

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 2 | Reading Guide

*Read Ruth, in full, at least once this week. While this week's Reading Guide will focus on Ruth 2, 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 2

Grief can shroud us like a cloak. It is heavy and constricting, blocking out light and sapping us of vitality and joy. Despite Ruth's beautiful demonstration of loyalty toward Naomi, the atmosphere of our story is thick with grief as both Ruth and Naomi are confronted not simply with the emotional weight of loss, but also the immediate concern of provision. How will they eat, much less carry on in the months and years ahead? And where, in all of this, is the Lord?

These are the questions, the concerns, which dominate as we begin chapter 2. Here, Ruth offers to glean among the fields outside of Bethlehem. Gleaning laws were built into the Mosaic Law, given by the Lord, to provide for the destitute. But there is risk involved, to be sure, especially during a time of such tumult as that which characterized the period of the judges. Would Ruth be harmed? Where could she go and not be met with rejection as a foreign widow?

By chance, seemingly, Ruth gleans in the field of Boaz, a near relative of Elimelech's family. Boaz, having heard of Ruth's tremendous demonstration of love and loyalty toward Naomi, in turn shows her great kindness. Was it chance that brought Ruth to Boaz, or the unseen hand of a gracious and loving God? As Ruth returns to Naomi, a massive sack of grain over her shoulder, we see Naomi's affect begin to change as she moves from the bitter grief of chapter 1 into a growing light, rising from the hope that God might, in fact, be up to something.

As this chapter comes to a close, we find ourselves hopeful alongside Naomi, celebrating with Ruth, and with a shifting sense of expectation as we look to see how the Lord might continue to provide. Just like Naomi and Ruth, we don't operate in the world omnisciently. We don't always (or often) have a perfect understanding of what

God is doing or how he's doing it. We aren't always able to see the map from above. But we are always called to trust in the Lord's faithful, loyal love. And that trust leads to hope. Again we come back to those two questions that we asked as we began in Ruth last week: *is God in control?* Yes, he is. We've seen it throughout this chapter. *Does he care?* Of course. Look at the way that Boaz reflects the heart of God toward Ruth, not simply extending kindness to her, but also imbuing her with tremendous value, worth, and dignity. This is a presentation of the heart of God in real time by real people.

Supplemental Passages

1) *Deuteronomy 24:14-22* | We see here one example of the gleaning laws which served as a means of provision for the deeply impoverished in Israel. It was this tradition which served as the basis for Ruth's journey to the fields outside of Bethlehem which, ultimately, led to her meeting with Boaz.

2) *Judges 6-8* | This is the account of Gideon, one of the judges of Israel. As you read through, pay special attention to the way that the angel greets Gideon in 6:12 as a "mighty man of valor." This is the same terminology (translated differently) which is used to describe Boaz in 2:1, where he is described as a "worthy man." Whereas Gideon was a man of valor in battle, Boaz provides a distinctly different definition of this term, namely, as a man of deep integrity, faithfulness, and kindness.

3) *Psalms 36* | As Boaz blesses Ruth for her faithful care of Naomi, he prays that she might be rewarded by "the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" That same imagery describing the Lord as one under whose wings safety and provision might be found is seen in Psalm 36:7. Consider these verses, particularly noting how they reflect the scene in Ruth 2.

Life Group Questions

1) What are some the challenges that might face Ruth as she goes to glean? What risks is she taking?

2) Describe the interaction between Ruth and Boaz in 2:8-16. What is Ruth's view of herself? How does Boaz imbue Ruth with value and dignity? How is this reflective of God's heart toward his people?

3) In what ways are we aware of the Lord's sovereign but unseen hand at work throughout chapter 2? How does grief sometimes contribute to our inability to see where the Lord is at work?

4) Consider the ways that community played an integral role in the development of faith throughout chapter 2. Boaz demonstrated for Ruth tangible expressions of the faithful love of God. Ruth offered hope to Naomi as she obediently went and returned with the gift from Boaz. In what ways have you experienced the community of faith carrying hope for you, or others, in times of distress and suffering?

5) Invite the group to share specific ways that they see the Lord moving in and through the lives of others within the group. Celebrate the Lord's faithfulness, both in your life and in the life-affirming words of your brothers and sisters in Christ.