

August 23, 2026

## FAITHFULNESS: RUTH 1:11-18; 2:5-12

### Introductory Activity

**Ask the group:** Has anyone ever done anything nice for you? Does anyone want to share a time when someone's good deeds toward you really lifted your spirits?

**Introduce:** In the opening verses of Philemon, Paul says he thanks God for the man because he had heard of Philemon's great love for the saints. (v. 5) In verse 7, he writes, "For I have great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother." The love we display toward others can be an encouragement to them and a great uplift for those who observe it. Today we are going to begin a two-week study in the book of Ruth. In the book, we will observe great love demonstrated by Ruth, Boaz, and the Lord.

**Summarize and Transition:** Verse 1 of the book tells us that the events in the book of Ruth took place during the time of the Judges. Our lesson picks up after a few significant events, so let's set the stage. The opening verses of the book tell us that a man named Elimelech and his family lived in Bethlehem. However, a great famine came upon Israel, and they moved to the "fields of Moab" to find relief. Now, it is probable that this famine was a direct action of God in response to the sin of Israel (see Lev. 26:20; Deut. 28:24). In the book of Judges, we see God act by allowing foreign nations to oppress Israel because of their sin. Here we are reminded that God was acting in other ways to discipline His people. We also see throughout the book of Judges that God acts with the intention of bringing the nation to a point of repentance. Likewise, the famine experienced by this family in Bethlehem was meant to bring them to the point of repentance. Instead, they ran to a foreign nation for help.

While in the land of Moab, the family settled in. The two sons married Moabite women. However, at some point during the first ten years of their sojourn, Elimelech died, and after ten years had passed, both sons died.

The death of these three men left the three women: Naomi, Elimelech's wife, and the two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, alone. In the patriarchal society of the Ancient Near East, the death of their husbands left these three women in dire straits. Naomi, though, heard that the famine in Israel had concluded. Therefore, she determined to return to Israel and set out with her daughters-in-law. On the way, she tried twice to dissuade them from returning. Our lesson picks up with the second of her two requests that they return to Moab and their families. Let's look at this lesson and see how "In the midst of Naomi's tragedy, God demonstrated His care and sovereignty." (ETB LG, 131)

### 1. LOSS (RUTH 1:11-15)

Read (or have someone read) **Ruth 1:11-15**.

**Explain:** Let's begin by looking at the cultural situation in which these ladies found themselves, and then the spiritual situation and emotional situation for the ladies. To help us understand what Naomi is talking about

#### Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Judges and Ruth* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Judges* (NAC)
- *Exalting Jesus in Judges and Ruth* (Exalting)

when she speaks of marriage, we have to understand the Jewish custom of levirate marriage. On page 111, the Explore the Bible Personal Study explains the practice: “Orpah and Ruth could have considered the Israelite custom of levirate marriage. Levirate marriage involved a close family member, such as a brother-in-law marrying his brother’s widow to preserve the family through progeny (Deut. 25:5-6). The oldest brother-in-law had the obligation to marry his brother’s widow, and as such, he inherited all of his dead brother’s estate. The importance of levirate marriage was the perpetuation of the deceased’s name in Israel.”

In verses 11-13, Naomi does not mention a kinsman to whom they might marry. Instead, she talks about bearing new sons for them to marry. One reason for this might be the fact that both Orpah and Ruth are Moabites, not Israelites. Naomi, it seems, is assuming that they will find no husbands among the Israelites. This is a very good assumption. To understand why she might make this assumption, we have to go back in the history of Israel to understand the relationship between Moab and Israel.

The nation, or people group, of Moab descended from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:36-37). The nation of Moab appears several times in the history of Israel. In one encounter with Moab, their king hired Balaam to curse Israel (Num. 22-24). Soon after that event, the Moabites seduced the men of Israel into Baal worship (Num. 25:1-9). Later in the book of Judges, another king of Moab had oppressed Israel (Judg. 3:15-30). As a result of Moab’s actions, particularly the events surrounding the Balaam incident, the Lord placed a ban on Moab.

**Read** Duet 23:3, 6 (See Notes Box.)

Because of the way Moab had treated Israel, they were not allowed to become part of the Israelite community. Therefore, it was understandable that Naomi would have feared for her daughters-in-law’s marriage prospects in Israel. Moreover, she knew that it was unlikely they would wait for her to remarry, bear, and raise more boys for them to marry. (Not to mention Naomi was probably 50 years old at this point, which would have been senior adulthood in their culture. See NAC, 636)

**Discuss:** Despite these challenges, why do you think Orpah and Ruth were committed to following Naomi back to Israel?

Notes:

Duet 23:3

<sup>3</sup> No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the Lord’s assembly; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, may ever enter the Lord’s assembly.

Duet 23:6

<sup>6</sup> Never pursue their welfare or prosperity as long as you live.

**Explain:** We cannot know for sure, but it seems that the three ladies had a close relationship. Naomi calls them “my daughters” multiple times in this passage. We also see their close connection when the writer tells us that “they wept loudly” at the prospect of parting ways back in verse 8. This brings us to their emotional and spiritual state. It can be assumed they were all saddened by the recent death of Naomi’s sons. They were probably also apprehensive about their economic prospects and thereby their survival. But let’s focus closely on Naomi’s emotional and spiritual state.

**Ask:** How does she describe her life in verse 13? (bitter, or very bitter)

The Message paraphrase of verse 13 presents Naomi’s words as “this is a bitter pill for me to swallow—more bitter for me than for you. God has dealt me a hard blow.” In the following account (which we are going to skip over), we learn more about Naomi’s emotional state. When she arrives in Bethlehem, the women of the village greet her happily. In response, she tells them to call her not Naomi but Mara. Naomi means “pleasant” while Mara means “bitter.” One commentator writes, “Naomi is a bitter old woman who blames God for her crisis. (NAC, 637)

**Direct and Discuss:** Direct the group to page 113 of their Personal Study Guide and ask the question at the top of the page: Why does loss draw some people closer to God, while others struggle with anger toward God? How can the church community be a source of compassion for both?

People respond differently to the challenges of life. Some, like Naomi, develop a bitter spirit and become resentful toward God. Others draw close to Him. The church can help others respond positively through a Christ-like, loving, and patient presence with those who are suffering. The church and every disciple of Christ can be proactive in preparing for bad times. The truth is, everyone is going to face challenging times at some point in their life. Therefore, we should do what we can to prepare for those times. One way we can do this is through personal discipleship. If we are prepared in the Lord to face difficult times, we are more likely to respond in a godly manner when they come. It appears that Naomi did not do this.

In their initial flight to Moab, probably initiated and led by Elimelech, the family demonstrates (1) a lack of trust and (2) a lack of proper repentance in the face of God’s discipline through the famine. We can also see Naomi’s lack of godly understanding in the passage we read before. First, in verse 13 she says, “the Lord’s hand has turned against me.” We can read this as a declaration of God’s sovereignty, as seen throughout the OT. We can also see in it a refusal to acknowledge her own sin, and a shifting of blame from herself to the Lord. In verse 14, we see a misunderstanding of God’s unique and special nature. There she praises Orpah for returning to the false gods of Moab. It is as if she is saying that it is better for the Moabite women to remain pagan rather than come into a faith commitment to Yahweh God. In the end, we see that Naomi’s lack of proper discipleship has led her to despair and bitterness.

“Instead of repenting of her own and her people’s sin (*šûb*), she accuses God of injustice toward her.” (NAC, 637)

**Summarize Transition:** The story of Ruth begins with the plight of Naomi. She has lost everything. She “went away full, but [came] back empty.” (1:21) Like Naomi, “Believers will suffer loss,” and we should be prepared to reckon with it. Moreover, churches and disciples of Jesus should be ready to stand with those who suffer loss. In the end, Orpah leaves Naomi and returns to Moab, but as we are going to see, Ruth makes a very different decision. Let’s look at her words next.

## 2. LOYALTY (RUTH 1:16-18)

Read (or have someone read) Ruth 1:16-18.

This is probably one of the most famous passages in the Bible. While it is often heard repeated at weddings, this is a poem of commitment given by one desperate woman to another. It is a poem of commitment from a younger, more able woman to an older, less able one. It is a poem of commitment and care. The poem is given in 5 couplets. Let’s look at each of those briefly and examine Ruth’s commitment.

Reread verse 15a (Don’t plead with me to abandon you or to return and not follow you.). This is simply Ruth’s refusal to hear again Naomi’s plea that she return to Moab. However, “the use of the strong verb...’ to forsake, abandon’ suggests that even at this early stage Ruth felt obligated for Naomi’s sake to accompany her.” (NAC, 641) Ruth was doing this out of love and for Naomi’s benefit.

Reread verse 16b (For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live). Naomi had pleaded with Orpah and Ruth to return to their homeland. Her language had been one of insistence that going to Israel was irrational. “Orpah pursues the natural [rational] course; Ruth is determined to swim upstream.” (NAC, 638) The Explore the Bible Commentary explains further: “Ruth’s loyalty defied the logical route, driven by a deeper commitment and love for Naomi... It highlights her willingness to embrace uncertainty for the sake of her bond with Naomi... [and it] ultimately redefine[s] her identity and future within the narrative.” (ETBC, 123) In effect, Ruth is saying, “If you are going to Israel, then so am I.”

We will come back to the third couplet. Let’s skip to the fourth. Verse 17a reads, “Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.” This is an emphatic restatement of her commitment to accompany Naomi wherever she goes, as well as a statement of lifelong commitment to Naomi. They are family, and they are going to stick together until the end.

**Discuss:** How does Ruth’s commitment to Naomi reflect the sacrificial love to which disciples of Jesus are called?

**Explain:** Scholars point out that the book of Ruth presents many opportunities to consider the concept of *hesed* or *chesed*. “The Hebrew word *chesed* can sometimes refer to kindness or mercy. It can also refer to faithfulness or loyalty. Most often it is translated as ‘steadfast love’... *Chesed* is often used as a characteristic of God [and] is associated with His covenant love for Israel.”<sup>1</sup> We see the word repeated over and over in Psalm 136. The first verse is well known. It reads, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His faithful love

<sup>1</sup> John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016).

[*chesed*] endures forever.” If you read through Psalm 136, you will see God’s faithful love demonstrated in creation, His deliverance, protection, care of Israel, and His provision for His people. We see God’s steadfast love for mankind most clearly in the atoning work of Christ. In response to that love, believers are to care deeply for others. James 1:27 reads, “Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” In the ancient world, orphans and widows were the most vulnerable. Like Ruth, disciples of Jesus should care for the least of these. Moreover, like Ruth, who put herself in danger to care for Naomi, believers should be willing to go above and beyond for those in need.

**Application:** You might take a moment during your group time to consider a service project you can perform that will bless someone in need.

The two most important couplets related to Ruth’s spiritual life are the third and fifth. The third is found in verse 16c. It says, “Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.” The fifth is found in verse 17b says, “May the Lord punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.” “With radical self-sacrifice she abandons every basis of security that any person, let alone a poor widow, in that cultural context would have clung to: her native homeland, her own people, even her own gods.” (NAC, 641) She is giving up everything for her commitment to Naomi. She is leaving her homeland for Israel. She is forsaking any return to her birth family for Naomi. She is even giving up her gods. In verse 16, she uses the general term for God (Elohim), and in verse 17 she uses the more specific Yahweh. Her commitment to Naomi is life-changing. We do not know the extent to which Ruth understood Israel’s God at this point, but she is at least familiar with Him and his ways. As the book (and other Bible passages) reveal, Ruth did fully integrate into the Jewish faith later.

**Discuss:** How is Ruth’s commitment in these two couplets similar to what a person does today when committing their life to Christ?

**Explain:** Ruth gave up everything when she made her commitment to Naomi and Naomi’s God. When a person comes to faith in Christ, they are leaving much behind. While in modern Western cultures a new disciple of Christ is not often forced to leave his or her family, they are to leave behind their former ways of being. It might require them to give up unhealthy or immoral relationships. It might force them to give up an un-Christlike way of doing business that made them wealthy. Like Ruth, they might give up the security offered by the things of this world and depend on Christ for security in this world and the one hereafter.

**Summarize and Transition:** In her commitment to Naomi, Ruth is giving up the things of this world for the benefit of her mother-in-law. She does so out of love and care. She is an example to us of God’s faithful love for us. She is also an example of the love we should show to others. After Ruth concludes her impassioned plea, the writer tells us that Naomi “stopped talking to her.” In other words, she stopped arguing about it. “Ruth had made her point.” (ETB LG, 136) From this passage, we learn that we should minister to others, but we also learn that “We need to allow others to minister to us.” (ETB LG, 137) The bitter, determined Naomi kept pushing Ruth away and refusing her help. Ruth was wise enough to know that Naomi needed her. Her plea convinced Naomi to allow her to help. When we need help, we should just admit it and let God-sent persons help us.

We are going to skip a bit of the story. In the following verses, the two women settle in Bethlehem. They are in dire straits and need food, so Ruth goes to the fields to glean. “In the ancient world, gleaning involved going behind workers and gathering the grain that fell to the ground during the harvest. By Jewish law, Ruth had the right to glean in any field with the landowner’s permission. In fact, the law encouraged landowners to leave the corners of the fields for the poor. This would allow them to put in an honest day’s work and to provide for

Faithfulness: Ruth 1:11-18; 2:5-12

their needs without shame.” (ETB LG, 139) Through the Lord’s provision, she ends up in the field of a man named Boaz.

### 3. PROVISION (RUTH 2:5-12)

**Read** (or have someone read) Ruth 2:5-12.

In this passage, we see two important points: **The Lord as Provider** and **Boaz as the Hand of God’s Protection**.

**Lord as Provider:** One cannot read the book of Ruth and not see the Lord’s hand all over the life of this woman. Ruth 2:1 reads, “Now Naomi had a relative on her husband’s side. He was a prominent man of noble character from Elimelech’s family. His name was Boaz.” The writer just drops that in as a clue to what’s coming. But it also points to God’s plan at work. In verse 3 we read, “So Ruth left and entered the field to gather grain behind the harvesters. She happened to be in the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was from Elimelech’s family.” While the writer says that she just “happened” to come to Boaz’s field. It is clear from the rest of the book that God was at work in bringing her to that field.

**Boaz as the Hand of God’s Protection:** We could spend a lot of time detailing the ways Boaz showed kindness to Ruth. In this passage alone, we see him care about the foreign, pagan woman; he puts her in proximity to (and care of) the women in his field; he protects her from men who might seek to take advantage of her. Later in the book, we see that he provides provisions either directly or on the sly for Ruth and Naomi. He does this because he is a man of great character. He also does so because he sees that Ruth is a woman of character. In verse 12, he reveals that he understands that he is acting as the hand of God’s protection and provision.

**Discuss:** How might it change a person’s perspective on helping others if they saw themselves as God’s hand or protection and provision? (Oftentimes our flesh can cause us to be tightfisted, prideful, and dismissive of others. If we truly saw ourselves as the hands and feet of Christ, we might live more Boaz-like lives.)

**Summarize and Transition:** We will talk more about Boaz and his care for Ruth next week. But in the passage, both he and she provide us with examples of how to live out of God’s love and show that love to others. Their story also shows us that “Believers can be confident in God’s sovereign ability to provide for our needs” (ETB LG, 139), and He wants to use believers to provide the same for others.

### CONCLUDE

Ruth is one of the great love stories of the Bible. However, it begins with a family in mourning and then moves to reveal a family in trouble. The story of Ruth begins with a great love for Naomi and then moves to a story of great love by God revealed in Boaz.

Challenge:

- 1) What practices can you utilize in the coming weeks to deepen your discipleship in preparation for the challenging times that will inevitably come your way?
- 2) What can you do this week to show the love of God to others? (Is it sharing the gospel, your time, or your resources?)

Notes:

"Boaz sees himself as an instrument of the Lord to reward Ruth for her faithfulness to the Lord and to her mother-in-law." (Exalting, 276-277)

"Nothing is said about Ruth's appearance. Whether or not she was beautiful appears irrelevant to Boaz. What has impressed him is her character." (Preaching, 259)