

Naomi left Bethlehem with a full family and returned with only Ruth, yet she declared herself empty -- what does her story reveal about the difference between what we have lost and what we still possess?

The sermon points out that nobody living inside a Bible story knows they are living inside a Bible story -- how does this perspective change the way you endure your own difficult seasons without knowing how they will end?

Ruth chose to stay with Naomi when there was no logical reason to do so and no promise of a better future -- what does her commitment reveal about the nature of faithfulness, and where in your own life is God calling you to that kind of unconditional loyalty?

Naomi did not stop believing in God, but she believed God had turned against her -- how do you personally navigate the tension between trusting God and honestly wrestling with the feeling that God may have abandoned you?

The sermon suggests that pain can describe a chapter of your story without getting to name the entire book -- in what ways have you allowed a painful experience to define your identity rather than simply inform it?

The book of Ruth does not explain why Elimelech, Mahlon, and Kilion died, offering no heavenly justification or moral lesson attached to their deaths -- what does this silence teach us about how God relates to human suffering?

Ruth made a sweeping commitment to Naomi -- where you go I will go, your God will be my God -- without knowing where that commitment would lead her; what does her example challenge you to do in your own walk of faith when the full plan has not been revealed to you?

The chapter ends with the quiet detail that the barley harvest was just beginning, a detail Naomi could not see the significance of -- how do you cultivate hope in the middle of your story when you cannot yet see what God might be growing around you?

The sermon describes lament as a biblical practice of bringing raw, unfiltered pain and questions before God, pointing to the Psalms and even Jesus on the cross -- how might embracing lament as a legitimate spiritual discipline change the way your faith community talks about grief and suffering?

The pastor shared his own experience of living a life he did not expect, including seasons of bitterness and wounds that still hurt -- how does the honesty of a leader about their own unresolved pain shape the way a congregation understands grace, forgiveness, and the long work of healing?

Small Group Guide: The Life That You Didn't Expect

A Study from Ruth Chapter One

Before You Begin

Invite group members to come prepared to engage honestly. This passage deals with grief, loss, and unanswered questions, and the discussion will go deeper if the group has established a culture of trust and confidentiality. Remind everyone that the goal is not to fix one another but to walk alongside each other, just as Ruth walked alongside Naomi.

Overview

This week we began a four-week series walking through the book of Ruth. In chapter one, we meet Naomi, a woman who left Bethlehem with a husband and two sons and returned with nothing but a foreign daughter-in-law and a heart full of bitterness. Her story raises questions that many of us carry quietly: What do we do when life does not follow the script we wrote for it? What does faith look like when we cannot see what God is doing?

Key Takeaways

- Most of us carry an imaginary version of our lives in our heads, and when reality does not match that version, the gap can be devastating.
- The book of Ruth opens during the period of the Judges, a time of moral and spiritual chaos described in Judges 21:25 as a season when everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Ordinary people were trying to survive in an extraordinarily difficult world.
- Naomi lost her husband, both of her sons, her financial security, and the future she had imagined, all while living far from home.
- Ruth's declaration in Ruth 1:16-17 was not spoken at a wedding. It was spoken in the middle of grief, loss, and uncertainty, and it represents one of the most remarkable acts of faithful commitment in all of Scripture.
- Naomi's request to be called Mara, meaning bitter, shows how pain can move from something we experience to something that begins to define us.
- The Bible does not censor Naomi's grief. Lament, the honest and raw expression of pain before God, is a legitimate and biblical response to suffering.

- Chapter one ends with a quiet but significant detail: the barley harvest was just beginning. Naomi could not see it yet, but something was growing.
 - We must be careful not to write the ending of our story while we are still living in the middle of it.
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Discussion Questions

Opening Question *(Use this to ease into the conversation)*

Think about a time when life did not go the way you planned, even in a small way. How did you respond when reality did not match your expectations?

Digging Into the Text

1. Elimelech moved his family to Moab because there was a famine. The sermon pointed out that the text never says this was a sinful decision. Have you ever had to make a difficult choice simply because circumstances forced you into it, not because it was what you wanted? What was that like?
2. Naomi experienced loss in layers: her husband, then both sons, over a period of ten years. How does prolonged or repeated loss affect a person differently than a single tragedy? Have you seen this in your own life or in the life of someone close to you?
3. Ruth chose to stay with Naomi even though Naomi had nothing to offer her. What do you think motivated Ruth to make that choice? What does her commitment reveal about the kind of love and loyalty that God calls us to show one another?
4. Naomi told the women of Bethlehem to call her Mara, meaning bitter, because she believed the Almighty had made her life bitter. She was not denying God's existence; she was accusing God of causing her pain. How do you respond to that kind of raw honesty toward God? Does it make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?
5. The sermon described lament as a biblical practice of bringing pain and hard questions honestly before God. Psalms is full of laments, and even Jesus cried out asking why God had forsaken him. How does knowing that lament is biblical change the way you think about expressing grief or anger to God?
6. The pastor shared personally about a season in his own life when his marriage, ministry, career, and sense of identity all collapsed at once. He said that pain can describe a chapter of your story without getting to name the entire book. What do you think that means in practice? How does someone keep pain from becoming their identity?
7. Naomi said she came back empty, but Ruth was standing right beside her. The sermon suggested that grief can sometimes narrow our vision to the point where we struggle to see what is still present. Have you ever been in a season where loss made it hard to see what you still had? How did you find your way through that?

8. Chapter one ends with the barley harvest just beginning, a detail Naomi could not appreciate in her grief. Looking back on a hard season in your life, can you identify something that was quietly growing or beginning that you could not see at the time?
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Reflection Questions for Personal Application

These questions are designed for individual reflection. You may choose to share your answers with the group or simply sit with them privately.

- What is the gap between the life you expected and the life you are actually living right now? Have you been honest with God about that gap?
 - Are you carrying any bitterness that has started to feel more like an identity than a wound? What would it look like to grieve honestly without letting bitterness hold the pen?
 - Is there a next right step in front of you right now that you have been avoiding because you cannot see the whole plan? What would it look like to take that step anyway?
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Practical Applications

This Week, Choose One

1. **Write an honest prayer.** If you have been carrying questions or anger toward God that you have never said out loud, write them down in a private journal or letter. Do not clean up the language. Do not perform faith. Just be honest. The Psalms model this kind of raw, honest conversation with God.
 2. **Identify your Ruth.** Think about someone in your life who is walking through a hard season. You do not need to have answers or solutions. Simply reach out and let them know you are not going anywhere. Sometimes the most faithful thing we can do is stay.
 3. **Audit the script.** Take a few minutes this week to write down the life you expected to be living versus the life you are actually living. Then ask yourself honestly: Am I allowing what happened to me to define who I am? Bring what you find to God in prayer.
 4. **Look for the harvest.** Think back on a painful chapter of your life that has since passed. Write down one thing that grew out of that season that you could not have seen while you were in the middle of it. Share it with someone you trust as an act of testimony.
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Closing Thought for the Group Leader

Close your time together by reminding the group that Ruth chapter one does not end with resolution. It ends with two grieving widows arriving in a town they are not sure will receive them, with no plan and no guarantee of what comes next. But it also ends with a harvest

beginning. We are not asked this week to wrap anything up neatly. We are simply asked to keep walking and to keep walking together.

Closing Prayer

Invite a group member to close in prayer, or use this as a guide:

Father, thank you for a book of Scripture that does not hide from pain. Thank you that you do not require us to pretend that bitter things taste sweet. We bring you our real lives this morning, the gaps between what we expected and what is, the losses we have not fully grieved, the questions we have been afraid to ask. We trust that you are bigger than all of it. Help us to take the next right step, even when we cannot see where it leads. And help us to walk alongside one another the way Ruth walked alongside Naomi. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Next Week: Ruth Chapter Two

The Life You Did Not Expect: A 5-Day Bible Reading Plan and Devotional Guide

Day 1: When the Script Falls Apart

Reading: Ruth 1:1-5 -- The opening verses describe an ordinary family -- a husband, a wife, two sons -- uprooted by famine and forced into an unfamiliar land, only to face devastating loss one death at a time.

Devotional:

Most of us carry an unwritten script for our lives. We plan, we dream, we pray, and without realizing it, we begin to expect that life will follow a certain order. But Naomi's story begins with famine, displacement, and the death of everything she counted on. No explanation is offered. No prophet appears at her door. Just loss. If your life looks nothing like what you planned, you are not outside God's reach. You are simply in the middle of a story that has not finished being written. The absence of an explanation is not the absence of God. Hold on.

Reflection Questions:

- What expectations have you carried about how your life was supposed to look?
- Where have you felt the gap most sharply between the life you planned and the life you are living?
- How does Naomi's story challenge the idea that faith protects us from loss?

Practical Application: Write down one expectation you have been grieving. Acknowledge it honestly before God in prayer today without trying to fix it or resolve it. Simply name it.

Day 2: The Faithfulness of the Next Step

Reading: Ruth 1:14-18 -- Ruth refuses to leave Naomi's side and makes a sweeping declaration of loyalty, choosing to follow Naomi into an unknown future with no promise of security or comfort.

Devotional:

Ruth does not know how the story ends. She is a widow, a foreigner, and she is walking away from everything familiar. She does not ask God to reveal the full plan before she moves. She simply takes the next step. Her words to Naomi -- where you go, I will go -- are not spoken at a

wedding. They are spoken at the edge of grief, in the middle of uncertainty, with nothing guaranteed. Faithfulness does not always look like confidence. Sometimes it looks like simply refusing to let go when everything around you is telling you to walk away. Take the next step.

Reflection Questions:

- Have you ever delayed obedience because you wanted God to reveal the full plan first?
- What does Ruth's loyalty to Naomi reveal about the kind of love God calls us to practice?
- Where in your life right now is God asking you to take one step without seeing the whole staircase?

Practical Application: Identify one area of your life where you have been waiting for certainty before acting. Commit today to taking one small step of faithfulness in that direction, even without the full picture.

Day 3: The Permission to Lament

Reading: Psalm 22:1-11 -- The psalmist cries out to God in raw anguish, asking why God seems distant and silent in the middle of suffering, yet continues to appeal to God's faithfulness even while expressing deep pain.

Devotional:

Naomi does not hide her pain when she returns to Bethlehem. She tells her neighbors to stop calling her pleasant and start calling her bitter. The Bible does not censor her. It does not interrupt her with a corrective theology lesson. It lets her speak. The Psalms are full of this kind of honest, aching prayer. Even Jesus, hanging on the cross, cried out the opening words of Psalm 22. Faith does not require you to pretend that bitter things taste sweet. God is not fragile. He can hold your anger, your confusion, and your grief. Bring it to him honestly. That is not faithlessness. That is lament, and lament is a form of prayer.

Reflection Questions:

- Have you ever felt pressure to suppress grief or anger because you thought it was inappropriate for a person of faith?
- What is the difference between lamenting before God and losing faith in God?
- How does knowing that Jesus himself cried out in anguish change the way you view your own suffering?

Practical Application: Write an honest prayer today that says exactly what you feel -- no editing, no cleaning it up. Tell God the truth about your pain and then close by naming one thing you still believe about him, even if it is small.

Day 4: Bitterness as Identity Versus Bitterness as a Season

Reading: Hebrews 12:14-15 -- The writer warns that bitterness, when it takes root, grows into something that corrupts and spreads, affecting not only the person carrying it but those around them as well.

Devotional:

Naomi asks to be renamed Mara, which means bitter. What she has suffered is real. Her grief is legitimate. But there is a difference between passing through bitterness and allowing bitterness to become your name. Pain can describe a chapter of your story without being allowed to title the whole book. When bitterness becomes identity, it changes the way we see ourselves, the way we see others, and the way we see God. It does not mean you stop hurting. It means you refuse to let the wound define the whole person. What happened to you matters deeply. But it does not get to decide who you are or where your story ends.

Reflection Questions:

- Is there a painful experience in your past that has quietly become part of how you define yourself?
- How does bitterness affect the way you relate to the people around you and to God?
- What would it look like to grieve fully without allowing grief to become your permanent address?

Practical Application: Ask a trusted friend or counselor to help you identify whether there is an area of your life where pain has shifted from being something you experienced into something that is shaping your identity. Pray specifically about that area today.

Day 5: The Harvest You Cannot Yet See

Reading: Romans 8:24-28 -- Paul describes hope as the confident expectation of something not yet visible, and affirms that even in weakness and confusion, the Spirit intercedes on our behalf, and God is working all things toward a purpose we may not yet be able to see.

Devotional:

Ruth chapter one ends with a detail that Naomi cannot see from where she is standing. She has come home empty, or so she believes. She is grieving, disoriented, and convinced that the Lord has brought her back with nothing. But the narrator tells us that the barley harvest is just beginning. Something is growing just outside of Bethlehem, and Naomi has no idea. This is the nature of hope. It does not always feel like hope. Sometimes it simply looks like the next morning arriving, like a harvest beginning in a field you have not yet walked into. You do not

know what is growing just outside the chapter you are living in right now. Neither did Naomi. But the harvest was real.

Reflection Questions:

- Where in your life are you tempted to write a final conclusion when you are actually still in the middle of the story?
- How does the image of the barley harvest challenge the way Naomi -- and perhaps you -- have been measuring what you have left?
- What would it mean for you today to hold your grief honestly while also holding space for a harvest you cannot yet see?

Practical Application: Find a quiet place and sit with Romans 8:28 for several minutes. Do not try to explain it or apply it immediately. Simply let it rest over the situation you are currently walking through. Then write down one sentence that begins with the words: "I do not know how this ends, but I believe..."