

Ruth: A love story to us from God's heart

A peek behind the writing of this study in 2020:

Some of the greatest blessings come in surprising packages. For instance, the shutdown of social gatherings due to the pandemic we all experienced in 2020 had some facets in that category. While Covid19 ushered in a myriad of difficulties on every front, that season also made room in my life for extra study and writing which has resulted in this study of Ruth. Another great blessing disguised in a surprising package came after taking reluctant leadership of a Bible study in 2009 made up of women where the average age at that time was about 80. My friend, Fern, (who, as I edit this study in 2024, is 105 years old- no kidding!) hosted a Bible study in her home for 30 years before I joined. While I will save the humorous quirky details of how that all came to be for another time, let me just say that those seasoned women were my inspiration and cheerleaders in the study and presentation of these Bible lessons. While most of those dear women have gone to glory, it would be most appropriate to dedicate this writing to their memory and their encouragement that kept me pushing forward. 😊

May God bless you as you study this sweet story and demonstration of God's steadfast love in the midst of tragedies and triumphs. Enjoy the journey! 😊

Introduction:

Is the book of Ruth a love story? The unfolding drama of the events of this book could be painted in a way that focuses on the romance of Ruth and Boaz, but many scholars would say it's not a romantic love story. I know, I know- I'm a romantic at heart too. Yeah- who doesn't love a good Hallmark movie every once in a while with a sappy predictable happy ending? While we'd like to frame the story in that camp, you'd miss out in a great way if you fail to grasp the greater narrative of God's steadfast love and mercy and His gracious fingerprints all over this true story. Don't miss the reason God wanted us to know this story, because it truly is a love story to us from God's heart. I'm excited and honored to share the thoughts and insights with you- dig in with me!

One more note: When I quote Scripture, I am using the ESV unless noted otherwise.

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Lesson 1: Naomi's Plight and the Decision at the Crossroad

Read Ruth 1:1-14

Read again the names of the people being introduced in the first few verses. (Don't worry if you stumble to pronounce their names.) Take a moment to see them in your mind's eye as real people making tough decisions for the sake of the survival of their family.

What was happening in the land of Israel that caused this family to "sojourn" ?

My notes: By using the word "sojourn," this helps us understand the intention was not a long-term move, but a temporary maneuver with the thought to return someday. The NIV uses the phrase "went to live for a while" which paints an accurate picture of what their intent was.

What is the name of the country they moved to?

My notes: To get to the country of Moab, Elimelech and his family had quite a hike through the Judean wilderness and across the Jordan River. They basically left the Promised Land of Israel and returned towards the wilderness from which God had delivered Israel centuries before. Frame this move with the understanding that Moab and Israel had conflict in their history that should have caused great hesitation from any of the Israelites desiring to live on Moabite soil. Some would argue that these were clearly steps in the wrong direction.

What happened to Elimelech and his sons?

Can you tell when the sons takes Moabite wives?

My notes: Since we're walking this journey with these women, please take a moment to wrap your heart around the great grief these real women experienced, especially Naomi. In these days, having no men in the family meant extreme poverty. Naomi was in a bad place by the death of her husband and two sons. To be a childless widow was to be among the lowest, most disadvantaged classes in the ancient world. There was no one to support you, and you had to live on the generosity of strangers. Naomi had no family in Moab, and no one else to help her. It was a desperate situation.

What a sad, sorrowful start to this story. Did Elimelech make a bad decision by moving his family to Moab? Was he indeed taking steps in the wrong direction? I don't know....Maybe that's the hard truth. Maybe there should be grace as the family needed to escape famine. It's hard to make a judgment call. As the narrative continues, we'll see God's fingerprints of hope and mercy and grace intertwined. Rather than dwell on whether or not this move was a mistake, instead marvel at God's

ability to take what might have been missteps and use it to create far greater good than could have been imagined.

As you consider these thoughts, please know that your missteps do not need to define your life. Neither do they need to dictate that there's no redemption for the sad and sorrowful and destitute events. God is good and He is amazing. He can take our messes and create a masterpiece. He can take our messes and create a message to tell. Glory to God! Let His love story be written in you.

Can you think of a time when God has taken what seemed like a disaster in the moment and worked great good through it?

Where does Naomi learn about the food prosperity of Israel?

My notes: Naomi was in the fields most likely trying to get the gleanings left for widows. (Perhaps the people of Moab also practiced this kindness?) Gleanings were the grain that fell on the ground or was missed during the harvest season. It was available for the poor.

As Naomi decides to leave Moab, who is going with her on this journey? What is their destination?

Along the way, not far into the journey, Naomi has a change of heart. Read again, her words to Ruth and Orpah in verse 8.

My notes: By telling her daughters-in-law to go back to their mother's house, Naomi knew that they could be better cared for there than to follow Naomi, who is now in dire circumstances. In the phrase of blessing for her daughters-in-law, Naomi uses the word LORD which is Yahweh when she says: "May the LORD deal kindly with you..." Yahweh, a name of God, refers to His involvement in human affairs. He is an intimate God, not a distant God. Please take a moment to think on this. Naomi, even in her most difficult and destitute season of life, called on Yahweh, who is not distant, but so very near to each of us, to bless her two daughters-in-law. Yahweh, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, is not your distant God either, but is so very near for you to call on Him.

Naomi asks the LORD to "deal kindly" with her daughters-in-law as they have been kind to Naomi and to their husbands and father-in-law. The Hebrew word that's translated "deal kindly" is *hesed*, (or *chesed*) which is difficult to translate because it stands for a cluster of ideas—steadfast love, mercy, grace, kindness, faithfulness, and loyalty. It wraps up in itself all the positive attributes of God. *Hesed* is to love as God loves. In the Bible, it is sometimes translated "unfailing love" or "steadfast love," which endures to eternity. It also describes unmerited kindness that seeks to actively intervene to help a loved one. It is love in action in a most wonderful way.

As you consider this beautiful blessing that Naomi gives to her daughters-in-law, don't lose sight of the devastating circumstances surrounding Naomi's life in this particular moment.

How hard is it to speak words of blessing in the midst of super difficult circumstances?

In verse 9 Naomi continues with another blessing. Where does Naomi pray that Ruth and Orpah will find rest?

My notes: In other words, Naomi prays that they would re-marry.

Describe the tender responses of the daughters-in-law to Naomi.

My notes: Clearly Naomi and her daughters-in-law have a dear relationship. Going through hard times together can either draw you nearer to your loved ones or bring profound bitterness and separation or anything in between.

Can you describe a difficult season where you bonded with someone?

What was the initial response to Naomi from both Ruth and Orpah in verse 10?

In verses 11- 13, what does Naomi say she could not offer them?

In verse 13, what is the phrase Naomi uses to describe her emotions?

To what does Naomi attribute this season of difficulty in verse 13?

My notes: Naomi is not only in despair for herself and feeling as though the hand of the Lord has gone out against her, but she describes her emotions as “exceedingly bitter” for Ruth and Orpah as they too are suffering for the family’s misfortune. Remember that a widow in these days, were destitute to a life of poverty with few options. This is what Naomi had to offer her daughters-in-law. There might have been a feeling of guilt on Naomi’s part that perhaps they should have never gone to the land of Moab. The people of Israel were warned that they should not marry women from Canaan since they would be tempted to serve foreign gods. Perhaps Naomi felt as though she deserved God’s heavy hand, but now she is grieving that these young women whom she loves have to bear it also.

Who hasn’t felt that pain of a family member or someone near to your heart who’s made a poor choice? I’m so grateful that our God, in His mercy, can take even those defective decisions and destructive paths and use them to re-route us to His grace and mercy. He is indeed a wonderful God full of *hesed* for His undeserving people. We are not stuck in broken-mode! Glory to God!

In verse 14, what is Orpah’s response to Naomi’s passionate appeal?

What is Ruth's action to demonstrate her response to Naomi's passionate appeal?

My notes: You gotta love Ruth, don't you? Ruth is already winning my heart in that simple action. 😊

Extra study: If you would like to consider more on God's steadfast love, let these words from the Psalms that speak of God's *hesed* for His own pour over you. Write down anything that speaks to your heart from these words.

Psalm 13:5 Psalm 23:6 Psalm 69:15 Psalm 36:7 Psalm 42:8

Psalm 31:7 Psalm 33:18 Psalm 86:15 Psalm 44:26 Psalm 63:3

Reflection: Review the notes on God's steadfast love (*hesed*). Take a moment to thank God for His *hesed* and His gift of forgiveness that flows so freely. Does anything come to mind for you personally as you consider these thoughts?

Prayer: Let me give you my own amplified version (aka Cathy's Reversed Version 😊) of the blessing Naomi speaks to her daughters-in-law in verse 8 of chapter 1: "May Yahweh, who is actively involved in your lives, bless you and show you His steadfast, unfailing love and care now and through eternity because He is full of mercy, grace, and kindness." Isn't *hesed* a beautiful word especially when it comes from the heart of God? Please take a moment to pray that the Lord "deal kindly" (*hesed*) with those near to your heart.