

# Ruth



## The Appeal of *Ruth*<sup>1</sup>

Here we find one of the most charming stories to have ever been told. It's a story of love and loyalty, and the Lord's faithfulness in the midst of adversity. It includes unlikely romance, racial tension and quirky customs. It begins with disheartening devastation but concludes with a happy ending; from famine to fullness! Like all great stories, we are drawn in by the characters, the setting and the predicament (1:1-5). The tension of the plot and the intrigue of ambiguous details keep us on the edge of our seats. The dialogue between the characters drives the narrative forward, while the resolution leaves us to marvel, not just at the righteousness of the romance, but the greater story of redemption to which it points, and which it reflects in the lives of the characters, the plot and the often unseen providence of God. *Ruth* is a great story!

However, a story brilliantly told makes it no less true. The story is merely the canvas upon which the biblical author—under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19-21), paints a portrait of the God who is present in the lives of his people and working out his purposes according to his eternal plan of redemption (Ephesians 1:11). It is clear from the author's own pen that we ought not only appreciate this story as a standalone tale. The story also leads us to worship the God who works such stories into his Great Story, pointing even beyond the author's own time to the great Son of David, Jesus Christ (4:17-22; c.f. Matthew 1:5).

### Historical & Literary Context

The opening words set the stage for the story of *Ruth*: 'In the days when the judges ruled...' (1:1). 'The opening line [of *Ruth*] reflects the narrator's

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion, reference to the book of *Ruth* will be italicised to distinguish the title of the book from the character Ruth.

determination to place the events of the book in a truly historical context.<sup>2</sup> These words are also meant to remind us of the end to the previous book, Judges:<sup>3</sup>

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit. (Judges 21:25)

In our present cultural context, such a statement might not get a second glance; it might as well describe our time and place. These words, however, crystallised what characterised Israel's constant turning away from God and their subsequent moral decline, throughout the book of Judges. When *Ruth* is read in the context of Judges we quickly realise just how wonderful Ruth's story is, and just how gracious the Lord is, even in times of such moral and spiritual depravity.

Although it's difficult to pinpoint precisely when *Ruth* was written we do find suggestions in the text itself that its earliest possible time of composition would be some time during the reign of King Solomon (3:7; 4:17, 22). Although the curious customs we encounter in *Ruth* might confuse us and require further explanation, the mundane aspects of the story make it highly relatable and compelling: Naomi's bitter experience of grief and her need for a fresh start, Ruth's vulnerability yet courage as a foreign woman, the need for Ruth to work, for Boaz to be a man of good moral character, the eager expectation and arrival of a baby, and the jubilation of deepest longings fulfilled. We find all these and more in the story of 'Ruth the Moabite.'

While the opening verse presents the historical context to *Ruth*, the first verse, together with the closing passage (4:18-22), provide the biblical theological context as well. *Ruth* therefore forms a kind of bridge between 'the time of the judges' (1:1) and the instalment of the Israelite monarchy in the book of 1 Samuel. Although the reasons for Israel's demand to have a king were a clear

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 623.

<sup>3</sup> The book of *Ruth* is placed at different points in the Jewish Scriptures at different points in history. In some Jewish Scriptures *Ruth* is placed before the book of Psalms; in others, after the book of Proverbs, following the description of the 'wife of noble character' (Proverbs 31:10-31). Traditionally, the scroll of *Ruth* was read during the Jewish Festival of Weeks, fifty days after Passover.

rejection of God as their King (1 Samuel 8), God also foresaw—indeed promised—this provision and instructed how it should be instituted (Deuteronomy 17:16-20; c.f. Genesis 17:6, 16; 35:11). The climax of Ruth’s story, in its immediate context, is found in the advent of king David, great grandson to Boaz.

It is truly remarkable that this book bears the name Ruth and not, say, Naomi. As the narrator reiterates no less than five times, she is a Moabite (1:22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10; cf. also 2:6); the only Old Testament book named after a non-Israelite. Ruth is also not the main character; the events focus more on Naomi’s loss, bitterness and redemption. By contrast, of the main characters Ruth’s dialogue is the shortest and occurs the least often. The historic title of the book therefore probably more so reflects the admiration the narrator expects the reader to share for the character Ruth.

## Theological Themes

Two key theological themes undergird *Ruth*. Firstly, The Lord’s ongoing, but often unseen, sovereign activity (what theologians call divine providence), implicit in the famine, Ruth’s meeting Boaz and Boaz’s meeting with the closer guardian redeemer; explicit in the provision of food and the birth of Obed. Secondly, the covenant faithfulness of the Lord worked out in the faithful actions of his people.<sup>4</sup> Both these themes notably find their expression on the lips of Naomi and might contribute to the reason Ruth makes her remarkable declaration of loyalty to Naomi and allegiance to her God (1:16-17). Subsequent to these we encounter themes of judgement, faith, grief, hospitality, romance, work, racial tension and redemption—all woven together to form part of the rich tapestry that is God’s plan to redeem a people for his own by the saving work of his Son, King Jesus (Matthew 1:18-23).

*Ruth* depicts God, not through signs and wonders—like e.g. in the book of Exodus, but through his often unseen and underappreciated activity in the lives of ordinary people (1:6; 4:14). The God who is in fact perhaps closer to the

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<sup>4</sup> What in Hebrew is known as *hesed*.

everyday experience *we have* of him. As you'll see reflected in the outline below, the narrative turns on the theme of redemption i.e., God's activity of reclaiming and rebuilding broken lives from the costly overflow of his kindness, his *hesed*. Wonderfully, his redemptive heart has not changed—even today, but continues to overflow in love to the people he has redeemed and for whom he has secured an enduring future.

## **How to Use The Study Notes**

As we've done for some time now the study notes are structured under three main parts: Getting Started questions, Into the Text questions and Takeaway questions.

**Getting Started** questions are designed to be icebreakers, to help encourage people to talk, share and hear from one another. As people share from their own experiences and opinions they're more likely to talk and engage in discussion throughout. This also helps us get to know each other and grow in relationship with one another as we approach God's Word together. The Getting Started questions also tie in to the passage to hopefully get us thinking and preparing for what God's Word will have to say to us.

The **Into the Text** questions are designed to help us understand the context of the passage, make some observations, tease out the meaning of what we see in the passage, so that we might have a firm foundation for understanding how God is calling us to live as his people.

Finally, the **Takeaway** questions are designed to help us think more concretely and specifically about how to respond to what God has taught us in his Word.

Group leaders shouldn't feel bound to the order or content of the study questions, but they should at least work through the study questions in prayerful preparation to lead their groups in Bible discussion. Leaders might want to spend longer on a question or cut out other questions in order to better grasp a particular part of the passage your group may be wrestling with or find especially tantalising! If

you would like to delve deeper into the riches of God's Word in *Ruth* the Recommended Resources below are a good place to start.

*As you open up this part of God's Word, I pray you will grow to know the God who rules and reigns over all things, who often works through the unseen events of our lives, to bring about the completion of his redemptive plan in the person and work of his Son, our Lord Jesus.*

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## Recommended Resources

*Ruth For You* by Tony Merida

*Judges, Ruth* by Daniel I. Block<sup>5</sup>

*A Sweet & Bitter Providence* by John Piper

*NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* by D. A. Carson (ed.)

## Series Outline

Sunday	Passage	Title
5 March	Ruth 1	The <i>Need</i> for Redemption
12 March	Ruth 2	The <i>Nearness</i> of Redemption
19 March	Ruth 3	The <i>Right</i> of Redemption
26 March	Ruth 4	The <i>Cost</i> of Redemption

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<sup>5</sup> Most of the following study notes are drawn from Daniel Block's excellent commentary.

## Ruth 1: The Need for Redemption

*Ruth* 'opens with some devastating words as things go from bad to worse. 'Bethlehem' (literally, 'house, or granary, of bread') marks the beginning and end of this chapter in the story (vv 1, 22). *Famine* precipitates the crisis and 'return'<sup>6</sup> punctuates Naomi's journey back. Like every good story, we're introduced to the setting, the characters and the predicament they find themselves in.

### The timing of the crisis (v1-2)

The story is set during 'the days when the judges ruled' (1:1), a time characterised by no clear national leadership and everyone living however they wanted (Judges 21:25); not to be understood positively but negatively, for God's people were supposed to be living under God's reign as their King and doing what accorded with his good design and rule.

Although the narrator doesn't provide any explicit commentary, theologically we can surmise that 'there was a famine in the land' because God had warned them during the time of Moses that if they persisted in their rebellion against the LORD he would call them back to himself by various means, including famine (Leviticus 26:18-20; Deuteronomy 28:23-24). It's the reason 'a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.'

The name Elimelek means 'God is my king'. 'Elimelek's departure for Moab may reflect his own doubts about the truth his name declared.'<sup>7</sup> 'Naomi' means 'pleasant' (NIV meaning; compare v 20). 'Mahlon' means something like 'sick' and 'Kilion' means something like 'frailty, mortality' —ominous names indeed, preparing us for the crisis that's about to turn Naomi's life upside down.

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<sup>6</sup> The theme of 'return' is clearly reiterated throughout chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> Block, 624.



The relationship between Israel and Moab is one coloured by five factors in their history: (1) the Moabites' contemptible origins in the incestuous relationship of Lot and his daughter (Genesis 19:30–38); (2) the Moabites' resistance to Israelite passage through their territory when they came from Egypt (Numbers 22–24); (3) the Moabite women's seduction of the Israelites and the latter's subsequent punishment (Numbers 25:1–9); (4) Israel's constitutional exclusion of Moab from the assembly of the LORD (Deuteronomy 23:3–6); and (5) the recent oppression of the Israelites by Eglon the king of Moab (Judges 3:15–30). This combination of factors may explain the impression created by the narrator that, of the Bethlehemites, only Elimelek's family sought refuge from the famine in Moab. They also render even more remarkable the whole-hearted acceptance of Ruth successively by Naomi, Boaz, and the people of Bethlehem.

### **The nature of the crisis (v 3-5)**

After a whirlwind of bereavement at the death of Naomi's husband and her two sons, she is left with her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah (the meaning of whose name is uncertain) and Ruth (possibly meaning 'refreshment'). Although not explicit in our English translations we need to interpret Naomi's sons' marriage to these Moabite women negatively for the following reasons: (1) the word translated 'married' in verse 4 is a less common Hebrew term used to describe circumstances ranging from abduction to illegitimate marriage; (2) the LORD prohibited marriage to non-Israelites (Deuteronomy 7:3-4); (3) similar to Elimelek's move to Moab, parents watching their children marry foreigners in lands outside Israel was a mark of covenant curse (Deuteronomy 28:32); (4) Naomi's sons were married to their Moabite wives for ten years but failed to father any children (compare with 4:13); and (5) The fatal blow is *literarily* struck when both Mahlon and Kilion die, leaving Naomi with no husband and no male children to carry on the family name.

### **Naomi's response to the crisis (v 6-18)**

Now face with 'a present without men and a future without hope.'<sup>8</sup> God's intervention in v 6 occasions Naomi's return. In the midst of her grief Naomi was

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<sup>8</sup> Block, 629.

able to hear good news, that the LORD had not forgotten his people, but had come to their aid by providing food (literally, 'bread) for them. The House of Bread was being restocked. The absence of any reference to Israel's repentance reveals that this was nothing less than an act of divine grace. Particularly noteworthy is Naomi's reference to 'kindness' (Hebrew, *hesed*). Block notes that *hesed* 'is a covenant term, wrapping up in itself all the positive attributes of God: love, covenant faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, loyalty. In short, it refers to acts of devotion and lovingkindness that go beyond the requirements of duty.'<sup>9</sup> Naomi sees the LORD as the God who rewards such 'kindness' with 'kindness' in return. Ruth and Orpah's collective rejection of Naomi's first plea in v 10 leads her to intensify her exhortation in v 11-12: 'Return home, my daughters... Return home, my daughters.' Her logic in v 13 is straightforward and persistent; enough to convince one Moabite daughter-in-law, but not the other. 'Orpah pursues the natural course; Ruth is determined to swim upstream.'<sup>10</sup> The third exchange sets the stage for one of the most significant statements in the book. In response to Naomi's fourth and final plea in v 15, Ruth's more lengthy response gives voice to her loyalty to Naomi (spanning place, people, God and even death); but more than that, Ruth expresses her newfound allegiance to the LORD—the God of Israel, whom she invokes to witness her oath (v 16-17). 'With radical self-sacrifice she abandons every base of security that any person, let alone a poor widow, in that cultural context would have clung to: her homeland, her own people, even her own gods.'<sup>11</sup> This is enough to silence Naomi and leave the reader marvelling at Ruth's faith. She emerges as a character of incredible courage and nobility in her own right, and Naomi grows to accept her as a permanent part of her life.

### Naomi's interpretation of the crisis (v 19-22)

When Naomi and Ruth reach Bethlehem, their arrival causes a ruckus. 'The women' of the town who evidently knew Naomi before Elimelek relocated the family to Moab, think they see a ghost, for it seems Naomi is somewhat a pale shadow of her former self. Their shock gives rise to Naomi's lament in v 20-21.

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<sup>9</sup> Block, 633.

<sup>10</sup> Block, 638.

<sup>11</sup> Block, 641.

So traumatic has Naomi's experience of grief and loss been, she sees herself as a different person (hence the name change), interpreting her experience in Moab as the LORD's 'affliction' and 'misfortune' upon her. Perhaps she saw the famine and subsequent relocation to Moab as the LORD's judgement after all. The opening chapter finishes on a note of hope, however: Naomi and Ruth return 'as the barley harvest was beginning.' At the end of the opening chapter Naomi and Ruth are clearly in need of redemption and reversal. But the providential note of hope in v 22 is sounded in preparation for possibilities the next chapter may bring!

### Lament in the Christian life

'There is deep mercy under dark clouds when we discover the grace of lament.'<sup>12</sup> While we might want to tell Naomi at the end of *Ruth* chapter 1 to look rather at the evidences of God's grace in providing for her, from enabling her return to Bethlehem, to the provision of Ruth, her lament in v 20-21 actually resonates with many other instances in the Bible when God's people cry out in their times of crisis (e.g. Psalm 13; 88). While we might focus on Naomi's accusatory tone, we must also recognise her unrelenting acknowledgement of the LORD's hand in her life. Even this side of the resurrection the apostle Paul urges us to 'rejoice with those who rejoice;' and 'mourn with those who mourn' (Romans 12:15). We still live in a world full of pain while we await 'the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:23). Resurrection hope doesn't ignore our troubles, but provides us with the light toward which the dark tunnels of our lives can lead. Sometimes we all need someone else to help lead us to that light – doesn't this highlight the grace of Christian fellowship!

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the grace of lament*, 22.

## Getting Started

1. What are you looking forward to learning from the book of *Ruth*?

## Into the Text

2. As you read through chapter 1, what stands out to you about:
  - a. Elimelek
  - b. Naomi
  - c. Ruth
  - d. God
3. Do you think the famine that occasioned the move to Moab was simply a result of misfortune? Why or why not?
4. How does this opening chapter leave you feeling toward:
  - a. Naomi
  - b. Ruth
  - c. Elimelek
  - d. God
5. What does Naomi's and Ruth's statements about God teach us about him? Do you agree with their professions, blessings and descriptions of God? Why or why not?

## Take Away

6. Do you find yourself identifying with any of the characters so far? What do you think God may be teaching you, through their eyes?

7. Although there was certainly much in Naomi's life which justified her lament in v 20-21, there were also some signs of God's grace in her life which occasioned hope. What 'little providences of God' might he want you to see in your own life today which might lead you to greater hope in him, even in the midst of change, loss or grief? Spend time sharing with the group and giving thanks in prayer for these.
  
8. How does Ruth chapter 1 encourage us to respond when we feel God is hidden or distant?

## Ruth Chapter 2: The Nearness of Redemption

Signalled by 1:22, Ruth's status as a foreigner, a Moabite, underlies much of the tension in chapter 2; whilst, immediately, we are introduced to the relative on Naomi's husband's side, Boaz in 2:1 (cf. v 20). Boaz's name could mean something like 'strength,' but this is only speculative. More clearly, Boaz is described as 'a man of standing,' 'a man of moral worth and material wealth,'<sup>13</sup> as his actions will go on to demonstrate.

### Ruth's initiative (verses 2-3)

God's Law instructed harvesters to have compassion toward 'the alien, the orphan and the widow' by deliberately leaving the grain in the corners of their fields for the economically vulnerable classes and not go back to gather ears of grain they may have dropped (Leviticus 19:9, 10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19). Although Ruth appeared to be aware of such provision, this brought no guarantees—after all, this was 'the days when the judges ruled' (1:1); when 'everyone did as they saw fit' (Judges 21:25). Ruth seems to be aware that the right to glean was frequently denied to the destitute; she was dependent upon the mercy 'favour' of the men in the field. 'As it turned out' (2:3) literally reads, 'and her chance chanced upon the allotted portion of the field of Boaz' (compare 1 Samuel 6:9). An ironic literary device employed by the narrator (compare the timing and purpose of 1:1, 6, 22). 'In reality the narrator is screaming, "See the hand of God at work here!"'<sup>14</sup>

### Boaz's grace and Ruth's humility (v 4-16)

Boaz blesses the harvesters, invoking the LORD's name (v 4), shows care, compassion and concern for Ruth's welfare (v 5, 8, 9), he speaks tenderly to her ('my daughter') and expresses his admiration of her courage in leaving her homeland to accompany her mother-in-law to a foreign land (v 11). Ruth's humility is displayed in the overseer's comments in v 6: she asked for permission and she worked hard all day (cf. v 17-18). When Boaz approaches her directly

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<sup>13</sup> Tony Merida, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Block, 653.

in the field she respects his position as the landowner, noting her alien status and therefore dependence on his good graces (v 10). All Boaz had heard about her was confirmed upon meeting her face to face. Boaz invokes the blessing of the LORD upon her in v 12. 'Inasmuch as she had come to Boaz and he had offered her his protection, he was personally functioning as the wings of God' (cf. Psalm 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 91:4).<sup>15</sup> Ruth's second response in v 13 reinforces her humble status and character, while at the same time reinforcing Boaz's generosity as she 'does not have the standing of one of [his] servants.' Boaz is a gracious host to her at mealtime, inviting her to join the harvesters to fill on bread, wine vinegar and roasted grain (v 14). Even as she leaves he instructs the harvesters to deal extra generously with her (v 15-16).

### **Marveling at a hard day's work (v 17-23)**

Ruth finishes the hard day's work, weighs out what she collected and took it home to present to Naomi, to her astonishment (v 17-19). An ephah amounts roughly to 13kg, highlighting Ruth's strength to carry it all the way back into town after a hard day's work. The words 'left over' and 'enough' reiterate Boaz's generosity and Ruth's ingenuity. When Ruth tells Naomi who it was with whom she 'found favour,' Naomi responds with a word of blessing to the LORD and to Boaz. 'He has not stopped showing kindness to the living and the dead' (v 20), reveals her growing acknowledgement of the LORD's gracious provision. Naomi then adds that Boaz, being 'a close relative,' is one of their 'guardian redeemers' (v 21)—a man in a position to lift them out of poverty and continue Elimelek's family name (more on that in the next study). You can almost see the looks on their faces as they marvel at this turn of events in vv 22-23: in Boaz Ruth (and by extension Naomi) has found security, safety and sustainable work: 'the LORD bless him' indeed! This turn of events signals to Naomi that the day of their redemption is drawing near!

### **Boaz: a reflection of the LORD's *hesed***

Characteristic of Old Testament narrative, the instruction we receive doesn't come in the form of clear imperatives, but impressive indicatives! Boaz's grace,

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<sup>15</sup> Block, 664.

concern, care and generosity clearly reflect the LORD's *hesed*; his loving kindness, compassion and love to his people. Reflecting on such glorious attributes of God lead us to their greatest humanly expression in Jesus, who perfectly displayed compassion for the vulnerable and generosity to the hungry. As New Testament believers who know the outcome not just of this story but of the world, we are led to marvel at the fullest expression and revelation of the LORD's *hesed* in the Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ (4:17-22; Matthew 1:1-5; 28:16-20).



## Getting Started

1. What commendable attributes do you look to emulate in your life as a follower of Jesus? Why?

## Into the Text

2. What qualified Boaz as 'a man of standing' (v 1) throughout this chapter?
3. What makes Boaz's commendable character so remarkable? (Compare with Judges 21:25)
4. How have we seen the following aspect of Ruth's character develop throughout chapter 2:
  - a. Her vulnerability
  - b. Her strength
5. What part do you see God play in the turn of these events?
6. How do you see God's *hesed* reflected in Boaz?

## Take Away

7. In what ways does Boaz represent a picture of biblical manhood? If not, why not?
8. In what ways does Ruth represent a picture of biblical womanhood (cf. Proverbs 31:10-31)? If not, why not?

## Ruth Chapter 3: The Right of Redemption

The ending to chapter 2 leaves us wondering what would come of Naomi's dream and what would happen to Ruth, the foreigner, down in Naomi's house. It seems that several weeks had elapsed between the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3. The events of this chapter occur at barley winnowing time, which probably happened after both the barley and the wheat had been cut and gathered at the threshing floor.

### Naomi's Plan (v 1-5)

This time Naomi takes the initiative (cf. 2:2-3). The problem is that Naomi is yet to find a home (or place of rest, cf. 1:9) for Ruth (v 1). Naomi presents the facts concerning Boaz which foreshadow the circumstances of her plan (v 2), before she gives Ruth detailed instructions to carry out her plan. She instructs Ruth to be as presentable to Boaz as she can be,<sup>16</sup> before ensuring she proposes to the right man (!) (v 3). Although Naomi's instructions have been interpreted by many to suggest sexually explicit activity, this line of interpretation isn't necessitated by the evidence and largely ignores the exemplary character which Ruth, Boaz and even Naomi have displayed in the story thus far. If anything, the similarity of language with the telling of the incestuous origins of the Moabites (Genesis 19:30-38) serves to contrast and correct, not accord, with the Moabites' reputation in Israel (see Historical and Literary Context above). After all, Boaz himself will go on to commend her, not for her seductive behaviour, but for her 'noble character' (v 11; cf. Proverbs 31:10). Naomi's instructions are indeed a gamble and put Ruth at risk; however, her plan may indicate more so their trust in Boaz and the LORD to steer the course of events toward a favourable outcome. Humanly speaking, the safe and successful execution of the plan depends entirely on the character of Boaz. Will his 'stand up' character (2:1) hold up to what can easily become a sketchy scenario? 'The delicacy of the scheme is

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<sup>16</sup> 'Your best clothes' (NIV) isn't meant to convey clothing of a seductive or attractive nature as such, but rather to clearly convey Ruth has concluded her period of mourning (cf. 2 Samuel 12:20; Block, 683).

obvious, and the potential for disaster is extreme. [...] the narrator challenges the reader to trust God the way these women do.<sup>17</sup>

### **Ruth's proposal (v 6-9)**

Remarkably, without hesitation, Ruth obeys Naomi's instructions (v 6). To say Boaz 'was in good spirits' need not indicate he was drunk but conveys an 'image of a contented man at peace within himself and in harmonious step with a world that is yielding its fruit as a result of the LORD's blessing (1:6) and his hard work.'<sup>18</sup> Although the second part of Ruth's answer to Boaz's question in v 9 may be hard to interpret in our cultural context, to an Israelite Ruth was clearly proposing marriage to Boaz. The gesture of a man covering a woman with his garment was a symbolic act, which according to Near Eastern custom signified the establishment of a new relationship and the symbolic declaration of the husband to provide for the sustenance of the future wife. This is what Naomi had in mind when she proposed this scheme as a way of providing 'rest' for Ruth in 3:2. In essence, Ruth challenges Boaz to be the answer to his own invocation of divine blessing in 2:12! A 'guardian-redeemer' was 'a legal term for one who has the obligation [or right] to redeem a relative in serious difficulty' (cf. Leviticus 25:25-55).<sup>19</sup> The responsibility and logistics of being a 'guardian-redeemer' will be spelled out in more detail by Boaz himself in chapter 4.

### **Boaz's promise and provision (v 10-18)**

How easy it would have been for Boaz to behave otherwise than he does in v 10-13. In 'the days when the judges ruled,' it may have been expected for him to do so. But Boaz's characteristic *hesed* shines brightly in this delicate and vulnerable situation. Although she humbles herself as his 'servant', he dignifies her by calling her 'my daughter' – twice, the term of endearment Naomi gives her (v 16). He commends Ruth for displaying *hesed*, 'kindness', in choosing not to go after other younger, perhaps more attractive, men (v 10). This exchange suggests Ruth, nevertheless a widow of a ten year marriage (1:4), is significantly younger than Boaz. Boaz promises to act for her welfare, and certainly doesn't

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<sup>17</sup> Block, 686-687.

<sup>18</sup> Block, 689.

<sup>19</sup> NIV meaning

intend to delay (v 13), but there is a late twist in the tale: there is another man who is more closely related to Elimelek than Boaz. Although undoubtedly excited by Ruth's proposal, Boaz is evidently a man who respects due process! Before the sun rose too high in the morning, out of concern to maintain their commendable reputation and character (cf. v 11), Boaz sends her away – but not 'empty-handed' (v 17). Naomi's question to Ruth, 'How did it go, my daughter?' more literally reads, 'Who are you?' or 'In what state are you?' In other words, she is asking Ruth if the plan worked, to which Ruth replies by telling her 'everything Boaz had done for her' (v 16). The provision of grain may have helped provide a cover for Ruth in case anyone saw her leaving Boaz's threshing floor, or it could have functioned as a kind of promise on Boaz's part, that he will certainly follow through on his promise. In either case, it certainly adds to his already generous provision! Naomi's advice to Ruth in v 18 is the opposite to her advice at the beginning of the chapter. 'All the characters have played their role perfectly. Naomi has taken the initiative and gotten the ball rolling, Ruth has carried out her delicate and daring scheme, and Boaz has responded right on cue. The reader as witness to the drama waits with Ruth to see "how the matter will fall."' <sup>20</sup>

## The right to redeem

The writer of Psalm 49:7-9 raises a significant point:

<sup>7</sup>No one can redeem the life of another  
or give to God a ransom for them—  
<sup>8</sup>the ransom for a life is costly,  
no payment is ever enough—  
<sup>9</sup>so that they should live on forever  
and not see decay.

Just like Ruth, we need redemption from our vulnerable and helpless state of sin. The just wage for sin is death (Romans 6:23). But only God can redeem us, for our rebellion is fundamentally against him (Psalm 51:4); therefore he alone

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<sup>20</sup> Block, 701.

retains the right to choose redemption and forgiveness instead of punishment and condemnation. God determines the price for redemption; he alone can pay it in full. Wonderfully, rebellious sinners can be redeemed not with silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18-19). Because of Jesus we can look forward to a secure future described in terms of 'the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:23).

## Getting Started

1. What has surprised you so far in the book of Ruth?

## Into the Text

2. Put yourself in Ruth's shoes. What do you think you would have thought about Naomi's plan in v 1-5?
3. What reasons would Ruth have for following Naomi's risky plan with Boaz?
4. Why might Naomi's risky plan have only worked between Ruth and Boaz? What does this say about such people whose lives are governed by the LORD's *hesed* (v 10-13)?

## Take Away

5. Why would Naomi's plan not work as a Christian dating strategy today?
6. How do you see Boaz's commendable character in chapters 2 and 3 amplified and perfected in Jesus? Spend time praying, giving thanks to God for the ways he has so generously provided for us through his Son.
7. What would it look like for you to trust Jesus just as Ruth trusted Boaz?

## Ruth Chapter 4: The Cost of Redemption

The final chapter of *Ruth* brings the drama of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz to a climactic conclusion that extends well beyond their lifetime. In verses 1-12 Boaz is largely the focus of the drama as we intently read to see how he plans to resolve the hurdle of 3:13. In verses 13-17 focus shifts to Naomi (rather than Ruth), at least in part because the story on one level has been more about Naomi's redemption and reversal of loss raised at the very beginning. The chapter can be broken up into two distinct settings. The first part takes place at 'the town gate' (4:1-12). The 'town gate' in ancient Palestine was a complex structure with lookout towers at the outside and a series of rooms on either side of the gateway where defenders of the town would be stationed. But these gateways also served a secondary purpose, as a gathering place for the citizens of the town. This was where the official administrative and judicial business of the community was conducted. The second part takes place presumably at Ruth and Boaz's home (v 13-17), before the narrator draws a genealogical line from Perez – ancestor to Boaz, through to King David, perhaps revealing the greater purpose to this story of redemption and reversal (v 18-22).

### At the town gate (4:1-12)

In verses 1-2 Boaz prepares for the court proceedings. When Boaz sits down at the town gate he makes clear to onlookers that 'had arrived for legal business,'<sup>21</sup> 'just as the guardian redeemer he had mentioned came along' (v 1; c.f 2:3). After he gathered 'ten of the elders of the town' – which undoubtedly would have required more effort, Boaz leads the way through the legal proceedings. As Boaz presents the case to this guardian-redeemer we're immediately struck by how he leads with the plot of land, presumably for at least two reasons: (1) it highlights the guardian-redeemer's self interest, which acts as a foil for Boaz, the 'man of standing' (2:1). (2) It evidently plays down Boaz's real interest which is Ruth and securing Naomi's future. According to Mosaic law this land was never to leave the family, and the institution of the guardian-redeemer was one of the nation's customs designed to prevent this from happening (Lev 25:25–30). Even

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<sup>21</sup> Block, 705.

though his conversation with Ruth at the threshing floor had not mentioned land at all, he knew that gaining the rights to the use of Naomi's property was the key to winning the right to Ruth's hand. Perhaps to our surprise (and dismay) the guardian-redeemer initially agrees to accept his role as guardian-redeemer to Naomi (v 4). Boaz proceeds to inform the guardian-redeemer that acquiring the land from Naomi also involved two complicating factors: he would have to 'acquire'<sup>22</sup> a Moabite widow through marriage and he would have to maintain Elimelek's family line and reputation, all bound up in the ancient understanding of a person's 'name' (v 5). In the ancient world one of the most fearful curses one person could invoke on another was "May your seed perish and your name die out."<sup>23</sup> The guardian-redeemer then reneges on his acceptance of Boaz's proposal, 'because I might endanger my own estate.' He went over a cost-benefit analysis in his mind and decided that honouring his role as guardian-redeemer proved too costly, for it would have entailed supporting Naomi and producing an heir through Ruth who would then have likely in the future had the right to reclaim ownership of the land. He finally cedes his right as guardian-redeemer to Boaz who is 'next in line' (v 4). At this point the narrator adds an editorial remark which notifies us later readers that this story was written some time after the practice was in common Israelite use (although, compare this rendition in v 7 with the original law in Deuteronomy 25:7-10). Boaz then summarises the outcome of the legal proceedings, and confirms the eyewitness testimony of 'the elders and all the people' (v 9-10). The 'elders and all the people' respond in kind before invoking divine blessing upon the newly established household of Boaz and Ruth. The witnesses' request concerning Ruth is extraordinary inasmuch as they pray that Yahweh would grant this foreign woman a place among the matriarchs of Israel along with Rachel and Leah.

### **In the home of Boaz and Ruth (v 13-17)**

On first reading, it might surprise us that the narrative concludes by focusing not on Ruth but Naomi and the reversal of her fortunes. 'The women' bless the LORD for not leaving her without a guardian-redeemer. Although we might expect them

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<sup>22</sup> In no way to suggest women were simply treated as property to be bought and sold, but language typical of betrothal and marriage in the ancient world.

<sup>23</sup> Block, 715.



to be referring to Boaz, for that is how he has been described since 2:20, turns out they were in fact referring to the newborn son, for he is the one whom Ruth 'who is better to you than seven sons,'<sup>24</sup> has brought into the world (v 15). The women's blessing must be understood against Naomi's painful and bitter complaint about God in 1:20-21. 'There is a recognition now that she whose life had been emptied by God has now experienced his filling.'<sup>25</sup> The women also describe Ruth as 'loving' Naomi. Her love was not expressed primarily as an emotion, but seen in her acts of *hesed* – placing Naomi's welfare ahead of her own. In Leviticus 19:34 Moses instructs the Israelites to love the stranger as they love themselves. Ironically, it is this stranger from Moab who shows the Israelites what this means. Perhaps most remarkable of all, Ruth, who had previously been married ten years to Mahlon but had borne no children for him, has now conceived with Boaz, highlighting the dramatic reversal of events and the LORD's sovereignty over the miracle of conception and birth. The name of the boy, Obed, curiously conveys an ambiguous meaning: 'servant.' Is he a 'servant of the LORD' (as per the name Obadiah), or is he the 'servant' of Naomi in her old age? This son is Naomi's redeemer, the one who has come to serve her by restoring her life and offering her security in her old age.

### From a Redeemer for Naomi to the Messiah for the world (v 18-22)

History is not a series of wretched events, one thing after another, going nowhere. The story of Ruth is so important because it reminds us that history is moving to the worship of Jesus, who is the "root and the descendent of David" (Revelation 22:16).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The number seven corresponds to perfection in Jewish and biblical thought. Seven sons therefore portrays the perfect amount of sons – which in context speaks to just how precious to Naomi Ruth is, from the perspective of these women.

<sup>25</sup> Block, 726.

<sup>26</sup> Merida, 128.

## Getting Started

1. How has the book of *Ruth* challenged you so far?

## Into the Text

2. How have you seen God's provision throughout the story of Ruth?
3. Read the following cross references of other places in the Bible where Jesus is referred to as 'the son of David':
  - a. Matthew 1:1-6
  - b. Matthew 21:9
  - c. Acts 13:22-23
  - d. Romans 1:3
4. Read through Matthew's genealogy in chapter 1 of his Gospel. Note the women in particular who he includes:
  - a. Tamar (see Genesis 38)
  - b. Rahab (see Joshua 2:1-21; 6:25)
  - c. Ruth
  - d. Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11)
  - e. Mary (see Matthew 1:18-23)
5. What point do you think Matthew is making by including these women in Jesus' genealogy? (Compare Matthew 1:21)

## Takeaway

6. Look at the women's praise in v 14-15. What could you praise God for in a similar way, from your own life?

7. Imagine a friend tells you they couldn't become a Christian because they're not good enough. How does Matthew chapter 1 equip you to respond to them?
  
8. How does the story of Ruth give you confidence in Jesus?