

SESSION 5

Ruth: A Woman of Noble Character

Session Outcome

To be an instrument of God's care to those in need.

Customize:

Leader is the password to access expanded teaching helps on FoundryLeader.com



Discover:

Illustrated Bible Life discusses the meaning of the Hebrew word "hesed" and gives verse-by-verse commentary on the Scripture passage.

October

4

RUTH'S COMMITMENT

God provides care for people in need through His committed followers.

THE WORD

RUTH 1:1-17

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ²The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

⁸Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

¹¹But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? ¹²Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have

Last Week:

We gained a deeper understanding of the need to declare, and then live out, our commitment to God and His ways.

This Week:

We will gain a deeper understanding that God is fully aware of the difficult situations we encounter and has prepared in advance the provisions we need to endure, survive, and mature from those circumstances.

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another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—¹³would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!"

¹⁴At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

KEY VERSES

¹⁶**But Ruth replied, "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. ¹⁷Where 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."**

ENGAGE THE WORD

A TIME OF LOSS AND GRIEF

Ruth 1:1-5

Ruth is often assumed to be a sweet story that in the end brings the reader relief; however, it does not take long for the reader to see that it begins with loss and grief. For example, Naomi's family moving due to a famine (vv. 1-2) and after settling in Moab with the additions of daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, all men will have passed away (vv. 3-4). The opening scenes from Ruth reveal extreme loss for three grieving widows.

LOVING-KINDNESS

Ruth 1:6-10

Naomi desires for her daughters-in-law to rebuild their life in their homeland. As a widow with nothing to give them, she asks God to show them loving-kindness (*hesed*) as both Ruth and Orpah have shown to her. This "loving-kindness," or *hesed*, is a theologically loaded term in the Old Testament. This term is used of God and people, indicating actions and dispositions. It has been translated as "steadfast love" (ESV), "faithful love" (NRSV), "unfailing kindness" (NIV) and "loving kindness" (NASB, 1995). Scholars that seek to

Notes:

 Watch:

Dr. Jeren Rowell introduces this unit on Ruth.

 Listen:

FoundryLeader.com: This week's *Illustrated Bible Life* "Article Out Loud" takes a deep look into the meaning of *hesed*, a profoundly meaningful Hebrew word often used to describe the character of God.

Notes:**Did You Know?**

Ruth responded with risk and sacrifice in key moments that ensured continuation of the family line. Scholar L. Daniel Hawk reflects that "Ruth expresses the heart of the biblical vision" and this vision is fulfilled through David's greatest ancestor, Jesus [*Ruth, Apollos Old Testament Commentary* (Madison: IVP Academic, 2015), 141].

THE FUTURE?

define this term struggle to equate it to one word and often have lengthy paragraphs for definitions. *Hesed* is a term that signifies flourishing, commitment, sacrifice, and love in action.

Naomi urges the young widows to return home to Moab. The emotions in this scene are extraordinary. The young widows are weeping (v. 9). Both Orpah and Ruth want to stay with Naomi and return to Bethlehem with her (v. 10). It is clear that they have a sense of care and felt responsibility to their mother-in-law. The young widows have both demonstrated *hesed* to Naomi and Naomi prays for *hesed* to be revealed to them (v. 8).

Ruth 1:11-15

Naomi will again urge the young widows to return home. Her words demonstrate that there is no future for them through her. She laments, feeling like God is against her in this extraordinary loss (v. 13). She sees no future for Orpah and Ruth through her family line because it has come to an end. For ancient people, once your family line ceases and you lose your inheritance (family name and land), the memory of your family ceases. Naomi is aware of what the loss of her sons means for her future.

In many early interpretations of this story, Orpah is mischaracterized as one who turns away from God and rejects Israel. Yet, when we read the text on its own terms, Orpah is the daughter-in-law who obeys her mother-in-law's request! Earlier, Naomi mentioned that both young women have demonstrated kindness (*hesed*) to her. The character of Orpah may require us to read a bit closer to see her well. Anyone who has experienced a devastating loss like this story depicts is aware that grief is complex and necessitates different decisions from different people for their future(s). Some may need to move and leave, "return home," like Orpah. Others may sense an urge to stay with another grieving family member and look out for



Discover:

A word study never can be the end in learning to read the Bible, but it can be a good beginning. This one even has a little drama, involving ancient Jewish Hebraists and a modern larger-than-life Old Testament/Ancient Near East scholar. What is this word, what does it mean, and why does it matter? Let's dig into the meaning of *hesed* in this week's *Illustrated Bible Life* article, "How Shall We Translate Hesed?"

Notes:

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Think About It

Ruth would not have known that her commitment to Naomi and the Lord would have the type of future impact it did on her family, the nation, and for us today! Does this story encourage your renewed commitment to those in your family and church community today?

RUTH CLINGS TO NAOMI

them, even against their wishes, knowing this sacrifice is best, like Ruth. The text is intentionally ambiguous to their inner thoughts which is part of the literary artistry of this story.

Ruth 1:16-17

Ruth shifts the story with a surprising decision. Although Orpah will return home, Ruth vows to "cling" to Naomi. This term for "cling" in the Hebrew is a very strong word depicting a "cleaving" and a "holding fast." Ruth proclaims an oath to Naomi, invoking the covenant name of Israel's God, "Yahweh" (v. 16). This oath is unique in the Old Testament for several reasons. Ruth is the only woman to proclaim an oath like this in the entire Old Testament. Men usually speak oaths in this form in powerful positions such as royal figures and those in the military. When we compare this oath to the end of Judges where every woman is silent (Judges 19—21), Ruth's agency in this oath is mind-blowing! Not only does Ruth proclaim how she will live, but also how she will die. Ruth commits her life to Naomi after a loss that depicts no future for family, one filled with loss of family and family land.

The story contrasts the theme of emptiness with fullness as Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, head to Bethlehem with the hopeful news of a harvest. The agricultural and theological themes of emptiness and fullness, despair and hope, famine and harvest, begin to mark new beginnings for these two women and all of Israel.

REFLECT What lessons can we learn from Ruth's commitment to Naomi?

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Discussion Guide



Connect to My Experience

We are constantly surrounded by love stories. Most of the movies, television shows, and books we engage with have some romantic element, even if it's a subplot. Countless songs tell a lyrical story of love gained and love lost. Our social media feeds are flooded with engagement and wedding pictures. It's everywhere!

- What are some of your favorite love songs? Which are your least favorite?
- Which popular books, shows, or movie romances have stood out to you over the years and why?

Transition:

While most people enjoy a good love story, the reader of Ruth must be careful not to reduce what unfolds in its verses to a short romance that made its way into the Bible. Instead, the book of Ruth expands and deepens our understanding of love and commitment, not just in marriage, but also between family and beyond.



Connect to the Word

Invite someone to read Ruth 1:1-5, then discuss the following,

The story of Ruth is set during a dark and violent period in the Old Testament, the days of the judges (1:1). As we begin Ruth, it does not take long for the reader to see that it opens with loss and grief.

- The word "Bethlehem" means, "The house of bread." How does this insight add a layer of irony to Naomi's and Elimelek's tragic situation? (They had to leave a place known for its crop production to find bread somewhere else.)

Naomi and her family fled to Moab to find life (food) and instead found death.

- Take a moment to list all of the sources of loss and grief that the characters have experienced in just these five verses. (Naomi and her family experience famine, leave the place and people they know, and become strangers in a foreign land. Naomi loses her husband and both of her sons without the support of her extended family. This family was likely in Moab much longer than they hoped to be when they first arrived. It may be helpful to note here that Naomi's sons marrying foreign women could have been a source of grief as well.) What are your initial thoughts regarding these verses?
- Share a time when you faced a "from the frying pan into the fire" situation. What did you experience? What did you learn?

Invite someone to read Ruth 1:6-10, then discuss the following,

Word reached Moab, which is about 50 miles from Bethlehem, that "the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them" (v. 6).

- Why is it important that the news that reached Naomi was not just that there was now food in Bethlehem, but that it was a result of God's provision?

These verses provide a beautiful picture of the closeness between Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah.

- What can we learn from these verses regarding the loving relationship shared between these three women?

Invite someone to read Ruth 1:11-15, then discuss the following,

Naomi told Orpah and Ruth that the Lord had turned against her.

- How does this contrast with Naomi's words and actions in verses 6-9? Why do you think Naomi's attitude and outlook has changed?

Insight

The Hebrew word *hesed* is translated "kindness" in the NIV (1:8; 2:20; 3:10), and is a key theme in the book of Ruth. *Hesed* is also translated as mercy, faithfulness, loyalty, loving-kindness, and steadfast love, and is most often used to describe God's relationship to the people of Israel. The full meaning of *hesed* is difficult to capture in English, but it can be summarized as radical, covenantal, above-and-beyond love in action.

Invite someone to read Ruth 1:16-17, then discuss the following,

- What similar circumstances to Naomi's might cause a person to echo similar feelings? What guidance would you give to someone experiencing these types of feelings?

Naomi continued to plead with Orpah and Ruth to return to Moab. It could be easy to think of Orpah in a negative light and Ruth in a positive light.

- What in the text might enable us to have a clearer viewpoint of Orpah? (Naomi blesses her, highlights her past and current kindness, and wants her to marry. Orpah was weeping and offered to be with Naomi. She obeyed Naomi by going to Moab. Also, it was acceptable for her to stay with her people/family.)
- How can we, with God's help, discern between a time to leave (like Orpah) from a time when we should stay (like Ruth)?

Ruth's radical commitment to Naomi is now on full display.

- How did Ruth's pledge differ from what Naomi was encouraging her to do? What stands out to you most about Ruth's pledge?

Ruth made her pledge in the name of Naomi's God.

- What does Ruth's pledge tell us about her character?

As Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi claimed: "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty" (1:21).

- In what way might Naomi's lament shape her and Ruth's relationship, as well as their relationship with God? (Both women seemed to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings.)



Connect to My Life and the World

Every day, families around the world must flee the people and places they know due to various tragedies, including war, famine (as in the book of Ruth), religious persecution, and hostile leaders.

- How can we, as the church, tangibly show love to those who have experienced loss and are seeking safety and provision?

Naomi was grieving the loss of her husband, sons, and homeland.

- What are the ways people deal with their feelings toward God and others when they experience suffering or loss?
- Have you ever provided support for someone who was experiencing difficulties at the same time you were facing similar difficulties? If so, what was that experience like?
- How can we be a source of love and support for those who are experiencing loss or grief?

Close in prayer.

Sessions 5-8 are written by Miranda Musick

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