

# Don't Call Me Na'omi, Call Me Marah

## 1: 19-22

**DIG:** Why do you think the whole town was stirred by Na'omi's return? How do you think Ruth felt when she wasn't introduced to the women who welcomed Na'omi? Both Ruth, in verses 16-17, and Na'omi, in verses 20-21, confess God's sovereign control of events, each in her own way. What truth does each convey to ADONAI? Of themselves? Of their success in coping with stress? Which confession do you think have startled the original reader most? How could Na'omi have gotten rid of her bitterness?

**REFLECT:** What happens to believers when they concentrate more on themselves and their problems than on ADONAI? Who do you want beside you when you go through something difficult? What experiences have you had in starting over as Ruth and Na'omi did? How does someone who is bitter treat others? What are some situations (whether present or past) that have left you feeling bitter? How did you deal with it?

So the two women went on until they came to Beit-Lechem, a journey of about seventy-five miles (1:19a CJB). This was not an easy trip. They traveled from the Moabite highlands to the Jordan Valley, a descent of 4,500 feet. Then they would have climbed to Beit-Lechem, an ascent of 3,750 feet, walking through the wilderness of Judah.<sup>36</sup>

While their husbands were out in the fields, the women of Beit-Lechem saw the pair approaching. The whole town was stirred and ran out to greet them. They exclaimed, "Can this be Na'omi" (1:19b CJB)? The fact that so many women remembered her and were so glad to see her suggests that she had once been a gregarious soul, beloved by all who knew her. The word stirred (Hebrew: *hwn*), is the same form of the verb that expresses the excitement in the Israelite camp when the ark of the Covenant was brought in (First Samuel 4:5), and the rejoicing at Solomon's anointing that dismayed Adonijah (First Kings 1:45).

Na'omi means pleasant, and in an earlier time it must have been a perfect description of her. The fact that so many women remembered her and were so glad to see her suggests that she had once been a gregarious soul, loved by all who knew her. But now her life was colored with bitterness. "Don't call me Na'omi [pleasant]," she answered them, "call me Marah [bitter], because Shaddai (see Ag - The Meaning of Shaddai) has made my life very bitter (1:20). This was not the same Na'omi whom they had known a decade before. The years in Mo'av had taken their toll on Na'omi's appearance and personality. Living in "the world" had made her bitter . . . not better.

Once again, **Na'omi** does not believe in mere chance, but in divine providence. **Her** grief and depression that had earlier expressed itself toward **God (1:13)** continued. **I went out full**, with a husband and two sons, **and ADONAI has brought me back (shuwb) empty-handed** (in the emphatic position), as if say, "With absolutely nothing." Really **Na'omi**? Nothing? What did that make **Ruth**? Less than nothing? **Was** that a nothing standing right beside you? **She** had given up everything for you, and now **she** was nothing! **The Moabites** certainly didn't rate very high in **Na'omi's** estimation at this point.

It is equally striking that when **the women of Beit-Lechem** welcomed **Na'omi** home, **they** didn't even lower **themselves** to notice **Ruth** standing there. The narrator seems to go out of his way to point out **their** deliberate omission: **So the two women went on until they came to Beit-Lechem. And when they came to Beit-Lechem the whole town was stirred because of them.** In other words, everyone in **Beit-Lechem** could see that there were two women standing there. But instead of asking the obvious question, "Who is this with you?" the townspeople could only say: **Can this be Na'omi?** neatly sidestepping the embarrassing question about who this appendage might be. Awkward! It spoke volumes that **Na'omi** didn't mention **Ruth** at all, either being self-absorbed or embarrassed.

It is also notable that **Na'omi** wasn't broken and repentant over **her Moabite** wilderness experience. **She** may have been returning physically to **the Land**, but **she** wasn't returning to **ADONAI** with a **broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17)**. No, **bitter** was the perfect name for **her** at that time. It was a name with a history, a history of **God's** people rebelling at **His** perceived lack of provision for their needs. It was at **Mara** in the desert on the way out of Egypt that the children of **Isra'el** grumbled against **YHVH** because they couldn't drink the water because it was very **bitter** (see the commentary on **Exodus Cn - When They Came to Marah the Water was Bitter**). This was only a few days after **the LORD** had parted the Sea of Reeds and delivered them from Pharaoh's army, but it all meant nothing to them in the face of their very real thirst.

Like **her** ancestors, **Na'omi's** heart was angry with **God** for the way **her** life was turning out. **She** was feeling the pain of life in the wilderness and felt the judgments that had come **her** way were all **God's** fault. **YHVH** had testified against **her (1:21)**; that is, **He** had called **her** to account at the bar of **his** courtroom. And at this point **she** wouldn't even acknowledge **her** own responsibility to choosing to leave **the Promised Land** in the first place. The grass seemed greener on the other side of the fence in **Mo'av**, but when **she** got there **her** life had actually turned into a desert experience. The prodigal daughter was back, but it was only because **she** didn't see any prospect of survival among the pigs in the far country.<sup>37</sup>

Why call me Na'omi? Pleasant? Ha! Nothing could be further from the truth. **ADONAI** has testified against me by the afflictions **He** has placed upon her, **Shaddai** has afflicted me (1:21 CJB). **She** is helpless in the face of **God's** almighty power, **she** was sure all **her** problems were **God's** fault. **Her** return home had only intensified the depth of **her** grief. **She** saw nothing ahead but the loneliness, abandonment and helplessness of widowhood.<sup>38</sup> **Na'omi's** bitter outburst overwhelms the eloquent pledge of commitment by to **Na'omi** and **her God** by **Ruth**. Viewed side-by-side, there is no doubt that the younger foreigner cuts a more impressively noble figure. At this point, the reader is repulsed by **Na'omi** and drawn to **her Moabite daughter-in-law**.<sup>39</sup>

**The narrator's summary:** So **Na'omi** returned (**shuwb**) from the land of **Mo'av** accompanied by **Ruth** the **Moabite**, **her daughter-in-law**. Then a ray of hope for **Na'omi**, as well as **Ruth**. They arrived in **Beit-Lechem** as the **barley** harvest was beginning around the month of **April** (1:22). **Beit-Lechem** (Hebrew: *house of bread*) had finally lived up to **her** name. This verse provides a transition toward hope for **Na'omi**, as well as **Ruth** at the end of a rather tragic chapter. **ADONAI** was **not her** enemy but would, through **His** sovereign will, act with favor toward both widows. Since **barley** is the first crop to be **harvested** each year, the timing of **their** arrival meant that **Na'omi** and **Ruth** could get settled at a time when food would be relatively plentiful. This sets the stage for the rest of the book.<sup>40</sup>

As Iain Duguid discusses in his commentary on **Ruth**, like **Na'omi**, we naturally tend to lack a fundamental concern for **the Moabites** all around us. **Na'omi**, it appears, had little concern for the spiritual condition of **her Moabite daughters-in-law**. **She** had a good relationship with **them** and wished **them** well in the new lives back in **Mo'av**. Presumably **they** had been good wives for **her** sons, keeping **them** fed and warm and generally happy. **Na'omi's** relationship with **them** was even warm on a surface level. But underneath **she** had no deep concern for **their** souls.

Perhaps **Na'omi** simply assumed that **Orpah** and **Ruth** wouldn't be interested in **Isra'el's God**. They were **Moabites**, after all; **they** had **their** own god and **she** had **hers**. They had **Chemosh** and **she** had **ADONAI**. Who was **she** to impose **her** own understanding of **God** on **her** neighbors? **They** seemed to be good morale people, and **she** was living in a pluralistic society where everyone attended the temple of the deity of one's own choice. The vision of reaching out to **her** neighbors and incorporating them into the covenant community was lost to **her**, even when the opportunity presented itself.

**She** at least had some excuse for **her** reluctance. Although the mandate to be a blessing to all the *Gentile* nations had been given to Abraham, in the days of the days of the judges, that mandate was rather fuzzy. Few were looking for opportunities to make converts to the covenant community from those around them. But in the light of **Matthew 28:19**, where **Jesus** told us to **go and make disciples of all the nations**, what is our excuse? Who are **the Moabites** we see day after day, the people all around us who we so quickly assume are not going to be interested in the Gospel? Perhaps if we sought to testify to them of **God's** goodness to us in **Yeshua Messiah**, we might discover more interest in the Good News than we ever imagined. Our problem is that all too often we have as little real care for our friends and neighbors as **Na'omi** had for **hers**.

Part of **Na'omi's** difficulty, of course, was that **she** wasn't a very good member of the covenant community **herself**. There was no distinctive holiness about **her**; on the contrary, **she herself** was sinfully on the run from **the Land** of obedience. Those who are consciously living a life of disobedience to **YHVH** are not typically eager to defend and explain their faith to others! Yet isn't it striking (and encouraging to us all) that even though at that moment **she** wasn't looking out for **Ruth's** spiritual interests, or even looking for **Ha'Shem herself**; nevertheless, **ADONAI** was still able to use **her**, in spite of **her** attitude, as a means to draw **Ruth** to **Himself**? Fortunately, **God's** mission to rescue sinners is not limited by our flaws, failing, and foibles! **The LORD** will call to **Himself** those whom **He** chooses, sometimes through the most bizarre messengers and unlikely combinations of circumstances. It is **His** work from beginning to end. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).**<sup>41</sup>