

A Walk Thru the Book of

RUTH

Loyalty and Love

Walk Thru the Bible



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Introduction

Chris Gardner was as low as he could get. Homeless, a single dad, and jobless, he had nowhere to go but up. But few people were willing to help him move in that direction. Through determination, persistence, and hard work, he eventually got an unpaid internship at a stock brokerage firm, earned a solid income, and got promoted again and again. By the end of the story, he was very successful and very wealthy. He had gone from rags to riches through strength of character and relentlessly pursuing unlikely opportunities.

That's the Chris Gardner from the film *The Pursuit of Happiness* (based on the real-life experience of a successful broker by the same name). It's one of those feel-good stories of a destitute and hopeless person who ends up bountifully blessed and fulfilled. While many of these sorts of stories teach a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps message, the book of Ruth tells a different story. Ruth positions herself to receive God's blessing through her commitment and hard work, but God is the one whose plans prevail in the end. By the end, both she and her mother-in-law, Naomi, have gone from hopeless poverty to abundant and lasting life.

Background

Ruth was probably written during the time of David. The genealogy at the end of the book includes him but goes no further. The events themselves, however, took place about a century before David during the time of the Judges, while Israel was still without a king. That period lasted around three hundred years, so Ruth and Boaz would have to have been married toward the end of that era in order to be David's great-grandparents.

While Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz were alive, life in the Promised Land didn't seem as promising as Israel had hoped. There were reasons for this; God had given quite specific instructions for being his chosen people—along with promises of abundant blessings for obedience and dire consequences for disobedience—yet the people of Israel had not followed him wholeheartedly. In fact, after the first generation in the Promised Land died off, Israelites forgot what God had done for them and let their hearts get caught up in the idolatry indigenous to Canaan. They experienced a cyclical pattern of disobedience, then judgment, then desperate prayers for deliverance, then deliverance, then apathy again. It was seen as a lawless time—Israel's version of the old American West, where law-abiding citizens were often overshadowed by those who made their own laws. The kingship of God was easily forgotten for long periods of time.

The book of Ruth is an unusual glimpse of real life during these times. Unlike most of biblical history, which is told from priestly, political, or military perspectives, Ruth takes place in a simple rural context and is told from a woman's point of view. This isn't the story a great historian would tell; it's an inside look at the everyday life of common people. In fact, it preaches a message to those who think history is

determined by the rich and powerful: the story of God's kingdom is orchestrated by God himself, and absolutely anyone, no matter how unlikely, can take center stage in his plans. Israel's greatest kings, it tells us, descended not from the judges God used to win military victories, but from a couple of marginalized widows who were faithful in everyday life. Just as God would demonstrate centuries later in a manger in this very same town, he frequently uses humble means to accomplish great plans.

Major Themes

Ruth is a book of virtues. There are no parted seas or crumbling enemy walls, only the subtler miracle of ordinary people living out their faith and seeing God respond to it. The book commends to its readers the virtues of loyalty, hospitality, commitment, hard work, and obedience to the finer technicalities of God's law. For people who live according to God's own character, purposes, and ways, blessings eventually flow in and through their lives.

On the human side, one of the dominant themes of Ruth is restoration. We meet characters who have lost everything important to them and cling to God anyway. In their lives we see clear movements from emptiness to fullness; from aimlessness to direction; from temporal frustration to eternal significance; from hopelessness to purpose; from impossible to already done; and from loneliness to love. In these intertwined stories of provision, protection, and redemption, we find encouragement to believe that God will meet us in our moments of need and answer us beyond our wildest hopes.

The major theological theme of Ruth is God's sovereignty over circumstances as he orchestrates even minor details—such

as which field someone happens to find work in, for example. The text rarely attributes the specifics of the plot to him—not explicitly, anyway—but the implication is that he is working behind the scenes the whole time. In many ways, it’s a visual portrait of Romans 8:28: of all things working together for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose.

How to Use This Guide

The questions in this guide are geared to elicit every participant’s input, regardless of his or her level of preparation. Obviously, the more group members prepare by reading the biblical text and the background information in the study guide, the more they will get out of it. But even in busy weeks that afford no preparation time, everyone will be able to participate in a meaningful way.

The discussion questions also allow your group quite a bit of latitude. Some groups prefer to briefly discuss the questions in order to cover as many as possible, while others focus only on one or two of them in order to have more in-depth conversations. Since this study is designed for flexibility, feel free to adapt it according to the personality and needs of your group.

Each session ends with a hypothetical situation that relates to the passage of the week. Discussion questions are provided, but group members may also want to consider role-playing the scenario or setting up a two-team debate over one or two of the questions. These exercises often cultivate insights that wouldn’t come out of a typical discussion.

Regardless of how you use this material, the biblical text will always be the ultimate authority. Your discussions may

take you to many places and cover many issues, but they will have the greatest impact when they begin and end with God's Word itself. And never forget that the Spirit who inspired the Word is in on the discussion too. May he guide it—and you—wherever he wishes.

A Lawless Land

It didn't work out, and now she was depressed. Jan thought she had been trusting in God's promise—she even thought she'd heard him confirm his will again and again. But the promise never came, and her difficult circumstances had grown more difficult. Had she misunderstood his Word or misheard his voice? Had she missed God's blessing because of something she did wrong—or something she was supposed to do but didn't? Were her sins separating her prayers from the God who hears them? Perhaps she just didn't have enough faith. Or worse: perhaps God wasn't even there. No, that couldn't be it. She had experienced his work in her life so many times before. Her situation was simply an enigma. A draining, depressing enigma. She expected God to show up, and she wondered why he still hadn't—and why he remained so seemingly distant and detached in her crisis.

Most Christians have those thoughts on occasion, usually in a crisis in which we think God could have and should have intervened. Like it or not, we all seem to experience a relational gap between God and ourselves during certain seasons of life. When we do, we start to question the ground rules. “Did I not understand him? Did I break his rules? Am I not praying the right way? Am I his problem child?”

The truth we eventually come to grips with is that God doesn't spare his people from the hardships of this world, as Job and numerous other biblical characters testify. He does, however, give us plenty of guidance about how to avoid some of those hardships, how to navigate through the ones we can't avoid, and how to demonstrate faithfulness and godliness in spite of them. He also gives us plenty of promises about how he will keep us

THREE STORIES IN ONE

In many ways, the book of Ruth is really the story of Naomi, a Jew who lost her share of the Promised Land and had it restored in abundance. It's also the story of Boaz, a Jew who apparently had no heirs. Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz each had different needs, and God dealt with each of them as individuals. We can follow the distinct courses of his mercy: he brought Naomi from bitterness over loss to a completely restored inheritance; he gave the loyal outsider Ruth a permanent home among God's people; and he established a lasting legacy for the kind but lonely Boaz.

	Naomi	Ruth	Boaz
Chapter 1	Bitterness	Commitment	
Chapter 2	Provision	Courtship	Hospitality
Chapter 3	Security	Betrothal	Responsibility
Chapter 4	Inheritance	Marriage	Legacy

from ultimate harm and will bring us safely into his presence to dwell forever with him, where there are “eternal pleasures” (Ps. 16:11). He has not been silent. And by the time of Ruth, his voice had already been heard on these issues. The Torah had set the context for all that would happen in the family of Naomi and Ruth.

The Inheritance: Leviticus 25:23–28; Numbers 27:8–11

The law was aimed at keeping the land as close to its original owner as possible. If a man lost his piece of Israel’s promised inheritance, his family members were to try to redeem it. If the family members couldn’t, the tribe must. And if the original owner remained alive and regained his wealth, the subsequent owners were obligated to sell the land back to him. Whatever the cost, through however many generations, the promise must not be lost.

These commands are central to understanding the book of Ruth. Naomi’s family hadn’t just lost their land. They had lost their share in God’s inheritance, and the rest of the story is a tender portrayal of God’s desire to restore it.

Discuss

- Has God entrusted you with a heritage of any sort? How could you pass it on to future generations?

NAMES PAINT A PICTURE

As is often the case in Scripture, the names of characters in Ruth add color to the story. The book begins with a man named Elimelech (“God is king”) who, ironically, took his wife Naomi (“beautiful and pleasant”) out of the Promised Land and into Moab (“of his father,” i.e., Lot), the land of corruption. Their two sons, Mahlon (“sickness”) and Chilion (“failed”), married women of that land who were named Orpah (“stubborn”) and Ruth (“friendship”). Eventually, after all the men died, Naomi (“beautiful and pleasant”) called herself Mara (“bitter”) upon returning to her hometown, Bethlehem (the “house of bread”), which was in the beginning stages of a grain harvest. But in that place, Ruth (“friendship”) married a man named Boaz (“strong and quick”), and they bore children and grandchildren and a noteworthy great-grandchild named David (“beloved friend”)—a king of Israel and a man after God’s own heart.

The Fruitfulness: Deuteronomy 11:13–17

God promised abundance to those who keep his commands wholeheartedly. Rain would come in its proper seasons, and the land would produce a bountiful harvest. On the other hand, those who deviate from the paths he set them on were warned of famine and futility. Though this may not have been a one-to-one correlation—there have always been righteous people who suffer and wicked people who prosper for a time—the dynamic was certainly true for Israel as a whole. When people align themselves with God’s will, his blessings flow more freely. When they don’t, correction comes before more pleasant blessings.

This too is integral to understanding the book of Ruth. It’s easy for us to miss the implications of Ruth 1:1, but for people who were living in the Promised Land, it would have been a major statement. In the mind of the Hebrew reader, there would

be a reason for the famine, which would set the tone for the redemption to follow.

Discuss

- Do you think this principle of obedience leading to blessing applies to Christians today? Churches? Nations? Why or why not?

The Family Line: Deuteronomy 25:5–10

In a land of promise, where being part of God’s kingdom means having part of God’s estate, passing down an inheritance is vital. Not to build and maintain a heritage for future generations would be tantamount to removing yourself from the royal family. So when a man died without heirs . . . well, for many that was a tragedy worse than the death itself. The Promised Land had been won for every Israelite. It should never be lost for any of them.

The redemption and restoration found in Ruth make little sense without a firm understanding of this law. God’s desire was for his blessings to extend to a thousand generations—in other words, forever. When those blessings were threatened in the life of a family, he expected other members of the community to do whatever they could to preserve that family’s share of the promise. Primarily, the nearest male relative of a man who died was obligated to become the “kinsman-redeemer,” the *go’el*, if the deceased was childless and the widow could still bear chil-

dren. The purpose was to establish a heritage in the name of the departed. Otherwise, a lineage could be “blotted out” from the people of God. But beyond providing children, the extended family and the community at large were to protect the family’s interests. The land and the lineage were sacred.

Discuss

- Cain had once declared that he was not his brother’s keeper (Gen. 4:9). But when God established Israel, he assured them that they *were* each other’s keepers. What aspects of this sort of communal caretaking do you see in today’s church? What aspects are missing?

The Problem: Judges 2:10–19; 21:25

The period of the Judges is depicted as a cycle of lawlessness that led to oppression that led to repentance that led to deliverance that resulted in lawlessness again. For most of those three centuries, the people to whom God had given very specific instructions “did what was right in [their] own eyes.” It was a time of missed blessings.

That’s when the story of Ruth takes place. We don’t know the exact timing during that period, but chances are that lovers of God’s law were few and far between. Consequently, life was harder than it should have been. But the message of the book is that God’s covenant blessings still apply to faithful people even when those around them don’t “get it.” He always honors

heartfelt obedience, regardless of the lawless surroundings in which he finds it.

Discuss

- How difficult do you find it to be faithful to God in our culture? Can you think of examples in our own culture where “everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes”?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: This is the most excruciating season of your life. Your spouse's yearlong battle with cancer ended last month, and you're devastated. During the turmoil of the past year, you lost your job and all your savings. Now you're in debt up to your ears, bill collectors call you relentlessly, and your home is being turned over to public auction. You've tried to be faithful to God during the whole mess, but it's hard; you wonder where he is—or even *if* he is. If he's the God you've always believed in, he could have stepped in and delivered your spouse—and you—at any moment he wanted. Still, in the midst of your utter ruin, he waits.

- Would you be more tempted to blame God for your problems or to feel guilty for some unknown sin he must be chastising you for? Why?
- What questions would you ask him? How much would your commitment to him waver when he seems less than committed to you?
- What truths would help you focus on the big, eternal picture rather than on your present circumstances?