

*From Sweet to Bitter*  
a meditation based on  
Ruth 1

Names are important, and in this story the name, *Naomi* means “liveliness” or “delight.” Edward F. Campbell suggests that what Naomi is communicating to the women of Bethlehem on their return to that city is that her name, Naomi, actually means sweet. So she is saying, “Don't call me Sweet; call me Bitter. That is my true name.” Names are important, and although Naomi calls God by his Name, “*the LORD*” in the blessing she gives to her daughters, the name she uses for God in the end is not his personal name. She calls him, “Shaddai.” Remember that's how God was known to Israel in the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is also the name most used of God in the book of Job. It's calling on God to judge rightly and fairly given the tragedy upon tragedy that has befallen his people. “*Don't call me Naomi (Sweet),” she told them. “Call me Mara (Bitter), because the Almighty (Shaddai) 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 (Shaddai) has brought misfortune to me*” (Ruth 1:20-21).

Have we ever experienced what Naomi is speaking about? There was a time when everything was going the way we hoped for, all our dreams were coming true, we were “full.” Then, tragedy upon tragedy, we are being “emptied.” What do we do when we feel empty? We bring it to God! We bring to Shaddai, the true and righteous judge! We cry out to God, and we bring our accusations to him. Like Job. Like Jeremiah. “*You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring my case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?*” (Jer 12:1). W.L. Holladay suggests this translation: “I know you are innocent, God, but I still accuse you.” See, if we take God seriously, this is actually a proper response to him.

We hear in the story that Ruth *clung* to Naomi. She would not let her go off alone. It's not that Orpah was not a good woman. She too showed chesed (kindness) to her husband and to her mother-in-law. Orpah is a worthy woman. Ruth, by clinging to Naomi, is all the more so, and we see in her “the extraordinary” (E.F.C.). In this way again we see how Ruth, a Moabite woman, someone who before this did not know the true and the living God, is now imitating that God, imitating the undeserved action of God toward us. By clinging to Naomi, she is in a very practical sense clinging to God himself. We see how we, ordinary people that we are, can change the direction of someone else's life from sweet to bitter, back to sweet again.