

Reading: Ruth 1:1-22

Theme: A Stirring Return.

To be honest, there are times in our lives when things seemed to go so wrong; when things happen which we don't want, but are powerless to prevent. Tragedies occur to us all. At such times people may condemn God to the scrapheap. Up until this point they may never have given God a 2nd thought, never really believed in Him, but as tragedy strikes it is then used to openly dismiss the One they dismissed in life and practice already anyway.

We have seen in chapter 1 something of the difficulties and tragedies Naomi went through - left penniless, homeless, hopeless, a widow and had lost her two sons. She has only one of her daughters-in-law left and together they faced an uncertain future. Her homecoming causes quite a stir in Bethlehem. We can see contrasts between the start and end of the chapter. At the start of the chapter there was a famine when Naomi and the family left, now it is the start of the barley harvest. It seems we are to read more into this - the physical famine also showed a spiritual famine in Naomi's life. Here we are told that harvest time is beginning and are given a hint that is the start of the spiritual harvest of God's grace in both Naomi and Ruth. Naomi went away full but now was returning empty and she says is to be called Mara.

We are not told anything of the journey back to Bethlehem, but merely about what it was like on their arrival at Bethlehem - the barley harvest was starting - it is about April time and the first harvest of the year was beginning. We can imagine Naomi on the way back wondering if the report she heard was wrong or false. Their uncertain future would have been even more uncertain if there was still a famine. One of the first things she sees as they arrive in Bethlehem area were the fields ready for harvest, perhaps even being harvested. The report was true! Ruth also must have been encouraged by seeing this unknown place at its best. Our first impressions of a place are so important and Ruth is kindly allowed to have a favourable impression of her new home. I want us to see five things from these verses:

1. The Stir Their Arrival Caused.

Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem and as they did so, perhaps those in the fields did not pay too much attention to these two women - probably dressed in the fashion, style of Moab as they went past the fields where they were working. Naomi must have had so many memories flood back as she headed on to Bethlehem. When they arrived at Bethlehem we can picture the scene as someone looks, looks again and realised this woman is Naomi. They could not believe it; it had been over 10 years and now there she was and what a condition she was in! We can picture all her old friends gathering around her to greet her and to see how she was, to find out what has happened, to welcome her home. The whole town was stirred by the news that Naomi was back. In our opening comments on this book, I said that probably Naomi and her family were descendants of the original settlers in Bethlehem and were perhaps considered part of the local aristocracy of the place, so the news of the state of Naomi must have caused quite a stir. There is a very human and understandable touch at the end of v19 regarding the exclamation and question of the women "*Can this be Naomi?*" It is an exclamation of surprise and wonder. Let's move on and see:

2. The Change Seen upon Her Arrival.

The town, especially her women friends, could hardly believe their eyes. The 10 years or more since they last saw her had obviously been harsh and hard years. The years in Moab had left their mark and had altered Naomi's circumstances, even her appearance almost beyond recognising. She had gone out with her family, with high hopes of prospering away from the famine, possibly gone out with wealth. Yet here before them was a pair of dishevelled women, one hardly recognisable as the Naomi they'd known. Naomi herself owns the change - went out full - not only in terms of wealth, but full of hope, joy, life, vitality, a full family, but she returned from her time away from God's people and land in an empty, broken, sad, hopeless, joyless and poverty struck state. People could hardly believe their eyes at her state; her words seemed to stagger them also.

Each one of us needs to learn from Naomi - because we may think we have so much, but it could be that in a short time all we take comfort and refuge in, all we trust in could be gone and taken from us. We may boast or rely upon our health, strength, money, family, family connections, on our jobs, our intellect, perhaps even our youth. Yet all too soon such things could be removed in many ways. Sadly, people plan and live their lives as if they are immortal and that their life was going to last and never end. We need to recognise that the most precious things of this life are only ours as a loan - our loved ones, our health, all we have and are. The frailty of life, of health, of wealth in an uncertain economic climate etc should teach us that we are just creatures of a short passing time and even in that short time our lives and situations can vary enormously in their ups and downs.

Changes can affect our lives dramatically, even our looks and attitudes. Naomi experienced this and it caused people to wonder "*Can this be Naomi?*" Maybe in such a short time people could wonder at us and all we have been through. Those are somethings about the changes seen upon Naomi's arrival.

3. The Reason Naomi Gives for It.

As people wondered at her and her change of circumstances, Naomi doesn't go into a list of woes about the past 10 years. She could so easily have done that. She could have been like those who when you ask them how they are, give you an organ recital – it's my heart, my lungs, my legs, my stomach, my back etc. Such ones can be those with whom nothing is right - no one ever had such and such like them and the worries they have... in fact they'd even worry about having nothing to worry about! It usually goes "*I'm fine, but...*"

Naomi sees beyond all the secondary causes and owns that all she had gone through had been allowed by God Himself, even sent by Him. She doesn't try and cover the truth up, but is realistic and says "*Call me Mara... not Naomi.*" Mara means bitter, while Naomi means pleasant. There is a play on words intended in the translation, but in the Hebrew the form of words is also wordplay, to catch it in English we have to

say "*Call me Mara for the Lord has cruelly marred me*" she says she went away full, but the Lord brought her back empty, the Lord had afflicted her and brought misfortune upon her. Naomi doesn't attribute the problems to anything or anyone else, but to God.

Here we have a problem - for we have either to agree with her or say that God is not in control of everything. It is one or the other! This causes confusion in some people for they can't explain how the God of love, that they sentimentally picture, could allow such. When this cosy picture breaks down, they complain bitterly against God, disown Him, curse Him even. Naomi wasn't doing this here. She did not have a sentimental theology or view of God that is around today in many parts of the Church. Yet she does not complain, but here acknowledges God's control over life, even her own life.

It may be a question we have wrestled with. Maybe the answers we've come up with point us to a cruel, a hard, callous and indifferent God. This is not the case. Yet, God mysteriously works all things together for good to those who love Him, but it is definitely not easy as we go through such times.

4. Naomi's Faith Demonstrated.

Naomi's words point all the women to the work, the hand of the Lord as He had appeared to work against her and afflicted her. Yet she is not pointing the finger of accusation or complaint, but speaks out of recognition and even an acceptance of the Lord's work in her life - showing she has faith and trust in Him. You may question that, but I have reasons for saying it - not just preacher talk to try and cover up for God or defend Him! I come to this conclusion by noting what she says, especially the terms she uses for God. - "*Almighty*" and "*Lord*". She could have used many terms, did not need to use any names or terms for God, but she uses these 2 rich terms and names.

The 1st term "**Almighty**" refers to God being all-powerful. The word is *Shaddai*, often used with *El* - meaning God Almighty. Here it is just *Shaddai*. The word carries more than the idea of strength and power

alone, it refers to durability, to solidity, to trustworthiness. It is linked to the word mountain - these being characteristics of a great mountain. Naomi says the trustworthy, solid, dependable, all-powerful God has been at work in my life. She knew He is trustworthy, she could rely upon Him to work aright in her life. Naomi would have known OT books - most certainly Genesis and she may well have had in her heart and mind 5 specific examples when this term *Shaddai* is used, each pointed her to God blessing in a time of hopelessness:

Genesis 17:1 - Abraham at 99 was promised a son and heir - the Lord introduces Himself as God Almighty. God can turn our helpless and barren situations around for He is the Almighty, nothing is too difficult for Him.

Genesis 28:3 - Isaac blesses Jacob as he sets out on a dangerous and difficult journey to find a wife in a strange land. Such a hard situation, facing an unknown future, El Shaddai's blessing was needed.

Genesis 35:11 - Jacob was back in Canaan, now blessed by the Lord and the Lord uses this name again to bless Jacob - now Israel - and promises great blessings. Those blessings were assured because Shaddai made the promises.

Genesis 43:14 - as the brothers went on their second journey to Egypt and had to face the stern, harsh Prime Minister (*Joseph*); Jacob - having learned from his father - asks God Almighty to grant them mercy - he knew that even in such difficulties the Lord could keep them.

Genesis 49:25 - as Jacob lay dying, he blesses his sons and he sees hardship and problems for Joseph and so he asks for the help, care, protection and blessings of the Almighty upon him.

Naomi's use of the term shows she had trust in this God, the Almighty, who had never failed His people, had never been impotent or too weak to help them, but was with them and so even in her dark times of troubles and trials - which He allows to come upon even the ones He loves. Naomi wasn't being glib; she had this sure trust in the Almighty. More than that, 2ndly she uses the name "**Lord**" - His covenant name, the name He used when He entered into a relationship and covenant

with His people. This God was still her God. More importantly she was still His child and the object of His love and care.

Naomi's use of these names shows her faith and trust, which had even grown. She prayed for her daughters-in-law using only the term Lord; here her focus is on the power, trustworthiness of God and although things had gone bitter with her, she was not bitter against the Lord. She leaves the explanation of events with El Shaddai - her faithful God who knew what He is doing.

It is so easy for us to forget God's faithfulness, power, love and wisdom. We forget He is El Shaddai and the Lord. We panic, fear and try to understand what's happening, yet even in our most perplexing times He knows what He is doing. He always sees the upper side of the tapestry of our life but we struggle with the underside and all its crossed over dark strands, loose ends. God is always with us if we are a child of His and even at our lowest we find, if we look, He leads us, and underneath us are His everlasting arms.

Do we have a personal relationship with this God? Is He someone we just know about, or the God we personally know and love as our own God - for we have trusted the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour? This makes all the difference. This God is still Almighty to save us, to help us and He's still the Lord - the God who will enter into an eternal covenant relationship with the likes of you or me. Do we know His salvation, His covenant with us? If we do, then it is right to expect the help of the Almighty, the eternally faithful God in our ongoing lives and it can be looked for even in and through trying circumstances. Finally, we see:

5. The Town Buzzes Because of Ruth.

It is right to say that there was a buzz about something that was happening. The word translated "*stirred*" in the NIV, or "*moved*" in the AV could even be translated "*buzzing*" as it is in the Message "*When they arrived in Bethlehem the whole town was soon buzzing: "Is this really our Naomi? And after all this time!"*" There must have been a

network of communication, gossip even! The jungle telegraph worked well! Naomi had come back with a Moabite daughter-in-law! It seems that wasn't all they said. It wasn't words of criticism that were shared, but words of amazement, of being thrilled and excited. They spoke of things that caused a real buzz in Bethlehem; excitement was beginning to grow, develop and all because of Ruth!

I can't imagine someone like Boaz listening to the tittle tattle that went about town, but even he had heard about Ruth as we will see in chapter 2 - for when he is told that she's the Moabitess who had returned with Naomi - he goes and speaks to her 2v11-12 - basically saying to her *"You're the girl who has been converted!"* We can see, detect that the whole town is indeed stirred, there's a buzz. Not just that Naomi has returned in an impoverished state, but even in, through and in spite of Naomi, God has been working in this Moabitess and she has come to trust the living God as her own God. If the harvest was good news and a token of God's affection and favour, how much more was the conversion of this pagan Moabite woman! If ever they wanted a token of God's favour being towards them this was it! A harvest had begun both physically and even spiritually. The buzz was about what God would do as a result of this work in this woman.

Picture how we would feel as a church if someone we been praying about for a long-time was converted or restored. Imagine if someone came in for the first time said that they were converted by something they had listened to from our website or through reading something we'd put through their door. Would we be stirred? Surely there would there be a buzz in the life of the church? I hope there would be! We may say we believe in the potential power of God, but have little faith in His actual power and our prayers could be devoid of faith, be pessimistic, our prayer meetings could be lifeless, perhaps even poorly attended and we go through the same routine of saying prayers at them, not really expecting God to work in a glorious way to save people in, through or in spite of our church. Yet if we saw one or two converted, then I suspect that we would have a different attitude to prayer and outreach!

It only takes one conversion for a church to **actively** believe again in the wonderful saving power of God. The impact of one person coming to faith can transform our spiritual family here as we see God at work again. We will be dissatisfied, long for God to do it again and again and we will rejoice He is working amongst us. It would be a ripple effect; we would be keen to invite people in to hear the gospel preached, even to gossip the gospel ourselves.

I pray that we would have growing confidence in God's saving power through the gospel so that we will invite people in; we will gossip the gospel; we will be those who will meet together and cry out to God to work in a saving way. We do have so many encouragements in the life of the church that evidences our God is not powerless, but almighty and we should long He would save others and there be a buzz, a stirring, not just in the church but in the whole of the Wheatly area - as people are being saved and their lives transformed. I need such a renewed big vision and view of what our God can achieve; we all need this enlarged, enlivened view of what our God can do.

The town was stirred by what had happened to just one unknown Moabitess, but God went on to do more for, in and through her - but we will move on and see some glimpses of that in future weeks.