

Small Group Guide: Welcome to Providence

Week 1 - Ruth Chapter 1

BEFORE YOU MEET

Encourage group members to read Ruth chapter 1 on their own before gathering. Ask them to come prepared to share one thing that stood out to them from their reading.

OPENING QUESTION

Go around the group and share a time when something looked hopeless from the outside but eventually turned around in an unexpected way. What did that season teach you?

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The book of Ruth is set during the time of the judges in Israel -- a period marked by moral and spiritual chaos. Judges 21:25 describes this era as a time when everyone did whatever seemed right in their own eyes. Against this backdrop, a famine strikes Bethlehem -- a name that literally means "house of bread." A man named Elimelech, whose name means "my God is king," chooses to leave the promised land with his wife Naomi ("sweetness") and their two sons to seek provision in Moab. Tragedy follows. Elimelech dies, both sons die, and Naomi is left widowed and bereft in a foreign land with her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

The names in this story are not accidental. They carry symbolic weight that shapes how we understand the narrative:

- Elimelech -- "my God is king"
- Naomi -- "sweetness"
- Malon -- "sickly"
- Kilion -- "to come to an end"
- Ruth -- "refreshment"
- Boaz -- "the man" or "husband"

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1. God is faithful even when his people are not.** The backdrop of Ruth is Israel's repeated unfaithfulness. Yet God's provision and care continue. The famine, the deaths, the emptiness -- none of it stopped God from working on behalf of his people.
- 2. God works through ordinary, everyday circumstances.** Nothing miraculous happens in the book of Ruth. No parting seas, no fire from heaven. Yet God is clearly at work -- in a report of a good harvest, in the loyalty of a daughter-in-law, in the timing of an arrival. Providence does not always look dramatic.
- 3. Our interpretation of God's character should not be limited to one painful chapter.** Naomi interprets everything through the lens of her losses. She tells people to call her Mara, meaning "bitter," because she believes the Almighty has turned against her. But the narrator quietly shows us two signs she cannot yet see -- Ruth clinging to her side and the barley harvest beginning. Her grief is real, but her interpretation is incomplete.
- 4. Covenant faithfulness -- chesed -- is the defining characteristic of God.** The Hebrew word chesed describes God's loyal, steadfast love that holds to the covenant even when we fail. Ruth embodies this toward Naomi. It is the same love God extends toward us.
- 5. Faith often means taking the next step without seeing the whole path.** Elimelech's mistake was demanding a different outcome rather than trusting God in the land of promise. Ruth's faithfulness was moving forward without any guarantee of what lay ahead.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Getting into the Text

1. The sermon pointed out that the names in Ruth carry significant meaning. Knowing that Elimelech means "my God is king," what does it say about his decision to leave the promised land and seek provision in Moab on his own terms?
2. Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to return to their own families, their own people, and their own gods. What does Ruth's refusal to do so reveal about the kind of faith she had developed, even as a Moabite?
3. Ruth's declaration in verses 16 and 17 echoes the language God used when calling Abraham to leave everything and follow him in Genesis 12. What does it mean to you that a foreign woman is being held up as an example of Abrahamic faith?

Going Deeper

4. The sermon described chesed as a word that, in Jewish thought, encapsulates the entire nature of God -- his covenant love that holds even when we fail on our end. Where have you personally experienced that kind of faithfulness from God?
5. Naomi says, "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me home empty." She is being honest about her pain and her perception of God's role in it. How do you hold space for honest lament while still trusting in God's goodness? Is there a tension there for you?
6. The sermon made this observation about Naomi: "She believes that God is sovereign but she interprets his sovereignty only through her losses." Have you ever found yourself doing the same thing? What helped you -- or what might help you -- to see a more complete picture?
7. The narrator closes chapter 1 with two quiet details -- Ruth is standing with Naomi, and they have arrived at the beginning of the barley harvest. Why do you think God's provision often shows up quietly rather than dramatically? How does that affect the way we look for him in our own lives?

Personal Reflection

8. The sermon described people who walk away from faith because they were taught that following Jesus would mean a life free from hardship, and then reality did not match that expectation. How would you describe a more honest and biblically grounded picture of what faith looks like in the middle of suffering?
9. Where in your life right now are you tempted to demand to see the whole path before you take the next step of faith? What would it look like to take that next faithful step anyway?
10. The sermon closed with this image: just as Ruth clung to Naomi in her emptiness, the Spirit of God clings to us in ours. What does it mean to you personally that God's presence does not depend on whether you feel full or empty?

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This week, choose one of the following:

- **Identify the quiet signs.** Take time this week to write down two or three ways God may already be at work in your life or circumstances that you have been overlooking because

they do not look dramatic enough. Share what you find with a trusted friend or your group next time.

- **Be Ruth to someone.** Think of someone in your life who is in a bitter season -- someone who has lost the sweetness of life and feels empty. Reach out to them this week in a concrete way. You do not need to fix anything. Simply show up and refuse to let go.
- **Bring your honest lament to God.** If you are in a difficult season, resist the urge to either perform positivity or to walk away in bitterness. Write out an honest prayer to God that names your pain and your questions, and then closes with a declaration of who he has revealed himself to be -- not based on your current circumstances, but based on his character and his faithfulness throughout Scripture.
- **Study, do not just read.** Pick one name or one detail from Ruth chapter 1 and spend fifteen minutes this week digging into its meaning and context. Come back to the group ready to share what you discovered.

CLOSING PRAYER

Close your time together by praying for any group members who are in a season of emptiness or bitterness. Ask God to make his chesed -- his covenant faithfulness -- tangible to them this week. Pray that each person in the group would have the courage to take the next faithful step, even without seeing the whole path.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week the group will move into Ruth chapter 2, where Ruth goes out to glean in the fields and encounters Boaz. Begin reading chapter 2 before you meet, and pay attention to the moments where God's hand appears to be hidden but is clearly directing the story.