

THE BOOK OF

RUTH

FAMINE IN THE HOUSE OF BREAD



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Such a short story about the calamities of one Israelite family, ultimately bringing a foreigner to worship Israel's God, seems almost insignificant when compared to the great stories of the Old Testament. What message from this tiny book made such an indelible impression that the story remains in Holy Scriptures after thousands of years? The answer is God's providence and desire to bring every tribe, tongue, and nation back to Him. This small book reveals that God's plans cannot be foiled by the frailty, failures, or even rebellion of His created Order. He will bring His plans to fruition. He will put Kings on thrones. He will bring Himself glory out of chaos.

The story also reveals how a handful of people who return to His goodness can receive blessing and be a blessing to those around them, in small ways, and in ways that touch the destiny of many. When God's people act on the hope and expectation that they know God is faithful to bring about, they act rightly. Ruth, a woman from a people scorned by Israel reveals this truth in her bold actions and faithfulness to her newfound family.

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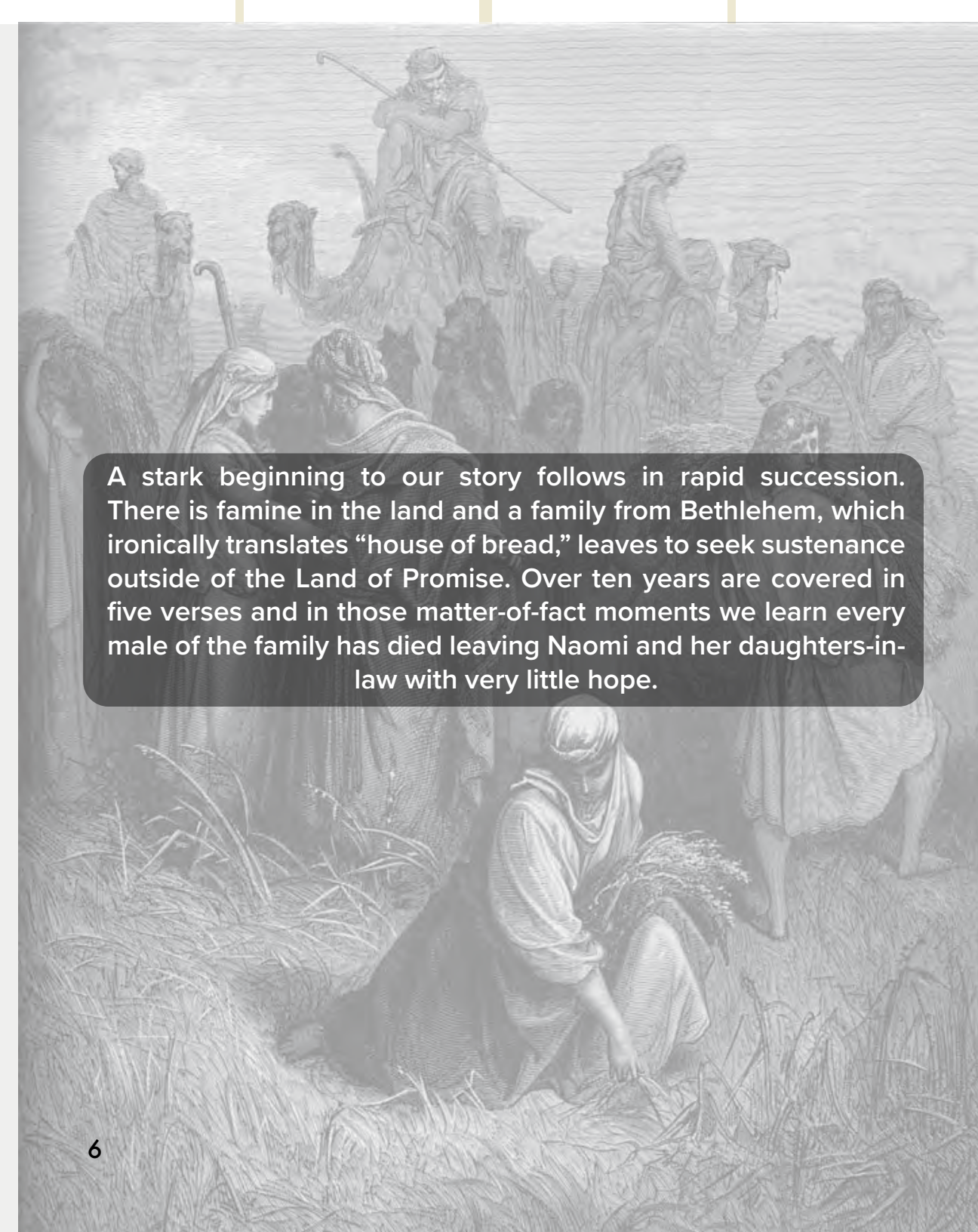
Ruth 4:1-12

SESSION 1

RUTH 1:1-18

¹In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. ⁶Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

¹⁰ And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹ But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” ¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶ But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” ¹⁸ And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.



A stark beginning to our story follows in rapid succession. There is famine in the land and a family from Bethlehem, which ironically translates “house of bread,” leaves to seek sustenance outside of the Land of Promise. Over ten years are covered in five verses and in those matter-of-fact moments we learn every male of the family has died leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law with very little hope.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Who were the Judges referred to in verse 1? What was their purpose? Discuss the tone of the book of Judges and what it is about.
2. There is a common pattern in the Old Testament related to famines. Read Genesis 12:10-20 and Genesis 26:1-11. What are some similarities compared to Ruth 1:1-4?
3. Discuss what you know about the land of Moab, then read Genesis 19:30-38. From this unusual story, what would you say the Bible might be telling us about Moab and Ammon?
4. Read Numbers 22:1-14. This is the beginning of the story of Balak and Balaam. What does this story tell us about the relationship between Israel and Moab?
5. How many times does Naomi try to dissuade Ruth from joining her?
6. Ruth leaves her home and people to move to a foreign place and worship a different god. Does this remind you of a key player in the Old Testament? Why might the author want us to make such a connection so early in the story?
7. Describe a time when you chose to be away from your family. Was it easy or hard? Explain.
8. How can others help when we experience deep grief?

GATHERING THOUGHTS

Abraham was called by the LORD to leave everything he knew, to go to a foreign land and to worship Him there. Ruth has found something similarly compelling. Her connection with Naomi and her God are so strong that she is willing to walk away from everything that she knows. Something makes it worth it.

What makes it worth it for us? We rarely will face leaving everything we know, but how well are you doing leaving your old self and all of its desires? How good are you at saying “no” to your past for the good of the gospel?



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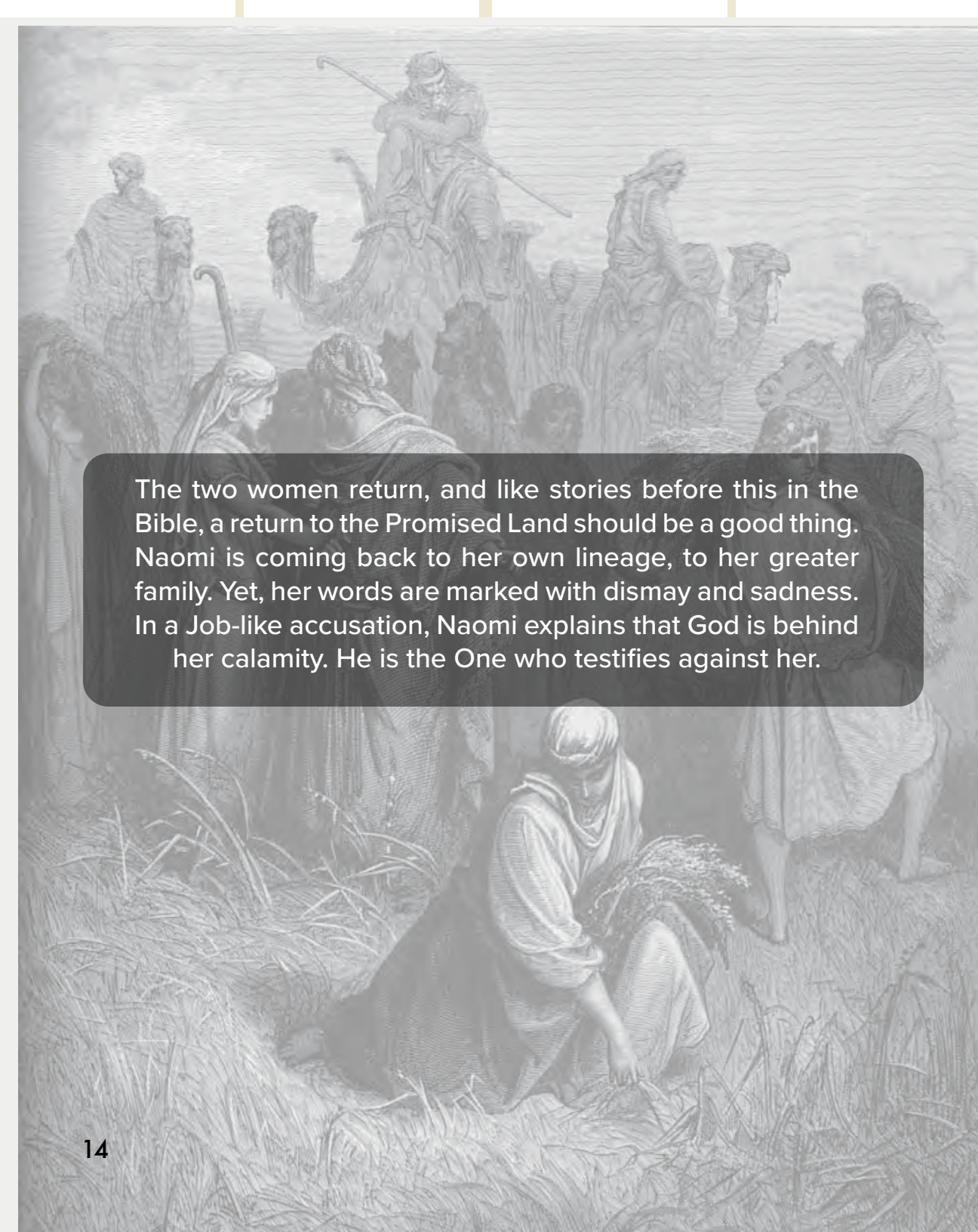
SESSION 2

RUTH 1:19 - 2:13

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?” ²⁰ She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” ²² So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

¹ Now Naomi had a relative of her husband’s, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.” ³ So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. ⁴ And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, “The LORD be with you!” And they answered, “The LORD bless you.” ⁵ Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, “Whose young woman is this?”

⁶ And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, “She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. ⁷ She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.’ So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest.” ⁸ Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹ Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn.” ¹⁰ Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” ¹¹ But Boaz answered her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹² The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” ¹³ Then she said, “I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants.”



The two women return, and like stories before this in the Bible, a return to the Promised Land should be a good thing. Naomi is coming back to her own lineage, to her greater family. Yet, her words are marked with dismay and sadness. In a Job-like accusation, Naomi explains that God is behind her calamity. He is the One who testifies against her.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Naomi has experienced ultimate grief. She asks people to call her “Mara,” which is basically “bitter.” Where does the text say the “bitterness” comes from? What does it reveal about Naomi’s understanding of God?
2. Read Exodus 15:22-27. In this scene a place is named “Marah.” Compare that text with Ruth 1:20-21. If those experiencing the story of Ruth know the story from Exodus, what might they expect?
3. At the end of Ruth chapter 1, the author gives us a clue. It is the “beginning of barley harvest.” What might be the purpose of this clue from the storyteller?
4. The scene changes in Ruth 2:1. The author introduces us to a new character, a relative of Naomi named Boaz. He is called a “worthy man.” Read the following verses that come before the book of Ruth and use the same terms: Joshua 8:3, Joshua 10:7, Judges 6:12 and Judges 11:1. What does the author want those who have experienced the Old Testament to think of Boaz?
5. Read 1 Samuel 16:18 which tells a story after the Book of Ruth. The terms are used again to refer to David. How are these stories linked?
6. Read Leviticus 19:9-10 and Leviticus 23:22. What is “gleaning” and why were Israel’s rules about it important? Seeing how Ruth is treated in her gleaning, what does it tell us about Boaz and his servants?
7. Read Deuteronomy 23:2-6. Since Ruth is a Moabitess (as the text has said), why do you think this restriction may not apply to Ruth? Explain.
8. Read Psalm 91. Boaz is saying that Ruth is taking shelter in the LORD, God of Israel. Considering the Psalm, what does this mean for her?

GATHERING THOUGHTS

God's plan continues to unfold in the characters of the story. Ruth has spent enough time with Naomi to understand at least some Israelite law, and Boaz shows a kindness and humility that is revealed through generosity to a foreigner, also an important aspect of the Law. But is Ruth a foreigner? Boaz says in verses 11-12 *"how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"* Ruth has forsaken all else to become a working member of Naomi's household and a worshipper of her God. The text implicitly indicates that she no longer considers herself a Moabite.

Are you the type that has held on to your old identities since you became a Christian? Which do you still hold onto such that it carries some authority over your faith in Christ? Is it your earthly citizenship? Is it your family heritage? Now is a good time to take a page from Ruth's book and recognize our worship of King Jesus requires submitting ALL ELSE before Him. How can you start to do this today?



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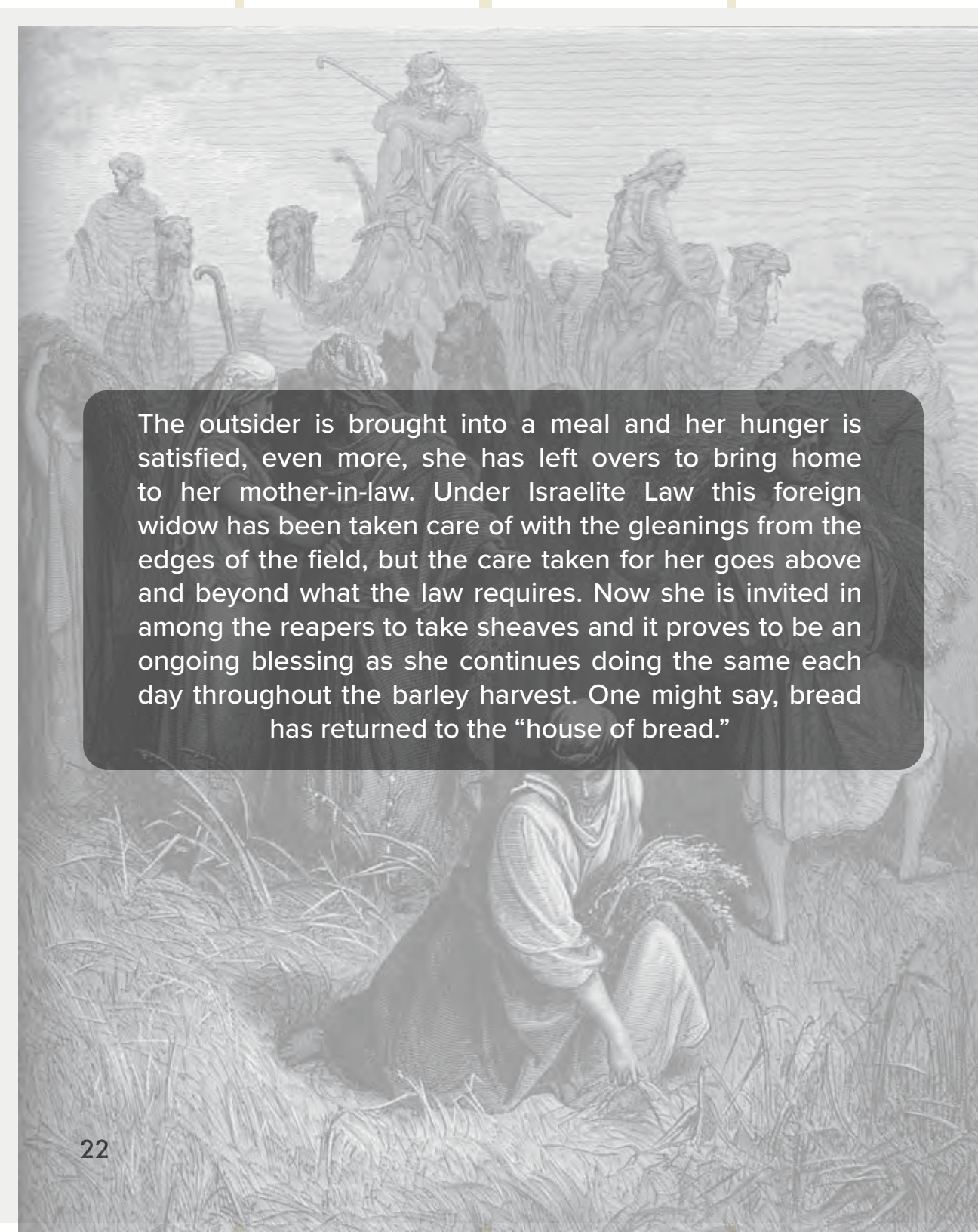
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SESSION 3

RUTH 2:14-23

¹⁴ And at mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.” So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. ¹⁵ When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. ¹⁶ And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.” ¹⁷ So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. ¹⁸ And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied. ¹⁹ And her mother-in-law said to her, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.” So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, “The man’s name with whom I worked today is Boaz.”

²⁰ And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi also said to her, “The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers.” ²¹ And Ruth the Moabite said, “Besides, he said to me, ‘You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.’ ” ²² And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, “It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted.” ²³ So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law.



The outsider is brought into a meal and her hunger is satisfied, even more, she has left overs to bring home to her mother-in-law. Under Israelite Law this foreign widow has been taken care of with the gleanings from the edges of the field, but the care taken for her goes above and beyond what the law requires. Now she is invited in among the reapers to take sheaves and it proves to be an ongoing blessing as she continues doing the same each day throughout the barley harvest. One might say, bread has returned to the “house of bread.”

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Even in our culture, what does it mean to be invited into a meal with someone?
2. Ruth is being cared for and protected. Identify all of the different ways so far in the book.
3. Naomi says that the LORD's "kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead." Considering the story so far, what do you think she means?
4. Compare these words in Ruth 2:20 with Ruth 1:20-21. What is consistent? What has changed?
5. How is Naomi's statement in Ruth 2:20 true today as well? Identify some specifics of God's kindness to you and take a moment to offer a prayer of thanksgiving together.
6. Naomi says Boaz is "one of our redeemers." Read Leviticus 25:25-55 to understand more about what a "redeemer" is in the context. Do we have such laws in our culture? Why/why not?
7. Read Psalm 19:14 and Job 19:25. The Bible is covered in texts that claim God is our ultimate Redeemer. How might this relate to the laws in Leviticus? Does it mean more or less than that for you? Explain.

GATHERING THOUGHTS

The ephah of barley would be unheard of as “gleanings” and she even had her lunch leftovers to provide for Naomi. Ruth received an abundance from Boaz as her benefactor and Naomi knew it. Her two questions should be read with a level of shock. The crazy thing is Boaz’s generosity seems to have been just a beginning. By his own words from the last session, “the LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel.” The storyteller wants us to know that the fullness of abundance has yet to be seen.

But now is the end of the harvest. Might famine creep back in? Now is the end of Ruth’s potential encounters with Boaz in the harvest field. What about this talk of Boaz as redeemer? This story is meant to peak our expectations, especially of what God is doing for His people. Do you wait in great expectation for what God is doing or do you tend to wait for the next negative effect to fall? Which seems more appropriate from a Christian’s perspective?



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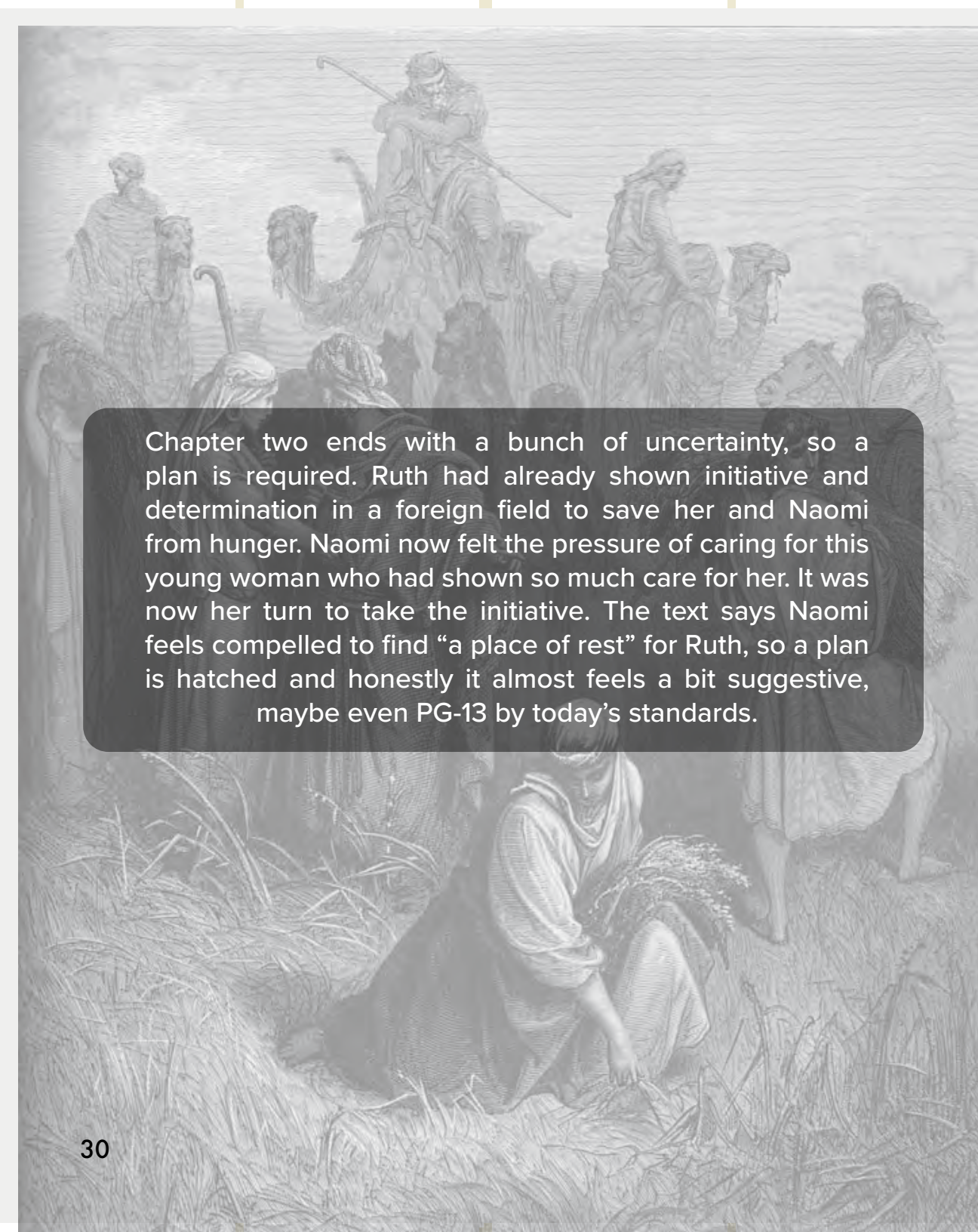
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SESSION 4

RUTH 3:1-18

¹ Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? ² Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” ⁵ And she replied, “All that you say I will do.” ⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. ⁷ And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! ⁹ He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” ¹⁰ And he said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

¹¹ And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. ¹² And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. ¹³ Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning.” ¹⁴ So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, “Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” ¹⁵ And he said, “Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out.” So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city. ¹⁶ And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, “How did you fare, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her, ¹⁷ saying, “These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, ‘You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’ ” ¹⁸ She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.”



Chapter two ends with a bunch of uncertainty, so a plan is required. Ruth had already shown initiative and determination in a foreign field to save her and Naomi from hunger. Naomi now felt the pressure of caring for this young woman who had shown so much care for her. It was now her turn to take the initiative. The text says Naomi feels compelled to find “a place of rest” for Ruth, so a plan is hatched and honestly it almost feels a bit suggestive, maybe even PG-13 by today’s standards.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Read Ruth 1:9-13 and compare it to Ruth 3:1. How is the situation different now?
2. What leads you to believe that this meet-up might have sexual overtones? What are the clues that Boaz and Ruth did not succumb to temptation?
3. Read Ruth 2:12 and compare it to Ruth 3:9. What might our storyteller be doing with this similar language?
4. Read Ruth 3:10 carefully. What was Ruth's "first" act of kindness? Why is Boaz blessing Ruth? What is his point?
5. Did Ruth do as she said in Ruth 3:5? Explain.
6. Identify the marriage proposal. Who makes it and why? What do you think is motivating the action? Passion or greed or something else?
7. Read Genesis 16:1-6 and compare it to this story in Ruth 3. How is the situation in Ruth like the situation with Sarai and Hagar? How is it different?
8. Compare Ruth 2:1 with Ruth 3:11. What leads Boaz to call her this? What about her character proves the point?
9. Read Proverbs 31:10-31. Can you guess what book directly follows Proverbs in the Hebrew organization of the canon?

GATHERING THOUGHTS

It's the middle of the night. We have a woman who is dressed to impress. We have a well-fed man after a day of work. Naomi predicted everything, almost perfectly. But Ruth, who had left her family and culture to dedicate her future to her mother-in-law, was not done acting on her expectations. In an unusual twist, she asks Boaz, a much older man, to marry her. She basically calls him to act on his own words in Ruth 2:12. It is as if she is saying "You said I am taking refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. Shouldn't you be the agent of His mercy?"

Ruth's story is full of faithful actions that put her at the mercy of God's faithfulness. She is a picture of industrious, faithful, and determined love. When you want something to happen, it is a clever balance between action and waiting. Some of us can be marked by inaction and call it "waiting on the LORD," while others can do whatever it takes to make something happen calling it "God's will." Ruth takes action but not always to her own benefit. She stays with Naomi. She takes initiative. She asks if Boaz will step into the role of redeemer. She is looking for doors that God might open. Maybe we should be doing the same.



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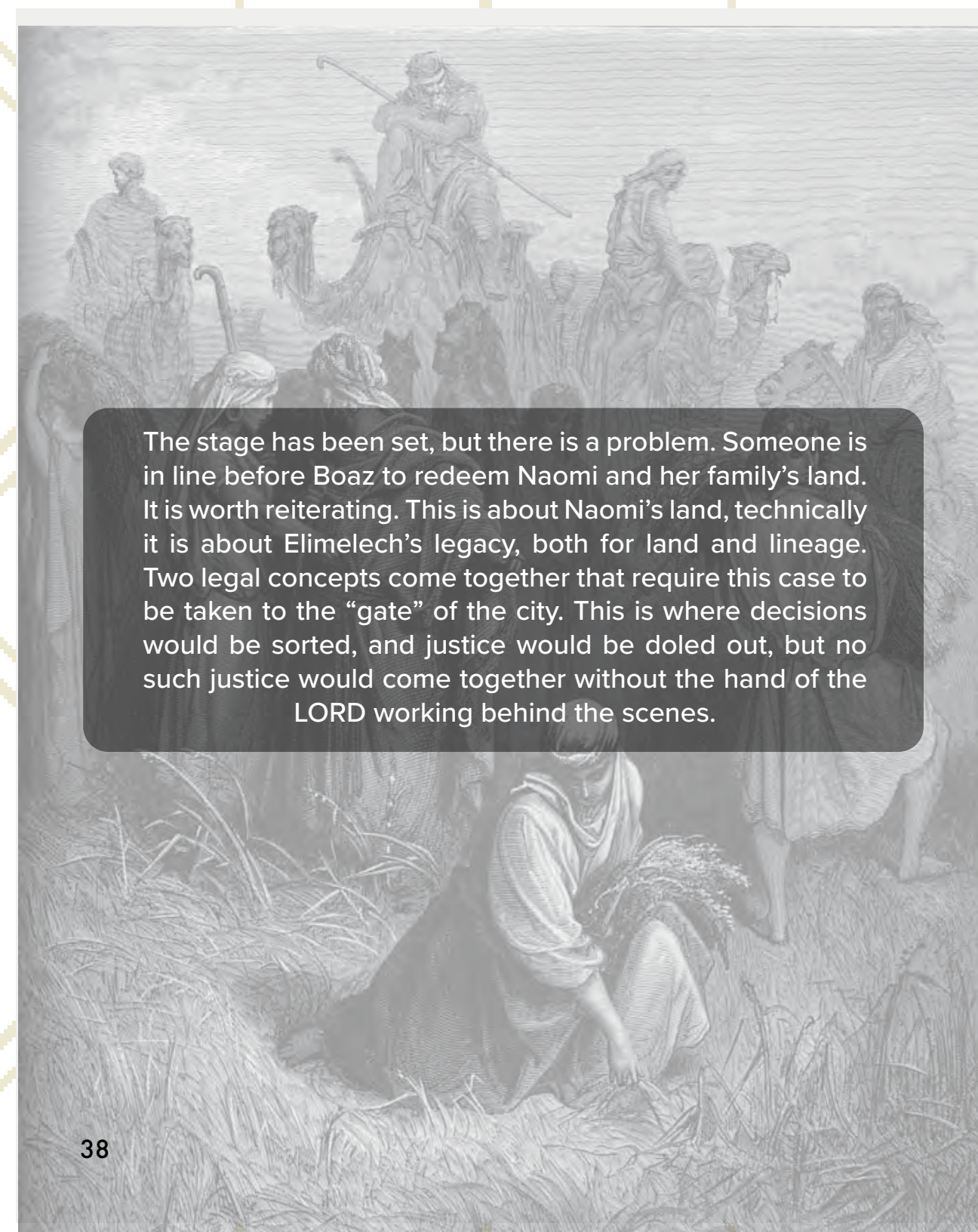
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SESSION 5

RUTH 4:1-22

¹ Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, "Turn aside, friend; sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down. ² And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down. ³ Then he said to the redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. ⁴ So I thought I would tell you of it and say, 'Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people.' If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you." And he said, "I will redeem it." ⁵ Then Boaz said, "The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance." ⁶ Then the redeemer said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it." ⁷ Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. ⁸ So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself," he drew off his sandal. ⁹ Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon.

¹⁰ Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.” ¹¹ Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, ¹² and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman.” ¹³ So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. ¹⁷ And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. ¹⁸ Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, ¹⁹ Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, ²⁰ Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, ²¹ Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, ²² Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.



The stage has been set, but there is a problem. Someone is in line before Boaz to redeem Naomi and her family's land. It is worth reiterating. This is about Naomi's land, technically it is about Elimelech's legacy, both for land and lineage. Two legal concepts come together that require this case to be taken to the "gate" of the city. This is where decisions would be sorted, and justice would be doled out, but no such justice would come together without the hand of the LORD working behind the scenes.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Elders were at the gate. Do you have people you go to that help you make decisions? Are they simply advisors or do you do what they say no matter how difficult for you?
2. Read Deuteronomy 25:5-10. What is the purpose of this legal protection? How does it fit in our story here in Ruth? What seems different and what might explain the difference?
3. Recall the idea of “redeemer” discussed in Session 3. How might that idea in Leviticus 25 combine with the idea here from Deuteronomy 25?
4. Ruth 4:11 brings up Rachel and Leah from Genesis 29-30. What do you remember from that text?
5. Ruth 4:12 mentions Tamar. Read Genesis 38 for the full story. How is the story similar and how is it different from our story here about Ruth?
6. Why would our storyteller be interested in both of these stories of women from Genesis?
7. What do verses 12 and 13 have in common and how does it fit as a theme in the book of Ruth?
8. What is your biggest takeaway from this book?

GATHERING THOUGHTS

This entire story, in a sense, concerns a son. First, the loss of sons. Sons should promise Naomi protection in the present and they promise her wholeness and legacy in the future. Naomi had lost all of this assurance. Her complaint and challenge to the LORD was exactly this in Ruth 1:21. He has “testified against” and “brought calamity upon” her. But in the ultimate twist, it is the LORD who has turned this story around not just by pulling strings behind the scenes, or providing a son, but ultimately by providing a redeemer.

This is not just any redeemer, but the legacy that would lead to King David himself. If you identify as a Christian, then you also know this legacy does not stop with David, but resolves in the Son of David, the ultimate redeemer. Do you trust that God is working behind the scenes in your life, no matter what your circumstances are right now?



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