

THE GOSPEL

ACCORDING TO

Ruth

A JOURNEY FROM FAMINE TO FULLNESS



Introduction to Our Class

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO RUTH

Why The Book of Ruth?

The book of Ruth is only four chapters (85 verses) long, but what it lacks in length it makes up for in depth. It is a remarkably powerful story about the way God reverses the fortunes of two widows who found themselves in dire need of assistance. And through their story, we come to know that God has a heart to do the same for us today.

Ruth and Naomi's journey from famine to fullness is the perfect illustration of this timeless truth from **Romans 8:28 (NIV)**:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”



Summer (Boaz and Ruth) by Nicolas Poussin. 1660-1664. Public Domain.

One striking feature of the story is that God does not show up in the typical ways the Israelites had come to expect. There are no nature-defying miracles, no divine oracles, and no direct speech from God in any form. Nevertheless, we see the compassionate and gracious hand of God at work in the lives of Ruth and Naomi, which shows us that God is just as present in the ordinary moments of our lives as the miraculous ones, quietly but decisively bringing all things together according to his plan and purpose.

So why study the story of Ruth? Because we all need a reminder that God's plan prevails, even when it's hard to feel his presence in our lives.

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Reflection Question: How have you seen God at work in the ordinary, day-to-day moments of your life?

How to Use This Resource

This book is a companion to Westside Church of Christ's Bible Study "The Gospel According to Ruth" that meets Thursdays at 10am. These notes will highlight some of the most important themes from our study, provide additional context for some of the verses, and ask reflection questions (like the one above) to help center your attention on how the story applies to your own life.

You can use these notes to *preview* upcoming class sessions or *review* ones you've just attended. Either way, we hope that this material is a great companion to our study that will help you draw deeply from the well of Scripture.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO RUTH

Class Outline

1. September 2: Intro and Ruth 1:1-5.

Family, famine, and tragedy

2. September 9: Ruth 1:6-22.

Naomi & Ruth return to Bethlehem

3. September 16: Ruth 2:1-16.

Ruth gleanes in Boaz's fields

4. September 23: Ruth 2:17-23.

Ruth and Naomi count their blessings

5. September 30: Ruth 3:1-18.

Ruth visits Boaz

6. October 7: Ruth 4:1-12.

Boaz redeems Ruth

7. October 14: Ruth 4:13-22.

Ruth's family legacy

A Story Designed to Transform

Ruth has all the features of a classic short story: Love, tragedy, drama, suspense, and ultimately a "happily-ever-after" ending.

But we know that the stories in the Bible, however enjoyable they are in their own right, are designed to do something more than simply entertain us.



Ruth in Boaz's Field by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. 1828. Public Domain

Every story, parable, letter, poem or historical account in Scripture is designed with **spiritual formation** in mind.

There is something that God wants us to *know, feel, or do* differently because of what we are about to read. After all, God teaches us to **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”** (Deuteronomy 6:5, with Jesus

adding **“mind”** in **Mark 12:30**). These commands show us that a faithful response to God's Word involves *knowing, feeling, and doing*.

Reflection Question: When you read the Bible, do you read it for information, entertainment, or inspiration? What's the difference?

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO RUTH

Six Major Themes in the Book of Ruth

Knowing that God wants the story of Ruth to transform our hearts and minds, it's helpful to take stock of the central themes we're about to encounter.

1. Outsiders Invited In

Ruth is a Moabite, not an Israelite, which means she was not part of God's people. Worse than that, her people came about through immorality and scandal (**Genesis 19:36-37**) and were considered Israel's bitter enemy. As a result, Moabites like Ruth were *prohibited* from being included in the congregation of Israel (**Deuteronomy 23:3**).

But, by the end of the story, Ruth the Moabite will be fully included in the life of Israel. This is a remarkable transformation from outsider to insider.

2. Caring for the Vulnerable

Ruth and Naomi are both childless widows, and as such, they were hopeless poor with no real prospects for their future. Ruth, as mentioned above, was a *foreign* widow on top of that. For these reasons, Ruth and Naomi are representative of society's most vulnerable members, and Boaz's generosity towards them is a positive example of the way God expects his people to care for people in their distress.

3. Grace in times of Trouble

Boaz's generosity towards these poor widows is a tangible illustration of the grace God gives all of us. In chapter 2, Ruth and Naomi "*find favor*" with Boaz, which is the Old Testament way of describing grace (an undeserved gift for someone in dire circumstances). To underscore this point, "*finding favor*" in **Ruth 2:1-13** draws on the same language God uses to describe his own divine character in **Exodus 34:6** ("gracious").

4. Redemption

The legal practice of redemption (purchasing a person's freedom from slavery or buying back their property after it was given as collateral) is a key part of this story. Understanding how Ruth was redeemed in a legal, physical sense will help us understand the love God showed us by redeeming us from sin by sending Jesus to the cross (**Ephesians 1:7**).

5. An Unlikely Example of Loyalty

Perhaps the most famous quote from the entire book of Ruth is Ruth's proclamation of loyalty to Naomi in **Ruth 1:16**:

"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." (NIV)

It's striking that this positive example of love and loyalty comes from such an unlikely hero: a poor, foreign, Moabite widow. Like Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in **Luke 10:25-37**, it would have been quite jarring for God's people to see such good deeds coming from someone they considered a bitter enemy.

6. From Famine to Fullness

The story begins with a devastating famine, but ends with a full and bountiful harvest. This physical move from famine to fullness illustrates the spiritual journey that God is leading us on. Although we may feel spiritual weary, God is leading us to a wonderful, life-giving harvest. And that's a major reason why even today, Ruth is read during Shavuot (i.e. Pentecost), a celebration of the *harvest season* given by God.

Reflection Question: Which of these themes speaks to your current season of life the most? Why?

Session 1: Ruth 1:1-5

Frightening Famine Forces Faithful Family to Flee (Ruth 1:1)

The book of Ruth begins with a crisis: During the volatile time in Israel's history when Judges ruled, a severe famine hit Bethlehem. It was apparently dangerous enough that one particular Israelite family (Elimelek, Naomi and their two sons) fled to Moab to find food.



This wasn't the first famine in the Bible that forced an Israelite family to become economic refugees. Abram and Sarai fled to Egypt in **Genesis 12:10**; Isaac fled to Gerar in **Genesis 26:1** and Joseph's brothers came to Egypt for food in **Genesis 42:1-2**. In each situation, the lack of food wasn't just a minor inconvenience (like when your favorite grocery store is temporarily out of stock of a particular product); it was an existential threat. And you know what they say: Desperate times call for desperate measures. For Elimelek and his family, deciding to go to *Moab* of all places was certainly a desperate measure.

What's the Deal with Moab?

Moab was a kingdom situated to the east of Israel, and the two groups were not on friendly terms, to say the least! There are two primary reasons behind this mutual animosity.

1. Scandalous Past

First, from the beginning, Moab was drenched in scandal. Moab's origin story is found in **Genesis 19:30-38**, when Abraham's nephew Lot conceived children with his own daughters, who took advantage of him after he had too much wine. These two children went on to become the kingdoms of Moab and Ammon. Israel looked down on these nations with disgust because of the way their nations were conceived.

2. Ongoing Animosity

It's possible that Israel could have overlooked Moab's scandalous beginnings if Moab had treated them with kindness later on, but that's not the path Moab chose. Instead, as **Deuteronomy 23:3-6** points out, Moab ignored Israel when they needed food and water in the desert and then hired a prophet to put a curse on them. In **Numbers 25:1-3**, Israelite men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who pressed the Israelites to worship false gods.

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Reflection Question: In your own words, why was Moab an unlikely place for an Israelite family to go for food and safety? What kinds of risks were they taking going there?

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RUTH 1:1-5

“No Moabites Allowed!”

Based on Moab’s scandalous past (see the previous page), their ongoing animosity towards Israel, and their willingness to seduce them physically and spiritually, it should come as no surprise that God prohibited Moabites from being included in the congregation of Israel—down to the tenth generation. God also prohibited Israel from making any kind of treaty of friendship with them (**Deuteronomy 23:3-6**).

Knowing that background on Moab and the tension that existed between them and Israel, it’s shocking that an Israelite family like Elimelek and Naomi would flee there to find food and safety from the famine in Israel.

Ruth 1:2-5—Tragedy Strikes our Main Characters

Three verses into our story, we’re confronted with pain and heartache. Naomi’s husband Elimelek has died, leaving Naomi as a widow. Her two sons marry Moabite women (Orpah and Ruth), but the sons die before having any children of their own. We now have three widows, two of whom are Moabites, and none of whom have children to care for them or provide for them.

What’s in a Name?

Most Biblical names have a special meaning or significance. The names in the book of Ruth underscore the tension and danger that are present in the story. Bethlehem, where the famine took place, ironically means “house of bread.” But the lack of bread has forced Elimelek (which means “God is king”) and Naomi (“pleasant”) to the home of Israel’s arch enemy, Moab. “Moab” sounds like the Hebrew phrase “from [my] father,” which is a perpetual reminder of their scandalous beginnings. Finally, Ruth means “friendship,” which is quite fitting for her.

Famine, Tragedy, and Mourning

So here we are, at the end of verse 5: **Famine** has struck the “house of bread,” and even though “*God is king*,” tragedy strikes leaving an Israelite woman grieving over the loss of her husband and both of her children. Life is not in any way “pleasant” for Naomi and her two daughters-in-law.

It should be quite obvious that we have arrived at the low point in the story. Stuck in Moab with no family, no fortune and no hope for the future, these three widows face a daunting dilemma: How will they ever be able to find joy and happiness again in the midst of all this pain and misfortune? Is there any hope

for these three women, or will they silently suffer and fade into the background of society?

As it happens, we find our answer to this question in **Psalm 37:17-18**, which is written by King David, the great-grandson of our main character Ruth.

“The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” (NIV)

As the rest of the story unfolds, we see how true those words of Scripture really are. Although the story starts in famine, it’s headed decisively in the direction of fullness.

And that’s the good news we can anticipate in the book of Ruth.

Reflection Question: What kind of attitude or emotions would you experience if you were in Naomi’s position? How would you try to cope if you were faced with a similarly daunting future?

Digging Deeper: Moses, Moab, and the Promise of Hope

What Does Moses Have to Do with the Book of Ruth?

Great Question! As it turns out, a lot! The book of Ruth highlights her journey from a Moabite outsider to an Israelite insider. Although there were several reasons why she should have been permanently excluded from the community of Israel, she was nevertheless welcomed into the family of faith by the end of the story. Moses' rise, fall, and restoration reveals a similar theme, which connects his life to the story of Ruth.

Moses and Moab

Moses was the faithful leader of Israel who courageously led his people out of their slavery in Egypt and towards the Promised Land. Moses had no equal in all of Israel (see **Deuteronomy 34:10-12**), but towards the end of his life, his faithfulness wavered. As a result of his disobedience, God forbade Moses from entering the Promised Land:

Then the Lord said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it." Deuteronomy 34:4 (NIV)

Instead of entering the Promised Land, Moses died and was buried just outside of it. Would you like to guess where he was buried? **In Moab!**

We've seen that the Law of Moses prohibited Moabites from associating with the Israelites, so Moab was a fitting burial location for a man of God who was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Being buried in Moab would have been a lasting reminder to the Israelites that Moses was prohibited from joining them, just as the Moabites were prohibited from associating with them, because *Moab was the end of the line*.

Moses and the Transfiguration

The Old Testament account of Moses' life ends with his burial in Moab, but that's not the last word written about Moses. During the lifetime of Jesus, there was a miraculous scene high atop a mountain called "The Transfiguration" (see **Matthew 17**). During that divine encounter, Jesus and his disciples were joined by Moses and Elijah.

Significantly, this mountain was located inside the Promised Land. That means that even though Moses was not allowed to enter the Land during his physical lifetime, God still poured out his grace on Moses and allowed him to enter it alongside Jesus. When you read the full story, Moses' journey parallels Ruth's. In both cases, there is a journey from exclusion to inclusion, which foreshadows the way Jesus adopts us all into his family through the grace he poured out on the cross.

