

The Book of Ruth, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Loss in Moab and Ruth's Loyal Love

Ruth 1:1-22

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson teaches that God is sovereignly and graciously at work behind the ordinary events of ordinary lives. The famine, the move to Moab, the marriages, the deaths, the timing of the homecoming at barley harvest, none of it is random, yet none of it cancels the real choices and real love of the people involved. What is doctrinally at stake is a right view of God's providence: we want students to magnify God's faithfulness without sliding into a fatalism that erases human responsibility, and to honor genuine human love and obedience without imagining that God is absent. Ruth and Naomi truly choose, truly grieve, truly trust, and God truly governs it all toward redemption.

The lesson also aims at the heart of the grieving and the heart that must learn loyal love. Many in any class carry real sorrow, and Naomi gives them permission to be honest before God while showing them that God meets the empty and fills them in His time. Ruth gives us a vivid, costly picture of covenant loyalty and of trusting, obedient faith that leaves the old life behind to cleave to the LORD. The aim is not merely to inform but to form, to soften hard grief into honest trust, to stir cold hearts toward steadfast love, and to enlarge our confidence that the God who governs the harvest governs our seasons too.

Finally, this lesson lifts the eyes to grace for the outsider. Ruth the Moabite, a woman with no natural claim on the covenant, comes to take refuge under the wings of the God of Israel and is woven into the line of David and of Christ. Drawing timeless principles from this Old Testament narrative (Romans 15:4), we point forward to the gospel that is now for all nations, so that every outsider in the room hears that the God of Bethlehem still welcomes those who come to Him in faith. The student should leave both comforted in grief and challenged to trust and to love.

Question 1

Student Question:

The story opens "in the days when the judges ruled" with "a famine in the land" (Ruth 1:1). What does the Bible teach about how God uses hard providences and even our ordinary decisions to accomplish His purposes, and how can we trust His hand without excusing our own responsibility for the choices we make?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The book opens with a careful setting: "in the days when the judges ruled." That was a turbulent, often faithless era, when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes"

(Judges 21:25). Against that dark backdrop, the LORD is quietly preparing a story of redemption. A famine strikes Bethlehem, the “house of bread,” an irony the original readers would not have missed. The very town named for bread has none, and a covenant family must decide what to do.

Here we meet the doctrine of God’s providence. Scripture teaches that God governs all things, the famine, the seasons, the rising and falling of fortunes (Acts 14:17; Psalm 104:14–15). Yet the Bible never uses providence to excuse human choice. Elimelech chooses to leave; Ruth chooses to cling; Naomi chooses to return. God’s overruling hand and our genuine responsibility are taught side by side throughout Scripture (Genesis 50:20; Proverbs 16:9).

We must guard against two errors. The first is fatalism, the idea that because God is sovereign, our choices do not matter or that we bear no accountability. The second is practical atheism, living as though God is absent and everything is mere chance. The truth holds both together: God is at work, and we are responsible. This is the comfort and the summons of the whole book of Ruth.

Notice how God works not chiefly through spectacular miracles in this story but through ordinary decisions and ordinary kindnesses. There is no parting sea here, no fire from heaven. There is a famine, a journey, a harvest, a kinsman. And through these everyday threads God weaves the lineage of David and, ultimately, of Christ. This should encourage every believer that no ordinary day is wasted in the hands of a faithful God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s providence governs even hard seasons (Acts 14:17)
- Human responsibility is never erased by divine sovereignty (Proverbs 16:9)
- Guard against fatalism on one side and practical atheism on the other
- God works through ordinary events, not only miracles
- The days of the judges show our need for God when each does right in his own eyes

Discussion Prompts

- How do you hold together God’s sovereignty and your own responsibility?
- Where have you seen God work through ordinary, unspectacular events in your life?
- What “famine” are you facing, and how does it test your trust in God?

Question 2

Student Question:

Elimelech moved his family from Bethlehem, the “house of bread,” to Moab to escape the famine (Ruth 1:1–2). When you face a hard season, are you more likely to run toward a quick fix or to stay and trust God where He has placed you? Name a present situation where you feel that tug.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Elimelech's move to Moab was understandable. A father wants to feed his family. Yet there is a quiet sadness in a covenant family leaving the land of promise for the fields of Moab, a people often at odds with Israel. The text does not openly condemn him, but the unfolding sorrows invite us to ponder the cost of leaning on our own solutions in a hard season.

Every one of us knows the pull toward the quick fix. When the cupboard is bare, when the diagnosis comes, when the relationship strains, we are tempted to run toward whatever promises relief, even if it leads us away from where God has planted us. The question is not whether moving is always wrong (sometimes it is wise) but whether we are trusting God or merely managing our fear.

This is a self-examination question, so let it land personally. Trusting God where He has placed us does not mean passivity; it means seeking Him first, weighing our choices before Him, and refusing to let panic drive us. Bethlehem would have bread again. The famine was not the end of the story, though Elimelech could not see that from inside it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hard seasons tempt us toward quick fixes over trust
- Not all change is wrong, but fear-driven decisions are dangerous
- Trusting God is active, not passive
- We rarely see the whole story from inside the trial

Discussion Prompts

- When pressure hits, do you run toward a fix or toward God?
- How can you tell the difference between wise action and fearful escape?
- What present situation is testing whether you will stay and trust?

Question 3

Student Question:

In a few short verses Naomi loses her husband and both her sons (Ruth 1:3–5). What does Scripture teach us about how God regards the grieving and the widow, and what does this passage show us about facing real loss without pretending it does not hurt?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The text is unflinching: "And Elimelech Naomi's husband died... and they died also both of them." In a handful of words a woman loses her husband and both her sons. Scripture does not soften the blow or rush past it. The Bible is a book that knows grief, and it never asks the suffering to pretend.

God has a special tenderness toward the grieving and the widow. He is called “a father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows” (Psalm 68:5). Pure religion before God includes visiting “the fatherless and widows in their affliction” (James 1:27). Naomi is exactly the kind of person God draws near to, even when she cannot feel His nearness.

For the grieving in our classes, this passage is permission to be honest. We do not honor God by denying our pain. The Psalms are full of lament, and the Lord Jesus Himself wept at a graveside (John 11:35). Faith does not mean a frozen smile; it means bringing our true sorrow to a God who is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18).

And yet, even here, the seeds of redemption are already planted. Beside the grieving Naomi stands Ruth, the very instrument God will use to turn her emptiness to fullness. Grief is real, but in God’s hands it is never the final word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture treats grief honestly, never demanding pretense
- God is a father to the fatherless and judge of widows (Psalm 68:5)
- Pure religion cares for the widow in affliction (James 1:27)
- Lament is a faithful response, not a failure of faith
- God plants seeds of redemption even in seasons of loss

Discussion Prompts

- How does it comfort you that God draws near to the widow and the grieving?
- Why do we sometimes feel we must hide our grief from God?
- Who in your church family is grieving and needs you to draw near?

Question 4

Student Question:

Naomi later says, “the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me” (Ruth 1:20). Have you ever been honest with God about your bitterness or sorrow? What keeps you from bringing your raw grief to Him, and what might change if you did?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Naomi’s words are raw: “the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.” This is not polite religion. She names her pain to God’s face. Remarkably, the Bible records her words without rebuke. There is room in faith for honest lament.

Many of us were taught, perhaps without words, that good believers do not feel bitter, do not question, do not weep too loudly. But the Scriptures tell a different story. Job, David, Jeremiah, and even our Lord in Gethsemane poured out anguish before God. Honesty is not the enemy of faith; hidden, festering grief is.

This is a personal question. The change that comes from bringing raw grief to God is not that He always removes the pain, but that we are no longer alone in it. We discover, as Naomi will, that the God we accuse of emptying us is the very God preparing to fill us again. Honesty before God is the doorway to comfort from God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest lament is a biblical and faithful response
- Hidden grief festers; expressed grief can heal
- God is not threatened by our raw honesty
- Comfort comes through honesty, not through pretense

Discussion Prompts

- What keeps you from being honest with God about your sorrow?
- How might naming your grief before God change your experience of it?
- Where do you sense God preparing to fill an emptiness you feel now?

Question 5

Student Question:

Naomi heard “that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread” and rose to return home (Ruth 1:6). What does this teach about repentance and returning, about turning back toward God and His people when we have wandered, and why does God meet the returning heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The turning point comes in verse six: Naomi “heard... how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread.” Word of God’s provision reaches her in Moab, and she rises to return. The journey home begins with hearing of God’s grace and choosing to turn back toward Him and His people.

This is a quiet picture of repentance and returning. To return to Bethlehem is to return to the land of promise, to the covenant people, to the place of worship. Throughout Scripture, God calls the wanderer home: “Return unto me, and I will return unto you” (Malachi 3:7). The God who provides bread is the God who welcomes the returning heart.

Why does God meet the returning? Because His very nature is gracious and merciful, “slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Joel 2:13). He does not stand with folded arms waiting for us to grovel; like the father in the parable, He runs to meet us (Luke 15:20). Naomi takes the first step home, and she finds harvest waiting.

There is also a lesson in the timing. Naomi returns “in the beginning of barley harvest.” The moment she turns back toward God’s people, she steps into a season of provision she could not

yet see. Returning to God is never returning to emptiness; it is stepping into His readiness to provide.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Returning to God begins with hearing of His grace
- Repentance is a turning back toward God and His people
- God's nature is to welcome the returning heart (Joel 2:13)
- God meets us as a running father, not a folded-armed judge (Luke 15:20)
- Turning back to God leads into His season of provision

Discussion Prompts

- What good news of God's grace stirs you to turn back to Him?
- Is there an area where God is calling you to return?
- How does knowing God welcomes the returning change your willingness to repent?

Question 6

Student Question:

Naomi urged her daughters-in-law to go back, but Ruth clung to her (Ruth 1:14). Who in your life has shown you this kind of clinging, loyal love, and to whom is God calling you to be that steadfast, present friend right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When Naomi urges both daughters-in-law to go back, Orpah kisses her and turns away, but "Ruth cleave unto her." The Hebrew word for cleave is the same used for a man cleaving to his wife (Genesis 2:24); it speaks of covenant loyalty, a refusing-to-let-go love. Orpah's choice is understandable and not openly condemned, but Ruth's clinging is held up as something rare and beautiful.

We have all needed a Ruth, someone who would not let go of us in our darkest season. And we are all called to be a Ruth to someone else. This kind of loyal love is costly. Ruth gains nothing obvious by clinging to a bitter, empty widow with no future to offer. That is exactly what makes her love so striking.

This is a personal question, so let it press in two directions. First, give thanks for the clinging friends God has given you. Second, ask honestly: to whom is God calling you to be that steadfast, present friend right now, perhaps to someone who has nothing to give back? Loyal love that expects no return is one of the clearest reflections of the love of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- To cleave is covenant-strength loyalty (Genesis 2:24)

- Orpah's choice is understandable; Ruth's is exceptional
- Loyal love is costly and expects no return
- We are both recipients and givers of clinging love

Discussion Prompts

- Who has clung to you when you had nothing to offer?
- To whom is God calling you to be a steadfast, present friend?
- What makes loyal love so costly, and so Christlike?

Question 7

Student Question:

Ruth declared, "thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16). What does Scripture teach about the nature of true, trusting, obedient faith, and how does Ruth's confession show that real faith involves both a turning of the heart and a binding commitment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Ruth's confession is one of the high points of Old Testament devotion: "Intreat me not to leave thee... thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." Here is faith with both feet planted. It is a turning of the heart toward the LORD and a binding commitment to His people, sealed with an oath, "the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me."

True faith in Scripture is never mere mental agreement. It is trusting and obedient; it acts, it commits, it cleaves. Ruth does not merely admire Naomi's God from a distance; she takes Him as her own and orders her whole life around that choice. This is the timeless shape of saving faith: a trust that surrenders and obeys (Hebrews 11:8).

Notice that Ruth's faith costs her everything familiar. She binds herself to the LORD before she has any evidence that it will go well for her. That is the nature of trusting faith; it commits to God on the strength of who He is, not on guarantees of outcome. We who live after the cross are called to that same wholehearted, obedient trust in Christ.

We should be careful not to read later covenant practices anachronistically into Ruth's moment. Hers is an Old Testament confession of faith in the God of Israel. Yet the principle is timeless and points forward (Romans 15:4): genuine faith always involves both the turning of the heart and a real, life-binding commitment.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True faith is trusting and obedient, not mere agreement (Hebrews 11:8)
- Faith involves both a turning of the heart and a binding commitment
- Ruth commits on the strength of who God is, not guaranteed outcomes

- Old Testament faith points forward; draw timeless principles (Romans 15:4)
- Real faith reorders the whole of life around God

Discussion Prompts

- How does Ruth's confession challenge a faith that is only words?
- What does it mean to commit to God before you see the outcome?
- Where is your faith being called from agreement into action?

Question 8

Student Question:

Ruth left behind her homeland, her gods, and her people to follow Naomi and the LORD (Ruth 1:16–17). What have you had to leave behind to follow God, and what might He still be asking you to release in order to walk fully with Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Ruth's decision was a leaving as much as a cleaving. To follow Naomi and the LORD, she left her homeland, the gods of Moab, and her own people. There is no following God without some leaving; the two always travel together. Abraham left Ur (Genesis 12:1), the disciples left their nets (Matthew 4:20), and Ruth left Moab.

This is a personal question. What have you had to leave to follow God? Old habits, old loyalties, old securities, old gods of comfort or approval or control? And what might He still be asking you to release? Often the thing we grip most tightly is the very thing God asks us to lay down so our hands are free to take His.

Ruth's leaving was not loss in the end; it was the doorway to a future she could never have imagined in Moab, a place in the family of God and in the line of the Messiah. What we surrender to follow God is never thrown away. It is exchanged for something far greater, often more than we could ask or think.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Following God always involves leaving something behind
- We must identify the "gods" of comfort, approval, or control we cling to
- What we surrender to God is never wasted
- Leaving for God opens doors we cannot yet imagine

Discussion Prompts

- What have you already left behind to follow God?
- What might God still be asking you to release?
- How does Ruth's story reframe the cost of surrender?

Question 9

Student Question:

Ruth was a Moabite, an outsider with no claim on Israel, yet she came to take refuge under the God of Israel and was later named in the lineage of David and of Christ (Ruth 1:16; 4:17–22; Matthew 1:5). What does her inclusion reveal about the breadth of God’s grace toward the outsider who believes, and how does this quiet story in Bethlehem point forward to the gospel for all nations?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, and it touches the heart of the gospel. Ruth was a Moabite. By natural standing she was an outsider to Israel’s covenant, a woman from a people often hostile to God’s people. Yet she came, in Boaz’s later words, to take refuge “under whose wings thou art come to trust” (Ruth 2:12; compare Psalm 91:4). And astonishingly, this outsider is woven into the lineage of David and of Christ (Ruth 4:17–22; Matthew 1:5).

Here we see the breadth of God’s grace toward the outsider who believes. God’s heart for the nations is not a New Testament afterthought; it runs through the whole of Scripture. He promised Abraham that in him “shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). Ruth the Moabite is an early, living proof that the God of Israel receives all who come to Him in faith, regardless of bloodline or background.

This quiet story in Bethlehem points unmistakably forward to the gospel for all nations. The same town where Ruth gleaned would one day cradle the Christ who came to “give light to them that sit in darkness” (Luke 1:79), the Savior whose gospel is to be preached “to every creature” (Mark 16:15). When Matthew names Ruth in the genealogy of Jesus, he is telling us that the door God opened to one Moabite widow He has flung wide to the world.

For every outsider in the room, this is good news worth hearing plainly. You do not have to be born into the right family or come from the right background. The God of Bethlehem still welcomes those who come to take refuge under His wings, those who say with Ruth, “thy God my God.” Grace reaches the outsider, and in Christ that grace is now offered to all nations.

Let us magnify the providence here without flattening Ruth’s real faith. God was at work weaving her into the messianic line, yes, but He worked through her genuine, trusting, costly choice to follow Him. Divine grace and human faith meet, and out of that meeting comes redemption that reaches all the way to us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s grace reaches the outsider who comes to Him in faith
- Ruth takes refuge under God’s wings (Ruth 2:12; Psalm 91:4)
- God’s heart for the nations runs through all Scripture (Genesis 12:3)

- Ruth is named in the line of David and Christ (Ruth 4:17–22; Matthew 1:5)
- The story points forward to the gospel for all nations (Mark 16:15)
- Divine providence and genuine human faith meet in redemption
- Background and bloodline do not bar anyone from God's grace

Discussion Prompts

- What does Ruth's inclusion teach about the breadth of God's grace?
- How does this Old Testament story point forward to the gospel for all nations?
- Who is an "outsider" in your world who needs to hear they are welcome to God?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter, the famine, the losses, Ruth's loyalty, and Naomi's bitter homecoming at the dawn of harvest. Name one specific way Jesus is using this passage to form you, to deepen your trust, soften your grief, or stir your loyal love, and what is one concrete step you will take this week in response?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks the student to look back across the whole chapter and respond. We have walked through famine and a fearful move, through devastating loss, through Ruth's clinging loyalty and bold confession, and through Naomi's bitter homecoming that lands, providentially, at the dawn of barley harvest. The chapter ends with emptiness and harvest standing side by side, the perfect picture of how God works.

The aim of all our study is formation, not mere information (Romans 15:4). So press the question gently: how is the Lord using this passage to shape you? Perhaps He is deepening your trust in His providence over your hard seasons. Perhaps He is softening a grief you have carried in silence. Perhaps He is stirring you toward the kind of loyal love Ruth showed, or calling you, like Ruth, to leave something behind and cleave to Him more fully.

Whatever the Spirit is doing, ask for one concrete step this week. Faith that stays abstract changes nothing; faith that takes a single obedient step begins to transform a life. It may be a hard conversation, an act of loyalty, an honest prayer of lament, or a definite turning back to God and His people. Name it, and take it.

Close by lifting the eyes to Christ. The story that begins in famine ends, generations later, in Bethlehem with the bread of life. The God who turned Naomi's emptiness to fullness is the same God who meets us in Jesus to fill what is empty in us. Let that hope send the class out trusting, grieving honestly, and loving loyally.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The chapter holds emptiness and harvest together
- Scripture aims at formation, not just information (Romans 15:4)
- Faith must move from the abstract to a concrete step
- God turns emptiness to fullness, ultimately in Christ
- Trust, honest grief, and loyal love are the fruit we seek

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this chapter pressed most deeply on your heart?
- What one concrete step will you take this week in response?
- How does Naomi's emptiness-into-harvest give you hope in Christ?