

## Naomi – Ruth 1-4

Have you ever thought that life isn't fair? Many of us will know that feeling, "It's not fair".

All of us go through hardship. Life, for all, has its ups and downs. I remember Tracey describing life as being like a heart monitor. There are highs and there are lows. You can't have one without the other and if you remove them both then all you have is a flat line. We all have good days and we all have bad days. Maybe the difference is that from the height of a good day you can see and appreciate the changes seasons of life but in the depths of a bad day, the shadows of life hide and remove a sense of perspective.

Last week, we started looking at this story through the lens and perspective of Ruth. Ruth was someone who encapsulated the loyalty of God. But if you weren't here or need a reminder, this is the beginning of the story. Naomi and her family have left Israel due to a famine and they go to Moab. There, Naomi's husband dies. Her two sons marry local girls but then the two sons die. Naomi decides, upon hearing news that the famine has finished, to return to her home town of Bethlehem. One of the daughters-in-law heeds Naomi's pleadings and returns to her family but the other, Ruth, stays loyally with Naomi.

And it's Naomi we are looking at today. And for Naomi, the grief in her situation has become ingrained and overwhelming and we see her ask for people to use a different name for her, "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." Naomi in Hebrew means pleasant, Mara means bitter.

We may not change our name as a sign of grief, but we show it in other ways. There may be changed patterns of behaviour, a withdrawing from the world around us. It might be marked in a change of appearance and clothes. These are all external displays of a grief within.

It's here I want to be clear about something before we move on with the story. What we are about to look at is Naomi's story of how God brings joy back to her life. But it does not mean that her grief has vanished. Grief does not vanish. No amount of time, no amount of new joy, no amount of prayer with magically make grief vanish. Grief does not vanish. Grief changes us and we learn to live with grief. When we talk about the grief process, we talk about how grief becomes a part of life and the journey to it being a less painful part of life but it's a process that, in essence, doesn't end. As Naomi journey's through this story, the grief stays with her and she learns to live with her grief to the point where she is walking both with a reconciled grief and a new found joy that God has given her. And this is the point for anyone who has experienced grief, and by anyone I mean all of us, the goal, the hope is to reach that point where we walk with joy again as well as with our grief, but a grief that no longer overshadows the rest of life.

So, let's return to the story.

Naomi and Ruth return to Israel and the town of Bethlehem and Ruth does the one thing that she can to support Naomi, she goes gleaning. This basically involves going to the fields when crops are being harvested and picking up the left-over grain from the ground. When you look carefully at Old Testament Law, you see that there is a command that those bringing in the harvest shouldn't be too thorough and careful and should leave some of the crop behind so that the poor could come in after and find food to eat. Leviticus 19:9-10 "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God."

For whatever reason, she ends up in a field belonging to a man named Boaz. She's looking for a place that is safe (you suspect that not every field would have been safe) and in this field she finds that safety and more than that, she finds safety. Boaz spots her, inquires after who she is, tells the workers to leave her alone and says to Ruth these words, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled. I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

The loyalty of Ruth that we spoke about last week has been rewarded. And within Boaz we see compassion in action. Caring for others put before economic or personal gain. On an aside, I think this is a lesson this country needs to relearn.

But this compassion, this care is so crucial within grief. It's not a 'snap out of it' approach, it's a gentle watching brief, letting someone know that have been noticed, they are seen and a making sure that the person doesn't just fall between the cracks.

And this care and compassion brings hope to Naomi. 2:19-20 "Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said. "The Lord bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers."

This care and compassion, this new found hope awakens something within Naomi and there's this feeling she comes back to life herself because suddenly a light bulb goes on for her and she remembers her duty to her daughter-in-law. Her duty as a mother is to find a husband for her. As we looked at last week, Naomi wasn't in a position to provide another son for Ruth to marry but the closest male relative could be the answer... The closest male relative, the kinsman redeemer is the one that could provide further hope and a future.

Now, you'll have to read the whole of the book of Ruth to see that whole story with it's twists and turns and near disasters but in a nutshell, the great romance story of the Bible takes place and we see the hand of God guiding and leading. This is no mere chance story and nor is it just a tale of two

hearts coming together. It's a greater story of love and a demonstration of the love that God has for us.

Boaz, the kinsman redeemer stands for the great power of salvation and hope and love that God has for us. God doesn't abandon us in our dark moments but has provided a figure of hope in Jesus. Naomi finds joy again through the work and compassion of Boaz. At the end of the story we read this, "The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

And, of course, we remember that Jesus came from the house and line of David.

In those dark moments of life, where is it that we will find fresh hope and joy? There is one sure and certain place, one place where we are guaranteed to find mercy, grace and compassion and that place is with our kinsman-redeemer, Jesus.

So may you, in those dark times of grief, turn to him. May you know that he can hold you and all the grief you are bearing in the palm of his hand. And may you allow him to help you to live with that grief and be healed of its pain but may you also hear his voice speaking words of love, of joy and of hope so that in the fulness of time climb out of the dark depths of loss and ascend again the peaks of life and experience the happiness that can only be found in Jesus.