

THE GOSPEL

ACCORDING TO

Ruth

A JOURNEY FROM FAMINE TO FULLNESS

Week 2 Handout: Ruth 1:6-22

Ruth 1:6-22

NAOMI AND RUTH RETURN TO BETHLEHEM



Shavuot, Ruth, and the Celebration of the Harvest

Modern Jewish Rabbis recommend reading the book of Ruth during Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost), which celebrates the harvest season God has provided and the Law of Moses (i.e. the Ten Commandments). Many Jewish families read the book of Ruth on the first night of Shavuot, and it's not uncommon for synagogues to include it in their public readings the following day.

There are quite a few reasons why Ruth is a great choice for this occasion.

First, one of the prominent themes in the book of Ruth is the interplay between famine and harvest. The famine in Bethlehem (**Ruth 1:1**) forced Elimelek and Naomi out of Israel and into the foreign, immoral land of Moab. There, Naomi and her daughters-in-law lost everything: husbands, sons, and any semblance of hope for the future.

In the next section of Ruth (**1:6-22**), we begin to see how the harvest season in Bethlehem (which ended a physical famine) represents a glimmer of hope that their emotional famine would soon be ended as well. Since the book of Ruth takes place during the harvest season (**1:22**), reading it is a great way to celebrate Shavuot.

Second, Shavuot is understood to coincide with the anniversary of King David's death. Since Ruth is a bit of an "origin story" of David's family, the connection between Ruth and Shavuot makes sense.

Third, the day that Israel received the Law of Moses, the entire nation became "converts" to the covenant God was establishing with them. Ruth is a positive example of a foreigner who embraced Judaism with all her heart, which ties in well with the conversion theme from Shavuot.

There's No Place Like Home (Ruth 1:6-7)

The book of Ruth predates *The Wizard of Oz* by a few thousand years, but we can be sure that Naomi would have agreed with Dorothy's assessment that "*there's no place like home*." When Naomi gets word that the famine has ended (**1:6**) and the harvest season has begun back home in Bethlehem (**1:22**), she jumps at the chance to return home.

As mentioned in our introduction class, God does not speak any direct words in the book of Ruth, and it has only frequent and vague references to the actions he performs in the story. **Ruth 1:6** contains one of the references to what God is up to when it says "*the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them*."

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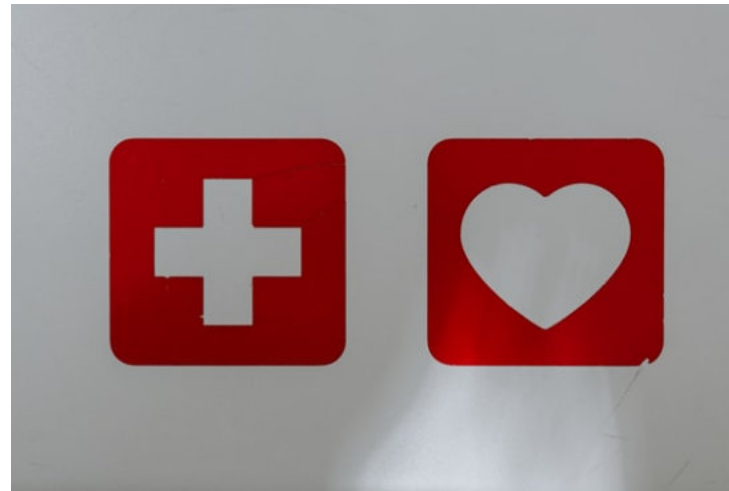
God Comes to Our Aid.

Several other passages and stories from the Bible help us understand what this phrase means. To “come to someone’s aid” means to show concern for them, to visit them, or attend to their needs.

This is the same Bible word used in **Exodus 3-4** when God noticed the suffering of his people in Egypt and rescued them from their oppression. It's also the same word used when God “visited” or “took note of” Sarah and fulfilled his promise to give her a child in **Genesis 21:1**. When Joseph was giving his final blessings to his brothers in **Genesis 50:24**, he promised them that God would “come to their aid” and lead the people to the land he promised their ancestors. Finally, in **Psalms 8:4**, Ruth’s great-grandson David asks the reflective question “what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?”

What general theme do you hear from these passages?

The overall picture is that God sees us in our distress, personally attends to our needs, fulfills his promises, and takes the time to notice us, even when our problems seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things.



When you are down and feeling like your struggles wouldn’t matter all that much the all-powerful, ever-present, all-knowing creator of the universe, remember that our God visits us in our distress and “comes to our aid.”

After years of famine in Bethlehem, eventually God comes to their aid by providing them with food. There’s a fun little wordplay in the original Hebrew language. The word for “food” is *lachen*, and the word for “them” is *lahem*. So God gives “lahem lachen” in the city of Bethlehem (the house of bread).

Reflection Question #1: What is an example where God “came to your aid” like he did for Naomi and the people of Bethlehem?

Connection to the Prodigal Son

This scene in Ruth is similar to the famous story about the prodigal son in Luke 15. In that parable, a greedy and immoral son demands his inheritance early and then squanders it in a faraway place. Faced with a famine and a dire future, he “got up” and returned to his father.

Ruth 1:6-7 uses similar language to describe the women’s voyage home. The Bible says that Naomi “got up” in v. 6 and “returned” to Bethlehem in v. 7, just like the prodigal son.

It should be obvious that these stories aren’t identical, however. The son’s misfortune was a result of his own sin, while the women were simply the victims of an area-wide famine that forced them far from home.

In both cases, they return home when they realize the harvest/banquet is ready if they’re willing to get up and go. God comes to the aid of his people, but we need to be willing to get up and go!

Reflection Question #2: Why do we need to “get up and go” instead of waiting around for the situation to magically get better?

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Should I Stay or Should I Go? (Ruth 1:8-19)

Naomi knew Ruth and Orpah didn't have any reason to go with her back to Bethlehem. Their homes, families, and future were in Moab. In Israel, they would be complete strangers and possibly mistreated upon because of their status as Moabites. The customs of the day would suggest that Ruth and Orpah were to remarry some of Naomi's other sons, but in light of Naomi's age, that ship had sailed, so to speak. Because of Naomi's genuine concern for her daughters-in-law she urged them three separate times to go back to Moab:

1. "Go back... to your mother's home" 1:8
2. "Return home, my daughters." 1:11
3. "Go back with her." 1:15

Naomi offered her daughters a blessing of God's kindness (*hesed*, God's loving-kindness from **Exodus 34:6**). Since Naomi was set on going separate ways, God's kindness would take the place of the kindness she wanted to show them personally. It was also a way to informally say, "Our relationship and commitment to one another has now ended."

Despite Naomi's threefold urging to return to Moab, Ruth persistently declares her loyalty and her commitment to staying by Naomi's side.

"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 1:16-17 (NIV)

In the end, Orpah returns home, while Naomi is persuaded to let Ruth return with her. The story does not criticize Orpah for her decision, since it is the sensible and respectful thing to do. As Robert Hubbard Jr. writes,

"Her departure merits some praise as an obedient daughter who properly accepted Naomi's wise counsel. Her choice only highlights how extraordinary was Ruth's conduct. That is the narrator's point: Orpah did the sensible, expected thing, Ruth the extraordinary and unexpected. Thus, Ruth models an adventurous faith, one willing to abandon the apparently sensible and venture into unknown territory. One may understand Orpah; one must emulate Ruth."

NICOT, The Book of Ruth, 115-16

Naomi notes that Ruth is "determined," which is the same Bible word as "courageous." When Joshua was preparing to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land, he was faced with overwhelming obstacles and formidable armies. God told Joshua to be "strong and courageous." Ruth had the same courage, commitment and persistence to go back with Naomi that Joshua had about conquering the Promised Land. *Maybe that's why Naomi eventually decided to let her come along!*

Reflection Question #3: What kind of example does Ruth give us for our relationships with friends, spouses, co-workers, etc?

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Why is Ruth in our Bibles?

Very frequently, Bible scholars and theologians will ask the question: Why did someone in Israel think that God's people needed *this story* in their Scriptures? Surely there were countless other stories of God blessing women that could have been told instead. So why the story of Ruth and Naomi?

As Christians we believe that God inspired the Bible and worked through the lives of the right people at the right time to give us the Bible as he intended, but there were also some very logical, human reasons why different books were included in the Bible. Often, specific stories or entire books of the Bible were included to address a particular controversy, question, or dilemma that God's people (Israel or the church) were facing later on.

David's Controversial Family Tree

One reason Ruth was an important story to be told might have been the fact that King David technically should not have been allowed to serve as King, or even be welcomed among the people of Israel to begin with! How's that for a juicy controversy! Consider this command from God in Deuteronomy 23:3:

"No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation." (NIV)

Do you see the problem? King David's enemies (and there were many) surely knew that he was only three generations removed from a Moabite



King David in Prayer,
Pieter de Grebber, (c. 1640)

ancestor (Ruth). They might have had serious concerns about him or valid criticism about his legal status to rule over Israel.

Perhaps the book of Ruth was written to show that Ruth was a full, whole-hearted convert to Judaism who renounced whatever immorality or idolatry that was typically associated with Moabites.

In order to bring legitimacy to David's kingship, the story would need to show Ruth's genuine love for God and her sincere desire to become fully Israelite in her heart, mind, soul and strength.

Setting Ruth's Record Straight

And that's exactly what this part of the story accomplishes. In fact, future Rabbis look at Naomi's three urgings and Ruth's persistence as a model for *discouraging* people from converting to Judaism

three times, but then allowing them to do so if they keep requesting it even after being told "no." If that seems surprising, remember that Judaism (unlike Christianity) does not have a strong sense of being called to make converts. They will allow converts only if a person shows the same kind of passion and commitment that Ruth has about becoming an Israelite and worshipping the God of Israel.

Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, her commitment to joining Israel, and her passionate declaration to worship no other Gods but YHWH could all help bolster David's standing in Israel in future generations. This part of the story help set the record straight about Ruth's allegiances and her standing in Israel.

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Call Me Mara (1:20-22)

In the Hebrew language, “Naomi” means “pleasant” or “lovely,” but Naomi’s life is anything but pleasant so far in the story. In **Ruth 1:13**, Naomi laments that her life is bitter (Hebrew “mara”) because God’s hand has turned against her.

That helps understand why Naomi wanted to change her name from “Pleasant” (Naomi) to “Bitter” (Mara) in **Ruth 1:20**. In that verse she reiterates her view that God himself is responsible for her bitterness. It’s hard to blame her for the pain and heartache she’s feeling. After being uprooted because of a famine, and ending up in the worst of all places possible, then losing her husband and her two sons in that foreign land, Naomi is understandably dejected. She is, as some have pointed out, quite like a female Job.

Upon returning, she laments that she left Bethlehem “full” and has now returned “empty.” She has every right to feel this way after the pain she endured. But at the same time, I wonder what Ruth might have thought about Naomi describing her life as “empty” such a short time after Ruth’s remarkable display of love and loyalty.

By the end of chapter 1, we are back in Bethlehem with only a hint of hope in the story. The harvest season has returned, but that’s probably too little, too late from Naomi’s point of view. Yes, Ruth is with her, but Naomi is still overcome by grief. The damage from the physical famine has been done, and even though the harvest season in Bethlehem is welcomed news, it can’t bring her husband or sons back from the dead.

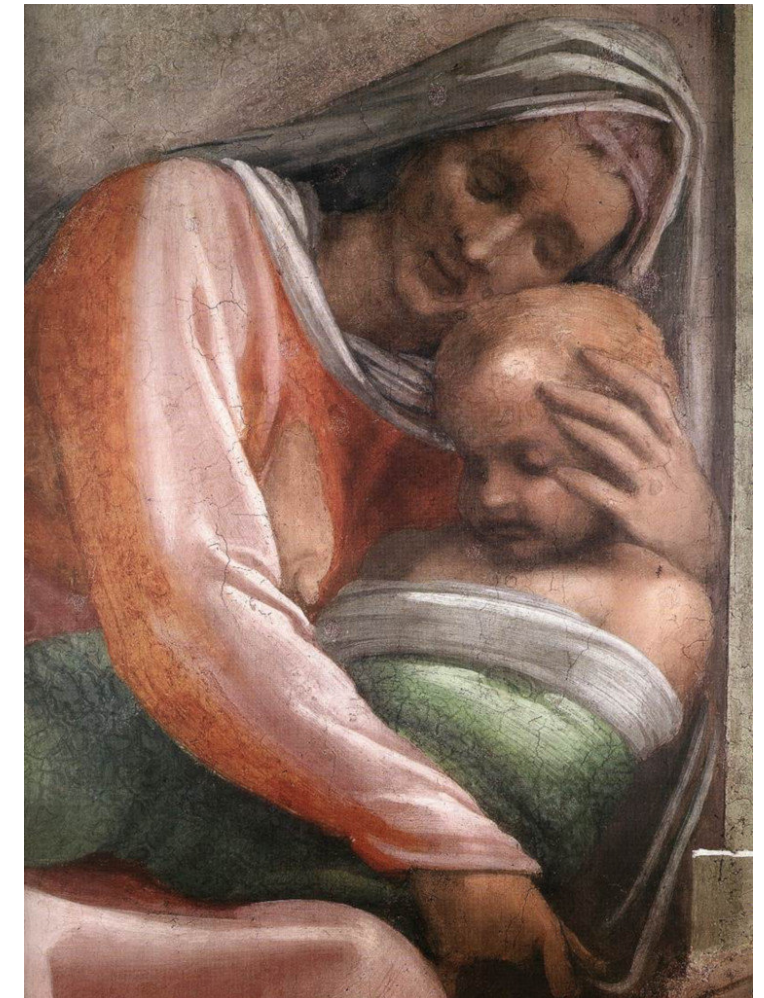
The Narrator’s Subtle Sign of Hope

As we just saw, Naomi wanted to change her name to “Bitter” because of how badly things were going. In **Ruth 1:21**, Naomi rhetorically blurts out, “Why call me *lovely*?” or “Why call me *pleasant*?” After everything Naomi has endured, that’s a legitimate question!

The narrator of the story actually has a good answer to why we should still call her “Lovely.”

Notice that in the entire story, no one seems to call Naomi by her preferred name “Bitter.” Not Ruth, not Boaz, not the women of Bethlehem, and not even the narrator of this story. **Why is that?**

The narrator had the benefit of time and perspective that Naomi didn’t. Naomi was stuck in the moment and living day-to-day in the midst of her struggle. When you are down



Ruth and Obed, Michaelangelo, Sistine Chapel, fresco 1508-1512

deep in the mud and mire of heartache and tragedy, it’s nearly impossible to feel any kind of hope. Just ask Job, who endured the same kind of suffering as Naomi!

The narrator can see the big picture. They know how everything plays out. They know that Ruth will meet Boaz, that Naomi and Ruth will be blessed beyond measure, and that

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Ruth will give birth to a son that will bring lasting joy to their whole family. And eventually, Ruth's descendants will sit on the throne of Israel (David) and even the throne of Heaven itself (Jesus)!

So back to Naomi's question... **"Why call me lovely?"**

Because there's no need to call Naomi "bitter" when we know that God is close to the brokenhearted, and he is hard at work to bring her from famine to fullness. In fact, some remarkable blessings and a reason for hope is just around the corner for both Naomi and Ruth, which are hinted at with the last verse in chapter 1:

"So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning." Ruth 1:22, NIV

The opening chapter begins with a time, a famine, and a departure. The chapter ends with a time, a harvest, and a homecoming. Although Naomi can't quite see the light at the end of the tunnel yet, as readers of the story we can see how God was already moving these two women along their path from famine to fullness.

Reflection Question #4: Do you think Naomi is being overly negative, or is her bitterness justified? Do you think it's fair to think of her as a female Job, as some theologians do?

Ruth and the Heroes of Faith

In the first session, we explored the connection between Ruth the Moabite and Moses, who died and was buried in Moab. That connection is one many examples of parallel plots and themes between the book of Ruth and the story of other heroes of faith from the Hebrew Bible. The narrator is showing how the same God who guided patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is also guiding these two widows on a similar journey of faith.

Consider this small sampling of similarities between Ruth and other Old Testament stories:

- Famine calls to mind the famines faced by Abraham, Isaac and Joseph's brothers.
- Ruth leaving her home country calls to mind the faith of Abraham.
- Naomi's lack of children calls to mind barren or childless women like Sarah,

Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Hannah, Michal, and Elizabeth.

- Ruth's bold initiative to marry and start a family parallels the story of Tamar and Judah.
- Boaz's decision to marry a foreigner leads to an Israelite ruling family, just like Joseph's marriage to an Egyptian woman.

These connections show us that something truly remarkable—providential even—is happening in the lives of Ruth and Naomi.

Abraham and Ruth

Ruth and Abraham both left their home country and declared their faith in God alone. In each case, they left behind the safe, the comfortable, and the life they knew to be part of God's bigger plan.

Abraham did so because he was specifically and intentionally called by God. He was given clear promises to help assuage his fears. Ruth's decision to go with Naomi is perhaps even more admirable, because she does so on her own volition. There were no specific promises, no specific commands, just Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, her commitment to the Lord, and her faith that better days were in Bethlehem instead of Moab.

NOTES, QUESTIONS, DOODLES
