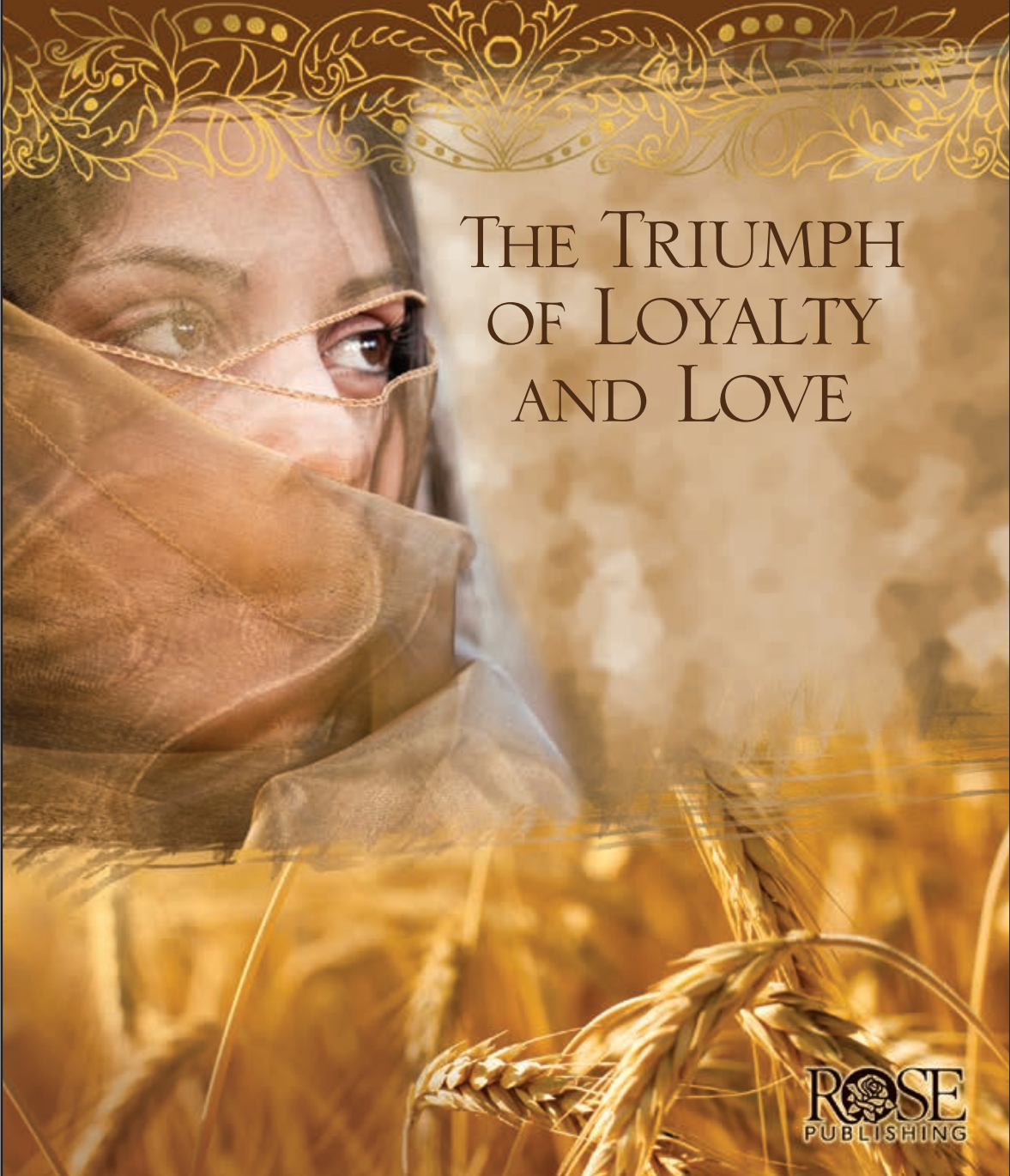


Loss, Love, and Redemption

RUTH



THE TRIUMPH
OF LOYALTY
AND LOVE

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FROM TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH

Life can throw us unexpected and painful surprises. For many of us, or for people we love, life can change in a single moment: a tragic car accident, an ill-timed jump into a pool, a catastrophic tornado or hurricane, or a broken relationship that drags us and others through horrible and sad experiences. Even worse, one terrible event might bring about another. As the saying goes, “when it rains, it pours.”

When events overturn our lives, we can get lost in grief and hurt. We might even experience a loss of identity and lose sight of those things that make us who we are. It is a time of disorientation.

The Old Testament story of Ruth and Naomi explores the problems of loss and identity. The answers the book offers contain much wisdom for our lives today. The book of Ruth is a love story. It is a love story between Ruth and Boaz, and one that illustrates the love between God and his people. It is a story that portrays God and his unfailing love and ceaseless loyalty.

In capable hands, stories are powerful tools. They appeal to both our emotions and our intellect. In the story of Ruth we encounter loss and suffering, disappointment and disorientation, uncertainty and bitterness. But we also find good news; we find love, commitment, perseverance, hope, and God’s powerful and tender hand throughout. It is a story about transformation, about God turning our “wailing into dancing” (Ps. 30:11).

SCENE 1:

A TRAGIC STORY IN A FOREIGN LAND

(RUTH 1:1–22)

WHAT'S IN A NAME? “In the days when the judges ruled . . .” marks the setting for the story (Ruth 1:1). It sends the readers back to a time when “Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judg. 21:25). Israel’s social and spiritual life was a mess. The time of the judges was known for its cycle of disobedience, repentance, God’s intervention, gratitude, and back to disobedience. Although the text does not say that the famine was a punishment from God, the mention of the days of the judges makes this connection possible.

Whatever the case, we find a man from Bethlehem—the name *Bethlehem* means “house of bread”—leaving town and heading to the foreign land of Moab because of the famine. Already we know that things are not the way they are supposed to be. The “house of bread” is running out of bread. The Hebrew word for *bread* and *food* is the same.



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The names of the man and his family increase the likelihood that we are in for a surprising story. The man’s name, *Elimelek*, most likely means “my God is king.” In those times, one of the main functions of a king was to provide security and food for his people. A good king made sure his people did not suffer hunger. Moreover, the names of Elimelek’s sons suggest that the story will take a tragic turn. *Mahlon* means something equivalent to “sickly” and *Kilion* to “weakly.” With those names, we suspect that they won’t be in the story for too long. Elimelek’s wife’s name seems to be the only good news; *Naomi* means “pleasant.” But in a story that promises surprises, we can anticipate a great surprise for Naomi as well.

DEATH AND THE AFTERMATH In three short verses, we read that Elimelek died and, after ten years, so did Mahlon and Kilion. “And Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband” (Ruth 1:5). Before moving on, however, let’s pause to fully appreciate the full effect of those few words.

In the cultural world during the times of the Old Testament, women were valued only by their connection to a man. Unmarried women derived their value from their fathers and married women from their husbands. Their security and safety depended on the husband's ability to provide for them. When a married woman lost her husband, as Naomi did, her value declined steeply, and her safety and security depended on her sons. When Naomi lost her sons as well, she became destitute. Now she was on a social level below servants. Making matters worse, she was a foreigner in a kingdom other than her own, one of the lowliest of the low.

The turn of fortunes for Naomi is total and paralyzing. Her life is overturned. It reminds us of another biblical character whose life was overturned: Job. However, Naomi was a woman; her life is even worse off than Job's because she has no one to turn to for help. "The LORD's hand has turned against me!" (Ruth 1:13).

A QUESTION OF LOYALTY Naomi is not the only one in this position. Naomi's daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, are in a similar predicament. They are also widows. Although the text never states it, Ruth and Orpah do not or cannot have children—ten years of marriage to Naomi's sons did not produce children for either woman. By cultural tradition, both women were attached to Naomi, their mother-in-law, to share her fate. Naomi, however, graciously releases them from their cultural duty and encourages them to go back to their mothers, to at least have the possibility of a future. After some argument, Orpah decides to go back. Ruth, however, decides to stay with her mother-in-law. It is a courageous decision, and one that comes from a deep love, commitment, and loyalty to Naomi. Naomi calls this love *hesed* ("kindness;" Ruth 1:8), a Hebrew word that is more often used to describe God's love, commitment, and loyalty toward Israel.

Ruth left her home, her identity, and her possibility of a favorable future, and joined Naomi in what could only be a future filled with more suffering. Yet, her actions are just what Naomi needs. Naomi leaves Moab, and when she is back in Bethlehem she says, "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me

DON'T urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me. —Ruth 1:16–17

back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (1:21). Naomi changes her name; she is now “Mara,” which means bitter (Ruth 1:20).

THE LIFE OF DESTITUTION



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Returning to Bethlehem must have been a very difficult decision for Naomi to make. All that she had died in Moab. But she heard that “the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them” in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:6). Naomi understood that life for her back in her village of Bethlehem would be better. God commanded the Israelites to protect the weakest people in the community: “Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this” (Deut. 24:17–18; also Ex. 22:22). The second chapter of Ruth opens with a hopeful

reminder: “Naomi had a relative on her husband’s side, a man of standing . . . whose name was Boaz” (2:1).

However, life for Ruth in Bethlehem would not be any easier: She is female, a foreigner, barren, and widowed. Yet her commitment was firm and exemplary. She took it upon herself to care for her sorrowful mother-in-law. “As it turned out” (2:3), the text tells us, perhaps with a knowing smile and a wink, that Ruth just happened to be getting her grain in a plot of land that belonged to Boaz.

LEARN to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. —Isa. 1:17



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SCENE 2:

A NEW LIFE, A NEW HOPE

(RUTH 2:1–23)

BOAZ, A WORTHY MAN These three Hebrew words, *ish gibbor hayil*, are used to describe Boaz in Ruth 2:1. Translated sometimes as “a man of standing” or “a worthy man,” these words offer clues to the character of Boaz. The first part of the expression *ish gibbor* means “man mighty in,” and *hayil* can mean “strength, power, ability, honor, wealth,” depending on the context. In this social context, the expression means a man strong in wealth, ability, and honor. In other words, Boaz is a man well respected and known for his character and leadership. The name *Boaz* probably means “in strength.” Socially, Boaz stands galaxies away from Ruth’s own social status.

We also learn about Boaz’s spiritual character when he arrives at his field and greets his servants. Boaz is a pious and well-liked person; his servants’ love for him suggests that he is a fair and honest person. He is so in touch with his servants that he even notices a new person following his harvesters. He approaches Ruth and makes an offering that speaks volumes about his character. Boaz greets his servants with, “The LORD be with you!” (2:4). Indeed, the Lord’s presence becomes evident in Boaz’s own righteous and compassionate character toward his servants and Ruth. Boaz makes offers to Ruth worthy of his character:



- Permission to stay in his field,
- Permission to be with his servants,
- Protection from the men in the field,
- Provision to share in the water of his workers.

Although the first offer fulfills the command to provide for the poor (Lev. 19:9; 23:22; Deut. 24:19), Boaz went far beyond the requirements of the law. Ruth’s social condition places her below even the poor Israelites following the harvesters. Not only that, but providing his protection to her from the men reminds us that women then, as often is the case today, are easy targets for abuse and violence. However, Boaz offered more than protection; he made Ruth, for all practical purposes, part of his household. Again, Ruth was socially

far below Boaz's servants, but now she is to share in their water. Further, Boaz invites Ruth to his own table to share his bread. It is more than a generous gesture;; it is a righteous and compassionate deed.

However, Boaz is not finished with showcasing his character. Unknown to Ruth, he orders his servants to leave extra grain, and even stalks of wheat, for Ruth to pick up. Ruth ends up with about thirty pounds of grain to take home! According to documents from Babylon around that time, harvesters would take home one or two pounds a day. Ruth took home more than ten times the salary of a harvester! In addition, she took home leftover cooked grain for Naomi. While the great amount of grain Ruth brought back home was impressive, for a hungry Naomi the sight of already cooked grain was a blessing beyond words. Ruth's care and commitment soothed Naomi's bitterness and grief.

A DEEP LOVE Why did Boaz act in such a way toward Ruth? The answer, in part, is that he acted from his own commitment and character. The answer is also found in his own words. Ruth bows down with her face to the ground—as a person in her social standing would be expected—and asks, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” (Ruth 2:10). Boaz answers, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband . . .” (2:11). Boaz is moved to compassion because of Ruth's own loyalty and commitment to Naomi. Ruth's love and commitment to Naomi exemplify the attitude that God's people should have toward those in need. Ruth's unrelenting and selfless love toward Naomi enraptured Boaz.

HESED Most of the time in the Old Testament, *hesed* is used in connection to a covenant, such as marriage, as it is here in the book of Ruth. It means that people are willing to fulfill their covenant obligations and go beyond them for the sake of an important relationship. *Hesed*, then, suggests taking loyalty, commitment, compassion, and love a step beyond what is simply required.

In the times of the Bible, marriage was more an economic than a romantic affair. Boaz had nothing to gain from courting a foreign woman from the lowest rung of the social ladder. And that is exactly what makes Boaz's actions even more extraordinary— a man doing what is right without expecting anything in return! Boaz's loving actions were a response to Ruth's own loving commitment and loyalty to Naomi. Although not at the same social level, Ruth is his match on a spiritual level.

WHOSE HESED? With great joy, Naomi receives Ruth's gifts and cries out: "Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" (Ruth 1:19). Naomi had bitterly complained that God's noticing her had brought much affliction (1:21). When she learns that the man's name is Boaz, a light comes on in her mind: "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead" (2:20). Who is the "he" referring to? Boaz or the Lord? It's not clear, though it probably refers to both. In Boaz's *hesed* Naomi recognizes the Lord's *hesed*.



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After so much heartbreak and bitterness, Naomi finds comfort through the loving and compassionate acts of Ruth and Boaz. Although the text does not say it this way, we can recognize that God has reached out and touched Naomi through Ruth and Boaz. We would expect God to use his people this way. Boaz, after all, is an Israelite of impeccable character and reputation. But Ruth . . . well, notice the way Ruth is introduced in this chapter: "And Ruth the Moabite . . ." (2:2) and "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab . . ." (2:6). She is a Moabite, one of Israel's most ferocious enemies, and a pagan—remember that Naomi asked her to return to her gods and her family (1:15). Indeed, Boaz behaves the way all Israelites should. Ruth, although not from Israel, also behaves as an Israelite should!



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SCENE 3:

A DECISIVE ENCOUNTER

(RUTH 3:1—18)

A PLAN FOR RUTH As she realizes that God is blessing her, Naomi's grief is diminished. But Naomi is still empty, and Ruth's future is still precarious. They are still poor, widowed, childless, and, in Ruth's case, a foreigner. With her renewed hope, Naomi reciprocates Ruth's *hesed* with a plan of her own. What will happen to Ruth if Naomi dies? Her prospects are even grimmer without her mother-in-law. Having witnessed the righteous character of her relative Boaz, Naomi makes a rather risky plan. Ruth is to approach Boaz in the middle of the night, after a time of celebration following the harvest, while he sleeps outside the city, where the threshing floor was most likely located. With any other man, such a plan would be a recipe for disaster. However, relying on Boaz's righteous character, Naomi is sure that Ruth will be safe.

NAOMI'S LOYALTY Naomi explains her plan to Ruth and concludes: "He will tell you what to do" (Ruth 3:4). Ruth replies, "I will do whatever you say" (3:5). With this plan, Naomi is showing her *hesed* to Ruth: Naomi is seeking a husband for Ruth—a husband would assure a future for Ruth. However, Naomi needs to include the land in the marriage deal to entice a man such as Boaz to marry Ruth. By giving up her rights to the land, Naomi is taking a great risk. Once married, Ruth and the land would belong to Boaz. Naomi could end up with nothing, she could be completely destitute. Yet, Naomi knows Ruth's character and trusts in her *hesed*. Now more than ever, Naomi's future is tied to Ruth's. Filled with risks, this plan depends on Ruth's *hesed* and, as it turns out, on Boaz's *hesed* as well.

RUTH AND BOAZ However, Ruth does not follow Naomi's instructions entirely. Instead, after waking up Boaz, she says, "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family" (Ruth 3:9). Boaz does not react in anger to Ruth's daring actions. He replies, "The LORD bless you, my daughter. This kindness [*hesed*] is greater than that which you showed earlier . . ." (3:10). It is not completely clear to what Boaz is referring by the earlier *hesed*. However, something Ruth has done has caused a great impression on Boaz.

Ruth's request to "spread the corner of your garment" is a term that readers should recognize. In Ezekiel, the prophet used the image of marriage to illustrate God's relationship with Israel. The prophet used the same expression, "I spread the corner of my garment over you . . ." (Ezek. 16:8) as a symbolic gesture for the marriage covenant. Ruth is asking Boaz to marry her—a very daring request from a woman to a man. However, the words Ruth uses reflect Boaz's own words back in his field in Ruth 2:12: "under whose *wings* [God's] you have come to take refuge." (The words *wings* and *corner* are the same word in Hebrew.) Being covered by Boaz's garment represents God's own covering of Ruth. However, Ruth not only requests Boaz to marry her, but she goes beyond her own needs and future and requests that Boaz also redeem (buy back) Elimelek's land for Naomi, which would then provide a secure future for Naomi. Ruth's ability to think beyond herself and consider her mother-in-law's needs shows her commitment to Naomi.

Ruth's requests to Boaz include two important social protections included in the law: the levirate marriage and the guardian-redeemer. These two ancient practices had a very practical social and theological purpose: to assure both the safety of descendants and the possession of ancestral family land. Ancient Israelites derived much of their identity as God's people from these two social realities. Sons were to carry the family name and the land, which was the concrete expression of God's promises to Abraham. To this point, Ruth's explicit identity has been that of a foreign woman who accompanies her Israelite widowed mother-in-law. To the reader, it has become increasingly clear that Ruth behaves just as an Israelite should. In chapter 3 of Ruth, it is

LEVIRATE MARRIAGE AND GUARDIAN-REDEEMER

Levirate Marriage: A provision in the Mosaic law which guaranteed that the lineage of a man will continue. The nearest kinsman would marry the widow of a man who dies without a son (Deut. 25:5–10). The term *levirate* comes from a Latin word *levir*, which means "brother-in-law." In addition, this law provided protection for a widow who could be in danger to become indigent.

Guardian-Redeemer: Also known as "Kinsman-Redeemer." When an Israelite man experienced hard times, his nearest relative was required to help him. The Guardian-redeemer would buy the land of the needy relative to prevent it from becoming the possession of someone outside the clan (Lev. 25:25).

also clear that Boaz shares that view, since he has praised her *hesed* twice now. Furthermore, it has become clear to others in the city that Ruth is more than a foreigner: “All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character” (3:11). “Noble character” translates from a Hebrew expression that connects Ruth with Boaz: *eshet hayil*. Boaz was first introduced in the book as an *ish gibbor hayil*. Once again, the text presents Ruth at the same spiritual level as Boaz, an extraordinary claim in a male dominated world!

AN UNEXPECTED RESULT

Although Boaz promises to do as Ruth has requested, Boaz unexpectedly informs her that a closer relative has the rights of the guardian-redeemer (Ruth 3:12). However, Boaz assures Ruth that if the nameless relative is not willing to exercise his right, Boaz will do it. As a visible assurance of his promise to Ruth, Boaz gives her “six measures of barley” (3:15) to fill her shawl. Symbolically, Ruth and Naomi had come to Bethlehem with empty hands, but now Ruth’s hands are full. Naomi responds with caution and wisdom: “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens” (3:18).



Rembrandt, Boaz Pouring Six Measures of Barley into Ruth's Veil

RUTH AND PROVERBS

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the book of Ruth follows the book of Proverbs. By being there, the book of Ruth connects the last poem in Proverbs—“the wife of noble character” in Proverbs 31:10–31—and Ruth. The poem in Proverbs begins with the words *eshet hayil*: “A wife of noble character who can find?” (Prov. 31:10). The answer is Ruth. Ruth is the *eshet hayil*, the woman of noble character.



SCENE 4:

FROM EMPTINESS TO FULLNESS

(RUTH 4:1–15)

RESOLUTION AT THE GATES After the private conversation that Ruth initiated, the scene moves again to the public sphere. In the public sphere, Ruth and Naomi are voiceless and powerless. Boaz becomes their voice. He is a man of strength, of noble character, of great standing in the community. However, rather than bullying others to get his way, or using his own social capital to accomplish his plans, Boaz acts with wisdom. Boaz trusts in God's *hesed*. Although not explicitly affirmed, God's presence throughout the story is apparent.



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When Boaz goes up to the town gate, the nameless guardian-redeemer happens to come along. God is working behind the scenes, so this turn of events is not merely luck.

The names of the main characters are important in the story. However, the relative “guardian-redeemer” remains nameless. This nameless Israelite is willing to redeem the land that belonged to Elimelek, Kilion, and Mahlon, possibly because of the financial benefits that come with it. However, Boaz reminds him, “On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man’s widow” (Ruth 4:5). Notice how Boaz presents Ruth. To this point, Boaz has spoken of Ruth with much admiration and praise: her demonstration of *hesed* toward Naomi is noteworthy, and she is described as a woman of noble character, one who any Israelite male would be blessed to marry. But here, Boaz introduces her as “the Moabite,” a foreigner who belongs to one of Israel’s most hated enemy kingdom.

And she is also described as “the dead man’s widow,” not only a foreigner—and, although not explicitly said, also childless. Presented this way, Ruth is not a desirable partner but a financial liability. The nameless relative

relinquishes his right to redeem Naomi's land. Although not doing anything illegal or immoral, this relative fails to do *hesed* to Naomi. While obeying the law, he was not willing to walk the extra mile that *hesed* would demand.

In the public sphere, Boaz forced the hand of the nameless relative. By means of what seems to have been a formalized ritual, the relative transfers all rights to Boaz. This transfer was made official with an offering of clothing. Here, at the gate, the piece of clothing is a sandal. This symbolic act formalizes the transaction, and the elders witness it: "We are witnesses" (4:11) and bless the foreign woman, "May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah . . ." (4:11). The elders praise Ruth at the gate, just as Proverbs affirms, "Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate" (Prov. 31:31).

REMOVING a sandal was a symbolic act that signaled a change of status. When people expressed pain, they would tear their clothing, and changing into rough clothing would symbolize their low emotional state. When women became widows, such as Naomi and Ruth, they would wear clothing that reflected this new social status. And before going to see Boaz, Ruth changed her clothing to indicate her new status as one who is open for marriage. Boaz subsequently covers Ruth as a symbol for marriage.

FROM EMPTINESS TO FULLNESS Boaz married Ruth, and "the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son" (Ruth 4:13). This is a story of redemption through *hesed*. God could have done wonders with Naomi and Ruth; he could have come in an awesome storm and talked to them, as he did with Job. He could have sent a powerful prophet, as he did with the widow of Zarephath and the prophet Elijah. But he didn't. Instead, quietly behind the scenes, God allowed his people to represent him. Boaz's *hesed* represented God's own *hesed*. Boaz's loving, courageous, compassionate, and righteous actions represented God. And Ruth's own courageous, loving, daring, and loyal actions, along with her commitment to Naomi's God, show a way to go beyond the written law and seek the kingdom of God and its righteousness. Ruth becomes a model for what *hesed* looks like—not just for women, but for all of God's people.

Naomi is no longer “Mara”; she is no longer bitter or empty. Now, “Naomi has a son!” (4:17). Naomi’s identity has radically changed. Ruth’s identity is equally changed. She is no longer a foreign widow. She is now married to a man of noble character; she is a mother; and she is being compared to great women of Israel: Rachel, Leah, and Tamar (4:12). Ruth is now an Israelite woman, a woman of noble character, the mother of Obed, the ancestor of the great King David, and, eventually, of the Messiah Jesus (Matt. 1:5–16). God’s *hesed* transforms and renews people!

GOD’S HESED “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). God’s love is so much more than a feeling or an emotion—it is an action. The letter of John teaches us as much. We know about God’s immense love in that he *sent* his own Son to give us life. That is the main quality of *hesed*. It is action that is born from commitment, loyalty, compassion, and love. If Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi illustrate it for us, Jesus Christ perfects it with his obedience and sacrifice. God’s *hesed* in Christ gives us new life, makes us a new creation, and enables us to imitate Ruth, Boaz, Naomi, and, especially, Jesus. May our *hesed* be like that of Ruth, Boaz, Naomi, and Jesus!



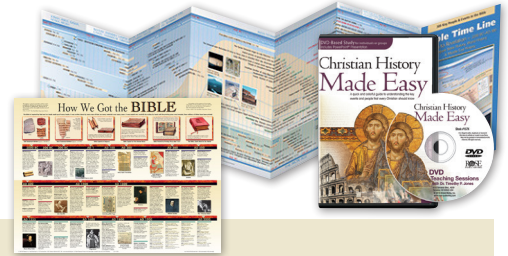
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WE LOVE because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.
—1 John 4:19–21

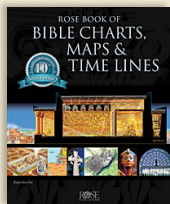
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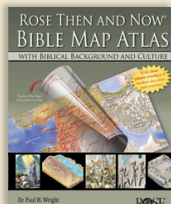
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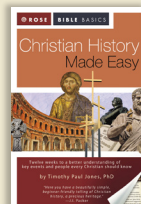
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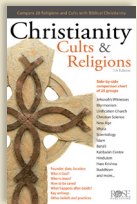


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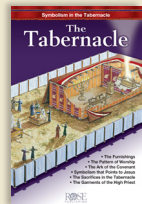


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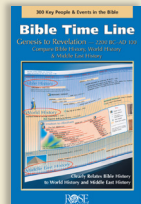
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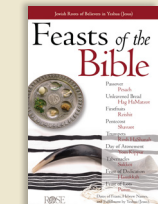
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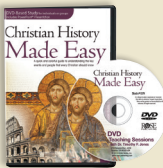


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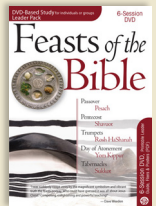


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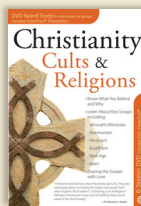
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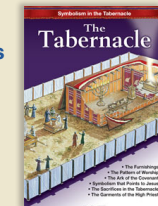
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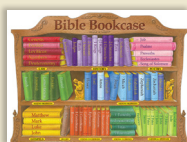


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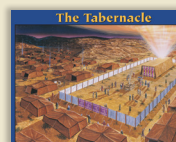
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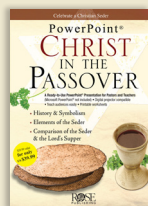


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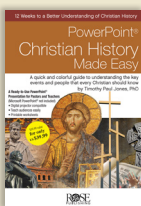
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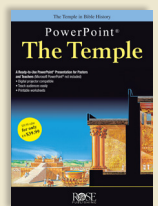
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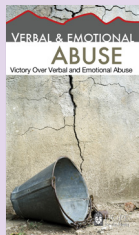
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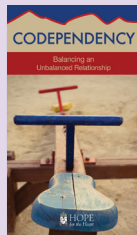
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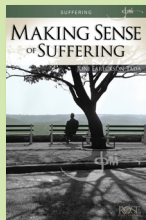
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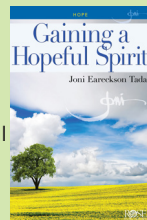
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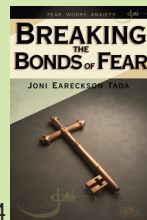
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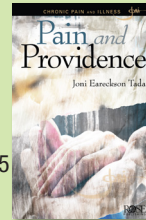
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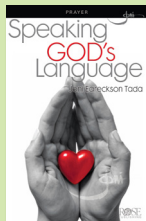
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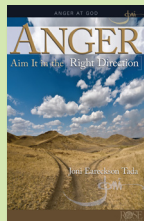
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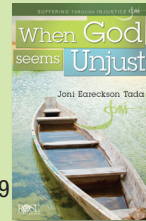
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