

The Faith of Ruth

Lesson for December 3, 2023

Unit I: Profiles in Faith

Adult Topic: Changing Identity

Background Scripture: Ruth 1; 4:13-22

Printed Text: Ruth 1:6-18, 22

Key verse: *But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”* Ruth 1:16, NIV)

Faith honors God and God honors faith! A story from the life of missionaries Robert and Mary Moffat illustrates this truth. For 10 years this couple labored faithfully in Bechuanaland (now called Botswana) without one ray of encouragement to brighten their way. They could not report a single convert. Finally, the directors of their mission board began to question the wisdom of continuing the work. The thought of leaving their post, however, brought great grief to this devoted couple, for they felt sure that God was in their labors, and that they would see people turn to Christ in due season. They stayed; and for a year or two longer, darkness reigned. Then one day a friend in England sent word to the Moffats that she wanted to mail them a gift and asked what they would like. Trusting that in time the Lord would bless their work, Mrs. Moffat replied, “Send us a communion set; I am sure it will soon be needed.” God honored that dear woman's faith. The Holy Spirit moved upon the hearts of the villagers, and soon a little group of six converts was united to form the first Christian church in that land. The communion set from England was delayed in the mail; but on the very day before the first commemoration of the Lord's supper in Bechuanaland, the set arrived.

Source Unknown

This week’s lesson in the book of Ruth is a true example of real faith, trust, and love.

Key Terms

1. **Bear** (verse 12) – To bring forth; beget; to be born.
2. **Grant** (verse 9) – To consent to carry out for a person; to allow fulfillment of; to bestow or transfer formally.
3. **Grieves** (verse 13) – To cause to suffer; to be bitter; is enraged.
4. **Land** (verse 7) – A portion of the earth's solid surface distinguishable by boundaries or ownership; region; territory.
5. **People** (verse 6) – Human beings making up a group or assembly or linked by a common interest.
6. **Returned** (verse 22) – To go back or come back again.
7. **Sons** (verse 11) – Offspring; descendants; inheritors.

Lesson Background

The book of Ruth is the narrative of a love story, yet also has some important Genealogy. The story is set in the time of the judges, a time characterized in the book of Judges as a period of religious and moral degeneracy, national disunity and frequent foreign oppression. The book of Ruth reflects a time of peace between Israel and Moab. The author was anonymous, but some believe it was perhaps written by Samuel the prophet; however, it is unlikely that he was alive when this book was written. It was written about 1046-1035 B.C. Key personalities include Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.

Its purpose was to demonstrate the kind of love, and faithfulness that God desires for us. It shows the difference between what happens when a nation does not follow in obedience to the covenant of God (Judges), and when God's people follow in faithfulness within the covenant (Ruth).

The story begins with several trials, among them famine, death, and poverty (Ruth 1:1-5).

In chapter 1, Ruth remains loyal to her mother-in-law Naomi after the death of her husband and in-laws. Naomi decides to return to her homeland of Bethlehem alone, however, Ruth insists on staying with her and adopting Naomi's God as her own. "But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (1:16).

The book of Ruth is more than just a beautiful, God-ordained, love story, although it is that. The importance of faithfulness in human relationships among God's kingdom people is powerfully underscored. The author focuses on Ruth's unswerving trust and selfless devotion to desolate Naomi (1:16–17; 2:11–12; 3:10; 4:15, this week's lesson) and on Boaz's kindness to these two widows (chapters 2–4). The author of Ruth presents striking examples of lives that embody in their daily affairs faith and the self-giving love that fulfills God's law.

Lesson in Depth

I. Going Back Home (Ruth 1:6-10)

She had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people: From distant Moab, Naomi heard that God was doing good things back in Israel. She wanted to be part of the good things that God was doing.

Our life with God should make others want to come back to the LORD just by looking at our life. Our walk with the LORD should be something that makes others say, "I want some of that also!"

She went out from the place where she was: This set Naomi apart from many other people. Many hear of the good things God is doing in the lives of others, and only wish they could have some of it – instead of actually setting out to receive it. Naomi could have stayed in Moab all of her life wishing things were different, but she did something to receive what God had to give her.

Go, return each to her mother's house: By all common sense, this was the wise thing to do. Orpah and Ruth had stronger family ties in Moab than they did with Naomi, so it made sense for them to stay in Moab instead of going to a new land – Israel – with Naomi.

The LORD deal kindly with you... The LORD grant that you may find rest: With these words Naomi freely blessed them. She prayed that they would remarry (each in the house of her husband).

Deal kindly is the ancient Hebrew word *hesed*. “*Hesed* encompasses deeds of mercy performed by a more powerful party for the benefit of the weaker one.” (Huey)

In Ruth 1:9, Naomi described marriage as a place of **rest: The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband**. God intends that each marriage be a place and source, of rest, peace, and refreshment in life.

She kissed them... they lifted up their voices and wept: This emotion shown is evidence of the real relationship of love and trust between Naomi and her daughters-in-law.

Naomi knows how it feels to live in a foreign land — far from kith and kin — and she wants to spare Orpah and Ruth from experiencing that feeling. She wants them to remain in a place where they will feel at home and where they will be accepted without the taint of foreign roots. “To her mother’s house” in a patriarchal society, a person would usually refer to the “father’s house” instead of the “mother’s house.” Block looks at other occurrences of the phrase “mother’s house” in scripture (Genesis 24:28; Song of Solomon 3:4; 8:2) and concludes that each involves love and marriage — and therefore, by using this phrase, “your mother’s house,” “Naomi is releasing them to remarry” (Block, 631).

And they said to her, “Surely we will return with you to your people.”: Naomi pleads with her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab. And they said to her, “Surely we will return with you to your people.”

II. My Name is Bitter (Ruth 1:11-15)

Are there still sons in my womb: According to the laws of ancient Israel, if a young woman was left widowed, without having had a son, then one of her deceased husband’s brothers was responsible for being a “surrogate father” and providing her with a son. Naomi here says that she has no other sons to give either Orpah or Ruth.

The hand of the LORD has gone out against me: This obviously weighed heavily on Naomi’s heart and mind. She felt that the calamity which came upon her family came because they were disobedient, probably in leaving the Promised Land of Israel and marrying their sons to Moabite women.

Perhaps Naomi felt a particular guilt; perhaps she was the one who pushed to move out of Israel, and who pushed to marry off the sons.

Despite this feeling, Naomi is going back to the land of Israel – and going back to her God. Though she felt that the **hand of the LORD has gone out against me**, she did not grow bitter against God. She returned to Him in repentance, knowing that the answer is drawing *closer* to Him, not going *further from* Him.

Naomi didn’t accuse God of doing something wrong against her. She acknowledged His total control over all circumstances. It was actually an expression of trust in Him.

If Naomi was bitter or angry against God, she probably would have gone another way – *further* from the God of Israel, rather than back to Him. Instead, **she showed that she trusted the sovereignty of God**, and knew that despite her personal calamities, He is a good God who blesses.

What Naomi could not see is that the hand of the LORD would go out *for* her shortly! There is never reason for us to despair if we believe **the hand of the LORD has gone out against me**. If we return to Him, His hand will go out *for us* again! Naomi had no idea – not the slightest – of how greatly God was going to bless her in a short time.

They lifted up their voices and wept again: Both Orpah and Ruth felt deeply; both loved Naomi; both were anxious about the future. But a choice had to be made, and Orpah chose to stay in Moab, while Ruth **clung to** Naomi.

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her: Orpah responds by kissing Naomi, signifying that she is leaving — but Ruth clings to Naomi. But there is no suggestion here that Orpah does anything wrong by saying goodbye to Naomi. There comes a place in our following after God where it comes down to *doing*. Ruth and Orpah both felt the same feelings, but Ruth *did* differently than Orpah.

Some are content with feeling Christian feelings – with feeling a love for God, with feeling a love for His Word, with feeling a love for His people. But what will you *do*? We are glad that God didn't just feel His love for us; instead, *For God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten Son*. (John 3:16) Our response should be one of faith and trust.

Look, your sister-in-law has gone: Naomi said, ‘Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people, and to her god. Follow your sister-in-law’ (v. 15). Naomi uses Orpah as a positive example to influence Ruth. Orpah has done the wise thing by returning home. Naomi advises Ruth to do the same. Ruth must now face her decision without Orpah's help. It is truly a major life-decision. Shall she leave her homeland and her family — everything that is familiar — to travel to Bethlehem with Naomi, who must face a bleak future with or without Ruth? Naomi, having nothing herself, has nothing to offer Ruth but a hard life. The unusual thing about this verse is Naomi's comment that Orpah has gone back to her gods. That is not an action that would usually be commended in Scripture.

III. A Determined Faith (Ruth 1:16-18, 22)

Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people: This was a noble – even outstanding – friend-to-friend commitment. But Ruth's commitment to Naomi went even further: **And your God, [will be] my God**.

This was more than change of address. This will be “change in identity! Ruth was willing to forsake the Moabite gods she grew up with and embrace the God of Israel. She was deciding to follow the LORD. This Gentile woman, once far from God, had drawn near to Him.

And your God, [will be] my God meant that Naomi's relationship with God made an impact on Ruth. This is striking, because Naomi did not have an easy life. She had been widowed, had lost both her sons, and believed that she had caused each calamity by her disobedience. Yet she still honored and loved the LORD.

People should be able to look at your life, just as Ruth looked at Naomi's, and say "I want your God to be my God." Your trust in God, and turning towards Him in *tough* times, will often be the thing that draws others to the LORD.

Your God, my God: Ten years of Naomi's compromise in Moab never made Ruth confess her allegiance to the God of Israel. Yet as soon as Naomi stood and said, "I'm going back to the God of Israel, I'll put my fate in His hands" Ruth stood with her. If you think you will persuade your friends or relatives to Jesus by your compromise, you are mistaken. Perhaps you are sincere, but you are mistaken. Only a bold stand for Jesus will really do it.

The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me: Ruth had little knowledge of the true God, the God of Israel – but she knew He was a God of fairness and justice, so He could be called upon to hold Ruth accountable to this promise.

When she saw that she was steadfastly determined to go with her, she left off speaking to her: Naomi, seeing the depth of Ruth's affection and commitment, stops talking. She has exhausted her arguments. We can only wonder how she felt. One part of her must be afraid for Ruth — that Ruth is passing up a chance at a normal life to accompany her mother-in-law to a future that is uncertain at best. But another part of her must be rejoicing that she doesn't have to set out on her journey by herself — that she is not faced with total loneliness in the years ahead.

Ruth speaks to us of many important truths, but none is more evident in our passage than her love, loyalty, and her decisive faithful commitment. Her decision is a beautiful picture to us of the kind of decisiveness and commitment we should have in our faith in Jesus Christ and our Christian walk.

So Naomi returned: Naomi came back repentant and honest. She has felt that *the Almighty has afflicted me*. But in the coming chapters, it will be shown the Almighty will bless her. If only she could see it!

Now they came to Bethlehem: It would have been easy for Naomi to focus on what she had lost. She had lost a husband, two sons, and one daughter-in-law. She had lost all kinds of material possessions. All she had left was one daughter-in-law, Ruth. But through that one thing she had left, God was going to bring unbelievable blessing into her life.

All the good that happens in the future chapters begins here: With Naomi's godly repentance and honesty. It will make a difference not only in her life, but in the life of her daughter-in-law Ruth – and in the destiny of the nation Israel – and in your eternal salvation.

It is possible for God to accomplish amazing things both for now and eternity, if we will turn towards Him today, not only in our feelings, but also in our actions.

Lesson Summary

Ruth's story is ordinary. Perhaps that's what makes it so compelling. She doesn't come from a famous family. She doesn't have great riches or great position. Ruth is just a widow – one from an enemy nation, at that. Nothing is going in her favor, but she's brave, and her faith never wavers. And yet the life of a foreign widow who has nothing becomes so important that it's included in the Bible and her name recognized in the lineage of Jesus.

In today's lesson we find the following lessons:

1. **There is Hope Even in the Most Devastating Times of Our Life.** The book of Ruth begins by looking at the life of Naomi. After moving to Moab with her husband and sons, she loses her husband and becomes a widow. Just 10 years later her sons die, too. It seems that Naomi's entire life crumbles in those years.

When life brings devastation, it's not easy to hope. It's hard to have faith. But when things are the most difficult, that's when we need faith and hope the most. In the moments where life feels like it's crushing you, start with a little faith. Hebrews 11:1 reminds us that "*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*" And looking at the book of Ruth, we can see that even when we can't see beyond our pain to his plan, we can have hope that our story isn't over – better days are coming.

2. **The Past is Not Our Final Destination When We Trust God.** At the very beginning of the book of Ruth, she's living in Moab, her home nation. Moab was a place that most Israelites didn't like. It was an enemy nation, and Israelites tended to look down on the Moabites. On top of that, she was a widow, she was childless, and she lived with her mother-in-law.

That journey to Israel must have been frightening. She made a choice to stay with Naomi and help her, all the while knowing that she was going to a country that wouldn't like her very much. Her country of origin already made her an outcast, and being a childless widow gave her plenty of reason to shrink back into a shell and simply live her life in obscurity.

No matter your past, you still have a purpose. Your past is not your final destination when you make a choice in faith. While your confidence may be wavering, God's promises are not.

3. **Doing the Right Thing Often Takes Great Sacrifice.** Naomi reminded Ruth that she was free to leave and go back to her family. She was free to go back to her gods and free to search for a new husband to take care of her. But even when her sister-in-law chose to go back, Ruth made a different decision.

Ruth chose to go with her mother-in-law, showing not only how dedicated she was to Naomi, but also her dedication to the God of Israel. In that instant, she decided, "...Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

It was a sacrifice for Ruth to refuse to return to her family. Her commitment to journey on with Naomi was a beautiful, selfless act, and a stunning example of the love of Christ – the same Christ who would be of her bloodline years later.

4. **Sharing Openly About Our Relationship with God Brings Intimacy to Relationships.** The story of Naomi and Ruth are woven together closely that their stories are nearly inseparable. In fact, we know more about the relationship between these two women than we know about them individually. Their relationship offers a beautiful model of a good relationship – a stunning look at a blending of lives.

The two women shared great sorrow, but they also shared great affection for one another. We also see the freedom in their relationship. Naomi loved Ruth, but she was willing to let her go back to her family. But it was Ruth's love for Naomi that made her willing to leave her country to return to Israel. Even though Naomi knew that a new marriage for Ruth would change their relationship, she still played an important part in arranging the marriage of Boaz and Ruth.

It was their faith that was at the center of their relationship and intimate communication. Through Naomi, Ruth learned about the God of Israel and chose to put her trust in him. Naomi's ability to be open and honest with Ruth about her relationship with God is inspiring.

“How do you walk by faith? By claiming the promises of God and obeying the Word of God, in spite of what you see, how you feel, or what may happen. It means committing yourself to the Lord and relying wholly on Him to meet the need. When we live by faith, it glorifies God, witnesses to a lost world, and builds Christian character into our lives.” (Warren Wiersbe)