



# Ruth

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## Lesson 1: In the Days of the Judges

***“Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried”*** (Ruth 1:16-17).

***Doctrinal Focus:*** *The Book of Ruth continues the story of God’s plan to redeem a people for his own glory.*

Read Ruth 1:1-22.

The great theme of the Bible is redemption. Beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation, the Bible relates an unfolding story of how the only holy and righteous God has acted in human history to redeem a people from sin through the work of his Son Jesus Christ so that they will glorify and enjoy him forever. Each book builds on this theme, and therefore it is important to understand where in the development of the story of Scripture a particular book is placed. So where does the Book of Ruth fall in the redemptive history of mankind?

The Israelites who followed Moses out of Egyptian bondage refused to believe God’s promise to settle them in the land of promise. That generation was judged for its rebellion and unbelief and died after forty years of wilderness wandering. God then led a new generation into the land under the courageous leadership of Joshua and Caleb. While Joshua was alive, the Israelites served the Lord and kept the covenant with him. However, following Joshua’s death, they fell into a pattern frequently referred to as the *Judges Cycle*. Israel would sin and rebel against God by committing idolatry. God would respond to their apostasy by allowing them to fall into the hands of their enemies. Because of their suffering and oppression, Israel would cry out to the Lord for deliverance. God would raise up a judge to deliver the nation from its oppressors and bring rest to the land. But the nation would soon return to idolatry, and the cycle would begin

anew. The nation became increasingly corrupt with each successive cycle plunging Israel into religious and moral chaos. This cycle of sin, servitude, repentance, and deliverance is the setting of Ruth.

With only a few well-chosen words, the author of Ruth catapults us into the center of a crisis—a severe famine in the tribal region of Judah. There, in the city of Bethlehem, (a city whose very name means *house of bread*), Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion struggle to survive. Their story of suffering and sorrow and how God broke into their lives with his relentless love and unbounded grace is a microcosm of Israel’s story and of mankind’s story. Throughout the pages of Ruth, the golden thread of God’s redemptive plan for man is woven into the circumstances and lives of Naomi’s family, Ruth, and Boaz and points to the truth that every believer is part of a much larger divine plan. Thus a key theme in the book of Ruth is the continuation of God’s unfolding plan to redeem a people for his own glory.

Elimelech’s family lived *“In the days when the judges ruled,”* that is, they lived during a very chaotic and lawless period in Israel’s history. During those days, *“there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* (Judges 21:25). Such self-referential behavior brought the weight of God’s discipline upon Israel, and upon this small family. But instead of staying in the land God had

graciously given to Israel, instead of crying out in repentance to God for deliverance and relief, instead of persevering with the people of Israel and trusting God to provide for his family, Elimelech seemed to do what was right in his own eyes and moved his family to Moab. Moab was outside of the promised land east of the Dead Sea. It was a fertile region with adequate rainfall, so its green pastures and the hope of food undoubtedly seemed a sensible choice to Elimelech. Moab, however, was *outside* the promised land. The Moabites were known for their idolatry and sexual depravity<sup>1</sup>. Settling his family within this pagan culture was a choice of compromise; it was a choice to trust the world's provisions instead of God's covenant faithfulness. And like all choices to compromise and to disobey, it came with a tremendous cost.

Sometime after arriving in Moab, Elimelech died leaving Naomi to care for their two sons. Instead of returning home to Bethlehem, Naomi chose to continue living in Moab. Her sons, Mahlon and Chilion, married Moabite women, and for a while life seemed to go well for them. After ten years, though, disaster struck the family once again. Mahlon and Chilion died leaving Naomi bereft of her two sons and husband—a serious situation for an aging woman in a foreign land. The fields of Moab that had once seemed to offer the family a fulfilling life had instead brought them nothing but emptiness and despair.

And so Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem *“for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food”* (Ruth 1:6). Out of duty and devotion, Orpah and Ruth, Mahlon and Chilion's widows, departed from their homeland with Naomi. The small party had not traveled far when Naomi, herself a widow in a foreign land, realized the hopeless and difficult existence these young widows would face in Judah. Perhaps she also realized that returning to Bethlehem with two Moabite women in tow would be problematic in three ways. Pragmatically, Orpah and Ruth would be two more mouths to feed. Socially, Orpah and Ruth would be considered outcasts. Spiritually, Orpah and Ruth would be a continual reminder of the family's disobedience in leaving the promised land and marrying outside the covenant people

of God. After consideration, Naomi released them from their obligation to accompany her and encouraged them to return to their families. *“May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband”* (Ruth 1:8-9). She kissed them good-bye, but both began to weep and refused to leave her. Attempting to show them the irrationality of their decision, Naomi reasoned with her daughters-in-law. Her rhetorical question, *“Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?”* (Ruth 1:11) referenced the levirate law of marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) in which a dead man's brother or closest relative was required to raise up children in the dead man's name<sup>2</sup>. Naomi would need to remarry and give birth to a son who would then need to impregnate Orpah and Ruth so as to raise up children in Mahlon's and Chilion's names. Naomi further accentuated the futility of following her by asking, *“If I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown?”* (Ruth 1:12-13). No, the sensible course would be for Orpah and Ruth to return to Moab and remarry among their own people.

Orpah acquiesced, and with this one choice lost her opportunity to be part of God's covenant people. Orpah “marched off, out of the pages of the Bible” never to be heard from again. “Who now remembers Orpah?” (Duguid, 2005). *“But Ruth clung to her”* (Ruth 1:14), and her answer to Naomi has come to epitomize the highest order of devotion and loyalty: *“Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried”* (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth's decision was a complete renunciation of her homeland, her people, and her gods; and it was an absolute commitment to Israel, to the people of Israel, and to the God of Israel. Death alone would prevent her from keeping her pledge.

Naomi was silenced by Ruth's determined devotion, *“so the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of*

them” (Ruth 1:19). Her appearance, undoubtedly altered by the ravages of time and grief, prompted shocked whispering among the women, “*Is this Naomi?*” (Ruth 1:19). And Naomi, whose name meant pleasant, answered that she could no longer be called pleasant; she was now Mara, she was bitter “*for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?*” (Ruth 1:20-21).

Naomi’s words voiced a belief in the sovereignty of God—the truth that God has absolute authority and rule over his creation; he is all-knowing, all-powerful, and works all things “*according to the counsel of his will*” (Ephesians 1:11). And although knowledge of the sovereignty of God should bring

comfort and security to his people, Naomi was bitter and empty—without any certainty that God would use the tragedies in her life for his good purposes. She is not unlike many who hold orthodox beliefs about God, but who do not allow those beliefs to direct or influence the warp and woof of their lives. Naomi saw the deaths of her sons and husband as ordained by God, even as a punishment from God<sup>3</sup>, but she did not recognize the tragedies as God’s means of glorifying himself in and through her life (1 Peter 1:6-7; 1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Yet into the gloom of Naomi’s despair appears a glimmer of restoration and hope. It is the beginning of the barley harvest, a time of rejoicing in God’s goodness and of enjoying the bounty he had sovereignly provided.

#### Cited Works

- Adeyemo, T. (2006) (Ed.) *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi, Kenya: Word Alive Publishers.  
Duguid, I.M. (2005). *Esther & Ruth*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.  
Sproul, R.C. (2005). *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version*. Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries.

#### Notes

1. Moab originated out of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter (Genesis 19:30-38). The Moabites hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel (Numbers 22-24) and seduced Israel to worship false gods through their seductive women (Numbers 25). Most recently, they had oppressed Israel during the reign of King Eglon (Judges 3:12-14).
2. The levirate union or widow inheritance, though sanctioned in the Old Testament, is not mentioned in the New Testament. Rather, older widows were to serve the church and younger widows were encouraged to remarry (1 Timothy 5:3-16). Though widow inheritance is a common African tradition, it conflicts with the New Testament teaching that marriage ends with death (Romans 7:2). (Adeyemo, 2006)
3. Naomi’s response reflected the common dualistic perception that equated blessing with righteousness and suffering with unrighteousness. While it is true that God does use suffering to correct or to bring his people to repentance, he also uses it for other purposes such as the strengthening of our character (Romans 5:3-5) and the glorifying of himself (John 9:1-3).

#### Recommended Commentary

*Esther and Ruth* by Iain Duguid (Reformed Expository Commentary).

Sample



# Ruth Lesson 1

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## Questions for Discussion

Read Ruth 1:1-22.

1. Regarding Elimelech's decision to move his family to Moab,
  - a. Do you think it was merely a choice of common sense or were there other factors involved? Can you think of modern-day examples of this kind of choice?
  - b. What did it reveal about his priorities, his faith, and his relationship with God?
  - c. Think about the last big decision you made regarding your family, work, education, or ministry opportunity. What most influenced your decision process?
  - d. Explain how Elimelech's decision and the impact it had on his family could help you as you consider the decisions before you.
2. After reading Ruth 1, compare Ruth and Naomi in terms of their nationalities, gender, age, marital status, children, their prospects, what they said, and what they did not say.
  - a. Some commentators see Naomi as a woman of noble character while others are not so complimentary. What do you think about Naomi (i.e. her spirituality, her attitude, her outlook)? What lesson can you learn from her life?
  - b. As you think about Ruth, what conclusions can you reach about her (i.e. her spirituality, her attitude, her outlook)? What lesson can you learn from her life?
3. Ruth's pledge of loyalty to Naomi is a moving statement of commitment and self-surrender that perfectly captures the highest level of love and sacrifice one can give to another. Yet, Naomi's response was silence, "*she said no more*" (Ruth 1:18).
  - a. What do you think prompted Ruth to commit herself to Naomi and to Naomi's God?
  - b. Why do you think Naomi responded the way she did? Why was she silent?

4. From Ruth 1:20-21, list what Naomi said about God.
  - a. What impact did Naomi's experiences seemingly have on her beliefs about God?
  - b. Why might God cause "bad things" to happen? See Amos 4:6; Hebrews 12:5-11; 1Peter 1: 6-7.
  - c. What lesson do you want to remember next time difficulties leave you thinking like Naomi?
5. When Naomi returned to Bethlehem, she asked to be called "Mara," *because the Almighty has "dealt very bitterly with me."* Read Exodus 15:22-27 that references a place in the wilderness called Marah or bitter water.
  - a. What did God do to the bitter water of Marah?
  - b. What lesson did the Lord want Israel to learn from this experience?
  - c. What was the next stop on the wilderness road for Israel after Marah?
  - d. What insight does this give you about how God provides for his people in and through suffering?
  - e. If Naomi had thought more deeply about the events of Marah, what could she have expected God to do for her in her present "Marah"?
  - f. What can you expect God to do for you in your "Marah"?
6. Read 1 Peter 1:6-7 with 1 Thessalonians 5:18.
  - a. Do you see suffering, loss, and tragedy as God's means of glorifying himself in and through your life? Why or why not?
  - b. How could you help or comfort someone who is trying to understand the calamities that have befallen them?