

RUTH 1:6-22

Grieving Well

People suffer differently. Common reactions include anger, resentment, bitterness, deep sorrow, depression, regret, isolation, revenge, and erratic behavior. The bible frequently explores these emotions with openness and honesty. In Ruth 1, we meet three women who have collectively lost their husbands (a crisis in the ancient world) and must mourn and move forward. The situation is particularly fretful for Naomi who lost the security of both her husband and her two sons. She has nowhere to turn. Poverty awaits her wherever she goes.

Naomi's first response was **isolation**. She releases her daughters-in-law encouraging them to remarry (vs. 9). In the ancient world, marriage provided security for all parties especially women. Orpah understandably agrees to the terms. Ruth, on the other hand, refuses to leave Naomi. She chooses, instead, to "cling" to her mother-in-law. The Hebrew word describes the bond of a husband and a wife (Genesis 2:24) and of "clinging" to the Law of God (Josh 22:5, cf. Josh 23:8).

Ruth's choice was a dangerous (and, therefore, a brave) one. Not only was she a childless widow, but she must also travel to Bethlehem as a foreigner. Nevertheless, she refused to leave Naomi. In truth, both women need each other especially as they grieve. One of the worse decisions to make while grieving is isolation. Though they have lost much, these two women at least have each other.

The second response to sorrow is **faith**. Despite Naomi insisting Ruth remarry in Moab, the latter insists on not only relocating to Israel but worshipping their God. Verses 16-17 are the most recognizable verses in Ruth and are often read at weddings to describe the love and commitment between the groom and bride. Strikingly, these words are used to describe the bond between a daughter-in-law with her mother-in-law.

Ruth is a woman of surprising faith. She is from Moab and, thus, a Gentile. Her expression of faith demonstrates a genuine conversion that has made her loyal to Naomi. Although there was famine in "the House of Bread," there was fruitfulness in the heart of Ruth.

Unlike countless others, Ruth never blamed God for her suffering. Though she wept, she did so in faith. The God of Naomi will be her God regardless of what suffering she must go through. Without knowing it, Ruth's faith and presence will be a lifesaver for Naomi. Although blind to it, God was providing for both women by simply keeping them together. Life is difficult enough, but isolation from others and from

God makes it impossible. What sustains these two women is their mutual love and faith. Although Naomi will not mourn well, Ruth will be an anchor for her.

The third response to grief shown in this narrative is **bitterness**. Those who fail to grieve well will inevitably land on this lonely, destructive island. As she packs her bags and prepares to return to Bethlehem, Naomi feels defeated and depressed. As they arrive, the entire town “was stirred because of them” (vs. 19). Anyone from a rural community knows exactly what this means. It may have been scandalous when they left, but, now, their suffering and return would have been the talk of the town.

Most significant is Naomi’s response. She asks to be named “Mara” instead of “Pleasant.” “Mara” means “bitter” (cf. the wilderness wanderings in Exodus 15:23). Throughout Scripture, name changes signify a new identity. Abram became Abraham while Jacob became Israel. Likewise, birth names either told a story of their birth or were prophetic. Elijah (“my God is Yahweh”), for example, was a perfect name for the prophet and his ministry. Similarly, the angel Gabriel insisted Christ be named Jesus which means “Yahweh Saves.”

Mara is among the few biblical characters who changes their own name. It is a change of identity. She is now angry, resentful, and depressed. All she sees is her pain and loss. One can imagine that returning to Bethlehem, though a practical solution, would have added to her suffering. Everywhere she went, she would see former playmates of her boys, friends of her late husband, and the home where they were born. Naomi succumbs to her grief. She becomes bitter. She becomes Mara.

To make matters worse, she accuses God of evil. English translations soften the language by having Naomi state that the Lord brought “calamity” (ESV), “misfortune” (NIV), or “affliction” (KJV, NKJV, NASB, CSB) to Naomi. The Hebrew word is consistently translated as “evil” or “wicked” or at least “to break,” “to shatter,” or “to injure.” For example, its first use in the Bible is in Genesis 19 when the men of Sodom try to rape Lot’s visitors. “I beg you,” Lot pleaded, “do not act so *wickedly*” (Genesis 19:7 emphasis mine).

Ruth attributed to God wicked acts. Her bitterness told her God has done her wrong. Unfortunately, this is a common response to suffering. We presume that God hates us, despises us, or enjoys torturing us. Many have fallen prey to this sort of thinking. But read the narrative closer. Not only has bread returned to Bethlehem just in time for Naomi’s return (vs. 6), but God has provided for her an incredible, loyal friend for her.

It is interesting that when she is greeted in Bethlehem, Mara never introduced her companion. Focused only on her pain she claims, “I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.” (vs. 21). However, if she could see through her pain, she would see God’s grace standing next to her. There is Ruth quietly holding the bags while Naomi launches into a diatribe of grief.

The good news of grace is that we are never alone. God’s love is sufficient amid our suffering. And when sorrow comes, we need not lose faith. He is there and he is not silent.