

**Studies in
The Story of**

RUTH



Ruth Bible Study Package

What's included:

7 studies (Ruth 1-4 & 3 character)

Background Context Guide (includes Scripture passages, key terms & definitions)

Key observations/terms

Sample questions for discussion

Possible application questions

List of additional resources

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Study 1: Ruth 1

Read Ruth 1

Background Context

Author: Unsure, potentially the prophet Samuel or a female

Audience: written to Israel after the exile

Purpose: as a contrast to the book of Judges, as an answer to Proverbs 31, as a model of keeping the law demonstrated by someone outside of the Israelite community

“When the judges ruled...” (Judges 2:6-23)

This text summarizes what was happening in Israel during that period in which the story of Ruth takes place.

Heterarchy – a system of power and organization; the complex set of relationships at work among individuals and communities that affect power relations between various peoples (i.e. mothers and daughters, women and men, Israel and Moab, etc.). The book of Ruth highlights a variety of these relational dynamics and it will help us to keep these dynamics in mind as we study interactions, choices, and systems in the text.

Moab – historically an enemy of Israel, turns Israel to idol worship and away from God (Numbers 25:1-9)

Widows – often the most vulnerable in Israelite culture, the system of care for a widow would be through her sons, Old Testament law wrote provisions in to care for the widows (Exodus 22:21-24, Deuteronomy 27:19, 25: 5-10)

Bible Project video: Overview Ruth

Key Observations/Terms

Names & meanings: Ephrathah Bethlehem (Bethlehem means house of bread, Ephrathah is interchangeable with Bethlehem), Elimelech (my God is king), Naomi (my delight), Mahlon (sick), Chilion (coming to an end), Orpah (neck), Ruth (friend or companion), Mara (bitter)

Hesed (verse 8): Hebrew term meaning goodness, kindness, faithfulness, loyal love

“Ruth clung...” (verse 14): same word used in Genesis 2 (expression of covenant love)

Change in situation of Naomi & Ruth

Repetition of Moab, “go back/turn back/gone back”, terms of empty & fullness (famine, without, given food, full, empty)

God is not a significant actor in the entire book

Sample Questions

Trace the situations of Naomi, Ruth & Orpah. How does it change through chapter 1?

Compare and contrast Ruth & Orpah's choice. What motivates them?

What is Naomi's understanding of her situation and of God?

What is "hesed" as demonstrated by Ruth in this chapter?

Possible Application

Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi are left in a vulnerable state. Any option before them is full of uncertainty. When Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah to return to their mother's house, Orpah takes it but Ruth clings to Naomi and promises to stay with her. Orpah's choice is understandable; Ruth's choice is sacrificial love. Where in our lives are we tempted to make an understandable choice rather than a costly sacrificial one? How might God be directing us to make "hesed" choices instead of understandable choices?

Naomi's life situation changes drastically; she goes from full to empty and has lost everything. Without hope, without security, without resources, Naomi has to continue to live in the midst of her loss and grief. What losses are we experiencing in our life? How are we sharing that with God and with other people? Can you create some space this week to spend time with God telling Him of the pain, grief, anger, or fear?

Study 2: Ruth 2

Read Ruth 2

Background Context

Farming practices:

Gleaning: Leviticus 19:9-10, Deuteronomy 24:19-22

In the OT law, provisions were put in place to care for the widows, poor, orphans, and foreigners in Israel. Landowners were prohibited from collecting all the leftover crops (to not glean to the edges of their property) in order to provide for those who needed food.

The period of time between beginning and end of barley harvest is about 3 months.

Ephah – approx. 30-50lbs

Kinsman redeemer:

In the OT law, this term described the nearest male blood relative, who had the responsibility and role to care for vulnerable family members by

- Buying back or redeeming land that was sold by a family member, to ensure that the land remains in the family (Lev 25: 25-30)
- Redeeming a relative sold into slavery because of poverty, thereby ensuring freedom for the people in the clan/family (Lev 25:47-55)
- Redeeming objects dedicated to the sanctuary (Lev 27:9 -28)
- Track down and execute murderers of near relatives (Num 35:12; 19-27)
- To receive restitution money on behalf of a deceased victim of a crime (Num 5:8)
- And to ensure that justice is served in a lawsuit involving a relative (Job 19:25; Ps 119:154; Her 50:34)

Bible Project video: Character of God, Loyal Love

Key Observations/Terms

Kinsman (verse 1) “mowda” vs relative/next of kin (verse 20) “gaal” The first term refers to a person who is related to an individual. The second term comes from the root word “gaal” meaning “to redeem” and is first introduced in this chapter. It will come up 21x in the book of Ruth related to a person.

Structure of chapter 2 based on location of and relational interactions:

Ruth & Naomi – in private (verses 1-3)

Boaz & reapers – in private at the field (verses 4-7)

Boaz & Ruth – in public at the field (verses 8-14)

Boaz & reapers – in private at the field (verses 15-16)

Ruth & Naomi – in private (verses 17-23)

Ruth drives the action; Naomi follows her plans

“As it happened” (verse 3), “Just then” (verse 4)

Contrasts:	<u>Ruth</u>	<u>Boaz</u>
	Woman	Man
	Moabite (foreigner)	Israelite
	Servant	Landowner
	Widow	Prominent, rich

“wings” (verse 12) – common image used of God’s shelter and protection in Scripture (see Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 61:4, 63:7, 91:4)

Repetition of glean, favour, Moab

Ongoing repetition: “hesed” (verse 20), themes of empty/full [full reward, satisfied (2x), how much, left over], keep close/clung

Sample Questions

Ruth and Naomi make and act on a plan to get food and yet terms of coincidence are introduced. What is the text communicating to us about what’s happening in this situation?

Why does Boaz take notice of Ruth?

Describe the life situations of Ruth and Boaz. How do both characters exercise agency within their context?

Whose “hesed” is being referenced in verse 20?

What is “hesed” as demonstrated by Boaz in this chapter? How does this build on our understanding of “hesed” demonstrated by Ruth from chapter 1?

Compare and contrast the situation of Ruth & Naomi at the beginning of the chapter and at the end. What has changed? What has remained the same?

Possible Application

Boaz first take notice of Ruth and then demonstrates hesed to someone who is in a completely different social circle than himself. Who are the people God is inviting you to take notice of on campus, at work, in your neighbourhood? How can you demonstrate hesed toward them?

Study 3: Ruth 3

Read Ruth 3

Background Context

Marriage culture:

“Most marriages in ancient Israel were monogamous and arranged by family members for economic, social, or religious reasons... Marriage was normally endogamous [within tribal, cultural, and faith groups]...” Taylor, Ruth, Esther, 55-56

Levirate marriage: Deuteronomy 25:5-6

An ancient custom designed to ensure both the provision for widows without sons and the continuation of a family name. If a married man dies without a son, the man’s brother would marry his widow and their first-born son would continue the name of the deceased brother.

Wash, anoint, put on your best clothes (verse 3): mark change in status from widow in mourning, style or literary device to show change in a character’s situation, present self for marriage to Boaz

Tamar & Judah: Genesis 38 (example of Levirate marriage AND serves to contrast the dynamic between Ruth & Boaz)

Although only directly mentioned in chapter 4, this is a story well known to the Israelite community and there is much in the description of Ruth & Boaz’s encounter at the threshing floor that would call to mind for many hearers this particular story. Similarities & contrasts include:

- Tamar, like Ruth, was a foreigner, who married into the nation of Israel
- Husbands died leaving both women childless (in Tamar’s case, levirate marriage took place with the second son, but was denied with the third son)
- Tamar clearly falls within levirate law, but Ruth does not (there is no brother for Ruth to marry)
- Judah (the figure with power in the story) is the one who puts Tamar in a vulnerable state
- Women taking action to secure a future for themselves and calling those in power (in this case, the men) to act in accordance with the law (in Ruth’s case, the spirit of the law) to provide security for them

Key Observations/Terms

Contrast from chapter 2: Naomi becomes the active driver of plans and Ruth is now following her direction

“Security” (verse 1) – means resting place, home (recall Naomi’s prayer in chapter 1 verse 9)

“so that it may be well with you” (verse 1) – Deuteronomy 4:40, 5:29, 6:3): This phrase is often connected to the keeping of God’s commands and decrees.

Repetition of themes of secrecy (verses 3, 7, 14) takes place at night

“spread your cloak...” (verse 9) Ruth asks Boaz to marry her (recall the status of these two characters from chapter 2)

Boaz's actions & response

Ongoing repetition: “hesed” (verse 10), “gaal” (next of kin, kinsman), empty/full theme, “cloak” (verse 9) is the same word used for “wing” in chapter 2

Sample Questions

What is the situation of Ruth & Naomi at the beginning of the chapter? Why does Naomi act in the way she does and what is she hoping for? What are the risks these women face throughout this chapter?

Why does the author draw our attention to the secrecy of this interaction at the threshing floor? Why is this interaction kept secret by the characters?

The term “hesed” shows up again. How does Ruth demonstrate this characteristic towards Boaz?

Boaz has no legal obligation to marry Ruth and provide for her and Naomi. What do we learn about him from his actions and response?

Possible Application

This chapter shows characters committing to decisions with limited knowledge; Naomi and Ruth don't know how Boaz will react and Boaz promises to act as next of kin while there is a closer relative who has more right than he to the land. COVID had made life unsettled and leaves us with limited knowledge of what life will be like, even a few weeks from now. How can we still make decisions and commitments in the midst of uncertainty? Where might God be inviting us to take next steps that are risky or sacrificial without knowing the whole plan?

Study 4: Ruth 4

Read Ruth 4

Background Context

City gate: key location within a community, like a cultural hub or town square. This is the location of business, decisions, justice, and communication of a town (examples in Deuteronomy 21: 18-21, Joshua 20:4, Proverbs 31:23, 2 Samuel 18:1-5, 19:1-8). Elders are senior males responsible within the community for legal, social, and religious decision making and administration.

Land: Leviticus 25

Land was never sold permanently because it belonged to God. The right to work the land and benefit from its production could be sold if a family needed to.

Rachel and Leah: Genesis 29-30

The wives of Jacob who, along with their maids, birthed 12 sons and one daughter, eventually becoming the nation of Israel.

Seven sons: Ideal or perfect family

Seven is a number representing perfection and ideal. Sons were highly prized in this culture.

Genealogy:

Cycle of 10 generations where the 7th generation is Boaz and the 10th is David, who later becomes king of Israel. This style of genealogy is similar to that of the ones in Genesis where the 10th generation enters into a new covenant and relationship with God.

Key Observations/Terms

Names & meanings: Obed (to serve)

Story shifts to take place in public with male actors; Ruth & Naomi has no dialogue in this chapter

“friend” (verse 1): actual Hebrew wording is “pelsoni almoni” which translates to our equivalent of “Joe Schmo” or “John Deer”

Joe Schmo first agrees to redeem Elimelech’s land, and then decides not to

Second action of God; “made her conceive” (verse 13)

Ongoing repetition: “gaal” (next of kin, redeem, redemption), empty/full theme around Naomi (contrast who chapter 1)

Sample Questions

Why does the story shift to a public process that involved elders and those who gather around the gate? What impact does that shift have on Ruth and her life in the community?

Why does Joe Schmo change his mind about redeeming the parcel of land belonging to Elimelech?

Compare and contrast the characters of Joe Schmo and Boaz and their decisions in this chapter.

What are the blessings the community gives (verses 11-12)?

What are the blessings given by the women (verses 14-15)?

Describe the situations of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz in this chapter. How has this changed throughout the book?

Possible Application

What is valued and applauded in our current culture? Think about what traits and decisions we see encouraged by our families, among our friends, on campus, in the workplace. What does the book of Ruth value and applaud? What values in your life God may want to invite you to let go of in order to more fully embrace a life that reflects the values we see in the book of Ruth?

Spend time looking back at your own life and identify experiences where others (God, family, friends, larger community) acted to bring you through a vulnerable season. What did you learn through that time? Who are the people in your life who may need you to do the same for them?

The book of Ruth shows everyday characters who make sacrificial and generous choices of faithful love within the boundaries and freedoms of the life situations they find themselves in. They act in ways that they know are good and honour God in the process. Locate your own boundaries and freedoms in your life. Where can you follow in the footsteps of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz? Where can you make choices simply because you know they are good? How will you influence others towards these kinds of choices?

Study 5: Character Study of Ruth

Read Ruth 3

Background Context

See Study 3: Ruth 3 notes

Recap: What do you think of Ruth so far from the first studies? Notice that she doesn't speak very much, yet she is able to draw out hesed (loyal love) in others. How have we seen Ruth draw out hesed in others (Naomi, Boaz, the community)?

Sexual connotations in this text:

Draw attention to the story of Tamar & Judah (Genesis 38) – God uses terrible things for His good will, women are the active players, call the men to make things right, Judah is the one who made Tamar vulnerable. Have group read and ask for comparisons/contrasts after reading both texts, or highlight some of those comparisons/contrasts yourself.

Sample Questions

Why does Naomi have to come up with this plan to seek security for Ruth?

Why does Naomi choose Boaz for Ruth?

Why does this happen at night? What is a bigger scandal? How it is played out at night, or if this were to occur during the day?

What emotions were experienced by Ruth?

What do we learn about Boaz's character based on his actions?

- Why does he praise Ruth?
- Why does he agree to Ruth's proposal? Why does he make this oath to her?
- How does it serve Ruth? Boaz? To have him first seek the closer kinsman?
- What other possible responses could Boaz have given Ruth?

How is Ruth "kind" or loyal to Boaz as he suggests?

Possible Application

How can you be a person that prompts others to lead lives of "loyal love" (hesed) like Ruth? What would that require from you?

How can you develop your character that allows you to operate out of "loyal love" (hesed)?

When have you been shown "loyal love" (hesed) from God and from others? How did you respond?

How have you shown "loyal love" (hesed) to others?

Study 6: Character Study of Naomi

Read Ruth 1:14 – 2:2 and 4:13 – 17

Background Context

Recap Naomi's situation: Ruth 1:1-14

Name change:

Names are significant in ancient Israelite culture as they often reflect a situation or a trait of a person. In most biblical narratives, God is the one who changes names (see: Genesis 17, Mark 3:13-19). A cultural practice of changing one's name reflects a new chapter in that person's life.

Sample Questions

What are the cultural expectations of Naomi toward Ruth?

Track Naomi's emotional experience through the passage. What does she feel as different events occur?

What is Naomi's view of God? How does she understand him?

Why does Naomi change her name?

What can we learn about grieving from the story of Naomi? What cultural narratives around grief does Naomi challenge for us? (i.e., narratives of "I'm fine", "I don't want to be a burden to others", "I need to be productive", etc.)

Compare and contrast Naomi in chapter 2 and Naomi at the end of chapter 4. What contributes to the change in her situation?

Possible Application

Read through the Naomi handout created for Ruth Con (available on <https://ivcf.ca/ivcf-bc/> website) and take time this week to try out one of the suggestions to meet a need you have.

Naomi models a few helpful ways for us to grieve: she enters into her emotions, she receives the help of others, she locates God as the actor behind her experiences, she's honest about her thoughts and feelings to God and to others, and she eventually moves into action without ever knowing why she experienced what she did. What part of Naomi's process challenges you? How can you take steps to follow her model for your own processing?

At the end of the story, Naomi enters into a season of restoration and nourishment. She returned to her community empty declaring the hand of God against her and we see a reversal in her state with her community declaring the hand of God actually being with her throughout her season of grief. Who are the people in your life who can help you interpret your experiences of life and of God? Make time in the next month to be honest with them about your experiences. Ask them to help you hear from God in the places where you feel distant from God.

Study 7: Character Study of Boaz

Read Ruth 2

Background Context

See Study 2: Ruth 2 notes

Ruth's vulnerability: woman, foreigner, widow

“not to bother” (verse 16) translates to not molest or touch for any purpose (sexual or violent)

Hospitality culture: sharing a meal was something done with people of the same status as you, or of close relationship. Within the system of relationships, typical expectations would be for foreigners to serve Israelites, women to serve men, and servants to serve masters.

Sample Questions

What are the risks Ruth takes in gleaning in the fields? How does Boaz's actions impact Ruth's experience of gleaning in the fields?

Without ever meeting, how does Boaz impact Naomi?

What actions does Boaz take that would be unusual in his context as a man in a position of power?

What motivates Boaz to take the actions that he does?

Possible Application

Farming practices in the OT law were meant to imitate God's provision to the poor (do not glean to the edges of the field). This meant not using up all of the available crop or resource in order to provide for those with greater need. What resources in your own life do you use up to the edge of? How can you build in margins to be available to serve the needs of others? What makes it challenging to practice this?

Furthermore, Boaz instructs his reapers to pull out grain to leave for Ruth. What is something you can do, in your own context, that is “right” or cares for someone else in your community AND costs you something?

Boaz blesses Ruth to “have a full reward from the Lord” (verse 12) AND his actions are part of contributing to her provision. What situations in our lives do we need to act and speak blessing? Where is God inviting us to be part of the path of another person's blessing in a concrete or tangible way?

List of Resources

Davis, Ellen F. & Parker, Margaret Adams
Who are you, my daughter? Reading Ruth through Image and Text
Translation and Notes by Ellen F. Davis, Woodcuts by Margaret Adams Parker
Westminster John Knox Press, 2003

Dharamraj, H., & Yalla, P. E.
Ruth: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary
Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2019

Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob
Ruth: INTERPRETATION: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
Westminster John Knox Press, 1999

Taylor, Marion Ann
The Story of God Bible Commentary
Ruth, Esther
Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020

Ruth 1 specific
The Biggest Little Farm
Netflix Documentary

Terry Leblanc
Native American Theology <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UyMhwYN0jM>

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