

Spring. Summer. Winter. Fall.

Monday. Tuesday. Wednesday. Thursday. Friday.

Morning. Noon. Evening. Night.

Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner.

Day after day, month after month, year after year – our lives follow the same recognizable pattern. We wake up, we go to work, we come home, we put the kids to bed, and we go to sleep. The particulars may look a little different, but the rhythm is unmistakably the same. It's not so much quiet desperation as it is endless repetition. On and on and on it goes, each day bringing its own blur of appointments, meetings, and obligations. The pile of ordinary days turns into a landfill of ordinary weeks and ordinary years. Eventually, it all adds up to one seemingly insignificant, ordinary life.

But, what if there was more to the story? Specifically, what if there was more to our stories? Could it be that there's more going on here than we think? What could an extraordinary God do with our ordinary lives?

We don't struggle to see God in the miraculous. It's not difficult to recognize His hand when He shows up in glory and power. Yet, God's ways are often more incognito than they are incredible. Though He is the God of burning bushes, parted seas, and conquered giants, He is also the God of business meetings, kitchen tables, and everyday conversations. He is the God who uses the mundane to hide the magnificent.

The book of Ruth gives us a unique window into exactly how He does that. Taking place largely over the course of one harvest season, these four short chapters tell the story of everyday people doing everyday things. They get up. They go to the fields. They go home. There are no miracles. There are no spectacular visions. There are only normal people doing their best to follow an infinite God in the intimate moments of their life.

By the time Ruth's story is over, however, the everyday has impacted the eternal. God has used all these small moments to have a huge impact. Ruth reminds us that God weaves and works in ways we can't always understand. He works in our hardships. He works in our choices. He even works in our mistakes. As He knits these disparate threads together, He creates a beautiful tapestry of love, faithfulness, and hope. More than that, He uses Ruth's story – and our stories! – to tell His ultimate story: the story of a King who is coming to make everything right.

The days that seem so monotonous may end up being miraculous. The difficult seasons can be part of God's grand design. You never know what God could be up to when you live in the extraordinary ordinary.

WEEK ONE: COMMITMENT

From the time we're old enough to know anything, we know to be afraid of the dark. We can't see in it. We can't find our way through it. Though other creatures can navigate the darkness – and some can even make their home there – we were made for brighter days. Without the light, it's hard to find life.

The book of Ruth opens during an incredibly dark time in Israel's history. The first sentence of her story places us in the time of the Judges, a time of great national and spiritual poverty. The Israelites had wandered far away from the God who had brought them into the Promised Land. As their spiral of disobedience intensified, the nation of Israel fell into disorder and disrepair.

But even in the midst of this darkness, there were those who lived for the light. One of the most unlikely was Ruth. As a member of the Moabite nation, Ruth didn't belong in the Promised Land. She wasn't a part of the covenant. She had no place among God's Chosen People. And yet, her choice to serve and follow the God of Israel would have an impact not just in her day, but in ours as well...

READ RUTH 1:1-5

“In the days when the judges ruled in Israel...”

This quick statement about the setting of Ruth tells us a lot about the nation of Israel in Ruth's day. By orienting us in the time of the Judges, the author of Ruth reminds us of one of the most turbulent and dark times in Israel's history. Judges is a book filled with corruption, compromise, and confusion. Repeatedly in its pages, God's people wander away from Him. Time and time again, God brings them back. Some of the darkest stories in the Bible find their home in the book of Judges (see Judges 17-19 for a couple examples).

The reason for Israel's decline? Judges repeatedly gives us an answer:

Judges 21:25: “In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.”

Without a king to guide them, the people of Israel were left to their own devices. There was no shared concept of right and wrong. There was no one to help get the nation back on track. The absence of a king meant the absence of a moral compass. The people did whatever they thought was right, regardless of how it affected the people around them.

Questions

Who should have been the Israelites' King (1 Samuel 8:7)? Why do you think they had so much trouble following this King?

"All the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." How is our cultural moment similar to the time of the Judges? What happens when people only do what seems right to them? How does this affect a society?

It's not a stretch to say that the book of Ruth opens in a time of great national hardship and heartache. After reminding us of the nation's darkness, the story focuses in on a family that is struggling to navigate their way through the dark. With a famine ravaging their hometown of Bethlehem, Elimelech and his wife Naomi take their two sons (Mahlon and Kilion) and move to the nearby nation of Moab.

Though the family ran to Moab to escape trouble, trouble finds them even in a foreign land. Soon after their move, Elimelech dies, leaving the family without their patriarch. Naomi's crew has already dealt with a famine and relocation. Having stacked grief upon grief, they now face the uncertainty of a life without the head of their household.

Their fortunes seem to be turning around when Naomi's sons find wives in Moab. Mahlon and Kilion marry two Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. While it was less than ideal given the cultural and religious differences between Moabites and Israelites, the marriage wasn't specifically prohibited by the Law. Given the family's circumstances, these marriages were their best shot at providing an heir and keeping the legacy of Elimelech alive.

What's In a Name?

Biblically, a person's name reveals a lot about them. Many of the names in the book of Ruth hint at the true character – or fate! – of that person:

- *Elimelech – "My God is King"*
 - *Naomi – "Sweet" or "Pleasant"*
 - *Mahlon – "Sickness"*
 - *Kilion – "Weakness"*
 - *Ruth – "Friend"*
 - *Orpah – "Back of the Neck" (i.e. what you see when someone turns to leave)*
 - *Boaz – "Strength"*
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Like the plan to move to Moab, however, this scheme also backfired. Over the course of the next decade, Mahlon and Kilion were unable to conceive with their Moabite wives. Beyond the social stigma of infertility in that culture, there was also the very real problem of having someone to carry on the family name. This problem became more pronounced when Naomi's sons succumbed to the very famine they had hoped to escape. With her husband and her sons now dead, Naomi had very literally lost everything she had.

The national tragedy of a famine had now spiraled into a very personal tragedy for Naomi. She had been emptied of everything. Her pantry was empty. Her home was empty. Her life was empty. There was seemingly nothing left.

QUESTIONS

How do you think Naomi felt in this moment? Has there ever been a time when you felt the same way? How did that affect you?

According to Ruth 1:4, this time of trial and trouble lasted nearly a decade. What do you think those years felt like for Naomi and her family? What kind of effect can a prolonged period of suffering have on a person? On a family?

READ RUTH 1:6-18

Upon hearing that the famine in Israel had lifted, Naomi made plans to return to her homeland. The presence of her daughters-in-law complicated the journey. With three mouths to feed and no way to even provide for herself, Naomi begged Orpah and Ruth to stay in Moab. Her entreaty to **"Go back to your mothers' homes"** mirrors language in the OT (Gen. 24:28; Song of Songs 3:4) that speaks of finding a new home and a new spouse. Naomi wants what's best for her daughters-in-law, and what's best is for them to stay where they belong.

Though Orpah turned back to Moab, Ruth wouldn't let go of her mother-in-law. Her declaration of loyalty to Naomi stands as one of the most beautiful and poignant statements in all of Scripture. Ruth's language in these short verses (1:16-17) shows us that she was willing to do whatever she had to do in order to stay by Naomi's side:

- **"Wherever you go, I will go."**
- **"Wherever you live, I will live."**
- **"Your people will be my people."**
- **"Your God will be my God."**
- **"Wherever you die, I will die. And there will I be buried."**
- **"May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!"**

More than just a statement of her commitment to Naomi, these words speak to Ruth's commitment to the God of Israel. Not only does Ruth make the commitment, "**Your God will be my God,**" she also pledges that she will be buried wherever Naomi is buried. In that day, many people thought that the gods of a nation were geographically bound to their location. By pledging to be buried in the land of Israel's God, Ruth is overtly forsaking the gods of the Moabites and pledging herself to the God of Israel – both in life and in death.

Missed It By That Much

Some commentators through the years have attempted to overemphasize and overspiritualize Orpah's decision to remain in Moab. As much as we might be tempted to speculate about Orpah's action, the text treats her decision as a reasonable one. As Naomi explains, there's nothing waiting for Orpah in Israel. There are no other sons and no hope of provision that Naomi can offer her foreign daughter-in-law. Orpah's decision is no moral failure, though it does pale in comparison to the gracious loyalty Ruth pours out on her mother-in-law. Much like the would-be kinsman-redeemer we'll see in chapter 4, Orpah makes the decision that makes the most sense. But sometimes, it's the decision that makes the least sense that leaves the biggest impact.

QUESTIONS

What stands out to you about Ruth's statement of loyalty to Naomi? What would this kind of gracious loyalty look like today? What would a modern-day version of this kind of pledge look like?

Have you ever experienced a friendship like this? What keeps us from the kind of deep relationship we see here between Ruth and Naomi? How should Christians lead the way in terms of cultivating deep friendships?

READ RUTH 1:19-22

When Ruth and Naomi make their way back to Bethlehem, the women of the town are shocked by what they see. Surely, this couldn't be the same Naomi who left them a decade ago? What happened to the rest of her family? And who is this young Moabite traveling with her? Naomi's presence in her hometown prompts a lot of gossip and speculation.

Naomi, for her part, confronts their questions head-on. She tells them of her hard years spent in Moab and everything she lost along the way. She even goes so far as to lay the blame for her

calamity at the feet of God Himself. In her mind, God has caused her to suffer and has laid this incredible burden on her life.

The years of suffering and emptiness have taken such a toll on Naomi that she decides to adopt a new name – “Mara.” The name means “bitterness,” a reminder of how sour her life had been in the years since she left Bethlehem. Yet the name “Mara” also calls back to another time in Israelite history. Back in Exodus 15, the Israelites came across a place where the water ran bitter – a place they, too, named “Marah.” There, the water was so sour that no Israelite dared to drink it, causing the people of that day to complain against both Moses and their God.

At Marah, God provided a piece of wood that turned the water sweet. When Moses threw that wood into the water, the Israelites were finally able to drink that water and have their fill. As Ruth 1 comes to its close, the question remains: “What will God do for this Mara?” The final verse of the chapter contains a hint of the hope to come...

“They arrived in Bethlehem in the late spring, at the beginning of the barley harvest.”

QUESTIONS

Do you think Naomi was correct in blaming God for her suffering and trials? Why or why not? In what ways are you tempted to do the same when you face difficulties? In what ways does blaming God for the trial keep us from trusting in Him through the trial?

Why do difficult times make it so easy for us to turn cynical and bitter? When times get difficult, how can we hold onto hope? What are some reminders that help you cling to hope in the midst of suffering?

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. As a Group, read Ruth 1. What stands out to you about this chapter in the story? Which character in this chapter do you most identify with? As you think back through the video teaching time, what ideas stuck out to you? What's the biggest takeaway you had from this lesson?
2. The opening sentence of Ruth orients us in the time of the Judges. What was so dark about this time in Israel's history? How is this timeframe in Israelite history similar to our own day? In what ways do we still face some of the same challenges Ruth and Naomi faced? Why does "doing what's right in our own eyes" always end in confusion and chaos?
3. The opening five verses of Ruth compress a decade's worth of tragedy into one compact paragraph. How did living through such a difficult time affect Naomi's heart and mind? In what ways do times of suffering and difficulty threaten to turn us bitter? How do we walk through seasons like that and still maintain a sense of hope?
4. What stands out to you in Ruth's declaration of loyalty to Naomi? What does this kind of loyalty look like in everyday life? What are some of the obstacles that keep us from living with that sense of gracious loyalty? How can we, as Christians, help set the example for faithful friendships like these?
5. This opening chapter of Ruth contains a lot of imagery of emptiness. In what ways are the characters in this chapter declared as being empty? What are some ways our culture struggles with emptiness – both corporately and personally? How does God fill that sense of emptiness we feel?
6. What does faithfulness look like in a time of darkness? What difference does everyday faithfulness make in a culture like ours? How does God work through the cumulative effect of our faithful lives?

WEEK TWO: COMPASSION

Hard times have a way of creating hardened people. The longer trouble lasts, the shorter our fuses get. The more severe the recession, the more we hoard our resources. Living in tough times often forces us to put on thick skin. When the going gets rough, all we tend to care about is ourselves. We don't look to the needs of other people. We don't concern ourselves with the welfare of those around us. Suffering can turn us into the worst versions of ourselves – selfish, entitled, and bitter.

Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem because of the promise of better days. Yet, just because the situation in Israel had improved didn't mean that the Israelites themselves had. Life in those days could be tough for a pair of widows. With no one to look after them, Ruth and Naomi could only rely on the kindness of others. They were quite literally at the mercy of any who might show them mercy.

READ Ruth 2:1-13

The second chapter of Ruth immediately introduces us to the third major character in the narrative – a man named Boaz. He's identified in Ruth 2:1 as a "wealthy and influential man," a Hebrew term (*"gibor hayil"*) that could also translate as "mighty warrior." Though its use here almost certainly refers to the strength of Boaz's character over his physical attributes, the book's setting during the time of the Judges could mean Boaz had seen his fair share of battles. Regardless, the text makes special note of the fact that Boaz is related to Elimelech. In many ways, Boaz's character and his lineage will drive the rest of the story forward.

As Ruth and Naomi get settled into their new life in Bethlehem, their primary issue becomes one of provision. How are they going to take care of themselves? What are they going to eat? Ruth decides to take matters into her own hands. Wanting to care for her mother-in-law, Ruth offers to go into the fields and glean behind the harvesters. Even though she was a Moabite woman, Ruth knew enough about the social programs of Israel to know where she could find help.

Her search for food eventually takes her to the fields of Boaz. While the text presents this as a chance encounter ("**As it happened**" (NLT) in Hebrew literally means "*her chance chanced upon*"), readers know this is far more than some happy accident. Ruth's initiative and God's ingenuity meet in this moment to do something new and unexpected. As the end of the book will make clear, Ruth's presence in Boaz's field isn't just a matter of happenstance, but of Divine providence.

What Is Gleaning?

Though unfamiliar in our culture, gleaning was one of the primary social welfare programs of the Old Testament. The Law commanded that landowners not harvest the corners of their field. The marginalized people of the community – the poor, the widow, the alien, and the orphan – could then come and pick that grain for their own personal use. By leaving parts of their crops unharvested, those who had wealth and land could care for those who were unable to care for themselves. Boaz’s obedience to this command shows that he took his obligation to the Law, and to his neighbor, very seriously.

Leviticus 19:9-10: “When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. It is the same with your grape crop—do not strip every last bunch of grapes from the vines, and do not pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God.”

QUESTIONS

How does Ruth’s initiative in going out to glean show her love and concern for her mother-in-law? How is it a tangible expression of her declaration of loyalty in Ruth 1? What would this kind of love and loyalty look like in your life?

As you think about your own life, how have you seen God work through coincidence and chance encounters? How has He used your initiative to do something more than you had imagined? What are some ways He has moved in spite of what you intended?

When Boaz arrives in the fields, he makes special note of the new woman gleaning in the fields and asks his foreman who she is. The foreman's response praises Ruth's work ethic, noting that she has hardly taken any time to rest since arriving in the field earlier that morning. Upon hearing Ruth's story of accompanying Naomi back to Bethlehem, Boaz's heart is moved to compassion at the widows' plight. He makes it a point to wander out to the edge of the field so that he can speak to Ruth directly.

Boaz's first words to Ruth show us why he had a reputation as a *'gibor hayil.'* He invites Ruth to continue her gleaning work in the field throughout the remainder of the harvest season. Moreover, he tells her that his fields are a safe place for her. Both the men and the women who work among his day-laborers have been told to treat Ruth with respect and kindness. Ruth's commitment and loyalty to Naomi has spurred Boaz's heart to offer the same back to her.

Boaz's generosity towards Ruth continues throughout the day. When lunchtime comes, he invites her to sit with him and the rest of the harvesters as they enjoy a meal together. He even walks her through some of the food customs of the area by explaining how his workers eat their bread with the sour wine. In the afternoon, Boaz even goes so far as to offer special provision for Ruth, commanding his workers to leave full heads of barley on the ground for her to pick up as she gleans. By the time Ruth is done working for the day, Boaz's generosity has provided her with more than she and Naomi need.

This first act of provision sets the stage for an even greater act of redemption to follow.

Ruth and the Heroes of Israel

*Throughout the narrative, Ruth is often spoken about using some of the very same words that were used to describe the patriarchs (and matriarchs!) of the Israelite people. Boaz's words to her on Ruth 2:11 ("**I have heard how you left your father and mother and your own land to live here among complete strangers**") mirror what Genesis said about Abraham:*

Genesis 12:1: "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you.'"

This is not the first time Ruth has been referred to as a true Israelite – nor will it be the last. Back in chapter one, Ruth's journey to Bethlehem was described as a return (1:22), even though she was a Moabitess who had never set foot in Israel before. A later blessing in Ruth 4:11 will compare Ruth to Rachel and Leah, the wives of Jacob who literally gave birth to the nation of Israel! Ruth may have been born in Moab, but the text makes it clear that she is an Israelite through and through.

QUESTIONS

As you read these verses that introduce us to Boaz, what stands out about him and his character? How does this stand in contrast to what we know about Israel in the time of the Judges? In what ways was Boaz the polar opposite of many of the men of his day?

Boaz's kindness to Ruth was motivated by her kindness to Naomi. What kind of impact can one simple act of kindness have on a community? How do ordinary acts of love and kindness transform hearts and minds? How should we live in light of this?

READ Ruth 2:17-23

After a full day of work, Ruth heads back home with over 30 pounds of barley! For two widows, this would have represented multiple weeks' worth of food! When Naomi saw Ruth carrying a full basket into the house, she asked her daughter-in-law where she found such an abundant harvest. Ruth responds by telling her about Boaz and all he had done for her that day.

Naomi's ears perk up at the mention of Boaz's name. That's because Boaz is a relative of her late-husband Elimelech and one of the family's redeemers (2:20). In Israelite culture, a dead man's relatives had the ability (and the responsibility) of redeeming the estate of the deceased. This "kinsman-redeemer" (Hebrew "Go'el") would be selected from among the family to protect the family name. What that redemption looked like could vary depending on the circumstances. In fact, the Law offered several instances where the kinsman-redeemer might need to get involved:

- Purchase family property that was lost due to debt (Leviticus 25:24-28)
- Buy relatives out of slavery (Leviticus 25:47-50)
- Avenge the death of a relative due to murder or manslaughter (Numbers 35:16-29)
- Marry the wife of the deceased relative in order to protect the family lineage – a practice known as levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10)

While some of these commands may seem archaic and even oppressive to our modern sensibilities, they were progressive and protective in the Middle Eastern culture of that day. In a day and time when someone's name was their entire legacy, these laws ensured the preservation of a family line. More than that, in a culture where women had few rights, the kinsman-redeemer protected the most vulnerable in the family – the widows and orphans left behind.

The role of the kinsman-redeemer will become significant in Ruth 3, when Ruth asks Boaz to fulfill his obligations as the redeemer of Elimelech's family. But it's not hard to see how the

concept illuminates the rest of Scripture and the redemption we have in Christ. A later passage in the book of Isaiah will explicitly tell us that God Himself is our Redeemer – our *go'el* – and that He will redeem and purchase us out of our sin and shame:

Isaiah 54:4-5: “Fear not; you will no longer live in shame. Don’t be afraid; there is no more disgrace for you. You will no longer remember the shame of your youth and the sorrows of widowhood. For your Creator will be your husband; the LORD of Heaven’s Armies is his name! He is your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, the God of all the earth.”

QUESTIONS

When you hear the word “redemption,” what comes to mind? What does it mean to redeem something or someone? How does the imagery of the kinsman-redeemer help us think about how Jesus has redeemed us?

Reread Isaiah 54:4-5. How do you personally relate to the pictures of redemption in these verses? How has God brought you out of shame and disgrace? How does this affect the way we share the Good News with those who don’t yet know Him?

The Importance of Hesed

Hidden in the background of the book of Ruth is one of the great concepts in the Hebrew language. The word ‘Hesed’ (or ‘Chesed’) appears three times in the text of this short book (1:8; 2:20; 3:10). Hesed is a patently Hebrew word, one we really don’t have an equivalent for in our language. That’s why different translations come up with different ways to talk about it. Some simply translate as “love.” Others say “unfailing love.” Still others translate it as “loving-kindness.” The idea carries so much meaning that it’s hard for us to contain it with one English word.

In the Hebrew imagination, hesed was about covenantal love and kindness. It is love plus commitment. It is love filled with kindness, mercy, and grace. It is love that transforms the unlovable. It is love that lasts. It is a love that is long-suffering and patient. In short, it is the kind of love God has for His people.

Interestingly, the book of Ruth tells us that humans can be agents of hesed. Its three uses in the book ascribe this kind of love to Ruth and Boaz, in particular. Ruth’s hesed is shown in her devotion to Naomi and her loyalty to Boaz. Boaz’s hesed comes to the forefront in the way he responds to the widows’ needs. Our acts of love and kindness are more than a temporary diversion. They offer the world a glimpse of God’s eternal love.

Encouraged by Ruth's report, Naomi encourages her to stay in Boaz's field for the remainder of the harvest season. The time of the Judges wasn't a particularly safe time for women (Judges 19 contains a stark example of this!) and Boaz's field offered a place of both provision and protection.

It's this harvest setting that has earned the book of Ruth a place in the yearly Jewish lectionary. The Feast of Pentecost (or *Shavuot*) is a celebration of the summer harvest season in Israel. Ruth is read as part of the festivities, usually on the second day of the feast. The inclusion of this book in Israel's annual rhythms ensures that Ruth and Boaz's compassion and loyalty continues to make an impact even in our day.

QUESTIONS

How would you define the word 'compassion'? How do we see compassion throughout this second chapter of Ruth? Is compassion a feeling, an action, or both?

*As we saw, the Hebrew word *hesed* calls us to love others the way God loves us. What words/phrases would you use to describe the love God has for you? What would it look like for you to have that kind of love for the people around you?*

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. As a Group, read Ruth 2. What stands out to you about this chapter in the story? What qualities/characteristics of Boaz stand out to you? Why? As you think back through the video teaching time, what resonated with you? What's the biggest takeaway you had from this lesson?
2. Ruth's kindness to Naomi eventually spurs Boaz's kindness towards her. How do our acts of love and kindness have an impact on the people around us? As Christians, how might our "good deeds" reverberate beyond the initial action? How should this motivate us to live differently?
3. One of the characteristics ascribed to both Ruth and Boaz is the term *hesed* – a word used to describe God's own love for us. What were some of the words/phrases you would use to describe God's love for His people? What would it look like for us to take those ideas of love and apply them to the way we treat our neighbors?
4. How do Ruth and Boaz both serve as models of generosity and kindness? As you think through these first two chapters, how do they show their compassion for the people in their lives? Is compassion something that comes easily for you? Why or why not? Do you find it more difficult to feel compassionately or act compassionately? How does true compassion require both?
5. The second chapter of Ruth reminds us that God sometimes works in coincidence. Has there ever been a time when you saw God at work in the seemingly random experiences of life? What was that like and what did He do? How should knowing that God works in these ways change how we face the seemingly ordinary days of our lives?
6. The theme of redemption is a big concern of the book of Ruth. How did Ruth and Naomi need to experience redemption? How do we need to be redeemed? As a Group, reread the words of Isaiah 54:4-5. How have we found similar redemption in what Jesus has done for us?

WEEK THREE: COURAGE

The Bible is filled with stories of people who did the wrong thing. They saw the choices in front of them and made the selfish decision. They walked down a path that seemed right only to discover that it ended in death and destruction. Adam and Eve picked the fruit rather than obedience. Cain chose violence over worship. The Israelites wandered in the desert instead of stepping into the Promised Land. When given a choice, we humans have a tendency to choose poorly.

After a successful harvest season in Boaz's fields, Naomi hatched a daring scheme. Boaz was one of her family's redeemers, meaning that he had the ability to redeem Naomi's land and bring the two widows into his own household. To test his willingness to fulfill these obligations, Naomi asked Ruth to go visit him under the cover of night. If a midnight rendezvous with a man you hardly know sounds risky, that's because it is!

In sending Ruth out in the middle of the night, Naomi was trusting that Boaz's integrity was just as strong in the dark as it was in the light. History would suggest that a lot of things could have gone wrong very quickly. There were any number of ways Naomi's plan could have gone sideways. Thankfully, Ruth and Boaz learned from the mistakes of the past, creating a better future. Sometimes, all you need is the courage to do the right thing.

READ Ruth 3:1-6

With harvest season rapidly approaching its end, Naomi senses that their window of opportunity with Boaz is also closing. If he is willing and able to fulfill his duties as the family's kinsman-redeemer, then now's the time to act. Once the harvest ends, who knows when Ruth will have the opportunity to speak with Boaz again?

Knowing all this, Naomi unveils her plan. During the harvest season, the men of the city would often sleep on the threshing floor just outside of town. The flat, elevated surface created the perfect conditions to separate the grain and the chaff. The workers would spend the late afternoon threshing that day's harvest, celebrate with dinner and drinking, and then sleep out on the threshing floor to protect their crops from raiders.

Naomi tells Ruth to put on her finest clothes and perfume to go out and meet Boaz out on the threshing floor that night. With his mind and heart full from that day's work, Naomi's hope is that Boaz will be agreeable to any request Ruth makes of him. Their simple and shared hope is that Boaz will commit to fulfilling his role as kinsman-redeemer.

Yet, the simplicity of Naomi's plan hides its peril. Sending a young woman out in the middle of the night was a dangerous proposition. Beyond that, the narrator paints the whole situation as one fraught with sexual temptation. From the way Naomi asks Ruth to dress to the way she describes Boaz's possible reaction ("He will tell you what to do"), there's the hint that

something improper might occur. Even if everything goes right, there's still the chance that Boaz might respond wrongly. As one scholar has noted:

"Here is a servant demanding that the boss marry her, a Moabite making the demand of an Israelite, a woman making the demand of a man, a poor person making the demand of a rich man. Was this an act of foreigner naivete, or a daughter-in-law's devotion to her mother-in-law, or another sign of the hidden hand of God? From a natural perspective the scheme was doomed from the beginning as a hopeless gamble, and the responsibility Naomi placed on Ruth was quite unreasonable. But it worked!"

Replaying the Past

Beyond the danger inherent in a middle-of-the-night meeting, Ruth and Boaz's meeting at the threshing floor also had the weight of history behind it. Several elements of their encounter mirror some of the darkest moments in both Moabite and Israelite history. The allusions to these historical failures ratchet up the tension on the threshing floor, making the reader wonder if this time will be different than history suggests:

- *Genesis 19:30-38 contains one of the disturbing stories in the Bible. Following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's two daughters hatch an insane plot to seduce their own father. They both become pregnant and give birth to sons. One of those sons, Moab, becomes the father of the Moabite nation. Naomi's plot to send a Moabitess to the threshing floor in the middle of the night recalls the troubling origin of Ruth's people and how a terrible situation escalated into something much worse.*
- *Genesis 38:1-30 recalls another horrifying story – this time from Israel's history. Judah's son Er dies young, leaving behind his wife Tamar. Though Judah initially agrees to give Tamar one of his other sons in marriage (fulfilling the commands of levirate marriage), he breaks his promise. His unwillingness to do the right thing makes Tamar desperate for an heir. In her desperation, she eventually disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law Judah. By choosing to ignore the laws of the kinsman-redeemer, Judah created a mess. What will happen if Boaz chooses to do the same?*

QUESTIONS

What part of Naomi's plan seems the riskiest to you? Why? Why do you think Ruth agreed to go along with her mother-in-law's scheme?

How would you define the word 'courage'? What does courage look like in everyday life? How does Ruth exemplify this definition of courage throughout her story?

READ Ruth 3:7-18

To her credit, Ruth follows through with her mother-in-law's crazy plan. That night, she approaches Boaz on the threshing floor after an evening of feasting and celebrating. Keeping with the sexually-charged description of this encounter, the narrator tells us that Ruth uncovered Boaz's feet while he slept. While some have taken this as a euphemism for uncovering nakedness, there's no suggestion that either Boaz or Ruth behave improperly in this moment. This ambiguous phrasing, rather, seems designed to remind us of how this encounter might have gone differently. The hints of scandal only serve to highlight Ruth and Boaz's righteousness.

Boaz, startled by the sudden draft on his feet, wakes to find a woman lying there on the threshing floor with him. Surprised at her presence, he asks the woman to identify herself. His conversation with her on the threshing floor parallels the earlier conversation he had with her in the field in Ruth 2. He asks who she is, a question he previously asked his foreman in Ruth 2:5. When Ruth identifies herself, she asks Boaz to "spread the corner of his garment" over her. This calls back to Boaz's observation that Ruth had found refuge under the wings of the God of Israel (2:12). By making this request of Boaz, Ruth was asking him to be a physical representative of the spiritual refuge she had already found in the Lord.

Boaz understands exactly what Ruth is asking him to do. This is more than just a request to redeem the land of Naomi and Elimelech. This is a request for Boaz to take Ruth as his wife. Though the text never tells us about Boaz's singleness (perhaps he had a wife who died in the earlier famine?), it does make it clear that Boaz is in the perfect position to take Ruth as his wife. There's just one problem: there is another kinsman-redeemer who is closer to the situation and has the right of first refusal. Boaz can only redeem Ruth if the first kinsman-redeemer is unable or uninterested in fulfilling his role.

Knowing that this problem can only be solved in the daylight, Boaz tells Ruth not to worry about it. He promises to deal with the situation first thing in the morning. Until then, he instructs Ruth to stay on the threshing floor with him until dawn. Whereas Naomi had no qualms about sending a young Moabitess out in the middle of the night, Boaz intends to protect her through the darkness. When she heads home in the morning, Boaz will make it his mission to give both her and Naomi a more permanent home.

QUESTIONS

How do we see both Boaz and Ruth's integrity in this passage? How do times of difficulty and darkness test our integrity? In what ways do they challenge us to live out what we say we believe?

How do the examples of the past help us make decisions today? What can we learn from the successes/failures of those who have gone before? In your opinion, how were Boaz and Ruth able to overcome the failures of the past in order to build a new future?

Redemption in Ruth

It's in Ruth 3 that the covert theme of the book comes to the forefront. Ruth is a story about redemption and what it means to be redeemed. In fact, variations of the word "redeem" appear 23 times in these 4 short chapters!

In the Old Testament, redemption often had to do with the oppression of slavery and debt. If a person fell into a debt they couldn't repay, they would become a slave to their creditor. With no way to buy themselves out of their slavery, they needed someone to redeem them – to literally purchase them – and buy their freedom back. Though Ruth and Naomi never fell into slavery, they faced the very real specter of poverty. They had no way to provide for themselves. The land that Elimelech had owned prior to his death had likely fallen into debt and disrepair. The widows needed someone to help them get these things back. It wasn't just about buying the land; it was about buying their future.

In both the Old and New Testament, the language of redemption is used to describe what God has done for His people. At the beginning of Exodus, God promised, "I will redeem you with a powerful arm and great acts of judgment. I will claim you as my own people and I will be your God" (6:6-7). In the New Testament, Jesus said that He had come to "give His life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). The language of redemption reminds us that God has bought us out of our slavery and bondage to sin. He has given us a home. He has given us a future.

Ruth's story, then, isn't just a quaint story from a bygone era. It's our story. This short love story gives us a walking, talking picture of redemption, and reminds us of the Redeemer who has bought us and made us His own.

As the morning approaches, Ruth makes preparations to leave the threshing floor and head back home. Before she leaves, Boaz gives her six scoops of barley to take back to her mother-in-law. The purpose of his gift is two-fold. For one, it serves as a kind of down payment to show Naomi that Boaz is serious about taking on the responsibilities of the kinsman-redeemer. Secondly, the barley gives Ruth an alibi for being out so early in the day. If anyone saw her returning from the threshing floor with grain in hand, they would assume that she had merely gone out to get the day's provisions for her household.

Upon arriving home, Ruth tells Naomi everything that transpired over the course of the evening. Naomi hears enough to be encouraged that things are headed in the right direction. However, the existence of the nearer redeemer ends the chapter with a hint of uncertainty. What will happen when Boaz explains his intentions to the other kinsman-redeemer? Will the nearer kinsman assert his rights? Or will Boaz be able to redeem the land and claim Ruth as his wife? Regardless of what might happen, the chapter ends with the promise that the resolution will come quickly: **“The man won’t rest until he has settled things today”** (3:18).

QUESTIONS

What’s the biggest risk you’ve ever taken in your life? What was that like? Looking back, can you see God in that risk? Why or why not? How does seeing God in the midst of the risk change things? In what ways does it help you to be more courageous?

How do you think Naomi and Ruth felt as they waited to hear back from Boaz? Would it be easy for you to wait had you been in their situation? How does waiting help refine and focus our faith?

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. As a Group, read Ruth 3. What stands out to you in this chapter? What comes to your mind when you think of Naomi's plan? How risky was this plan to ask Boaz to marry Ruth? As you think back through the video teaching time, what resonated with you? What's the biggest takeaway you had from this lesson?
2. When you think of examples of courage, who comes to mind (can be biblical or personal examples)? How do Ruth and Boaz both show courage in this chapter? What does courage look like in everyday life? What does it look like in YOUR everyday life? Would you characterize yourself as a courageous person? Why or why not?
3. Thinking back over your life, what are some of the risks you've taken? Which ones turned out to be good? Are there any of them you regret? How do we know when taking a risk is the right thing to do? How do we know when God is calling us to take a risk? What's the difference between moving out in faith and doing something foolish?
4. Think about all the ways Naomi's plan could have gone badly. Why do you think she went ahead with this scheme anyway? Why do you think Ruth went along with it? How do dark and desperate times motivate courage? What are some areas in our world/culture where people of faith need to be courageous today?
5. The theme of redemption has been strong in these middle chapters of Ruth. In what ways does mankind need to be redeemed? Do you think most people today have a sense that they need redemption? Why or why not? How does Boaz's example point us towards a greater kinsman-redeemer to come?
6. Chapter 3 ends with waiting. Does waiting come easily for you? How do you think you would have felt had you been in Ruth and Naomi's place? Has there ever been a time when you had to wait for God to show up in your circumstance? What lessons did you learn in the waiting?

WEEK FOUR: CONVICTION

“Do the right thing.”

Like most clichés, this is more easily said than done. It’s one thing to say we want to do the right thing. But as we all know, it’s a little more difficult to actually do it. Beyond that, who gets to decide what the “right thing” is, anyway? People disagree on matters of morality and conscience all the time. If your idea of right doesn’t match up with mine, which of us gets to decide what the “right thing” is? Our increasingly pluralistic and perspective driven culture makes it seem like no one has a monopoly on what is right – or what is wrong, for that matter. It’s tough to do the right thing when you can’t even decide what the right thing is in the first place.

Ruth and Boaz lived in a culture not too dissimilar from our own. The final refrain in the book of Judges paints a picture of a society that had lost all sense of common morality: “In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). With no leader to guide them, the nation of Israel floundered and failed. When you can’t agree on what’s right, eventually you might find there’s nothing left.

At the threshing floor, Boaz had promised Ruth that he would do the right thing. With the arrival of the morning, all she and Naomi could do was wait and hope that Boaz would remain true to his word. In a culture of compromise and corruption, would he be a man of conviction? Would he do what was right, not in his own eyes, but in the eyes of the Lord? The answer to that question wouldn’t just change Ruth’s fate, it would change the fate of the entire world.

READ Ruth 4:1-8

The third chapter of Ruth ended with a hitch in Naomi’s plan. Though Boaz was a willing kinsman-redeemer, there was another family redeemer who had more immediate rights. In order for Boaz to redeem Ruth and Naomi (and to take Ruth as his wife), he would need the nearer kinsman to voluntarily give up his rights to the land and the widows. With that goal in mind, Boaz began his morning at the town gate. With so much foot traffic going through that spot, the gates of a city almost always had witnesses present, making it an ideal place to conduct legal business.

As luck would have it, the nearer kinsman arrives at the town gate almost immediately after Boaz sets up his post there. Seeing the man walking down the street, Boaz summons him over to talk business. The designation for the man (“friend” in the NLT) is actually a Hebrew singsong phrase “*peloni almoni*.” The phrase is essentially their equivalent of “John Doe.” It was a way of glossing over someone’s name or even concealing their identity. The implication is that, by

turning down his role in redeeming Ruth, “Mr. So-and-So” forfeited the part he might have played in God’s story.

It's in their interaction that Boaz shows the kind of shrewd businessman he is. He begins by telling the kinsman about the land and the need to redeem it. “Pelsoni Almoni” is intrigued by this and makes it clear that he is willing to redeem the land and protect Elimelech’s legacy. But, as soon as he has the man on the hook for the land, Boaz pulls the rug out from under him. In order to redeem the land, the kinsman must also agree to redeem Ruth and take her as his wife. By saving this news for last, Boaz makes sure that the kinsman’s dominant thoughts are the obligations he will incur if he chooses to redeem the land.

Not wanting to muddle his family legacy by intermarrying with a Moabitess, ‘peloni almoni’ decides that he has no interest in redeeming the land. Since Boaz has already expressed his willingness to take on the role, the nearer kinsman agrees to give up his rights and instead let Boaz take on the responsibility. The transaction is ratified by the kinsman presenting Boaz with one of his sandals, a tangible sign that he is transferring his right to “walk the property” over to Boaz. The leaders assembled at the gate served as witnesses to the arrangement and ‘peloni almoni’ fades to the background from which he came.

Following the Law

One of the interesting facts about the book of Ruth is that it contains no new laws. There’s nothing in the book that establishes new covenant commands or puts any additional requirements on the people. What it does do, however, is show us how to interpret and live out the commands we’re given elsewhere in God’s Word. Boaz’s combination of the laws regarding redemption and the laws about levirate marriage give us a powerful example of how different laws can interpret and complement one another. Beyond that, his thoughtfulness in how he treats his workers (Ruth 2:4) and his generosity in following the Old Testament laws about gleaning show us what it looks like to apply God’s Word with kindness and faithfulness. The characters in this book may not add to the catalogue of commands, but they illustrate what the Law looks like in three dimensions.

QUESTIONS

Boaz went to meet the nearer kinsman the very next morning. Why do you think he dealt with the issue so quickly? Are you normally a procrastinator? Why or why not? How does Boaz’s example challenge us – particularly when it comes to doing the right thing?

In your opinion, why did ‘peloni almoni’ walk away from his responsibility as redeemer? What are some excuses we use to keep us from doing what we know we should do? What happens if we walk away from those opportunities God has put in our paths?

READ Ruth 4:9-16

With the agreement ratified, Boaz proclaims his intent to take Ruth as his wife. Through their marriage, he will not only redeem the property of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Kilion, but keep their names alive into future generations. Boaz calls on the ten leaders at the gate to be witnesses of the arrangement, fulfilling his earlier word to Ruth that he would settle the matter quickly and legally.

The elders gathered at the city gate do more than witness the transaction. They also pronounce a blessing on the new couple! Their blessing equates Ruth with Rachel and Leah, the two wives of Jacob and matriarchs of the Israelite nation. Though Ruth was born a Moabite, she is here characterized among the greatest of all Israelites. Moreover, the elders pronounce a blessing in the names of Judah, Tamar, and Perez. They reaffirm one of the lessons that on the threshing floor – that Ruth’s story has recast and even redeemed some of the darkest moments in the history of Israel.

Yet, the most significant part of their blessing comes at the end of 4:11. There, they pray that Ruth’s name and family would be great not only in Bethlehem, but across the entire region:

“May you prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem.”

The reference to Bethlehem Ephrathah is rare in the Bible, only occurring five times across the entire Old Testament. Its most significant usage comes in Micah 5:2, a prophecy that Bethlehem will one day play a critical role in God’s plan to redeem the world. More specifically, the prophet Micah looks forward to the day when the ultimate Redeemer will be born in Bethlehem:

Micah 5:2: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past.”

It’s here at the end of Ruth’s story that we finally see the significance of everything that’s happened. This isn’t just a story of a family in need of redemption. Nor is it just a story of a nation recovering from a famine. This is a story of a world in need of redemption. This is the story of all people and their need for God to provide something that no human nation can give us. What’s at stake here isn’t just the legacy of a family or the redemption of land. God was using the ordinary concerns of a family to do the extraordinary work of saving the world.

Tony Merida: *“Ruth is about the coming Messiah. This is not just any story about a woman finding a husband or a widow finding a family. We find out at the end of the book that Ruth’s descendants will be kings of Israel. She is part of the royal line that eventually leads to Jesus.”*

QUESTIONS

Which character in the story do you most identify with? Whose story in the narrative reminds you the most of yours? Looking over the entire arc of their story, what is it that makes you feel so connected with them?

God uses the ordinary events of Ruth to have an extraordinary impact. Do you think Ruth and Boaz ever would have imagined that their stories would lead to something so incredible as David? As Jesus? What hope does this give you as you think about your own ordinary story?

READ Ruth 4:18-22

This short five verse epilogue to the story of Ruth gives us a final reminder of the great impact Ruth's story had on the Israelite nation (and the world as a whole!). She became the mother of Obed, the grandmother of Jesse, and the great-grandmother of David. Her faithfulness and loyalty to God would one day lead to a King who would chase after God's own heart. Ruth's decision to stick with her mother-in-law and travel back with her to Bethlehem wasn't just a crossroad in her own life; it became a crossroad in history! Or, to say it another way, her story became a part of His story!

Earlier in the study, we noted that Ruth is traditionally read as part of the liturgy during the Feast Of Pentecost (or *Shavuot*). One reason for this is because of its harvest themes, which tie in nicely with the harvest celebration that occurs during Pentecost. Another reason has to do with the story of David. Rabbinic tradition holds that Pentecost marks David's birthday – as well as the day of his death. As such, the book of Ruth is read during the festival to remember David's life and to celebrate the King He provided for them through Ruth's lineage.

Christians, however, can look at Ruth's story as pointing towards an even greater King! For Ruth to be in the lineage of the King of Israel is an incredible thing. For her to be counted in the lineage of the King of Kings is even more impressive! But, that's exactly what happened! Matthew 1:5 explicitly mentions Ruth as one of Jesus' ancestors. The Moabitess and the Messiah are linked!

Ruth's story reminds us that we need a King. We need someone to lead us. We need someone to take care of us. We need someone to redeem us. Without a King, we have no hope of a future. And yet, her story also reminds us that's exactly what God has provided for us. Because

of what He has done, we have the hope of a King who will never fail and whose Kingdom will never cease. As Peter said in his very first sermon (preached, oddly enough, on the Day of Pentecost):

Acts 2:29-31: “Dear brothers, think about this! You can be sure that the patriarch David...died and was buried, and that His tomb is still here among us. But he was a prophet, and he knew God had promised him with an oath that one of David’s own descendants would sit on his throne. David was looking into the future and speaking of the Messiah’s resurrection. He was saying that God would not leave Him among the dead or allow His body to rot in the grave.”

Filled to the Full

The opening verses of Ruth painted a picture of emptiness. A famine had emptied Israel of all food. Death had emptied Naomi’s family. With no children to carry on her name, Ruth had been emptied of hope. Yet, the end of the book shows us the great reversal of all these losses. Where once there was emptiness, God has brought about a new fullness for this family (and for His people). The situation at the end of the book is radically different from the circumstances that set this whole narrative into motion:

- *The story began with Naomi losing her sons; it ends with Naomi having a daughter-in-law who is better than seven sons and a grandson who she treats as her own.*
 - *The story began with famine and a lack of food; it ends with the cupboard overflowing with grain due to Boaz’s generosity.*
 - *The story began with Ruth and her husband unable to conceive a child; it ends with the birth of her son Obed.*
 - *The story began with Israel lacking a king; it ends with the promise of King David and an even greater royal lineage to come.*
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QUESTIONS

In what ways do we need a King? What are some areas of life where we need someone to lead us/provide for us? How do we have that in Jesus? How do we know we can trust Him as our King?

What are some ways that God has “filled” your life? When you look back over the course of your life, how have things been “empty”? How has God been at work in your story to bring you more than you ever might have imagined?

Think back over these four weeks in the book of Ruth. What has this book taught you about living in the “extraordinary ordinary” lives that God has blessed us with? How has Ruth’s example challenged/encouraged you as you go about your seemingly ordinary life?

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read Ruth 4 together as a Group. What stands out to you in this chapter? As you think back through the video teaching time, what resonated with you? What's the biggest takeaway you had from this lesson? What kind of legacy did Boaz and Ruth leave behind because of their faithfulness and loyalty?
2. One of the "cautionary tales" in Ruth 4 concerns *'peloni almoni'* and his unwillingness to accept responsibility as kinsman-redeemer. Why do you think he walked away from the part he could have played in this story? What are some of the excuses we give that keep us from seizing the opportunities God puts in front of us? What does his example teach us about the importance of seizing those moments as they arise?
3. How do we see people live out/apply the Law throughout the book of Ruth? Think about the examples of Ruth and Boaz in particular. What do they have to show us about the essence of living out God's commands? How does living out God's Laws improve the quality of our relationships (and our lives)? How does this tie into what Jesus had to say were the two greatest commands (Matthew 22:36-40)?
4. What are some areas of life where we see our need for a King? Why do you think God wired us to need that kind of influence? What happens when we try to live without a King? How do we see this play out in our world today?
5. Do you think Ruth and Boaz ever would have imagined that their stories would lead to something so incredible as David? As Jesus? What hope does this give you as you think about your own ordinary story? What are some practical ways we can entrust our ordinary days to God with the expectation that He can do something extraordinary with them?
6. The ending of Ruth is an inversion of its beginning, as what was empty has become full. What are some areas of your life where you feel "empty" today? How can your Group support and pray for you through this time? Close your time in prayer together, asking God to work in your individual stories and to fill up what seems empty.

“Even the most mundane of domestic events may play a part in the ultimate redemption of the whole world.” - Jonathan Magonet