were to be lifted out of the commonplace and made to shine with the divine light. Thus was God moving in the out-of-the-way village in the far-off yonder time with a down-and-out individual.¹⁶ Glorious things were in prospect for her; but she was blinded to all that at this time.¹⁷

Charles Simeon writes a good reminder to us: So, then, shall it ere long be said of you, ye sons and daughters of affliction, if only ye improve your trials for the furtherance of your spiritual welfare. How soon shall all “your tears be wiped away from your eyes!” How soon shall “joy and gladness come forth to meet you; and sorrow and sighing flee away for ever!” “Be patient, then, unto the coming of your Lord:” and you shall soon find, that “the sufferings of this present life were not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us.”¹⁸ Amen.

I trust no one here is experiencing a famine in the heart, but if you are, draw near to Him who loves you instead of blaming Him and pushing Him away. Rest in His loving arms until this time passes and you again sense the fullness He has for you. If I can help, let me know. Amen.

¹⁵Ridout, S. (2004; 2004). *Gleanings from the Book of Ruth*. (21). Pleasant Places Press.

¹⁶McGee, p. 58

¹⁷McGee, J. Vernon, *The Romance of Redemption*, p. 55

¹⁸Simeon, C. (1832-63). *Horae Homileticae Vol. 3: Judges to 2 Kings* (99). London.

“Naomi committed the grievous error of placing the blame for all her trouble upon God by charging ‘The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.’ This has been symptomatic of the Adamic nature from the very beginning. Even Adam inferred that the woman whom God had given him was responsible for the presence of sin; He thereby threw the blame back into the lap of God, suggesting that if God had not given her to him, the tragedy of the fall would have been averted. The children of Adam have been making that and similar charges against God ever since. It was not God who had dealt bitterly with Naomi; she was reaping the fruit of the sin of disobedience. Naomi was but gleaning in the fields of a far country, away from the blessing of God. God was not responsible for her misfortune, but he was responsible for the voice that had wooed her back home. It was the grace of God that was responsible for the blessing that was to come to her now that she listened to the voice and returned. .¹⁹

¹⁹ McGee, J. Vernon, *The Romance of Redemption*, p. 55