

Ruth is a short book - only four chapters - so there's no need to be in a hurry to get through it. I've provided a synopsis/commentary on each chapter and there are questions that pertain to each, but I encourage you to move at the best pace for your group. This might mean that you will want to do some chapters over the course of more than one week, and the questions are numbered such that you can easily pick up from wherever you ended the previous session. The introduction below is also its own "lesson" and at the conclusion of the study there are additional questions to ask in view of the entire book which can also be it's own lesson (or more).

Ruth

Introduction

On the surface Ruth is a story of the faithfulness of two women to one another, and of God's faithfulness. The story moves from sorrow to joy, from emptiness to fullness, leaving us satisfied and encouraged. There's a happy ending, and we like happy endings. We can rightly read Ruth as a story of how God is faithful to reward our faithfulness, an example of the way God takes a broken situation and makes something new and unexpected.

It is significant that Ruth's story is situated within the time of the Judges (Ruth 1:1), a decidedly bleak period in Israel's history. The book of Judges twice sums up the age: "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." (Judges 17:6, 21:25). At that point in Israel's story, it seemed as if the people had abandoned their God and perhaps that God had abandoned them. Immediately following this grim assessment of Judges, the book of Ruth restores hope that God is still faithful. Out of bleak circumstances, God brings new beginnings, new life.

But there is an even broader context to the story. God called forth Abraham and formed a people from his descendants - a people with whom God made a covenant, a people who were to deny all other gods to worship God alone. The Israelites were God's chosen people, and they were expected to behave like it. This might sound easy enough, but reality is rarely so straightforward. Unavoidably the Israelites encountered foreigners, which raised the question, "What is our relationship to other peoples?"

The primary concern was that mixing with foreign peoples would draw Israel away from the one true God to the worship of idols, that intermarriage would dilute the identity of God's chosen people. Quite the opposite of wanting to draw people in, Israel was preoccupied with keeping

others out (Deut 7:1-4).¹ So the Israelites were forbidden from marrying foreign women, but (not surprisingly) they didn't always succeed in keeping this commandment. Most famously, Solomon, the wisest king of all, had many foreign wives which turned his heart away from God (1 Kings 11:1-8).² Things were mostly downhill from there, and eventually the Israelites, having broken the covenant, were exiled from the Promised Land. Upon their eventual return to Jerusalem, they rediscovered the Law and its prohibition of foreign wives. In the book of Ezra we find a remarkable passage in which, in order to restore Israelite identity and the right worship of God, the Israelites with foreign wives are told to put them away - including their children (Ezra 10:1-5).³ Nehemiah, too, concludes his memoir by recounting the great evil of mixed marriages (Nehemiah 13:23-27) and effectively sums up his work in the final two verses: "Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign... Remember me, O my God, for good." (13:30-31).

This is serious stuff. It's within this overarching context that we come to appreciate the book of Ruth - a story about a foreign woman who is faithful. And not only that, she turns out to be the great-grandmother of King David, a foremother in the lineage of Jesus himself (Matthew 1:6). Her inclusion played an essential role in salvation history.

¹"When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you— 2 and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. 3 Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly." Deuteronomy 7:1-4

This is a disturbing passage. God commands the Israelites - not just to conquer the foreigners occupying the Promised Land - but to annihilate them. The assumption was that if the foreigners were not totally eradicated, they would inevitably influence the communal life and lead the chosen people astray. And taking foreign wives was forbidden due to the concern that the children of such unions would end up worshipping false gods. It's hard for us to comprehend the severity of this passage, in part because it's hard for us to understand that the Israelites understood themselves as a people before God, not as individuals, so they were very concerned with communal righteousness. In their conception, a bad apple had the potential to ruin the whole bunch, so little sympathy was given to the bad apple, even if there are many.

² "King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, 2 from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the Israelites, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods"; Solomon clung to these in love. 3 Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. 4 For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David. 5 For Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. 6 So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not completely follow the Lord, as his father David had done. 7 Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. 8 He did the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrificed to their gods."

³ "While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept bitterly. 2 Shecaniah son of Jehiel, of the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra, saying, "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. 3 So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. 4 Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you; be strong, and do it." 5 Then Ezra stood up and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear that they would do as had been said. So they swore." Ezra 10:1-5

If we have ears to hear, we will often discover that the Bible speaks with many voices.⁴ In the conversation about Israel's relationship with foreigners (especially foreign women), the book of Ruth speaks softly but powerfully. Clearly we're meant to see that Ruth's inclusion is a positive, even wonderful, development. But that recognition only leads to more questions. Is every foreigner to be regarded like Ruth? Or is she somehow exceptional? What does this teach us about exclusion/inclusion in the Old Testament? And what does it teach us about the dynamic of exclusion/inclusion among the people of God today?⁵ What does it tell us about welcoming aliens into our society? About how we treat the vulnerable? And finally, how does Ruth's story reveal to us who God is? These are some of the questions to bear in mind while reading this delightful little book.

- 1. How would you describe the Israelites' relationship to foreigners in the passages above?**
- 2. Was their concern about the corrupting influence of foreigners justified? What are the dangers of intermarriage? Why couldn't/didn't the Israelites keep this clear commandment?**
- 3. Are you surprised that God would instruct them to keep people out rather than inviting people in? Why would God do this?**
- 4. What (if anything) do these passages teach us about our church community? How does Jesus change things? How does the NT answer the question of intermarriage differently?**

Ruth 1

The book of Ruth begins quickly, without delay. A famine arose in the land and a family from Bethlehem journeyed to neighboring Moab in search of food and a more secure life. Already in the third verse, Elimelech, the patriarch of the family, has died, leaving his wife Naomi and their two sons. In the course of two verses, Mahlon and Chilion both get married to Moabite women and then both men die. This familial tragedy is given little attention; it serves to provide the context for what follows. These three women, Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah - women who may barely know each other - are suddenly on their own.

Naomi hears that God has mercifully ended the famine in Israel and so sets out to return home. It is difficult to overstate the vulnerability of the situation Naomi faced. She was a widow without sons in a foreign land. There was nothing in Moab for her to build upon, no reason to hope for a better tomorrow. Her prospects are only somewhat better in Israel, but then where else could she go? Initially she set out with her daughters-in-law, but soon implores them to return to their families. Much like herself, their prospects are better in their home country. And how can Naomi possibly help them? She has no more sons, nor will she anytime soon. Surely Ruth and

⁴ This isn't necessarily to say that the Bible disagrees with itself, but it is at least to say that different books - even different portions of the same book - have different contexts, emphases, and concerns. Perhaps you've had an argument with someone - especially someone you love - and at some point you realized that you weren't actually disagreeing, but you were still arguing about something - perhaps even something important.

⁵ Every person, community, small group etc. has boundaries, whether formal or informal. Even communities who are open to everyone still can draw a distinction between people who are a part of the group and those who are not a part. In fact, it makes no sense to speak of a group or community unless some people are excluded.

Orpah don't intend to wait for Naomi to find a husband, deliver sons, and for the boys to become men!⁶

Orpah is apparently persuaded and bids her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth is still there, so Naomi pleads her case: "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." Naomi's words make explicit for us something about which the book's original hearers wouldn't have needed reminding: that Ruth, from the land of Moab, has a different God - in fact, she doesn't worship the one true God but a variety of gods. To leave this behind further compounds the significance of a young widow moving to a foreign land.⁷

And this sets the scene for Ruth's famous statement:

"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 is casting her lot with Naomi for reasons we can only guess. She's leaving behind everything and venturing into the unknown. It's a remarkable declaration of faithfulness and courage (or is it also one of insecurity and desperation)? Naomi sees Ruth's determination and quits trying to deter her.

The two of them then arrive in Bethlehem where Naomi's return causes a stir. When the people ask the rhetorical question. "Is this Naomi?" she responds that they should call her Naomi ("pleasant") no longer and that henceforth she should be called Mara ("bitter") because, "The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me."

⁶ Is it obvious that Naomi wants to send away her daughters-in-law for their own good? Or is she possibly wallowing in self-pity? How we answer this ambiguous question depends in part on how we translate the ambiguous verse 13. Consider the difference in these two popular versions.

"Would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, *for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake* that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." (ESV)

"Would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. *It is more bitter for me than for you*, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!" (NIV)

Most versions follow the NIV translation, which, places the emphasis on Naomi's regard for her own suffering rather upon her regard for the suffering of her daughters-in-law. This is not a crucial question, but an interesting one. We tend to want to make heroes of Biblical characters - even when they might not deserve it.

⁷ At a time when each land had different gods, the belief was that each god was tied to a particular place. The god in one place was not the god in another, so settling in new places meant worshipping new gods. One of the remarkable distinctions about the Israelites (something which really emerged during the exilic period) was that they believed, not just in a local deity, but in the one true God, the God of gods, the God who was God everywhere.

5. ***Why did Naomi urge her daughters-in-law not to come with her? Was she thinking more about her own interests or theirs? How does suffering affect judgment?***
6. ***Why did Ruth and Orpah both initially want to remain with their mother-in-law? Why is Orpah persuaded to return home? And why does Ruth decide to go along? Whose choice pleased Naomi more?***
7. ***What leads a person to leave behind their home, their way of life, their culture, even their religion, for a new home, life, culture, religion, etc.? We know that Ruth's story ends well, but if we only read the first chapter, what would we think about her decision? Does it appear more admirable or foolish?***
8. ***Is Naomi justified in attributing her misfortune to the Lord's doing?***
9. ***Naomi declares that she has returned to Bethlehem empty - but Ruth is with her! How does Naomi see herself? See Ruth? See God? And how are these three intertwined?***

Ruth 2:

3000 years ago, life was hard for everyone, but for two women living on their own, life was extremely precarious. They had no male to provide for them, so they had to provide for themselves. Ruth suggests that she go glean⁸ in the field of Naomi's kinsman, Boaz. It was often dangerous for a woman to go into a field (or many other places) unaccompanied, but this was a risk Ruth thought worth taking. They needed to eat.

Boaz observed an unfamiliar face among the gleaners and inquired about her identity with his servants. Boaz then speaks directly to Ruth, instructing her to glean only in his field and offering her protection. Ruth is shocked that Boaz would take special interest in her, especially since she's a foreigner. He responds by declaring that her good reputation precedes her, and he then blessed her in the name of the Lord. He goes yet further by inviting her to eat some bread with his workers, after which he instructs them to allow her to glean among the sheaves and even to leave her extra wheat to gather.

At the end of the day Ruth had gleaned far more grain than she could've possibly hoped. Naomi was apparently surprised by how much Ruth brought home and asked who's field she'd gleaned. When Ruth said that the field belonged to a man named Boaz, Naomi exclaims joyfully, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" It turns out that Boaz is one of Naomi's closest relatives. So, following both Boaz's and Naomi's instructions, Ruth spent the rest of the season gleaning in Boaz's field.

⁸ Gleaning was a practice made possible by the Law: Leviticus 19:9-10: "When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. It is the same with your grape crop—do not strip every last bunch of grapes from the vines, and do not pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God."

- 10. Why is Ruth, the foreigner, taking initiative and not Naomi? What does this reveal about Ruth? And how might it foreshadow what is to come?**
- 11. What does Boaz's response to Ruth's presence in his field reveal about him?**
- 12. How does Ruth's reputation influence Boaz's response? What does the favor Ruth receives teach us about faithfulness?**
- 13. How does Naomi change between the first and second chapters? How does her description of God's activity change? What is the significance of her declaring that the Lord has not forsaken the "living or the dead"?**

Ruth 3

Regularly gleaning Boaz's field provided for Ruth's and Naomi's immediate needs, but they were still in many ways insecure, their future uncertain. So Naomi devises a daring plan. She instructs Ruth to anoint herself and put on her best clothes - the sort of thing you might do before getting married. Ruth is then to go to Boaz alone late at night - a potentially scandalous act. Most daring of all, Naomi tells Ruth to lie down beside Boaz and uncover his feet. There is no denying that this is a sexually charged scene. Ruth has lain beside a man in the dark. This isn't the kind of thing that is supposed to happen, and it certainly could have backfired. There was no guarantee Boaz would respond as they hoped. He was startled to discover her, and exclaimed "Who are you!?" Ruth declares who she is then boldly tells him to extend his garment over her, a request which meant to take her as his wife.

Ruth's risk is rewarded. Boaz responds as well as she could've hoped. He is not only willing to marry her, but is apparently flattered that she would come to him, an old man. His willingness to grant Ruth's request owes to her outstanding reputation: "...all my fellow townsmen know that you are worthy woman." If Ruth had not been such an upstanding person, this encounter with Boaz would likely have gone quite differently. Still she and Naomi did make one slight miscalculation. Boaz was actually not the nearest kinsman. There is an unnamed man whom Boaz reports is a closer relation than he who has first claim on the property (and thus marrying Ruth). Boaz says that he will settle the matter first thing in the morning and tells Ruth to sleep there rather than heading home immediately. She rises before there is enough light to easily be identified, and as she departs Boaz gives her a gift of grain (a wedding present!). Boaz instructs his workers not to let it be known that she came to him in the night, because otherwise people would likely draw damaging conclusions.

Ruth heads home to Naomi, where she recounts all that had happened and presents the gift. Ruth makes it sound as if the gift is for Naomi, when it's not clear if that's what Boaz intended. In any case, Ruth seeks to bless her mother-in-law. The chapter ends on a note of suspense; it's not yet clear to Naomi and Ruth what will happen. There is no mention or even suggestion of God's involvement, but at the same time it's hard to avoid the implication that God is redeeming the situation.

- 14. Did Naomi devise this plan more to benefit herself or Ruth? Which of the two takes the bigger risk?**
- 15. Is Ruth simply being obedient? Does she understand the risk she's taking? Does she think she has a choice?**

- 16. Is Ruth's boldness surprising? How can she, the foreigner, be so assertive?**
17. Why does Boaz respond as he does? What difference does Ruth's good reputation make? How important is reputation?
18. Is God involved in this story? How so? How do we know?

Ruth 4

As expected, Boaz sees to the matter immediately. He goes to the town gate to wait for his kinsman to appear, and sure enough he does. They sit down together and gather ten elders to serve as witnesses for the negotiations to follow. As Boaz presents it, Naomi is the one selling the piece of land, although it seems she and he have not spoken (Ruth has been the trusted liaison). The nearest kinsman has the first option to purchase - "redeem" - the land, and the man declares his intention to do exactly that. But then Boaz adds a significant condition to the deal: the one who buys the land then has to take Ruth as a wife. The man reverses his position because he does not want to complicate the question of his inheritance by raising a child in the name of another man.⁹

This leaves Boaz next in line, and he does not hesitate to take the deal. Having refused his right to the property, the kinsman then declared to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself." This initiates a kind of legal procedure/ceremony in which Boaz removes his sandal and gives it to the other man.¹⁰ Boaz announces that he is buying all the property that belonged to Elimelech, along with that of Chilion and Mahlon.¹¹ Boaz does the honorable thing by seeking to perpetuate the name of his dead ancestor. Whether or not Boaz desires marriage to Ruth in and of itself is not clear, but his words in 3:10-11 do at least suggest that he was happy to marry her out of more than just obligation. It's difficult for modern people to imagine that all marriages were seen as pragmatic transactions rather than an expression of love, etc. At any rate, neither Boaz or Ruth seems the least bit reluctant about the marriage.

⁹ This is a similar situation to the one described in Deuteronomy 25:5-10) There is is prescribed that if a brother died childless (and was married) it was the eldest remaining brother's responsibility to "take" the dead brother's wife as his own wife, beget children (hopefully), thus providing an heir in the name of the dead brother. But what is being asked here by Ruth is different. As 3:13 and 4:4 suggest, the kinsman apparently has the choice to either accept or reject the request, without judgment either way. The primary concern seem to be who will get Elimelech's property. In the absence of a male family member, the "deed" to the land reverted to Naomi, not Ruth.

¹⁰ This seems to be the inverse of what happens in Deuteronomy 25:9, where it is prescribed that, if a man refuses to raise up children for a dead brother, the widow is to remove his sandal and spit in his face.

¹¹ To this point the property in question has only been referred to as Elimelech's, but here the property of Chilion and Mahlon is mentioned as well. That Mahlon is included is helps clarify why marrying Ruth is part of the deal as well.

Once the deal is done, the elders/witnesses pronounce a blessing upon Ruth (“the woman”) and Boaz. Ruth, the foreigner, has been grafted into Israel’s story. Soon the Lord (in one of God’s rare appearances in the book) blesses Ruth with a son. And then the story takes an odd turn. Ruth is no longer mentioned, but only Naomi. It is as if Naomi has had the child herself, and the women of the city come to her praising the Lord that she has been granted descendants. These women then make a remarkable statement: Not only does Naomi have a grandson, even better she has a daughter-in-law, Ruth, who loves her, who is more than seven sons. Naomi nurses the child that Ruth has provided for her, and strangely it is the neighborhood women who give the boy his name: Obed. And Obed has a grandson named David.

- 19. Why does Boaz decide to redeem the field and marry Ruth?**
- 20. Does verse 4:13 imply that God has done something unusual for Ruth to become pregnant? Or is it suggesting that a child is always the Lord’s work?**
- 21. Ruth loves Naomi, but does Naomi love Ruth? Naomi declared that she returned home empty (1:21) but she’s had Ruth with her all along; Has her attitude toward Ruth changed by the end of the story?**
- 22. Why does Ruth disappear from the end of her own story?**
- 23. Why do the neighborhood women name the boy?**

Considering the Whole

It’s always a good idea to step back and consider the book as a whole (this is easier to do with a short book like Ruth!)

- 24. Who is your favorite character in the book? What does each give and receive during the course of the story?**
- 25. Could the book have been called “Naomi”? Is she, in a sense, the main character?**
- 26. What does this teach us about exclusion/inclusion in the Old Testament? Is every foreigner to be regarded like Ruth? Or is she somehow exceptional?**

- 27. How does Ruth's story foreshadow the inclusion of Gentiles in the New Testament?¹²**
- 28. What does Ruth teach us about the dynamic of exclusion/inclusion among the people of God today?¹³ What does it tell us about welcoming aliens into our society? About how we treat the vulnerable?**
- 29. What other lessons are we meant to learn from this little book? What is it about? Or put more directly, Why is it in the Bible?**
- 30. How does Ruth's story reveal to us who God is? What does God "do" in this book?**

¹² Consider especially Acts 10:34-48:

34 Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

¹³ Every, people, community, small group etc. has boundaries, whether formal or informal. Even communities who are open to everyone still can draw a distinction between people who are a part of the group and those who are not a part. In fact, it makes no sense to speak of a group or community unless some people are excluded.