

The Book of Ruth

Divine Providence. Divine Love.

If ever you've been found yourself emotionally distraught or overwhelmed with excitement while watching a movie, or finding time to squeeze in *one more chapter* in that novel that you can't put down, then you know the power of story. Good stories draw you in and carry you along to a particular destination known only to the author, and they invite you to see and smell and think about certain things along the way. So it is with the Book of Ruth, this short but powerful story that is situated in the midst of the forest of the Old Testament. It's easy to overlook it. But what it lacks in breadth it more than makes up as it plumbs the depths of God's character and the nature of his care for his people.

While we can rightly say that this tale of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz is, indeed, a story, that is not to say that it is not also true. This isn't a fairy tale. Ruth is set in real time with real people looking for any light in the darkness of their lives. And the reader is left unabashedly rooting for Ruth and Boaz, grieving with Naomi, and wondering what exactly God is up to in the midst of it all. But he is not absent. Like a strong wind in the sail of a ship, the story of Ruth is propelled along by the unseen hand of a sovereign God.

The experiences of the characters in Ruth are meant to mimic life in the world that we experience each day. When confronted with the pain of loss, the confusion of grief, the challenge of the unknown, we have perhaps found ourselves asking two deeply significant questions: *Is God really in control?* and *Does God care about me?* Wherever those questions take us, the story of Ruth meets us with an unpretentious invitation to trust that no matter how hopeless our situation might seem, we are never beyond the sight and love and providential care of God. The lives of the characters in this story offer a distinctly human perspective on the love and loyalty of the Lord toward his people. In Naomi we see an anguished, grieving, angry widow whose life is transformed from bitter loss to hopeful promise. Ruth presents a picture of loyalty, mercy, and the sacrificial love of God. Boaz offers a glimpse of a faithful redeemer whose kindness echoes the heart of God for his people. Wherever we are, the book of Ruth meets us there.

But why *this* Reading Guide?

With that background in mind, we wanted to consider with you for a moment why it is that we have constructed this Reading Guide as we have. Two of the core values that we

esteem highly at Summit are cultivating an individual passionate pursuit of the Lord and, correspondingly, living connected to faithful, biblical community. We believe that this Reading Guide can help us move toward both of those values. Why?

- 1) We will emphasize your individual engagement with the Lord as you spend time in his Word.
- 2) We hope to grow your familiarity with the Word as you continue to read it.
- 3) We pray that you increase your awareness of the Spirit's activity in your life as you prayerfully invite the Spirit to meet you while you engage the Word.
- 4) We encourage you to practice all of this with others in biblical community.

So how do we hope to do that with this Reading Guide?

Each week that we are in Ruth, our Reading Guide will consist of the following elements:

- An invitation to read Ruth, in full, once each week during the month of March.
- An overview giving attention to a specific focus for the chapter we are studying each week.
- Supplemental passages that will help provide biblical context for what you are reading in Ruth.
- Questions for personal and corporate application.

Ultimately, it is our hope, our prayer, that you would immerse yourself in Ruth. There are many ways to study Scripture. If you are wondering how you might spend a full month in such a short book, we would encourage you to consider printing out the text of Ruth. Then each week, as you go back through the text, do so adding highlights and comments with a different colored pen or marker. We believe that you'll be amazed at the cumulative impact of time spent prayerfully meditating on these four chapters. We are praying and trusting that the Lord will meet you and grow your confidence in his sovereign care and perfect love as you spend time in this remarkable story. We are excited to walk through Ruth with you.

Ruth 1 | Reading Guide

*Read Ruth, in full, at least once this week. While this week's Reading Guide will focus on Ruth 1, we would encourage you to continue to immerse yourself in this story throughout this series. As you read, consider these questions:

- What observations stand out?
- What does this text invite me to believe about God?
- What does this text invite me to understand about myself?
- How might the Lord be asking me to respond?

Overview of Ruth 1

This story begins with a family on the move, heading east from Bethlehem to the tableland beyond the Dead Sea called Moab. Our author situates this temporally during the time when the judges ruled, a period in Israel's history marked by cycles of rebellion and idolatry, national repentance, and deliverance, only to have the cycle begin again anew. In short, it was a time of spiritual darkness in the history of God's people. That darkness seems to reach across the pages of our Bibles to infect this story, as well, as we are met with tragedy and loss just a few short verses into this text. The questions that hang in the tense atmosphere that this story evokes reflect questions that we've all likely asked at some point. *God, where are you? Are you actually in control? And if you are in control, do you not care about me?*

In response to Naomi's tremendous grief and festering bitterness, and in response to those unspoken questions above, we are introduced to a Moabite widow named Ruth. Without prospects for the future, without a tangible sense of security, Ruth attaches herself to Naomi and the uncertain days that lay before her. Ruth is an ordinary person providing a glimpse of extraordinary kindness, loyalty and love. Though Naomi cannot yet see it, though she still bears the bitter wounds of loss, Ruth's faithful commitment to Naomi whispers of the Lord's faithful care and unfailing loyalty to his people.

Supplemental Passages

Judges 1-2 | These first chapters of Judges offer a glimpse of the cycle of disobedience which so thoroughly marked this period in Israel's history. It is some time within this period in Israel's history that Elimelech and Naomi move to Moab.

Numbers 21 | This passage provides but one example of the historical conflict between Israel and Moab. In this passage, Israel, as it fled Egypt, was denied passage through Moab, resulting in battle between the two nations.

Deuteronomy 28:1-24 | We cannot be certain that the famine which caused Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, and Chilion to flee Israel was caused by the idolatry of Israel which so characterized the time of the judges, but it is at least a possibility. This passage in Deuteronomy 28 provides a view of the covenant blessings associated with obedience, and curses with disobedience.

Psalms 13 | This Psalm of David reflects the lament found on Naomi's lips as she enters Bethlehem again. The language is different, certainly, but the questions that rise from this Psalm as to the duration of grief and the presence of the Lord are implied as Naomi tells the women of Bethlehem to call her *bitter*. Yet, this Psalm also presents the movement that must take place in times of grief, namely, the transition to trust and hope that we see in verses 5-6. Naomi is not yet there as we leave her at the conclusion of Ruth 1.

Life Group Questions

- 1) Which character(s) serve as the primary focus of the text? When, and how, does the focus shift over the course of Ruth 1?
- 2) How are the geographic setting (Moab) and the temporal setting (in the time of the judges) significant in shaping our understanding of what's going on in the text?
- 3) How does the author describe / characterize Naomi and Orpah? How does this characterization of each serve to highlight the power of Ruth's words and actions?
- 4) Ruth is presented as a picture of the faithful love and loyalty of the Lord toward his people. How does Ruth demonstrate this? As you read Ruth 1:16-17, what is Ruth sacrificing to remain with Naomi?
- 5) How might you respond if you had experienced Naomi's losses? What questions would you have? How have grief, fear, and uncertainty raised questions or doubts for you in your past?
- 6) Read Psalm 13. How does this Psalm offer hope in circumstances such as those mentioned in question 5?