



SESSION 1 of 4

Naomi

MEETING AIM

To explore how Naomi faced losing her family and livelihood.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Ruth 1

BACKGROUND

This is the first of four sessions in which we will be looking at how we cope with struggles. We will focus on four characters from the Bible who faced and reacted to difficult situations, including illness, the deaths of close family members, hunger, aggression, bullying and even hatred. Because Naomi is a character in the larger story of Ruth, she is often overlooked. How often is that the case with those who are in need?

These sessions may evoke painful memories or stir difficult situations and feelings. It is vital that those leading are able to offer appropriate pastoral care. It would be advisable to undertake a risk assessment of what to do if any difficult emotions are stirred.

5 GATHERING TIME

Start by inviting the group to share what they have been doing over the past week. Encourage them to be open about anything that might be worrying them. It doesn't have to be personal; it could be about events at school, in the country or the wider world.

10 INTRO ACTIVITY

You will need: a map of the world

Before the session, find out some facts about the following groups of people who migrated from their home countries: the Huguenots (French Protestants from the 16th and 17th Centuries); the Vietnamese 'boat people'; present-day Libyan and Syrian refugees.

Divide the young people into small groups and give each group one of the migrations to learn about. Ask them to find out the cause of the migration and to mark how far they went on the map. Bring the groups together and ask them to feed back what they have learnt.

Point out that it is often desperation that drives people to make these long and difficult journeys. It might be hard for us to imagine a life in which we don't know where our next meal will come from. Explain that in this session we will be looking at someone who had to migrate twice in order to find food.

15 BIBLE EXPLORATION

Use the following monologue to introduce the Bible passage:

"Well, I'm here because the doctor suggested that I need to talk to someone. Apparently, some people I used to know think I need help. Yes, I have been moping around a bit. What? Oh, yes, that is true. I have been thinking of changing my name. I mean what's the point of having a name that means 'pleasant' when my life isn't at all pleasant. That's why I think 'bitter' suits me better.

"First of all my husband dies, then my two sons. How am I going to survive? I mean, what is the point? If the Almighty is making my life so bitter, then why not be bitter? Life just isn't fair. None of it is my fault. It's all God's doing, you know. I bet you don't have an antidepressant to fix that. I mean, if God and the whole world is against you, what's the point? I suppose the news that this year's barley harvest in Bethlehem looks good is a positive. I might go back there. But there's no point in my daughters-in-law coming with me. They should steer well clear of bitter old me. My whole life is a disaster."

After the monologue, have someone read out Ruth 1. Briefly summarise the events so the group members understand what caused Naomi to feel so bad:

- Naomi moves with her family to look for food and a better life (just like the migrations in 'Intro activity')
- Things are initially good, and her sons marry
- But then Naomi's husband and sons die
- There is no support from the government at this time; the men supported the family
- Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem but tells her daughters-in-law to stay in their own land and find new husbands so they can have their own families
- Ruth stays with Naomi

5 CHATTING TOGETHER

Encourage discussion around the passage using the following questions:

- Which words would you use to describe Naomi's situation?
- What impact do you think Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi had on her?
- What was the significance of Naomi's name change? Do you ever put labels on yourself? What is the impact of this?
- Have you ever felt like Naomi did?
- Do you think Naomi should have blamed God? Why? Why not?
- If we are feeling bad about ourselves, who do we blame? Does blaming someone else help the situation?

- Is the solution to do something to fix the situation ourselves, like the people in 'Intro activity' did?

10 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: paper, pens and art materials

Give each person a piece of paper and access to the art materials. Explain that they are going to draw a map that illustrates a journey from one place to another. However, instead of drawing real locations they will add places to illustrate the difficulties they face in everyday life. These places should be located in the area of the map they are leaving.

In the place they are heading to they should add places to illustrate how they would deal with or face the issues they have already drawn. Examples could be places like 'Prayer Town' or 'Youth Leader Park'. They should illustrate and make the maps look authentic. You could even tea-dye the paper before they create their maps to give them an aged feel.

These maps can be kept in their Bibles or another safe place when the young people feel as if everything is against them.

5 PRAYER

You will need: paper, pens

Hand a piece of paper to everyone in the group. They should fold it in half down the centre, writing 'Naomi' on one side and 'Ruth' on the other.

Ask the group who they currently feel more like – are they closer to Naomi, feeling low and wishing they weren't in their current situation, or do they feel more like Ruth, sticking close to someone as they journey through the dark? Say that there is nothing wrong with feeling like Naomi, and that there are also Ruths in life who are ready to stand with us.

This story shows us that there is hope, even in the darkest situations, and that we can help and walk with others. Close with this simple prayer:

"Dear Lord,
Send light when we can't see a way forward.
And help us guide others when they can't see their path.
Amen."

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SESSION 2 of 4

Elijah

MEETING AIM

To explore how Elijah responded to the belief that he was all alone.

BIBLE PASSAGE

1 Kings 19

BACKGROUND

Elijah is feeling low after the high of recent events. He now feels as though everyone is against him and that he is all alone. He is on the run and in fear for his life, and rightly so. There are obvious signs of depression in the way Elijah reacts.

These sessions may evoke painful memories or stir difficult emotions about current situations. It is vital that those leading are able to offer appropriate pastoral care. It would be advisable to undertake a risk assessment of what to do if any difficult feelings are expressed.

5 GATHERING TIME

Welcome the young people and share any refreshments you have provided. Invite the group to share what they have been doing over the past seven days. As they share, ask whether any good things have happened this week.

5 INTRO ACTIVITY

You will need: fact bingo sheets (see below); pens

Before the session, ask each group member to think of a fact about themselves that the rest of the group might not know. It doesn't have to be a secret or anything personal. It could be something like an instrument they play or their shoe size, but the more unique it is the better. Have them send this fact to you. On a computer, create a grid of squares and write a fact in each square. Print out enough copies for each member to have one.

Allow time for the group to talk to one another so they can try to match the fact with a person. You could have a prize for the first person to match up every fact and individual. Explain that one thing that often makes us different from others is our belief in God. It might be that there are very few or no other Christians at school.

10 BIBLE EXPLORATION

Introduce today's Bible passage by reading this story:

Eli was a social media hero, a tech genius. He was internet famous. You know the sort. YouTuber, #iger, always on to the next social trend before anyone else and leaving behind those who were still sharing gifs of cats.

His greatest achievement was a meme that totally cut through the lies told by the government of his small country. The political policy the government had been following was in tatters. Government ministers and officials lost their jobs, and even the president and his family were in danger of being kicked out of office.

But that was the peak of Eli's success. The government moved quickly to put out their 'fake news' to manipulate the story and save their careers. But that wasn't all. Things soon got nasty.

The secret police traced Eli's IP address. Fortunately, he was a tech genius so he realised what was happening. He had to get out quickly. The last thing he saw were threatening emails from the arrogant politicians and even from the president.

Eli was on the run. He found himself in a tiny hotel room all alone. He didn't know what to do. He wasted days, unable to even get up out of the bed. He just about managed to eat enough to keep himself alive.

One day he got an anonymous email. It said that he wasn't alone. He logged on to a hidden network and set up a new Facebook account. He set up a group to talk about the issues with his government, switched off the computer and then went back to sleep, wallowing in his despair.

When Eli woke up he logged on to the Facebook group and there were 7,000 requests to join. Eli wasn't alone.

Ask someone to read 1 Kings 19. Explain that Elijah felt as though the whole world was against him. These events followed a great victory for him against the followers of Baal. But now he seems to have feelings of paranoia and may well have been depressed at this time. The main difference between the stories of Elijah and Eli is that Elijah had God on his side. However, the challenge for Elijah, and for us, is often where we look for, and how we find, God. What we expect and want can be quite different from the way God works.

5 CHATTING TOGETHER

Use the following questions to chat around the issues raised in the passage:

- Have you ever given up on something?
- What are the reasons for giving up on these things?
- Why do some people achieve big things, like climbing Everest, while others give up?

10 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: magazines; paper; art materials

Ask the group to think about where people look for God. In today's passage, 'mighty' God was found in a gentle whisper. There are obvious places like churches, but there also are other places. The Old Testament is full of God being found in different places, and quite often he is looking for us. After all, it is the angels, God's messengers, who go to Elijah.

Using images and words from the magazines, paints and other art materials, create some mixed-media art to illustrate where we might find God. Encourage the group to be creative and explore this topic. You might want to ask, as they work, how they would know that it is the God of the Bible they have found?

5 PRAYER

Point out that so much of our church time is noisy. We have songs, sermons, activities and youth meetings! When Elijah looked for God in this passage there was a lot of noise. There was wind, an earthquake and fire, but no God. God was found in the quiet and in the whisper.

Explain to the group that you will have a time of silent prayer. Decide beforehand how long you will do this for and let them know. Just five minutes can seem like a very long time for those not used to this practice. Do not have any candles or quiet background music; just embrace the silence.

Begin by saying: "Lord, we are here, quiet and listening for you..." Allow silence for the allocated time, then finish by saying: "Amen." Allow time for people to share how they felt and if they heard anything afterwards if they wish to do so.

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SESSION 3 of 4

Job

MEETING AIM

To explore the how Job faced losing everything.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Job 3

BACKGROUND

The story of Job is probably the darkest in the Bible. The pain and suffering he goes through is second only to that of those he loses, and his response is understandable. When it all goes wrong, he basically says: "I hate myself and all that I am." None of it is Job's fault, yet he has to live with the consequences.

There are big theological issues around whether the events here literally happened. The issue of God having a bet with Satan is difficult to accept at the best of times. However, these events are recorded to help us address the issues Job faced, and that will be the focus of this session's Bible passage.

5 GATHERING TIME

Share out your refreshments and invite the group to share what they have been doing over the past seven days. As they share, encourage them to talk about any issues they may be having and any situations they may be feeling negative about. Remember to be pastorally aware of any issues your group might be facing during this session.

10 INTRO ACTIVITY

Ask if anyone has heard of the Radio 4 show *Desert Island Discs*. You may need to explain the premise before saying that we are going to think about essential desert island items. What items do we love? What couldn't we imagine living without?

Get the young people into pairs and ask them to discuss their favourite songs, books, luxury items, TV series, films and items of clothing. Bring the group together and ask the pairs to feed back about their desert island items. Ask if they could imagine living without any of those things.

10 BIBLE EXPLORATION

You will need: Bibles

Use the following short drama to explore the Bible passage. You could practise it before the session or ask confident readers to read it out on the day:

TV anchor: Welcome to Channel YCW. I'm your host Ward Wordly. Today we have an exclusive live broadcast featuring Job, dubbed the unluckiest man in the world. He has lost everything in the past few days. Once he was a business tycoon, now he's an infected buffoon. We all like a good hard-luck story. Let's go live now to see what he has to say.

Job: Well, I was born, and that was pretty much the low point. No, scratch that. From the moment my parents knew I was going to be born, that was the low point. And things have gone downhill ever since then.

Reporter 1: Excuse me, Mr Job, but you were once a successful businessman with lots of livestock. You had everything.

Job: But what's the point of having these things if they're just going to be taken away? Look, we come into the world with nothing, and we leave with nothing. It doesn't matter whether you are a monarch, a successful entrepreneur or a slave. In the end, we're all in the same boat when we die. What's the point of even being born?

Reporter 2: It's interesting hearing you say all this. I thought you were a good man who trusted God.

Job: Yes, I believe that God gives, but he also takes things back. Why has all this happened? Why have I lost everything? My business has gone, my children have gone and now my health has gone. I'm alive, but what's the point of living like this?

TV anchor: Well, there you have it. Mr Job is not just the unluckiest person in the world, but probably also the most depressing guy. Let's cheer ourselves up with the weather report. Gail, I hear there's a hurricane on the way...

Ask someone to read out Job 3. Explain that this is a very difficult passage, but one that feels very real. Anyone who has gone through loss will understand Job's words. Point out that Job was a very good and devout man, but he had lost everything: his children, his business and his health. This all happened because God allowed Satan to take those things from him. (You might want to read Job 1 if you have time.)

5 CHATTING TOGETHER

As you talk about today's passage, be aware of any sensitivities in your group. Like all the other sessions in this series, this could bring to light issues that group members may or may not be coping with. Ask the following questions:

- How do you cope when bad things happen?
- Have you ever said "Why me?" when things got tough?
- Is Job's problem that he is just not thankful for what he has? Why? Why not?

- If we thank God for the good things we have, should we blame him for the bad things that happen in our lives?

10 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: pens; paper

Explain that our prayers and our journey of faith are often 'nice'. The danger with this is that when we face difficulties they don't fit in with our faith. Our prayers should contain a full range of human emotion. It isn't about blaming God, but it is about letting him know how we feel, sharing all our emotions. Holding in and hiding our emotions can lead to issues in both our mental and physical health.

Naomi hated herself and had a low self-image as she went through her struggles. Elijah ran away and felt all alone, perhaps experiencing depression, and Job wished he had never been born. However, Job shows us that complaining to God, and being real about how he feels, is OK. The challenge is working out how to complain.

Write a prayer of complaint to God. Explain that these prayers are private and no one else will see them. Encourage the young people to be open and honest in the words they write to God. They can be about something personal or about a wider issue in the world. Make the point that God made us emotional beings, so therefore our prayers should also be emotional.

5 PRAYER

Close with this short prayer:

"Dear Lord,
 Help us to be honest with our words to you.
 If we are happy, let us share that joy.
 If we are sad, let us tell you why.
 If we are angry, hear our cry.
 Be with us as we live the precious gift of life.
 Amen."

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SESSION 4 of 4

Jeremiah

MEETING AIM

To explore how Jeremiah faced his struggles.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Jeremiah 20

BACKGROUND

Jeremiah was hated for what he said and ridiculed for who he was: a prophet who listened to God. Jeremiah was only doing what God had told him. However, other people didn't like hearing what Jeremiah, or God, had to say.

In response, Jeremiah hated himself. His very being as a prophet brought him shame. By being angry at himself, Jeremiah was also angry at God. In this session we will explore anger toward God.

5 GATHERING TIME

Welcome the young people by name and share any refreshments you have provided. Invite the group to share what they have been doing over the past seven days. As they share, ask them how their week has gone. Has anyone faced any issues from others because of their faith, for example being teased or bullied? As with all these sessions, be pastorally aware of the situations your group may be dealing with, and be ready to offer support.

5 INTRO ACTIVITY

Before the meeting, do some research on the following predictions and events from history: nuclear war between the West and the Soviet Union, the bird flu epidemic and global warming. For each situation you will need to have a basic idea of the event, what actually happened, and how the respective governments and people responded.

Invite discussion around each of the predictions in turn, asking the group what they know about these situations and the outcomes.

Make sure the point is made that for at least two of the predictions the worst-case scenarios failed to be realised (there was no nuclear war and no bird flu epidemic). However, in all the scenarios the governments had to act, and in general the people were concerned about what might happen.

Explain that there are similarities between these predictions and the prophecies Jeremiah gave in the Old Testament.

The leaders of the day responded, as did the people. Unfortunately, it was Jeremiah who faced the consequences, at least initially.

10 BIBLE EXPLORATION

You will need: printouts of Jeremiah 20 (one for each person); pens; highlighter pens; Bibles

Give out copies of Jeremiah 20 and encourage the young people to read it on their own.

Explain that this is the fifth lament of Jeremiah. A lament is a style of prayer or psalm used when things are bad. Yes, it is the fifth time that Jeremiah is saying "woe is me". It is no surprise that he is seen by many as a misery! However, he is basically a realist. He says things as they are, and it is for this reason that people don't like him. The whole point of prophets in the Old Testament was to turn people back to God by saying: "If you don't change your ways, this will happen." But the people didn't want to change their ways and they didn't want whatever 'this' was to happen either.

Either alone or in pairs, ask the group to read through Jeremiah 20 and mark in pen or highlighter which parts of Jeremiah's lament are positive and which are negative. Which parts seem angry toward God and which parts praise him?

Once they have done this, get some feedback from the group and see if any areas of agreement emerge. Discuss any areas of dispute or uncertainty.

Point out that Jeremiah is angry at God because it was God who had chosen him to be a prophet. The rejection Jeremiah suffers as a result of the prophecies he delivers leads to the shame he feels. It is then that he wishes he didn't exist. Despite all this, there is still an acceptance that God is great. There is raw emotion and anger, but this doesn't lead to a loss of faith.

Ask the group to look at Psalm 22. As they read through it, let them compare the words in the psalm to Jeremiah's lament and then share what they find. Tell them that this psalm is the one Jesus uses on the cross. Jesus also cries out to God. There is nothing wrong with crying out, even in anger, to God. He is not only there for the good times...just ask Jeremiah.

5 CHATTING TOGETHER

Use the following questions to encourage the young people to share how they feel about the themes found in this passage:

- Is Jeremiah right to blame God for his shame? Why? Why not??
- What could Jeremiah do to change the situation he is in?

10 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: paper; art materials

Make sure everyone has access to Psalm 22:1-11. Explain that this psalm is very similar (it is a lament psalm) to the words Jeremiah used. The beginning of it was used by Jesus when he was on the cross.

On their own, encourage members of the group to rewrite the psalm in their own words, expressing the emotions and feelings it contains in modern language. Using the art materials provided they can decorate their words to visually express the meaning. Give any reluctant writers the help they need to do this. If they would prefer not to write they can draw a picture that illustrates the same sentiments as the psalm.

If anyone wants to share what they have written allow them to do so. However, these are likely to be personal so don't push anyone to share.

5 PRAYER

Close with a time of open prayer. Encourage the group to be honest and open in the way they pray. If they need and want to they can use the words from their rewritten psalm or some of Jeremiah's words.

End with the following:

"Dear God,

Thank you for being there.

Thank you for letting me be honest.

Be with us as we leave this meeting.

Be with us through the good times and the bad times.

Amen."

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