

Mother's Day

An Expository Study From The Book Of Ruth

Naomi: A Model Worth Modeling

Select Verses From Ruth

Written By

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For this Mother's Day, I'd like to turn your attention to one of the greatest and most effective mothers in Scripture. Her name is Naomi and her story is told in the short, often overlooked book of Ruth, which is sandwiched in between the books of Judges and 1 Samuel.

Indeed, the main character in the book of Ruth is none other than Ruth; however, Naomi is another leading character in the interesting plot, and by making a few observations regarding her life, each of you mothers here today can glean a few timeless principles which can help fashion you into the mother the Lord would have you to be.

After studying the book of Ruth this week, I've unearthed four key characteristics about Naomi; characteristics which if applied to your life will assure that you as a mother and mother-in-law will be everything it was designed to be. To enhance our understanding of these four points, we must first take a brief look at the background of this powerful little book.

Although the book of Ruth follows the book of Judges in your Bibles, chronologically it took place sometime during the first half of the period of the Judges. What this means is you can place the book somewhere in the opening chapters of Judges. How do we know the book was written during this period? The opening verse tells us:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

To better understand and appreciate the life of Naomi, we must seek to step back into the times in which she lived. What were the times of the judges like?

Judges 21:25 is really a snapshot of this 350 year period. Sadly and truthfully it reads:

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

Sounds like our day, doesn't it? Nobody truly cared about moral or spiritual absolutes, rather they were totally concerned with their rights. The result of this moral relativity was, as you can well guess, complete social and spiritual chaos. With no moral magnetic north, the compass of Israel spun wildly out of control. Sin was in and righteousness was out.

Thumbing through the book of Judges, several sins grab your attention ... sins like Israel's failure to completely rid the land of their polytheistic neighbors (Judges 1), idol worship (Judges 2:12), spiritual fickleness with folks only calling on God when they needed him, family feuds (Judges 9:1-6), adultery (Judges 16), homosexuality (Judges 19:22-23), wanton and willful rape of

innocent women (Judges 19:25), murder of the innocents (Judges 19:27), and internal strife between tribal clans (Judges 20). Sadly, our declining, decadent, morally and spiritually rudderless country reflects these godless traits all too well.

The days in Israel during the Judges were, indeed, morally dark, and as time progressed you see from a detailed study of the book of Judges how the darkness grew even deeper. Such is the nature of sin. It always leads to greater sin. It always leads to greater darkness. It always leads to greater bondage. It always leads to further personal and societal chaos.

The short, heart-warming story of the book of Ruth is set against this morally black and ominous backdrop. Why is it here? To show us first that God always has His righteous lights, His faithful people who will stand as a beacon of hope to those miserably shackled to the chain of sin. Naomi was one of those points of light in the ever-increasing darkness. From her life we learn the following principles about being a godly mother and mother-in-law ...

Naomi: A Model Worth Modeling

Naomi Responded To Trials With Total Honesty

According to verse one, Naomi's little, tight-knit, happy family was eventually forced to leave their homeland, Israel, and move to another country all because of famine, famine which was probably brought about by the Lord's judgment upon the entrenched sin of his people.

¹ Once in the time of the judges there was a famine in the land; so a man from Bethlehem of Judah departed with his wife and two sons to reside on the plateau of Moab. ² The man was named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and his sons Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah. Sometime after their arrival on the Moabite plateau ... (Ruth 1).

Hold it right there, please.

Ever been in a forced move? Ever had to leave a place you loved because life circumstances went south on you? If you've ever been in this predicament, then you'll identify with the emotions which must have rushed through her soul. How difficult it must have been to part with your home, your land, your life-long friends, your relatives. How difficult it must have been to move to a place where you didn't know anybody and nobody knew you. How tough to live in a country which probably didn't even speak your dialect. How lonely. Yet they went because they had to preserve their family unit at all costs. Moving was their only option, so they left.

In their leaving, however, let us never forget God was working behind the complex, convoluted, and emotionally charged circumstances to accomplish His greater will and sovereign plan for all mankind. Amazing. Be encouraged if you are a Naomi today. You've been uprooted. You've left friends and family behind to come here. You're in a land where they don't speak your lingo. Yes, adversity and trial has come your way, but God is always working in the heat of the flame to forge your faith and to move you to accomplish great things for His kingdom. As the Scripture reminds us ...

¹⁰ At the beginning I foretell the outcome; in advance, things not yet done. I say that my plan shall stand, I accomplish my every purpose (Isaiah 46).

³² All who live on the earth are counted as nothing; he does as he pleases with the powers of heaven as well as with those who live on the earth. There is no one who can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" (Daniel 4).

God is sovereignly in control of our lives. Naomi was one who knew, believed and acted upon this truth without equivocation. She knew God had an over-arching, good, loving plan for her life, and she knew that no occurrence, be it good or bad, could possibly thwart that divine purpose; therefore, she moved to that foreign land due east of Bethlehem.

Being people who trusted God, these folks packed up their old cart, kissed their loved ones and friends good bye, and rode out of Bethlehem, taking wistful glimpses of the old homestead as they watched it fade from view. And don't think for a minute this was an easy journey, physically speaking. Leaving the rolling, green, fruitful hills of Bethlehem, they quickly encountered tough, trying terrain, especially if they went south toward Kadesh-Barnea before they skirted the Judean hills on their trek eastward. I've been in this area several times, and it can be highly challenging and foreboding, and Moab was no Garden of Eden either.

Here are some pictures I took a few years ago as we drove through what was once ancient Moab. Want to travel through here on a donkey with a cart? Want to move here? I think the point needs to be stated: When

God moves you from one tough environment to another, it may be challenging in other ways; however, let us not ever forget He will lead, guide, and provide for you despite how arid the conditions are in the new location. Naomi didn't just know this spiritual premise about God. She believed it. Do you?





I know the Scripture is silent about what this event did to Naomi personally and spiritually, but don't you know it made an indelible impression on her? Don't you know she still wept many a night? Yet we see in verse two that she picked up the pieces of her life and sought to make a new home for her family. She sought to raise her two sons to the best of her ability. She was determined to learn from this time of testing ... yet she didn't know how hot the

furnace was going to get.

Not long after arriving in this strange country, her husband Elimelech, whose name means “My God is King,” suddenly died.¹ We don't know if he had a heart attack, a stroke, or what. We only know he died. Imagine how lonely this godly woman must have felt. Imagine how fearful you would have been in a strange country with two sons, no husband and no source of income. God certainly tightened the vice on this godly mother ... and it was all for a good and holy reason as we shall see.

Moving to a foreign land and losing her beloved husband were not her only life trials. We also catch a glimpse of additional adversity in her life she had with her boys. Looking at the names of her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion is most enlightening. In English these names mean nothing to you, but in Hebrew they are highly significant. Mahlon means “to be sick” and Chilion means “to pine or waste away.”² Why would any parent give their children these names? Because the Jews sought to name their children according to their character or according to what the child was physically like. From these names we can safely conclude that Naomi's sons were sickly and weak.

Who knows what they had? It could have been anything, but it was a sickness from birth that caused the parents to give these unusual names to their children. Obviously, the boys grew up and had lives because they got married, yet don't you know there were days, maybe years where godly Naomi had to put in extra time to care for these two special children? Naomi knew, more than most mothers, what health for your child meant. She also knew how to bear up in the difficult days of rearing two sickly sons. Yet, we never read one verse saying Naomi questioned God about the lot of her sons, rather we only see her faithfulness.

It must have been a joyous day when both of her sons had the opportunity, despite their physical limitations, to marry.

¹ The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon, 45. אֱלִימֶלֶךְ S⁴⁵⁸ GK⁴⁹⁷ (אֱלִימֶלֶךְ Ru 2:1) **n.pr.m.** (God is king, cf. אֱלֹהֵי מֶלֶךְ) husband of Naomi Ru 1:2, 3; 2:3; 4:3, 9.¹

² Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles. *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003): 464, 400, (“sick,” from the word מָחַל and the termination ון), [Mahlon], pr.n. m. Ruth 1:2, 4, 9 ... פְּלִיּוֹן const. פְּלִיּוֹן m.—(1) *destruction, consumption*, Isa. 10:22 ... (2) *pinning, wasting away*. פִּינֵי עֵינָי pining of the eyes, i.e. languishing itself, Deu. 28:65. See מָחַל No. 3. פְּלִיּוֹן (“wasting away”), [Chilion], pr.n. m. Ruth 1:2; 4:9.²

It must have been a sad day, however, when both sons unfortunately died (v. 4) ten years into their land of Moab tour. Dashed were the hopes of security. Gone were the dreams of grandchildren. Vanished were the desires of family ties. Naomi must have hit rock bottom, wouldn't you agree?

We get a peek at her heart and how she felt about the mounting trials in 1:19-22 where she told her friends back in Bethlehem after she returned there:

Don't call me Naomi, 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" (Ruth 1:20-21).

Mara. In Hebrew is means "bitter."³ I appreciate those words because they were painfully true. She didn't try and hide her feelings. She didn't try and appear like she had her spiritual act together. She was completely honest, transparent, and authentic with her spiritual feelings. I don't know about you, but I firmly believe this is a great trait for any godly woman to possess ... the ability to look at trials with honesty, not hatred, but with total honesty. God often allows godly women to pass through difficult tests, tests which you might not understand at the time, to get you to another place in your life where He can use you in a fantastic way. My counsel to you mothers in situations is this: *Be open with how you feel about your life's circumstances. Don't be afraid to share those inner hurts, for this is where healing begins.*

What are your hurts today, mom ... mother-in-law? Perhaps it is a difficult child, or a wayward child, or a complex, demanding husband, or a sick family member. Whatever your tragedy is remember to face it head-on like Naomi with total honesty. Don't be afraid to wrestle with what God is doing in your life, for He is most certainly working ...as we will see from Naomi's life ... to use these events not just to hone you into His holy image, but to enable you to ultimately impact others in your family for Him.

A quote I read the other day applies to Naomi, and just perhaps it will apply to you: "Little furnaces are for little faith. The greatest compliment God can pay us is to heat the furnace to the utmost." Are you in a hot furnace right now? Thank the Lord for it, because it demonstrates his love for you and shows you unequivocally his sovereign hand in your life and family.

A second wonderful thing we learn about Naomi is this...

³ The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon, 600: מַר S⁴⁷⁵¹, 4752 TWOT^{1248a}, 1249a GK⁵²⁵³, 5254 **adj.** and **subst.** bitter, bitterness;—abs. מַר Pr 27:7 +, הַמַּר Hb 1:6, מַר שׁ 64:4 +; cstr. מַר 1 S 22:2 +; f. מַרָּה Gn 27:34 +, מַרָּה Ru 1:20; cstr. מַרָּת 1 S 1:10; mpl. מַרִּים Ex 15:23 +; cstr. מַרִּי Ju 18:25 Pr 31:6;—*bitter*: **1.** lit., of water Ex 15:23 (J); food Pr 27:7 (opp. מְתוּק); wormwood (לְעֵנָה) Pr 5:4 (in sim. of end of harlot, cf. Ec 7:26 infr.); as subst. pl., of physical pain, result of curse לְמַרִּים Nu 5:24, 27, whence מֵי הַמַּרִּים v 18 (cf. Di) v 19, 23, 24; of harmful result of ruthless fighting 2 S 2:26; of wickedness Je 2:19; 4:18;=*injurious, hurtful* Is 5:20⁰ (opp. מְתוּק). **2.** fig., a. of cry (צַעֲקָה, צִעֲקָה) Gn 27:34 (J), Est 4:1; מַרָּה Ez 27:31 (del. Co); מַרָּה שׁ 64:4; as adv. (cry, weep) *bitterly* Ez 27:30 (מַרָּה), Zp 1:14 Is 33:7 (both מַר). **b.** of feeling, temper, especially c. מַרִּים מַרִּים מַרִּים מַרִּים Ju 18:25 *men fierce* (GFM *acid*) of temper, so 2 S 17:8 (like a bear robbed of whelps); מַרָּה Hb 1:6 *the fierce nation*; מַרָּה-מַרָּה=discontented 1 S 22:2; מַרִּים מַרִּים=the bitterly wretched Jb 3:20 Pr 31:6, so מַרָּת 1 S 1:10; cf. מַר יום מַר Am 8:10; as subst. abstr. מַרָּה-מַרָּה bitterness of soul Is 38:15 Ez 27:31 (del. Co), Jb 7:11; 10:1=מַרָּה-מַרָּה 21:25; cf. מַרָּה Ru 1:20 (name given to Naomi by herself); מַרָּה-מַרָּה 1 S 15:32 *the bitterness of death*; מַרָּה-מַרָּה Ec 7:26 (metaph. of harlot); in Ez 3:14 *I went bitterly*, del. מַר Co—Is 38:17 v. מַרָּה.³

She Loved Unconditionally

Concerning love, no greater words have been penned than those of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a).

Naomi understood what unconditional love was all about, and this is what made her such a great mother and mother-in-law. This lofty type of love is evidenced in her acceptance of her sons two Moabite wives: Orpah and Ruth.

She had every reason as an Israelite not to like or approve of these women. Why? The Moabites had historically opposed the Israelites when they attempted to enter the Promised Land after spending 40 arduous and unfruitful nomadic years walking in the sands of the Sinai (Numbers 22-25). Regarding the unfriendly actions of the Moabites, Moses pronounced this stinging curse:

No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you" (Deuteronomy 23:3-4).

Further, the Moabites were idolaters who worshipped the astral deity called Chemosh.

So, historically, spiritually, and culturally Naomi had every reason to resent these women her sons married. Quite readily she could have told both Mahlon and Chilion, "If you choose to marry these women, your father and I won't talk to you anymore, you won't be allowed in our home, and we will write you out of our wills." But she didn't. Instead, she looked past their spiritual mis-steps and loved unconditionally. Here's how the inspired author recounts what transpired after her two boys died:

⁷ She and her two daughters-in-law left the place where they had been living. Then as they were on the road back to the land of Judah, ⁸ ¹ Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's house! May the LORD be kind to you as you were to the departed and to me! ⁹ May the LORD grant each of you a husband and a home in which you will find rest." She kissed them good-bye, but they wept with loud sobs, ¹⁰ and told her they would return with her to her people. ¹¹ ¹ "Go back, my daughters!" said Naomi. "Why should you come with me? Have I other sons in my womb who may become your husbands? ¹² Go back, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to marry again. And even if I could offer any hopes, or if tonight I had a husband or had borne sons, ¹³ would you then wait and deprive yourselves of husbands until those sons grew up? No, my daughters! my lot is too bitter for you, because the LORD has extended his hand

against me." ¹⁴ Again they sobbed aloud and wept; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth stayed with her (Ruth 1).

See love in action? Do you hear words of love coming from Naomi's mouth?

What about you? Do you model Naomi's godly demeanor to what might be sub-par, maybe even sinful choices and after-effects of your children? Is Naomi a picture of you, mom? Sure it's easy to love your children unconditionally now when they are little. But what will happen if they grow up and make choices you don't agree with? How will you react (or how have you reacted) when the child you love spiritually trips and falls? Piety would say, "I will not tolerate this!" And, yes, there is room for the child to be confronted if they are making sinful or unwise decisions. However, should they wave off your counsel and choose to pursue their own mis-guided plans, then, love says, "I will forgive and I will seek to build a bridge over this chasm for the cause of Christ."

Naomi was a great mother and mother-in-law first because she was honest in her walk with God, and second because she loved people in her family with absolutely no strings attached. A third magnificent thing we learn about this great woman is that...

She Led Ruth To A Saving Knowledge Of God.

When Naomi made up her mind to return to Bethlehem in Judah once the famine was over, Ruth, who loved her mother-in-law, clung to her tunic and cried:

¹⁴ Again they sobbed aloud and wept; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth stayed with her. ¹⁵ "See now!" she said, "your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her god. Go back after your sister-in-law!" ¹⁶ ¹ But Ruth said, "Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! for wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Wherever you die I will die, and there be buried. May the LORD do so and so to me, and more besides, if aught but death separates me from you!" (Ruth 1).

Why did Ruth love Naomi so? Scripture doesn't tell us, so we are left to fill in the gaps with shreds of evidence. One clue, I think, comes from Naomi's name. In Hebrew it means "pleasant." Could it be she was the type of person you feel drawn to because love just flowed from her? Some folks are like porcupines who needle you, others are like wrecking balls that crash against you when you're near them, some are like well-fortified fortress you can never penetrate, while others are gifted at making you feel special, at listening to you, at giving you good advice, at showing you that you're a person of great worth. I think Naomi was this kind of person ... and Ruth loved her for it.

Further, Naomi's unconditional love for the wicked Moabitess caused love to well up in the life of this particular Moabitess. Naomi led Ruth to the Master simply by her loving nature. Her life easily reflected the words of Jesus in His first sermon:

¹⁶ Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father (Matthew 5).

She shone, alright, in a culture most Jews would have found repulsive. This, my friend, is the mark of a godly woman and mother. Her godly demeanor, her selfless love, coupled with her wise counsel gently led the heart-broken young widow named, Ruth, to embrace the true and living God.

In light of this I must ask you as a mother and mother-in-law: Is this a characteristic you possess? Does your life reflect the holiness of God despite your less than ideal circumstances? Does your gentle, godly demeanor catch the attention of those closest to you? Do your children see it? Does your husband? Do your cousins? Does your special nephew?

Naomi could have let bitterness captivate her life, and I think the result would have been one less person in the kingdom. She, however, continued to live for God on a daily basis no matter what. This unique and spiritually mature life approach eventually resulted in the conversion of her daughter-in-law to the Lord. May you have the same spiritual stamina and drive as a mother and mother-in-law in your family.

The final things I want to point you to in the life of Naomi is this...

She Consistently Gave Ruth Sound Counsel.

In the busy world of today's mothers, regardless of their age, there's a temptation to isolate yourself from others and to let them fend for themselves as they make their earthly pilgrimage. Naomi wasn't like this. She had trained herself to develop those whom God had entrusted to her. Although Ruth wasn't her flesh and blood daughter, she was Naomi's spiritual daughter, and she was faithful to point her in the right direction with her life. This point is demonstrated, of course, with Ruth's encounter with Boaz.

The majority of the book is concerned with this romantic tale, and in light of our time this morning we won't be able to go into all the historical details. Hence, let us focus our attention upon some salient points.

Ruth, not wanting her mother-in-law to starve, went out and started gleaning in a field of one Boaz, being careful to pick up what the harvesters left behind (Ruth 2:3). Chapter 2 verse three is most interesting when it states:

So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz who was from the clan of Elimelech.

This was no chance meeting, but part of God's sovereign plan. There was a divine reason why Naomi's family had been forced to leave Bethlehem years earlier, why her sons had married Moabite women, why Ruth had followed Naomi to Bethlehem, and why she was gleaning in this particular field. God providentially guided Ruth to meet Boaz to accomplish His greater redemptive purposes for mankind.

The statement that Boaz was from the clan of Elimelech is most instructive, for it points us back to the Mosaic law concerning what family members were responsible to do in the event that a husband died. Moses commanded in Deuteronomy 25:5-6:

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first sons she bears

shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

Continuance of a family name was extremely important in Israel, therefore, Boaz had a responsibility to the family of his brother Elimelech. Naomi knew this and she wisely acted up on it.

Naomi wisely steered Ruth toward Boaz, based on the teaching of God's Law as it pertained in these situations. Sure she was playing a match maker, but she was also being faithful to God's Word, and in making sure her beloved daughter-in-law married a godly man.

Hence we aren't surprised to witness in Ruth 2:17-23 Naomi pointing Ruth to Boaz.

¹⁷ She gleaned in the field until evening, and when she beat out what she had gleaned it came to about an ephah of barley, ¹⁸ which she took into the city and showed to her mother-in-law. Next she brought out and gave her what she had left over from lunch. ¹⁹ So her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you go to work? May he who took notice of you be blessed!" Then she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked. "The man at whose place I worked today is named Boaz," she said. ²⁰ ¹ "May he be blessed by the LORD, who is ever merciful to the living and to the dead," Naomi exclaimed to her daughter-in-law; and she continued, "He is a relative of ours, one of our next of kin."

Being a godly woman, Naomi was always concerned with giving sound and biblical direction to those in her family and under her care. The result of her impact on the life of this Moabites, a name which by the way keeps cropping up in the book to underscore her pagan background, is that Ruth and Boaz, two young people in love, eventually fell and love and were married.

But the story doesn't end here either, for the book closes with a most intriguing genealogical list. Why close with one of these and with the couple heading off into a beautiful sunset? Because the Lord wanted to demonstrate for all time the impact a life of a godly mother and mother-in-law can have upon a family, society, and the world.

So at the end of the book we read:

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enable her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son ... And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David (Ruth 4).

Wow!!! What a conclusion to a life filled with tragedy. Think about this for a moment will you mothers. The birth of David, the great forerunner of the Messiah, and the eventual birth of that Messiah, would not have been possible if it weren't for one woman, one mother-in-law with spiritual depth who remained true to God despite the obstacles hurled at her.

Naomi was a great woman because she continued to remain faithful to God even though she was tried by the fires of affliction. She was also a great woman because she knew how to love people regardless of who they were or what they had done, and because she was a bearer of the gospel. Her greatness is also seen in her godly counsel to the young woman God had entrusted to her.

Isn't it interesting how God took of the twisted events of her faithful life and brought them to such a powerful conclusion? Isn't that just like the Lord to work in your life in this fashion?

Let me be specific right now and ask you: What is your land of Moab today, mom? Who is your Mahlon and Chilion? Who is your Moabitess? Learn today that these two precious truths:

- Don't ever forget that God is sovereignly working in your life for His good purpose.
- Stay committed to impacting your family for Him, for who knows who God will raise up in your descendants. Maybe it will be another David!