

“Ever Thought About Changing Your Name?”

Ruth 1:3-5, 8-9a, 16-22; 4:13-15

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

Smoke Rise Baptist Church

Stone Mountain, Georgia

September 28, 2003

Have you ever thought about changing your name? Perhaps as a child you may have scribbled a few options on a piece of paper, but most adults don't give it much thought. During biblical times, though, it was not that uncommon.

Do you remember the time Jesus looked at Simon and said, “I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it” Matthew 16:18. What was Paul's name prior to his conversion? It was Saul. Traumatic experiences led to name changes in scripture and Naomi was another good example of that happening.

After Naomi returned to her home in Bethlehem from a ten year absence due to a drought, she told her welcoming neighbors not to call her Naomi, which meant “sweet” but Mara, which meant “bitter.” Why would she make this request? What happened to her while she was away from home in Moab?

Naomi lost some things very dear to her, her husband, two sons and the security that accompanied them. These family members died leaving her lonely and helpless. She had no way to provide for herself and her two daughters-in-law. Her only hope of survival was to return home and reconnect with family in Bethlehem.

Before leaving Moab, she encouraged both daughters-in-law to return to their families where they would be taken care of, too. Orpah accepted her offer, ever so reluctantly. Ruth refused to leave Naomi. Instead, she uttered some of the most endearing words of love and affection that had ever been heard, “Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me” Ruth 1:16-17.

So, Naomi returned to Bethlehem with shattered dreams, a broken heart and a new name. **“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”** Ruth 1:20-21.

Empty. We don't like that word, do we? There is nothing pleasant about it. I struggle to think of a time when it is positive.

An empty gas tank. An empty bank account. An empty cupboard. An empty stomach. An empty plate. An empty house. An empty pocket. An empty mind. An empty feeling. They're all bad. They all make us wince.

Naomi left Bethlehem full and returned empty. How sad.

When was the last time you felt like this? After the loss of your mate? After your bankruptcy? After your divorce? After your last CAT scan? After your heart attack? After your last child went away to school? After you lost your job? After your parents died?

This was the last time I felt that way. After my mother died, I felt so empty. There was just something uncomfortable about having neither parent in this world with me any

longer. I did not want to decorate for the holidays, celebrate birthdays or get excited over snowfalls. I felt empty. Hollow. I had nothing to give or at least no desire to offer it.

I wonder if this is how Naomi felt? Must have been. You don't change your name from Sweet to Bitter without a lot of thought.

From time to time we can all feel empty because life is full of surprises and we can lose some very precious things. I appreciated Craig Barnes' article in *The Christian Century*, "Homestretch." It is an article about searching for God after 9/11.

"In reality, we who trudge into church on Sunday mornings have always been walking on shaky ground. Our jobs, relationships and health are never as secure as we think and eventually we realize it is only a matter of time before we lose all these things."

Do you think Naomi intended her name change to be permanent? I do. I think she thought all her good days were behind her. She was ready to change the name on the mailbox and her driver's license. It was official and permanent.

Can you identify with her? Have you ever felt like you could never, ever possibly laugh again? Be happy again? Love again? Dance again? Hold hands again? Dream again? Get up excited again? Decorate for the holidays? Truth be known, we have all felt this way. That's how hard shattered dreams affect our emotions. That's what feeling empty does to us.

So, what do you do? What did Naomi/Mara do? She went home to family and friends. She found a "soft place to fall" and she waited patiently for God to help her, even though I think she was pretty skeptical about whether He would or not.

Out of his emptiness, John Claypool cried, "Lord, if there is to be anymore, it is up to you." He prayed this prayer after he lost his nine-year-old daughter to leukemia and his wife and job to a divorce. There are times when all we have to offer God is our emptiness. He understands. He will never leave us empty, though. He didn't Naomi/Mara.

Instead, he filled her empty arms up again with a baby, Ruth's baby. For you see, God brought Ruth and a wealthy man by the name of Boaz together. They married and Ruth bore him a son, which was like a grandson to Naomi. Now listen to the women that came to see Naomi and celebrate with her.

"Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth" Ruth 4:13-15.

By the way, do you know who Naomi's grandson was? He was Obed, the father of Jesse, and the father of David, the greatest King of Israel. Seems there was another baby born years later that was of the "house and lineage of David." His name was Jesus. Obed was his ancient ancestor. So was Naomi.

I wonder if Mara changed the name on her mailbox back to Naomi? I bet she did.

I wonder what Naomi would say to us today if we were thinking about changing our name from Sweet to Bitter? I think she would tell us to be patient. Put our faith in God. Give Him time to work in our lives and those around us. And hold off on going to the Division of Motor Vehicles to get a new license. By the time you get through the line, anyway, God will have already started working on your new life.