

Lesson Five

RUTH 1–4

Ruth: Loyalty in the Ruins, Redemption from a Kinsman

It starts with a funeral. Then another. Then another. By the end of Ruth 1:5, three husbands are in the ground, and three women, Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah, are left on a Moabite hillside trying to figure out how to keep breathing. Bethlehem, Naomi's hometown, is across the Jordan. So is everything she has lost.

From those ashes, the book of Ruth tells one of the most exquisite love stories in all of literature. It is not the love story of a girl and a boy, but the love story of a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law, and beneath that, the love story of God and His people. Ruth is about *hesed*: a Hebrew word that is something like loyalty, kindness, and covenant love rolled into one. It is the kind of love that chooses to stay. By the end of the book, *hesed* has restored a shattered family, drawn a foreign woman into the people of God, and quietly placed her in the family line of King David, and through him, of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Read all four chapters of Ruth this week, ideally in one sitting. It is one of the shortest books in the Bible and one of the most beautiful. Watch how God uses ordinary kindness, a sheaf of grain left in a field, a blanket offered at midnight, a sandal exchanged at the city gate, to write a story bigger than anyone in the book yet understands.

First impressions

Ruth opens with the words "in the days when the judges ruled." The book of Judges had just ended with the chilling line, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Ruth is set against that dark backdrop. While the wider nation drifts into chaos, a quiet story of covenant love is unfolding in a small town, in a small household, between two unimportant women. God's most important work is often happening exactly where the headlines are not looking.

1.
 - a. Read Ruth 1 to 4 in one sitting before working through the questions. What is your first impression of Ruth? Of Naomi? Of Boaz?
 - b. What surprises you most about the book?

A bitter return (1:1–22)

2. In 1:1 to 5, what happens to Naomi's family? Stop and count the losses. What would those years have done to a woman?

Ruth was a Moabite. The Moabites were the descendants of Lot's incestuous union with his daughters (Genesis 19:30 to 38). Deuteronomy 23:3 excluded Moabites from "the assembly of the LORD" to the tenth generation. Ruth had every reason to think the God of Israel had no place for her. The whole book is the story of how that fear was undone, and how a foreign woman with a checkered family tree became the great-grandmother of the king of Israel and an ancestor of the Christ.

3.
 - a. Read 1:8 to 18. Naomi releases both daughters-in-law to return to their own families. Orpah does. Ruth does not. What does Ruth say in 1:16 to 17, and what is remarkable about it?
 - b. These verses are often read at weddings. Why do you think they have found their way into wedding ceremonies, when they were originally spoken by a young widow to her grieving mother-in-law?
4.
 - a. In 1:20 to 21, Naomi tells the women of Bethlehem to call her not Naomi ("pleasant") but Mara ("bitter"). What does her honesty tell you about how God's people are allowed to grieve?
 - b. What is the difference between honest lament and faithless bitterness? Where is Naomi in 1:20 to 21?

For Thought and Discussion: The Christian life sometimes calls us to lament, to say to God, as Naomi does, "You have dealt very bitterly with me." Compare Naomi's words with the laments in Psalms 13, 42, and 88. Why does God include lament in His own songbook?

Gleaning in the field of Boaz (2:1–23)

The custom Ruth was relying on is laid out in Leviticus 19:9 to 10 and 23:22. When a field was harvested, the corners were to be left for the poor, the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan. It was a kind of welfare system written into the law of Moses, but it required two things at once: the landowner's obedience and the gleaner's hard work. Gleaning was hot, humbling, dangerous work. Ruth volunteers for it on her first morning in Bethlehem.

5. Ruth goes out to glean. What law was she counting on? What kind of work was this? What kind of woman would have had to do it?

Study Skill, Watching for Small Words That Carry Big Meaning: Read Ruth 2:3 very carefully: "She happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz." The Hebrew word translated "happened" is sometimes rendered "as it turned out" or "by chance." The narrator uses an almost humorous understatement to tell us, with a quiet smile, that the very last thing this was was an accident. Watch through the rest of Scripture for these small words ("happened," "behold," "now," "as it was") that often signal the silent hand of God just below the surface of the story (compare Esther 6:1; Acts 8:26 to 29).

6. Read 2:3 carefully. What does the author quietly tell us is actually going on beneath the surface of that word "happened"?

7. a. Notice how Boaz treats Ruth in 2:8 to 16. List the specific kindnesses he shows her.
- b. Boaz says to her in 2:12, "The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." How is this an early picture of the gospel call?

The threshing floor (3:1–18)

Naomi's plan in 3:1 to 4 sounds strange to modern ears, but in context it is honorable and bold. Ruth is to identify herself publicly to Boaz as a candidate for levirate-style marriage. The uncovering of his feet and the request to spread his garment over her are formal, recognizable gestures of asking for protection and covenant. (Compare Ezekiel 16:8.) This is a marriage proposal, made by the woman, at considerable risk to her own reputation, on behalf of her mother-in-law and her dead husband's family.

8. What is Naomi actually asking Ruth to do in 3:1 to 4?

For Further Study: Read Deuteronomy 25:5 to 10 on levirate marriage and Leviticus 25:23 to 34 on the kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew: go'el). What two responsibilities could a near kinsman fulfill, and how do they come together in Boaz and Ruth's story?

9. a. When Ruth lies down at his feet, what does she ask Boaz to do in 3:9?

b. Notice the phrase "spread your wings over your servant." Compare it with Boaz's blessing in 2:12. What is Ruth essentially saying to Boaz?

c. How does Boaz respond (3:10 to 13)?

Optional Application: Where in your life is God inviting you to be more like Ruth: bold in faith, willing to ask, not too proud to receive kindness? Name one specific thing.

The redemption (4:1–22)

10. a. In 4:1 to 6, Boaz negotiates with a closer kinsman. What does the closer kinsman initially say, and what makes him change his mind?

b. Why does it matter that the redemption happens at the city gate with ten elders as witnesses?

11. a. Read 4:13 to 17. Boaz marries Ruth; she conceives a son. What do the women of Bethlehem say to Naomi in 4:14 to 17?

b. Compare it with Naomi's words in 1:20 to 21. What has God done?

For Further Study: Read the genealogy in 4:18 to 22. Whose great-grandson is Obed? Whose great-great-grandson is he? Now look at Matthew 1:5. How does Ruth's name appear in the line of Christ?

Boaz and the Christ

Boaz is a picture of what Christ would later be on a far greater scale. Like Boaz, Christ is the willing redeemer who is also a near kinsman (Hebrews 2:14 to 17). Like Boaz, He covers His bride with His own garment and brings her into His family (Galatians 3:27). Like Boaz, He pays the price for those who could not pay it themselves (1 Peter 1:18 to 19). And like Boaz, He does this not under compulsion but out of love. The book of Ruth is not just a romance. It is a quiet sketch of redemption that the rest of the Bible will color in.

Study Skill, Recognizing Types and Shadows in the Old Testament: A "type" in Bible study is an Old Testament person, event, or institution that anticipates and pictures something greater in Christ. Adam, the Passover lamb, the bronze serpent, the tabernacle, the high priest, and the kinsman-redeemer are all examples that the New Testament itself identifies as types of Christ. Two cautions are important. First, we should only call something a type when Scripture itself authorizes the connection, not when we imagine a likeness. Second, the type always points to the antitype (the reality in Christ); the type is the shadow, not the substance (Colossians 2:16 to 17; Hebrews 10:1).

12.
 - a. Boaz is a "type" of Christ. List as many parallels as you can.
 - b. What did it cost Boaz to be Ruth's kinsman-redeemer?
 - c. What did it cost Jesus to be ours (Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 2:14 to 18; 1 Peter 1:18 to 19)?

For Thought and Discussion: Ruth is the great-grandmother of David, the ancestor of Jesus. A Moabite. A widow. A foreigner. A gleaner. What does her presence in Jesus' family tree tell us about who Jesus came for, and who is welcome in His family?

Your response

13. Ruth's life was shaped by daily, undramatic acts of hesed, loyalty and kindness when she could have walked away. Where is God inviting you to that kind of love right now? In your family? In your congregation? Among the elderly or grieving people you know?
14. Jesus is our Redeemer. He has paid the price you could never pay. He has spread His wings over those who have come to Him in the obedience of faith and have been clothed with Him in baptism (Galatians 3:27). What part of your heart most needs to rest in that this week?
15. Write one specific step you will take in light of what God has shown you, and one prayer you would like the group to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Begin by asking each woman to share about a person who showed her extraordinary kindness during a hard season. Don't rush this; the answers will warm the room and set up the discussion of hesed.

Discussion. Ruth is a tightly-woven story; the discussion will flow naturally if you simply walk through the chapters. Pay particular attention to questions 4 (Naomi's lament), 7 (Boaz's kindness), 9 (Ruth's bold request), and 12 (Boaz as a type of Christ). If time is short, do not skip 12. It is the heart of the book theologically.

Wrap-up. Close by reading Ruth 4:14 to 17 aloud and thanking God for being a Redeemer who has not left any of His daughters without a Kinsman. Pray that the women in your group would feel covered by His wings.