

## **Understanding the Book of Ruth**

Why Ruth Bible Study?

Ruth is a good model of a Christian woman. The Book of Ruth is a story about a changed life. Ruth's life was transformed from that of low estate to honor and glory! This is the kind of complete change that God plans for you. God is ready to give you transform your life so that you can live a new vibrant life.

The story of Ruth teaches how to bring about total change in your life. If you desire a transformed life, then, you would need a good counselor who will lead you out like Naomi.

You need somebody who can play the role of Naomi.

### **Discussion Questions about the Insights from the life of Ruth**

1. Briefly describe the context in which the book of Ruth is written. (What is the story line?)
2. Naomi moved to and from Moab. Can you state what caused her to move?
3. In your view can you explain the effects of these movements in her life and why you think she was thus affected?
4. When her sons died, Naomi believed that God had turned against her and Ruth (chapter 1). What caused these feelings and how did she deal with them?
5. Have you ever been in a situation you felt hurt, frustrated and alone? How did you deal with it?
6. Both of Naomi's daughters-in-law loved her, but they made very different decisions about how to go on with their lives? (1:6-18).
  - What did Orpah do?
  - What did Ruth do?
  - Why do you think Ruth wanted to go with Naomi to Judah?
7. In Ruth's life, there are three levels of connections can you identify them from chapter 1 verse 16 -18.
8. Based on your answer to # 4 above what in your opinion was the difference between Ruth and Orpah?

### **CHAPTER 2**

1. When they got to Bethlehem in Judah? (2:1-18), we see Ruth exhibiting three very important attitudes: Humility, Service and Obedience. Can you identify and explain the application of each in Ruth's life?
2. What seem to have been the risks for women who did this kind of work? How could the fact that Ruth was a foreigner

(from Moab) have made the situation even more difficult?

3. The field in which Ruth works belongs to a rich and important man named Boaz (2:3-23). What kind of person does he seem to be?
4. In relation to how Boaz treats Ruth, can you identify five manifestations of favor? (2:3-16)
5. The Law of Moses required faithful Jews to allow foreigners and widows to pick up stalks of grain after a field was harvested (Glean). In what way did Boaz do more than what the law required? What can you learn from Boaz's actions?
6. In chapter 3, Naomi helps Ruth to find a husband. Why do you think she felt this was an important thing to do?
7. In Matthew 19:29-30 Jesus says, ***"And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life."***
  - Can you describe how this scripture is fulfilled in Ruth getting a husband?
  - Briefly explain how this occurrence is applicable in your own life.

### CHAPTER 3

1. Can you describe the role of obedience or following instructions in what happens in chapter 3: 1- 9
2. Why do you think Boaz was so impressed with Ruth? (3:10)
3. What prevented him from offering to marry her right away? (3:12,13).

### CHAPTER 4

1. What did Boaz do to solve the above problem? (4:1-8).
2. How does what Boaz did to Ruth resemble what Christ did for you? (4: 9-10)
3. By stating the change in Ruth's life, identify at least three effects of the occurrence in # 1 above.
4. How would you describe the mood at the end of the story compared to its beginning?
  - How was Naomi affected by the birth of her grandson (4:14-16)
  - How does she show her gratitude?
  - How did Naomi's grandson, Obed, become a blessing for all the people of Israel?
5. How would you describe the book of Ruth as challenging the traditional beliefs among many of the Jews of Israel at the

time? What surprise ending does the book have for them?

6. What does this book teach you in relation to your own life in terms of:
  - a) The value of making the right choices. (compare Ruth and Orpah)
  - b) Attitude to leadership. (Remember to mention the three attitudes that Ruth had)
  - c) Hope
  - d) God's purpose for your life.

## **Study Guide: Ruth**

### **What makes Ruth unique?**

The book of Ruth is set in the time of the judges, but the book itself probably took shape many centuries later. Most scholars, in fact, believe that Ruth was written during the post-exilic period, after the people of Israel had been allowed to return home from their exile in Babylonia. Two of the leaders in post-exilic Israel—Ezra and Nehemiah—taught the people to be very strict about separating themselves from foreigners. This likely created a climate of suspicion and distrust of anyone who was a non-Jew in post-exilic Israel. The book of Ruth, then, is an excellent example of Israel's post-exilic literature, which challenged traditional ways of thinking about God, God's purposes, and God's chosen people (Israel).

### **Why was Ruth written?**

The story of Ruth was written to show the people of Israel that God's purposes may be fulfilled in unexpected ways, that God works in the lives of anyone who is faithful, and that God's love and goodness is for everyone—not just those who were part of the covenant people of Israel.

These messages seem easy enough for us to comprehend, but for Jews living in the days when scholars believe the book of Ruth was written, these messages were anything but easy to accept! Ruth was not from any of the tribes of Israel...but from Moab, which was situated across the Jordan River, and whose people were a long-time enemy of Israel. Ruth left the security of her own family to live in Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and to take care of this childless widow. Ruth married and eventually had a child of her own—and surprisingly became an ancestor of King David himself.

### **What's the story behind the scene?**

The story of Ruth tells about events that happened during the time of the judges, which was a period of many years before David became king of Israel in 1000 B.C. Many of the Hebrew terms and customs that are mentioned in the story come from this time, but some of the language and laws at work in the book come from as late as 250 B.C. This means that the final version of the story was probably written down centuries after the time when the story took place, in the time scholars refer as the post-exilic period, that is, after the people of Israel had returned from their exile around 539 B.C.

There is an interesting custom behind the story told in Ruth. In the ancient world, when a married man died and left no children, it was the custom for one of his brothers to marry his widow. Any children they had would then be thought of as the children of the dead brother, so that his name could live on (see Deuteronomy 25:5, 6).

### **How is Ruth constructed?**

Ruth is like a short story with interesting characters and a plot that leads to a happy conclusion. It is meant to be read as a story with an important message about God and God's people. The story told in the book unfolds in four scenes, each one corresponding to a chapter.

- Scene One (Chapter 1): Ruth and Naomi leave Moab
- Scene Two (Chapter 2): In Israel, Ruth meets Boaz
- Scene Three (Chapter 3): Boaz accepts Ruth
- Scene Four (Chapter 4): Ruth and Boaz marry and have a baby

## Study about Ruth

Stories of individual's relationship with God and the love He puts into their hearts for each other, particularly when it is cross-cultural love (boundless love), are especially important for us who are in multicultural set ups.

These stories from the Old Testament book of Ruth illustrate how God gives such love to an Israelite woman and a Moabite woman, and how God works out special blessings for them because of their faith in Him in spite of the difficult and tragic circumstances they find themselves in.

The Book of Ruth that can be used for individual or group study.

Life hurts. There's nothing very profound about that statement. Anyone can see the pain and suffering that surround us. A five year old dies from an unintentional gunshot wound, a mother develops cancer, a father of five loses his job, and the list goes on. The existence of evil and suffering in the world can keep us from trusting God. "Why would an all-powerful God allow so much pain and suffering in the world?" we may ask. It is a fair question.

Have you ever been through things that hurt you or made you feel that God is against you because your world is crumbling around you? As you read the first chapter of the book of Ruth, try to put yourself in Naomi's place.

## Getting Oriented

The period in which the events of recorded in the book of Ruth (the time in which the judges ruled) are among the worst in Israel's history. Like the period of decline within the ancient Roman Empire, the Israelite nation began to crumble from within. The book of Judges repeatedly states that during this time "everyone did as he saw fit". As each family or group fought for its rights alone, the society became fractured.

The book of Judges runs downhill, from bad to worse. The last five chapters contain some of the ugliest stories in the Bible – tales of homosexual assault, idolatry, civil war, thievery, rape and murder. No enemy does all this: Israelites do it to each other. Clearly, the exalted nation of Israel, God's chosen people, has lost its sense of direction. The book of Ruth shines like a beautiful diamond against this bleak background.

## Read Ruth Chapter1

### Key Terms

- v. 2. **Moab:** located east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.
- v. 2. **Naomi:** means "pleasant, lovely, delightful".
- v. 2. **Ephrathites:** Ephrathah was the ancient name of Bethlehem of Judah

v. 8. **LORD:** personal name of God meaning “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14); The God who is actively present with his people.

v. 8. **kindness:** The Hebrew term “hesed” means loyal love based upon faithfulness and commitment.

v. 11. **sons who could become your husbands:** The Old Testament Law stated that if a man died, his brother had to marry the widow to protect her and carry on the family name. Naomi’s comment here (“sons who could grow up to be your husbands”) refers to *levirate marriage*, the obligation of a dead man’s brother to care for the widow (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). This law kept the widow from poverty and provided a way for the family name of the dead husband to continue.

v. 20. **Mara:** bitter, sad.

v. 20. **Almighty:** “The Mighty One” suggesting unlimited power.

v. 22. **Bethlehem:** “house of bread”; located about five miles southwest of Jerusalem. The town was surrounded by lush fields and olive groves. Its harvests were abundant. The population of the town would not have exceeded a couple of hundred in most periods and was likely considerably less at this time.

## Exploring the Passage

1. Describe Naomi’s condition after ten years in Moab?

**NOTE:** There was almost nothing worse than being a widow in the ancient world. Widows were taken advantage of or ignored. They would equate to the homeless in our society. They were almost always poverty stricken. God’s law, therefore, provided that the nearest relative of the dead husband should care for the widow; but Naomi had no relatives in Moab, and she did not know if any of her relatives were alive in Israel.

2. Are you surprised by Ruth’s decision to stay with her mother-in-law? Why or why not?

**NOTE:** Moab was one of the nations that oppressed Israel during the period of the judges (Judges 3:12), so there was hostility between the two nations.

3. Naomi said that God was against her. Was she right to think and feel this way? Why or why not?

## Reflection

- How should suffering affect a person’s attitude toward God?
- Have you ever felt empty and afflicted by God as Naomi did? How did you respond? What did God do in

your situation?

4. The presence of God has been referred to as his “invisible providence”. The word “providence” comes from the Latin, *providentia* meaning to “see ahead of time.” The book of Ruth shows that Almighty God, in his *providentia*, is arranging the timing of Naomi and Ruth’s initiatives to accomplish His gracious and loving purposes and plans.

**Read** Ruth 2 (look for signs of God’s providence)

Are there some specific ways you can identify in which God has demonstrated his “providence” in your life?

### Getting Oriented

Naomi’s life had been hard. Ten years earlier things got so bad in Bethlehem after a severe famine, that she migrated into enemy territory with her husband and two sons just to survive. While living in Moab her two sons married Moabite women. However, her husband died and she became a widow. And then she lost both of her married sons before either had fathered a child. Now she is returning to the land of her birth with her daughter-in-law named Ruth from the despised country of Moab. Naomi had urged Ruth to return to Moab where she would have a positive future. But Ruth would not leave her mother-in law.

Naomi feels vulnerable in this period of lawlessness. She can’t manage to shake off feelings of depression, and she believes that God has turned against her. However, the author of the book leaves us at the end of the first chapter with a hopeful sign. Ruth and Naomi are returning to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. “Harvest” is an indication of God’s blessing. Just as God sent rain to refill Bethlehem “the house of bread” with grain at harvest time, so He was about to end the famine in Naomi’s life.

### Key Terms and Historical Background

**Gather leftover grain** (2:2). When the wheat and barley were ready to be harvested, harvesters were hired to cut down the stalks and tie them into bundles. Israelite law demanded that the corners of the fields not be harvested. In addition, any grain that was dropped was to be left for poor people, who picked it up (this was called *gleaning*) and used it for food (Leviticus 19:9; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19). This law served as a type of welfare program in Israel.

**I have told the men not to touch you** (2:9). The ideal position for a gleaner was right behind the harvesters, where one would be the first to pick up whatever stalks fell from the sheaves. However, a gleaner who followed too closely was vulnerable to rough treatment by the workmen.

**Half a bushel** (2:17). between thirty and fifty pounds of grain; about a month’s worth of the grain ration usually allotted to male workers.



**Family Redeemer** (2:20). responsible for protecting the interests of needy members of the extended family.

### Exploring the Passage

1. Do you see God's actively at work in the story or do you see the events that occur as merely coincidences? If you think God is actively working, how would you describe the nature of his involvement?

NOTE: In the ancient Near Eastern worldview, God played the most important role in cause and effect, both in history and in nature.

2. Previously Naomi had expressed thoughts and feelings that suggested that God was against her. She urged her daughters-in-law not to return to Bethlehem with her stating that *"Things are far more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD himself has caused me to suffer."* And when she returned home she instructed the women in her town: *"Don't call me Naomi ... Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me home empty. Why should you call me Naomi when the LORD has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy?"*

Observe the change in her perspective. Why do you think that her thoughts and feelings about God changed?

3. A single woman had few ways to support herself in those days. She could beg, sell herself into slavery, become a prostitute, look for a husband among the eligible men of the village, or seek support from her nearest male relative. Or, during the months of harvest, she could glean. Consider the risks of gleaning and the alternatives facing Ruth and Naomi. What do you learn about Ruth from her work in gleaning to support both herself and her mother-in-law?

**NOTE:** The author continually reminds us that Ruth was from Moab. Israel regarded Moab as an inferior people, descended from an incestuous union (Genesis 19:30-38). Moab had been hostile towards Israel since the days of Moses. Moab also oppressed some of the Israelite tribes for eighteen years toward the beginning of the judges' era (Judges 3:12-30).

4. What do you most admire about Boaz in this passage?

**NOTE:** The law of gleaning did not require the landowner to provide either food or water or protection from the men.

### Charting Our Course

How convinced are you that God wants to be involved in your life to accomplish his purposes and plans? What evidence (or lack thereof) can you point to in supporting your conclusions?

Life is like a grindstone, someone once said, and whether it grinds you down or polishes you depends on what you are made of. It also depends on your view of God. The question is, even in the hardest circumstances is God in control? If he is, that means he can change the bitterness of our hard experiences.

Do you believe that God is in control of your most difficult circumstances?

Naomi arrives with Ruth in Bethlehem as the barley harvest is beginning. Her daughter-in-law gleans leftover grain and, as it turns out, finds herself in the fields of Boaz who is related to Naomi. Boaz shows kindness to her and prays, *“May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully.”* The rest of the book tells how he proves to be the fulfillment of his own prayer. In a dramatic encounter with Ruth on the threshing floor, Boaz agrees to do the duty of a family- Redeemer and purchase Naomi’s family land so that it is not lost. He also agrees to marry Ruth so that he can provide her children to carry on the name of her dead Husband.

However, a legal complication could prevent Boaz from following through with his intentions.

### **Key Words and Historical Background Notes**

**town gate** (v. 1). This was the center of activity. No one could enter or leave the town without traveling through the gate. Merchants set up their temporary shops near the gate, which also served as “city hall.” Here city officials gathered to conduct business.

**leaders** (v. 4). Usually clan leaders or heads of household, served as the governing body of the city. Judicial and legal matters were in their hands. **like Rachel and Leah** (v. 11). Their sons became the initial fathers of Israel’s twelve tribes. **Perez** (v. 12). He was the father of the most famous tribe in Judah, the one to which Boaz belonged.

**seven sons** (v. 15). Since seven was considered a number of completeness, to have seven sons was considered to be the highest level of all family blessings in Israel.

### **Read Ruth 4**

1. Think about the choices Boaz and the unnamed kinsman each make in 4:2-10. What do you learn about each man’s priorities?

**NOTE:** At first the unnamed kinsman probably thought that he would only have to marry Naomi who was beyond childbearing years. Any male children that he would have fathered by Ruth would legally be considered the sons

of Ruth's first husband. Thus the land would never pass into his own family's possession, and in fact he would reduce his estate by spending it to purchase the land. He would also need to assume financial responsibility for supporting Ruth, any children Ruth would bear, and Naomi.

2. How did Ruth and Boaz's marriage affect Naomi?

3. Remember what Naomi thought God was doing in her life when she was empty of wealth, family, and status? What part did God play in filling her emptiness?

The book of Ruth tells how Naomi moves from *emptiness* at the beginning of the story to *fullness* at the end of the story, from *poverty* and *sorrow* to *security* and *joy*. The story is structured around her choice to find hope through *the kind, selfless and God-blessed acts of Ruth and Boaz*. The last verses of our story show that God's plan extended beyond Naomi's personal problems. God used Ruth and Boaz to produce Israel's greatest king. Their great-grandson turned out to be David. And many centuries later they also became the ancestor of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem.

Just as God brought fullness and hope to Naomi through the selfless work of Boaz expressed in his willingness to assume the role of family-redeemer, so also we are brought to fullness and hope through our family- Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ the Bible indicates that we, like Naomi in the beginning of the story, exist in a state of hopelessness. We all fall short of God's standard of absolute perfection and are therefore eternally separated from Him (Romans 3:23, Ephesians 2:1-3). However we can be brought to fullness and hope through the selfless and costly sacrifice of God's son, Jesus Christ (Mark 10:45; I Peter 1:18-19). In a small family circle in Bethlehem, God gives us a preview of how he will bring the bitterness of life on earth to an end.

- Do you believe that God can change the bitterness of your hard experiences? Explain.
- Are there ways that God has shown his faithfulness to you and changed your sorrow to joy?

