

Ruth 1:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.

Analysis

Naomi's response reveals her spiritual state: "**Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.**" She rejects her given name "Naomi" (Na'omi, נָעֹמִי, "pleasant/lovely") and requests instead "Mara" (Mara, מָרָא, "bitter"). This name change expresses her perception that God has transformed her life from pleasant to bitter. The wordplay is deliberate—her name no longer fits her experience.

Significantly, Naomi attributes her suffering to "the Almighty" (Shaddai, שָׁדַי), a divine name emphasizing God's power and sovereign control. This title appears frequently in Job, another biblical book wrestling with suffering's theological meaning. By using "Shaddai" rather than the covenant name "Yahweh," Naomi may be emphasizing God's overwhelming power that has crushed her, or simply using the traditional patriarchal name for God that expresses His absolute sovereignty.

The phrase "dealt very bitterly" translates hemar li Shaddai me'od (הָמָר לִי שָׁדַי מְאֹד), literally "has made very bitter to me the Almighty." The causative form of marar (מָרָר, to be bitter) indicates God actively caused her bitterness. Naomi doesn't see her suffering as random tragedy but as divine action. While her theology is incomplete (she fails to see God's redemptive purposes already working through Ruth), her honesty about feeling that God has dealt harshly with her represents authentic lament found throughout Psalms and biblical prayer.

Historical Context

Name changes in biblical narrative often signal identity transformation—Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Saul to Paul. Naomi's request for name change reflects ancient Near Eastern understanding that names express identity and destiny. By requesting "Mara," she declares that her identity has been fundamentally altered by suffering—she is no longer the pleasant woman who left but a bitter widow who returns empty.

The use of "Shaddai" (Almighty) connects Naomi's experience to patriarchal narratives where this divine name appears (Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3). God introduced Himself as "El Shaddai" to Abraham, emphasizing His power to fulfill promises despite impossible circumstances. Ironically, Naomi invokes this name while feeling that God has failed her, yet the same Almighty power that seemed to destroy her family will restore her line through Ruth's child.

The community's response to Naomi's suffering illustrates ancient Middle Eastern communal grieving practices. Her tragedy would have been shared by the entire village through ritual mourning and practical support. The question "Is this Naomi?" wasn't cruel incredulity but shocked compassion at how drastically suffering had changed her. Her altered appearance testified to genuine grief's physical and emotional toll.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. What does Naomi's honest expression of bitterness teach about the legitimacy of bringing raw emotions to God rather than pretending everything is fine?
2. How does Naomi's incomplete theological perspective (seeing only God's affliction, missing His provision through Ruth) warn against interpreting circumstances without patience for God's full story?
3. In what ways might suffering legitimately make us feel that God has dealt bitterly with us, and how can we maintain faith while experiencing such feelings?

Interlinear Text

וַיֹּאמֶר נָאמָן	וְלֹא אָלַיְךָ	אֶלְכָּךְ אַתָּה	לְךָ אַתָּה אֶלְכָּךְ	וְלֹא אָלַיְךָ	אֶלְכָּךְ אַתָּה	וְלֹא אָלַיְךָ
And she said	H413	H408	call	H0	me not Naomi	call
H559			H7121		H5281	H7121
מִזְרָחָה מִזְרָחָה	מִזְרָחָה מִזְרָחָה	מִזְרָחָה מִזְרָחָה	מִזְרָחָה מִזְרָחָה	מִזְרָחָה מִזְרָחָה	מִזְרָחָה מִזְרָחָה	מִזְרָחָה מִזְרָחָה
me Mara	H3588	bitterly	for the Almighty	H0	hath dealt very	
H4755		H4843	H7706		H3966	

Additional Cross-References

Job 6:4 (Parallel theme): For the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit: the terrors of God do set themselves in array against me.

Hebrews 12:11 (Parallel theme): Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

Isaiah 38:13 (Parallel theme): I reckoned till morning, that, as a lion, so will he break all my bones: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me.

Psalms 73:14 (Parallel theme): For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.

Psalms 88:15 (Parallel theme): I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up: while I suffer thy terrors I am distracted.

Job 19:6 (Parallel theme): Know now that God hath overthrown me, and hath compassed me with his net.

Job 5:17 (Parallel theme): Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: