



LIFE LESSONS FROM THE LADIES

The Book of Ruth: Lesson 1

I can't even begin to tell you how excited I am to study the Book of Ruth with you! I had planned to write this lesson my first week, but I felt so much opposition from the enemy that I tabled it for a few weeks, waiting until the warfare had lifted and I could hear from the Holy Spirit. I battled between wondering if I should even write it, questioning my understanding of the significance of it, and simply, wondering if I just "didn't like it." Well, I'm happy to say, I am THRILLED at the opportunity! As we will soon discover, the book of Ruth is so much more than commonly thought, or even taught. Many think it is simply a love story, where a Prince Charming named Boaz rescues a damsel in distress named Ruth, a shining moment at a dark time in Israel's history. The book does teach us about love, but it's also packed with deep insights about God and His relationships with people. We miss the main point if we forget that God is the hero of this story, and it should always be our first priority to discover what the Bible reveals about Him.

This book is written from a woman's point of view, seen through Naomi's eyes. The narrator writes about Naomi's husband, sons, daughters in laws, her losses, her return to Bethlehem, her people, her relatives, and the land she is selling. We will look at God from a woman's point of view.

The book of Ruth is written during a time very different than our own. We must try to understand what it would be like to live in the ancient world of Moab and Bethlehem, run by men. The story takes place during a patriarchal culture, creating very difficult circumstances and restrictions. Then we must take the lessons from these ladies and adapt them to our lives and culture today, in this generation. It's a short, four-chapter narrative that combines the human experiences of loss, love, and heartache with the divine hope of a sovereign and redeeming God. We read about hardship and famine and tragedy. We learn about a woman who knew about being married as well as being single, having children and becoming barren, experiencing loss, and finding fullness. And we meet Ruth, a widow turned wife, a servant turned heir, a childless foreigner turned mother, born in Moab but who found her home in Israel. Kelly Minter writes, "The name that chimes a thousand notes of redemption for every

woman who has ever been devastated by loss, struggles as a stranger, lived with the bitter, longed to be loved, fought for crumbs, or wept along the journey. She is an emblem of grace for every flawed and ailing sinner who has lived in her wake, not because of her own nobility but because of the One under whose wings she had come to trust, the God of Israel.”

The book of Ruth begins by getting rid of all the male characters in the drama, giving us a clear view of the women, reminding us that the story centers on them and their relationships with God. This is so intriguing! What a great reminder of how much God loves women and His intention for us to work together with men, as a team, to build and advance His kingdom. I love Max Lucado’s introduction to his Bible study on Ruth. He says, “Here is a play with four characters. Character number one is a prostitute. Character number two is her son. By the time we meet him he is wealthy, powerful, and single. (We wonder if his bachelorhood has anything to do with being the son of a prostitute.) Character number three is a foreign widow in a clannish culture. Everything about her is different. Speaks with an accent. Wears a different name. Eats different food. Has a different way. Her only friend is her mother in-law who happens also to be a widow and happens to be: Character number four. She is older than the first widow. Too old to have kids. When her two sons died and her husband dies, she is left alone. With only a foreigner as a friend. Four people. Each rejected. Each alone. Four frazzled strings in the bottom of a knitting basket. Left untouched, awaiting the toss of the Master Weaver. But He doesn’t discard them. He picks them up and weaves them together. The result? The unmarried son of the prostitute meets the foreign widow who left her homeland to accompany her mother in-law. The mother in-law recognizes the bachelor as a relative and urges the daughter in-law to make herself available. She does, the two marry, and the single bachelor has a wife, the young widow has a husband, the older widow has a grandson, and we have a story of providential romance.” Wow. Here we have ... the story of Ruth.

You might be thinking, “Wait a minute! There’s no prostitute in the book of Ruth!” She may not be mentioned by name, but she is there, all the same. You see, Boaz’ mother was Rahab, the former prostitute, listed in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 5:5. Isn’t that crazy?? We see God’s redeeming work all through the book of Ruth. And if anyone understood that, it would be Boaz. I pray that as we study, you are reminded that the Master Weaver has a place in His perfect plan for each of us, not just Ruth and Naomi.

So ... are you ready? Are you ready to learn more, see differently, and feel deeper than ever before as you study Ruth? Me too! Let’s do it!

First Day

I know not everyone likes to do this, but it’s important to get a good overview of the whole book before we start to break it up into smaller parts. For today, I simply want you to read all four chapters of Ruth. I’ll leave space for you to jot down notes, thoughts, questions, and truths that minister to you. I’m also going to include Warren Wiersbe’s outline of the book,

but don't read it until **AFTER** you do your own reading. I love how he places things together to help give us a better picture of how it's all tying together. Have a great day!

Book Outline

Key Theme: God providentially guides and blesses all who trust Him.

Key Verse: Ruth 2:12 (Would you agree?)

1. **Sorrow:** Ruth Weeping (1:1-22)
 - A. Naomi tries to run from her problems (1:1-5)
 - B. Naomi tries to cover up her mistakes (1:6-18)
 - C. Naomi gets bitter against God (1:19-22)
2. **Service:** Ruth Working (2:1-23)
 - A. A new beginning - faith (2:1-3)
 - B. A new friend - love (2:4-16)
 - C. A new attitude - hope (2:17-23)
3. **Submission:** Ruth Waiting (3:1-18)
 - A. Ruth presents herself to Boaz (3:1-7)
 - B. Ruth is accepted by Boaz (3:8-15)
 - C. Ruth waits for Boaz to act (3:16-18)
4. **Satisfaction:** Ruth's Wedding (4:1-22)
 - A. Boaz redeems Ruth (4:1-10)
 - B. The people bless Ruth (4:11-12)
 - C. God gives Boaz and Ruth a son (4:13-22)

Memory Verse of the Week: But Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." Ruth 1:16

Second Day

What's your memory verse?

The story in the book of Ruth includes two journeys, one from Bethlehem to Moab, and one from Moab back to Bethlehem.

1. Let's begin today by reading Ruth chapter 1:1-22. Reread verses 1-5. When was the story taking place?

No one knows who wrote this book, or exactly when, except that it was "in the days the judges ruled." Since David is mentioned in it, some scholars think it was written about 400 BC.

During the time of the judges, the people of Israel had no king and were morally and spiritually weak. Judges 17:6 tells us that “All the people did whatever was right in their own eyes.” (Also see Judges 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). It’s one of Israel’s lowest points in history. It was a time of division, cruelty, civil war, and disgrace. Hmmm, sort of like today, right?

2. Describe the first journey, from Bethlehem to Moab. Who left, why did they leave, and where did they settle?

Moab was a land east of the Dead Sea. The Moabites were descendants of Moab, a son of Lot and Lot’s eldest daughter. Moab was conceived when Lot’s two daughters got their father drunk and slept with him. As a result, both girls became pregnant and had sons, Moab and Ben-Ammi. Each son headed a nation, Moab and Ammon, and the people of these lands were called the Moabites and the Ammonites, who frequently fought together against Israel (Genesis 19:30-38). Israel was forbidden to intermarry with people of these nations (Deut. 7). After the Israelites had wandered for 40 years, God gave them the Promised Land, land that flowed with milk and honey. They didn’t need to go anywhere else; this land was permanent.

3. Read 1 Kings 11:1-8 for an example of why God didn’t want His people to intermarry. Summarize the story in your own words.

Elimelech feared for the health and safety of his family, but instead of trusting God, he leaned on his own understandings. He may have been afraid, and honestly, we all sympathize with him. But it appeared that he walked by sight, and not by faith.

4. Who made that same mistake in Genesis 12:10? Continue reading that chapter. What kind of trouble did he get into?
5. Why do you think God was allowing a famine in their land? Read Judges 2:11-19 for insight.

Israel had a history of turning to God during seasons of punishment, but forgetting Him during seasons of prosperity. Sadly, this sounds familiar.

6. Do you turn toward God only in times of trial and difficulty, and forget Him the rest of the time? How can this pattern affect your relationship with God?

7. Elimelech made some bad choices. He not only walked by sight, but what did he allow to motivate and control his decisions?
8. What should be our motivation as we make daily decisions? Read John 4:34.

Elimelech wasn't honoring God in his decisions. By going to Moab, he was leaving God's land and His laws, yoking himself with God's enemies. We are called to make the same choice every day; will we follow the Lord, or follow the ways of this world? Joshua told the people to "choose" whom they would serve (Joshua 24:15). Elimelech chose to leave God out of his decisions.

9. We face hard decisions every day. Are you choosing to follow the Lord and His ways? His ways are found in Scripture. Is the world luring you away, like Moab did to Elimelech? (Sometimes following the easier path is tempting when we are tired.) Ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart.
10. Elimelech's decision didn't just affect him. What happened as a result? Who is watching you? How many people are affected by decisions you make?
11. Elimelech was running from his circumstance. That rarely is the answer, unless you're fleeing temptation, like Joseph. Are you running away from something? Stay put and trust the Lord. Read 1 Corinthians 15:58, 1 Peter 5:9, and Ephesians 6:10-11. How do these verses encourage you in your situation?
12. How long did the family stay in Moab?

It's important to point out what the names of our characters meant. Elimelech translates "My God is King," Mahlon meant "sick," Chilion meant "Pining," Orpha meant "Stubbornness," and Ruth meant "Friendship." Naomi meant "Pleasant but we read in 1:20 she asks to be called "Mara" meaning "Bitterness."

Perhaps Elimelech only planned to be in Moab a short time, but obviously that didn't happen. Sin breeds sin. Carolyn Custis James wrote, "In five short verses, death wipes the men

off the scene, leaving three grieving widows behind. In a male-centered culture that ascribed value to women based on their relationships to men, these husbandless, sonless women hold no interest to anyone. In many minds, especially in the minds of the three women themselves, the story is over. Nothing is left to tell. Yet ironically, this is where the narrative heats up as the Biblical spotlight settles on Naomi and an all-female cast. Now the real story begins.” See you tomorrow, ladies. The drama continues!

Third Day

Are you working on your memory verse?

1. Today let’s begin by reading Ruth 1:1-17. Summarize verses 6-17 in your own words.

2. We now look at our second journey, from Moab back to Bethlehem. What motivated Naomi to want to return to her homeland? Was it physical or spiritual?

I love this quote: **“It seems that their physical circumstances and not necessarily the God of their circumstances, dictated their decisions.” Is the God “of your circumstances” guiding you, or is your circumstance?**

3. Why do you think the daughters in-law decide to go back with Naomi?

4. At what point does Naomi have the hard conversation with her daughters in-law, advising them to turn back? Why did she wait?

5. Why do you think she doesn’t want to take them with her to Bethlehem?

Naomi is heartbroken, to say the least. We understand, or at least sympathize with her pain. If I lost my husband and both my kids, I can’t imagine how I would feel. The Bible is very honest about the hardships that we will face while we live on this earth. We are broken people and our world is fallen and broken as well. Eugene Peterson writes, “No literature is more realistic and honest in facing the harsh facts of life than the Bible. At no time is there the faintest suggestion

that the life of faith exempts us from difficulties ... On every page of the Bible there is recognition that faith encounters trouble.”

Although her hardship is retold in five short verses, it was years of heartache, loss, disappointments, and grief. Some scholars have called Naomi a female Job. She was shattered and most likely struggling with her God. Her pain started years earlier with a horrific famine, which most of us can't imagine. While in Moab she was a foreigner, which had to be extremely difficult. She probably lived as an outsider there, especially with the political tension between Moab and Israel. She was probably ashamed and homesick, and then when her husband dies, she was thrown into a grief she hadn't expected. I bet she threw herself into the work of caring for her sons. Their culture also measured a woman's worth by the number of sons she produced. As the years pass, and neither Orpah nor Ruth conceive, which is pretty much a catastrophe for the family. Did Naomi plead with God, begging Him to open their wombs? Did she experience many sleepless and anxious nights? Then, the worst possible scenario ... both sons die. Her beloved boys. Naomi probably felt that she may as well have died along with them. 😞 Now she has no social status, no male connection, and no source of income. Many preyed on widows at the time, making her prey to constant attacks.

Have you ever hit rock bottom? Been “flattened” so to speak? Struggling to understand why the Lord would let “this” happen to you? Naomi's story and Job's are in the Bible so we can learn to be honest about our feelings and how bad we're hurting; to ask the hard questions and be real with our struggles. James says, “By spotlighting Naomi's ordeal, the narrator gives us permission to voice the thoughts and questions we are fighting so desperately to suppress. And in some mysterious way, we met God in our desperation.” Both Naomi and Job tragically lose their families and the life they were building. But Job still had a wife, and some friends, not necessarily smart ones though. But Naomi is an immigrant and a woman. And, it appears, friendless, besides her daughters in-law.

6. What did Naomi ask God to show the girls in verse 8?

7. What was their first response?

It doesn't appear that Naomi is simply testing their loyalty; she is adamant about them returning to Moab. She seems to realize they are both determined to stay with her, so she tries again, using the **levirate** marriage rule as leverage. This law is discussed in Deuteronomy 25:5 and refers to the custom that the next brother is expected to marry the childless widow of his deceased brother. The first child of that second marriage is considered a descendant of the deceased brother, and the child carries on the family line. This child also inherits the property originally belonging to the dead brother. Naomi is saying she can't have any other sons to replace the husbands that they lost. There was no hope for them to fulfill this law or continue with her.

We need to remember that the “god” of Moab was named Chemosh (Numbers 21:29). If they returned to their original family, they would also return to the worship of that false god of their family.

8. In verse 15, Orpah returns to her people and her gods. What does Ruth choose to do? What does this choice say about her character?

Ruth chose to be loyal to Naomi, but even more significantly, she chose to worship Jehovah, the God of Israel, as the One true God. Each girl had a choice of which “god” to follow. Ruth chose rightly. How about you?

9. Summarize Ruth’s beautiful words in verses 16-17. Which words or phrases reveal Ruth’s determination and strength? Which ones show her love and support for Naomi? Her spiritual convictions?

Today these beautiful words are used in many marriage vows because of their spiritual significance. In fact, our pastor had me say these verses to Brian in our own wedding, 35 years ago. I’ve always loved them! But think about the context in which Ruth said them. It was during difficulty and extreme loss and hardship that these words were uttered, not in a time of celebration. Ruth was offering a “sacrifice of praise” and declaring her obedience to God, despite adversity. She was declaring her faith in a faithful God, whom she had grown to love. We can’t help but notice the contrast of her attitude with that of Naomi’s, an Israelite.

Kelly Minter, in her book about Ruth, called *Loss, Love, and Legacy*, makes an interesting point. I wish I could say I thought of this, but alas, give credit where credit is due. She compares the two daughters-in-law crying, noting that Orpah wept “backward”, but Ruth cried “forward.” Sometimes obedience to God calls for a big change of plans. It can be through grief and pain, or something much simpler. And we weep because of the loss. We weep because of our pain, or our fears. God sees our tears. But when we weep, do we weep forward? Although there will be weeping in this life, the direction in which we weep is what truly matters. Orpah wept and went back, while Ruth wept and clung to Naomi, and ultimately moved forward. The apostle Paul wept, but didn’t allow his grief to stop his forward motion (Acts 20:22, 36-38), while the rich young ruler walked away from Christ with much sadness (Mark 10:17-22).

10. Have you turned back in the face of adversity or loss, rather than moving forward? How did God honor and reward Paul and Ruth who, in their tears, kept walking forward?

11. Kelly Minter continues, “Be encouraged. God sees your tears. Cry them, wipe them, feel them, but don’t let them stop you. It’s possible to cry and walk.” Write your thoughts

Ruth’s obedience wasn’t a “one time” thing. It was a lot more than that. Naomi continued to try to talk Ruth out of coming, but Ruth persisted. This was “prolonged obedience.” When we are called to move forward in obedience, like Ruth, will we draw on God’s continued strength and grace, rather than just giving up?

12. Is there a situation in your life that God is calling you to “prolonged obedience”? Can you share? Where can you find strength and grace for the battle? Can you think of another person in Scripture who is a good example of living a life of prolonged, persistent, obedience?

Fourth Day

Ponder the words of your memory verse today.

1. Read Ruth 1: 1-22, focusing on verses 18-22. How did the town respond to Naomi’s return?

Naomi hasn’t seen her friends in over ten years. Although she was happy to see them, I’m sure she was sad, perhaps ashamed, as well. After all, they knew she had left during the famine. Would they still be kind to her? Would they see her as disloyal? The text says the town was “stirred” which literally means “echoed with excitement.” The word conjures up images of joyous shouting and happy, animated conversations in response to an event. One imagines citizens scurrying around the streets shouting the good news to others, who then do likewise.”

2. What does their response suggest about Naomi’s reputation there?
3. It says they were excited to see “them”? What feelings or thoughts do you think the people had concerning Ruth, the Moabite?
4. In verses 20-21, how does Naomi respond?

5. It's important to see this. To whom does Naomi attribute her suffering?

6. Do you ever blame God for your circumstances, when they might be a direct result of your decisions? Are you blaming Him right now? Can God still fix the situation, even if it was your fault?

Naomi not only points to God as the One allowing her pain, but for being responsible for it. It's true that God is sovereign over everything that happens to us, but Naomi feels that God is "out to get her" and destroy her. My heart breaks for her. I think Naomi felt hopeless, sad, and alone, forsaken and forgotten by God. Have you ever felt like that? I certainly have. Maybe that isn't theologically correct, or the "right" words to say, but it's how our hearts can feel. And Naomi is honest about how "low," rejected, and alone she feels. God wants our hearts, and He is near to the brokenhearted. He wants you to cry out in honesty and be transparent before Him.

7. Is God desiring you to be honest with how you feel about something, instead of living in a state of denial? Are you willing to address your feelings, rather than just pretend, or do things to "numb" yourself? Will you sit and be honest before the Lord? Are you bitter, grieving, or doubting? Bring it to Him. He can handle it.

I read a statistic this week that was devastating. Nine out of ten wives will spend some portion of their lives in widowhood. Carolyn James Custis wrote, "Widow is a label that has a way of suddenly affixing itself to a woman without her permission, often without warning, and certainly without apology for the drastic alterations it will bring into her life." Naomi feels as if her life is in ruins, much like Job. When their world collapsed around them, they wondered where God was, the darkness casting a shadow over God's goodness and justice. Their stories remind us that we are called to trust and depend on God, even when all the puzzle pieces aren't fitting together. The difference between Job and Naomi, is that she's a woman, and he is not. Doors are shut to her; poverty is inevitable for her. He can work and rebuild, she cannot. He will not face many of the difficulties Naomi will. He will even have rights and be able to take legal action. Having lost her credentials and place in society as a wife and mother, she feels as good as dead. But God's view of widowhood is nothing like this! When anything, including widowhood, alters a woman's life, the center of her identity doesn't change, for she is not defined, or redefined by circumstances, relationships, her resume, or public opinion. God defines her. We are God's image bearers, which makes us incapable of insignificance!

8. In verse 21, how does Naomi describe herself? (How do you think that made Ruth feel?)
What does she rename herself?

9. As Naomi and Ruth travel to Bethlehem, they are accompanied by both despair and hope. They have no idea of what God has in store for them. According to verse 23, when did they arrive? Why do you think this is good timing for people who lived in ancient times?

10. “When God is at work, bitter hopelessness can be the beginning of some surprising good.” We know this to be true for this story. What about for you? Do you believe that God can bring you hope in your despair? Joy in your mourning? What does Ecclesiastes 3:1 say about this?

Let’s end on that note of hope, shall we? I pray that you find hope today as you face difficult situations. God has not left you; there’s good ahead.

Fifth Day

Write out your verse from memory.

In ancient days, harvest time speaks of assurance of provision. With each grain of barley, there is hope, opportunity, and a promise that God’s timing is perfect. The author ends our chapter by reminding us it’s the beginning of barley harvest, which is actually a very fitting way to end chapter one. I’d like to end our study this week with some general questions about chapter one.

- A. Why do you think child bearing is viewed so central to our identity as women and our purpose in life?

- B. What defines a woman’s value before God, and how does His view of us differ from how the world defines and values us and how we see ourselves?

