



Why did Naomi change her name to Mara?

Naomi in English means pleasant

Naomi is one of the main characters in the book of Ruth. Her story starts with a famine in her hometown of Bethlehem, which results in her family moving and settling in the neighbouring country of Moab. While they are there her husband, Elimelek dies. Naomi was now a widow, but she was not alone in her grief she still had the comfort of her two sons.

Both her sons were now adults and married Moabite women. Naomi must have felt as if she was moving into a time of hope for the future seeing her family extending. But all too soon, disaster, her two sons also die. In the brevity and matter of fact tone of the story it is sometimes easy to overlook the immense sense of loss and grief that Naomi must have experienced.

She had lost her husband and her sons, but also her security – she was now very vulnerable, and her future was fragile. What prospects were there for her and her two childless daughters-in-law?

A bitter time and the decision to move

Word filters over to Moab, that things have improved in Bethlehem, “that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them.” Naomi makes the decision to pack up and move back home. At the start of her journey she realises that there might be better prospects for her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and return to their families.

There is a very touching scene, were it is apparent that they all care deeply for each other. And although the thought of parting from her daughters-in-law is very distressing to Naomi, she is willing to put their best interests first. She spells out her desolate position, that she has nothing to offer them, and reveals what is in her heart.

“It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has turned against me!” Ruth 1:13

The outcome is that Orpah says goodbye and decides to stay in Moab, but Ruth will not leave Naomi and commits to stay with her. Their arrival in Bethlem, a journey which would take about a week, is the news of the day in the small town. People recognise and remember Naomi, but when they greet her, she no longer wants to be known as ‘Naomi.’

'Mara' translated into English means bitter!

In many cultures, names have great significance, and we can see that in scripture. Names were a declaration, full of hope and promise. Often in a Bible story the name of a person is a mini story. Will they fulfil the promise of their name? Does their name summarise their story and experience? Do they rebel and turn away and be the antithesis of their name?

Naomi wants everyone to know her heartache and suggests that from now on she should be called Mara, because her life has become very bitter! The name Marah in the Bible refers to a place of failed expectations, where there was a well of water in the desert, but the water was bitter and undrinkable.

What does Marah mean in the Bible?

The first mention of Marah in the Bible comes in the book of Exodus, chapter fifteen. It occurs after the Israelites had escaped from slavery in Egypt. They had crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, and from there Moses led the Israelites into the Desert of Shur.

After a great victory and celebration of God's deliverance, Israel were straight into a wilderness experience. Isn't life often like that? Just when we think that everything is going well, some problem or issue will confront us.

They travelled for three days, without finding any fresh water. What they had brought with them, was used up. The situation was becoming serious. The human body quickly dehydrates, for water is essential for our survival.

FACT – A person can survive about three days in the desert without water.

A place named Marah – meaning bitter

They arrive at Marah – a place where there was water. But it was undrinkable! It was bitter to taste, and Marah translated into English means bitter. The well of water should have been lifesaving, sustaining and satisfying, but proved to be none of those things. The water tasted bitter, but more than that, the people were also left with a feeling of 'bitterness.'

Failed expectations are difficult to deal with. When we expect something good, but we are 'let down' and we do not receive what we were expecting. Disappointment, a sense of injustice, of being unfairly treated, can all rise to the surface. Grumbling, complaining, and looking for someone to blame, are easy responses.

The children of Israel responded in that exact way – and blamed Moses. Of course as their leader they could see and relate to Moses, but on a spiritual level, they were grumbling and complaining about God's lack of care and provision! It was here at Marah, that God tested the people for the first time – to reveal what was in their hearts. God showed Moses a certain tree, and when he threw it into the water, the water became fit to drink. The miracle working God, who had delivered His people from slavery, demonstrated once again that He was able to bring healing and provide for their needs.

And then from there God led them to the oasis of Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, a place of refreshing and renewal.

A Marah Experience

Our Marah is unlikely to be a failed well of water. But we still experience those times of disappointment, and failed expectations – just as Naomi did. Anger and resentment can rise when we feel we have been treated unfairly and bitterness comes with a sense of helplessness. When we feel that the situation we are in, is not of our making, and it is not our 'fault.' And more than that, there is nothing that we can do to change the situation. We may even feel angry with God.

God has delivered us from the bondage of sin, a certain tree became the means of our forgiveness, by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. God made a way for our broken relationship with Him to be healed and restored, that we might receive life. He is able to provide for all our needs, the call for God's people to place their trust in Him has not changed. God wants to lead us from our place of 'bitterness,' a time of trial and testing, to Elim, a place of spiritual refreshing!

A hint that God is at work

At the end of the first chapter of Ruth, there is a glimmer of hope for the future. Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem at the beginning of harvest time – the season of blessing. Naomi has returned empty and desolate; in her grief she is bitter and angry with God. Her story, however, is not over, there is a possibility of being renewed and filled once again.

God redeems!

The heart of the gospel message is that God redeems, no matter how awful or dreadful the circumstance, ultimately there is redemption. This life is not all that there is – we have an eternal hope in Jesus! We can hold on to that hope, that no matter how grievous our situation may be, Jesus came to bring beauty instead of ashes, and the oil of joy in place of mourning. A promise that He will give us a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. Jesus changes everything!

Naomi's story moves forward into a brighter future, her daughter-law Ruth marries Boaz, a kinsman redeemer, and they have a son. The book ends with Naomi, caring for her Grandson, secure in her own home, in a pleasant place, provided for and loved by Ruth and Boaz. And, more than that, the book ends with a genealogy, the evidence of God weaving a bigger picture. Boaz was the father of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, the father of David, the line of the Messiah, Jesus....

More than Naomi had ever envisaged possible!

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." 2 Corinthians 1:3-4