

Ruth - Week 4

The Story of Naomi

Reflecting on Our Story

Charlotte Hendy

The book of Ruth ends with the birth of Ruth and Boaz's son – Obed. This is followed by the genealogy of David, who we learn is to be Obed's grandson. As followers of Jesus we know that the story doesn't end there – Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus himself was born of this line of David. What an amazing finale to an incredible story tucked away in the Old Testament and comprising of just four chapters.

But how did we get here? The book of Ruth contains many things, but one of the most integral themes throughout is the relationship between two women – Ruth and Naomi. They work together and support each other at different times and in different ways.

Ruth accompanies Naomi back to Bethlehem and works to provide her with food. Naomi opens up family connections in Bethlehem for Ruth. Each needs the other; both are integral to the story.

We see this most beautifully in Ruth 4:17, where the women say 'A son has been born to Naomi.' Here's the thing: we know that Ruth gave birth to baby Obed – biologically he's hers. So why aren't the women saying 'Ruth has a son'? Because Naomi is part of the story too.

It's such a beautiful picture: an outcome that both have worked together and supported one another to achieve. Our finale – which paves the way for Jesus – couldn't have happened without these two women working together and supporting one another.

This Bible study is written in the spirit of cooperation, encouraging you to think about your own story: the part you play and those whom you journey alongside.



Approaching the Text

Pray: Focus your mind and ask God to open up the passage to you and teach you new things.

Read: Ruth chapter 4 twice – you might want to read two different translations, for example New International Version and The Message or The King James Version.

Consider:

- How do Ruth and Naomi support one another throughout the book
- What stands out to you from chapter 4 and why?
- The book of Ruth points us to Jesus – where is God at work in your life right now?
- If your life were a story split into four chapters, which chapter would you be in and why? Who do you have alongside you in your present chapter? How might you and them work together and support one another?

Pray: Pray for all those participating in Bible Month.

To **read** an NIV Version of Ruth, Chapter 4, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **hear** an NIV Version of Ruth, Chapter 4, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **hear** a Dramatised Version of Ruth, Chapter 4, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **read** The Message Version of Ruth, Chapter 4, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **hear** The Message Version of Ruth, Chapter 4, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **read** The King James Version of Ruth, Chapter 4, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To **hear** The King James Version of Ruth, Chapter 4, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

Commentary by Dr Rachel Starr

Abridged Version

The concluding chapter of Ruth serves to demonstrate the acceptance of Ruth, and especially Naomi, by the community of Bethlehem. Naomi's needs are finally met. Land restored, daughter secured, she receives another son. Like Seth, the third son of Eve, Obed is seen to restore something of what has been lost.

Needing (Ruth 4:1-8)

Like the threshing floor, the city gate was a place where men met to trade, to judge and to gossip. As the chapter progresses, it is also where Ruth is celebrated, as is the capable woman of Proverbs (31:10-31).

At the gate, Boaz gathers a full cohort of elders to help him with his dilemma, on this occasion, the outcome being more hopeful than the judgements against marriage to foreign women in Ezra (10:14).

The revelation that Naomi owns some land is a surprise. Why was Ruth forced to glean in another field if Naomi had land of her own? Perhaps the land has been left uncultivated or was being used by another household. Although it was unusual for women to own land, other widows – and daughters – are recorded as owning land in 2 Kings and in Numbers.

Naomi's decision to sell the land reveals that she is at her wits' end: the harvest is ended and this is her only recourse. For the rest of the kin, the need to redeem it is clearly stated.

Boaz asks whether the next-of-kin is willing to redeem the land. His response is brief and positive – yes, he will do it. But then Boaz claims, wrongly, that to take on the land is to take on the Moabite woman also.

Anxious about his own inheritance (any child that resulted from a levirate marriage would be named for Ruth's dead husband and would inherit Elimelech's field in that right), 'So and so', the mocking name the narrator gives to the next-of-kin, declines.

Boaz's muddling of levirate and redeemer obligations may be a result of ignorance but it is possible that he does so intentionally, in order to use the levirate provision to overcome the prohibition against marrying a foreigner.

Nurturing (Ruth 4:9-12)

Once 'So-and-so' has been dispatched, Boaz declares his intention to marry Ruth. The presence of witnesses suggests public recognition of the union. Why does Boaz marry Ruth, then, if he does not have levirate responsibilities; and if, the role of redeemer, which he has taken on, only requires him to redeem the land?

In overcoming the barrier of Ruth's Moabite identity, and persuading the elders to support the marriage, Boaz might hope to be seen as the consummate civil leader, who goes beyond what is required of him by the law.

The first of the final pair of blessings is given by the people and elders to Ruth, although she is referred to only as 'the woman who is coming into your house' and as 'this young woman'. It is an odd blessing, and the references to Rachel and Leah, and especially to Tamar and one of her sons, Perez (but not his twin Zerah), could be seen as mocking of the union, reminding those gathered that this also is an unsuitable relationship, which will likely end in strife. But perhaps the people have been won over by the efforts of the new arrivals and the mention of trickster figures such as Leah and Rachel (Genesis 31) and Tamar (Genesis 38) is a way of celebrating Ruth and Naomi's subversive, transgressive heroism.

Ruth and Tamar, together with Rahab and the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba), meet again in the genealogy of Jesus. By making visible these four foreign women, all of whom were placed in precarious situations, perhaps the evangelist was seeking to prepare the gospel readers for Jesus' alternative family.

Naming (Ruth 4:13-22)

After keeping in the background since providing food to Judah (Ruth 1:6), God now acts to bring about a child with Ruth. Ruth and Naomi remain silent throughout chapter 4, but other women speak, giving thanks to God for the child. Unconcerned with honouring the names of dead men, or even living ones, the women claim Naomi as the parent of Obed. As expected, the child's name offers an insight: he is the one who will serve Naomi. At last Naomi's empty arms are filled and her wellbeing secured.

What does it mean that Ruth the Moabite becomes part of Judah?

For some, it is a warning: the dominant culture and religion overwhelm Ruth, and only through denying her otherness can she become part of them. But for others, her celebrated presence reminds the house of Israel that purity of ethnic identity is both impossible and unwelcome.

Ruth ends with a genealogy, the procession of men working to restore the lost men of chapter 1. And although no women are named, the preceding chapters make visible their efforts in bringing about new life.

Despite Boaz's repeated claim that his intention is to restore the names of Elimelech and Mahlon, neither are mentioned. Instead it is Perez who the line is named for, not Obed, as might be expected. The thrice mentioned Perez, whose name means "breach" serves to remind the reader that no line, however illustrious, is without interruption. The unexpected, the stranger, all help to strengthen the community of faith.



Looking for Belonging: The Theme of Home in the Book of Ruth

Jo Swinney

We live in transient times. Since the year 2000, the number of people living outside their country of origin has increased by a staggering 45%. There are all sorts of reasons for human migration. I've lived as a foreigner in four countries – for my parents' work, for study, and for adventure. I'm one of the lucky ones.

I've never been displaced by war, natural disaster, economic hardship or disease. Naomi and Ruth's experience is more representative of global trends than mine. For both of them, at certain times, home seems a distant dream.

The book of Ruth begins with a swift brushstroke of context: a famine in the land. We could pass it by, an inciting incident in a plot that races on, the next tragedy just a few short sentences away.

But let's pause for a moment and consider. This land: promised to Abraham, founding father of Israel, its very dirt a tangible sign of God's favour: how could it be that to stay meant facing starvation?

A famine: food so scarce the survival of an entire population hangs in the balance. Hunger of an intensity the well fed can't begin to imagine, bones protruding from skin, fatigue sapping hope, a desperate scabble for any calories on offer, from wherever they may be found.

With the advent of televised around the-clock news, we can become numb to far away tragedy. There is a lot of talk about 'the refugee crisis.' Let's remember the suffering that drives people to take the desperate measure of fleeing their country. Let's remember that each story is about fellow humans in dire straits.

As Somali-British poet Warsan Shire so powerfully puts it, 'you have to understand, that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.' So Elimelek, Naomi, Mahlon and Kilion are driven from home, and make their way to Moab as refugees. It isn't a short stay – they are there ten years and as it turns out, the men will never see their homeland again. All three meet untimely ends. But Naomi hears there is food in Judah again and makes her plans to go back – to 'return home'.

"Ruth now belongs wherever Naomi goes. She adopts Naomi's land, relatives and even God. Implicit in this is a rejection of her own land, relatives and god. She's all in."

Home can be many things. I wonder what it is for you?

Over my life it has come to mean more than a place; it also means family, community, culture, church. It means memory and story and precious art and objects. It means security, belonging, the ability to offer hospitality.

Although Naomi talks of Judah as home, her return is of little comfort. However hard it was for her to leave, losing her family was harder still. Despite leaving hungry, she says, 'I went away full.' Her life feels bitter now, even back where she came from:

‘The LORD has brought me back empty...the Almighty
has brought misfortune upon me.’

For Naomi, home is in family, and all she has now is a foreign daughter-in-law. Naomi's widowed daughters-in-law at first seem uprooted by their grief.

Orpah is persuaded to stay where she belongs.

Ruth now belongs wherever Naomi goes. She adopts Naomi's land, relatives and even God. Implicit in this is a rejection of her own land, relatives and god. She's all in.

We don't know where this loyalty comes from. It certainly doesn't seem reciprocated. Ruth's company is not the slightest bit comforting to Naomi, who has done her best to dissuade her from coming along. Is she doing it out of sacrificial love for a vulnerable, older woman determined to make a long journey on her own? Is her own family unkind or worse?

I wonder if the true explanation lies in the words of Boaz, her future husband: 'May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.'

Ruth would have been introduced to the God of Israel by her in-laws, seen them worship, watched them live according to his laws and in light of his calling. She would have received the blessing of God through her new family. For those of us who have been grafted into these same roots, it makes sense that Ruth would go where this God led. It makes sense that home would be among God's people, however far from her motherland this took her.

For all Christians there is a tension around the idea of home. We are at once created to make home wherever we are, and at the same time we must hold our citizenship lightly, as we wait for the permanence of heaven. What is true for both now and then is that we have refuge, as Ruth did, under God's wings, close to his heart.