

Lesson 10 | November 3, 2024

Naomi: Bereaved and Blessed

Study Text: Ruth 1:1 through 4:22

Central Truth: God works sovereignly in our lives through all circumstances.

Key Verse: Ruth 4:14

The women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the Lord, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel (KJV).

The women of the town said to Naomi, “Praise the Lord, who has now provided a redeemer for your family! May this child be famous in Israel” (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize that God is working through circumstances to bring about His redemptive purposes.
- Students will choose to trust God’s love and provision no matter what difficulties may come.
- Students will channel God’s sacrificial love to others—even people who are difficult to love.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: The Book of Ruth has been called one of the greatest short stories ever written. Why is it so captivating? It begins with hardship and loss and ends with joy and hope. It’s filled with tragedy and triumph and sacrificial love. And it shows us how God worked through the events of history to keep His redemption promise.

Discussion Starter—A Favorite Story

Say: Think for a moment about your favorite story. Maybe it’s from a movie or book, or maybe it’s a story you were told as a child. Now, in one or two sentences, tell us why it means so much to you.

Say: Today we are going to explore the Book of Ruth. But instead of focusing on the main couple—Ruth and Boaz—let’s look at it from the perspective of Naomi, Ruth’s bereaved mother-in-law. She reminds us to recognize God’s provision and trust His care no matter what.

The German poet Wolfgang von Goethe (*GUR-tuh*) called the Book of Ruth “the loveliest complete work on a small scale.” Full of symmetry and depth, it not only tells a compelling story, but it describes how God was constantly working on Naomi and Ruth’s behalf—leading them from place to place, protecting them from danger, providing for their needs, and using their gifts to bless others. Naomi’s character beautifully develops in the book’s four short chapters. We see her react honestly to loss, struggle with

bitterness, respond dramatically to Ruth’s unconditional love, and experience redemption by way of Ruth’s marriage to Boaz.

Part 1—Affliction of Naomi

Sorrow at Every Turn

Ruth 1:1–6

Say: The first line of the Book of Ruth tells us the story took place “in the days when the judges ruled” (1:1). But apart from this overlap, the Books of Ruth and Judges could not be more different. Judges is a sweeping international drama full of battles, heroes, and political maneuvering. Ruth, on the other hand, is personal. It tells the story of one faithful family and their loyalty to God and each other.

Knowing Naomi lived during the time of the judges helps us understand what her life might have been like. Living faithfully for God when everyone else is doing whatever seems “right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25) has never been easy. In Israel’s cycle of apostasy, God often sent judgment to turn His people’s hearts back to Him. Naomi and her husband Elimelech (*Eh-LIM-uh-lek*) were living in Bethlehem during such a time and experienced a “severe famine,” causing them to move to Moab with their two sons (Ruth 1:1).

As she struggled to care for her family during a famine and then faced the prospect of moving to the idolatrous country of Moab, Naomi’s situation must have seemed challenging enough. But even more loss awaited her: “Elimelech Naomi’s husband died” (verse 3, KJV). Within ten years, both her sons had married and then died as well, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, on their own (verse 5).

As widows in an ancient patriarchal society, Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah had few opportunities to provide for themselves. Instead, they would have been forced to depend on the kindness of others. They were susceptible to abuse and neglect with no male family member to protect them. Imagine Naomi’s despair as she experienced loss after loss. Yet, at the first hint of God’s activity in the story (verse 6), Naomi took action. The famine in Judah had lifted, so she quickly arranged to return home to Bethlehem.

Some scholars say the journey from Moab to Bethlehem would have taken these women approximately seven to ten days. While the distance wasn’t far, the dry, difficult terrain would have made the walk challenging. It would have been especially dangerous for women traveling alone. In many ways, their trek mirrored the condition of Naomi’s heart—desolate, lonely, and vulnerable.

Discuss

- Describe the emotions and thoughts that Elimelech and Naomi must have experienced as they escaped famine by fleeing to a foreign, pagan land.
- Considering the plight of widows in this ancient culture, what must Naomi have been feeling when her husband and both of her sons died?

- How can compounded losses create bitterness in someone’s heart?

A Bitter Lament

Ruth 1:18–21

Say: Just before the journey to Bethlehem got underway, Naomi encouraged Ruth and Orpah to spare themselves and return to their families. Orpah agreed, but Ruth insisted on staying with her mother-in-law: “Don’t ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God” (Ruth 1:16).

Ruth’s steadfast love for Naomi was apparent not just in her words, but in her actions. Soon, the two women began walking toward Bethlehem. When they arrived, they were greeted by friendly faces (Ruth 1:19). Naomi’s response to her friends’ excitement revealed the condition of her heart. Instead of *Naomi*, which means “pleasant,” she insisted on being called *Mara*, which means “bitter” (verse 20). Rather than believing she had been the victim of chance, Naomi cited God as the source of her suffering, using the names “Almighty” (*Shaddai*) and “the Lord” (*Yahweh*) twice each in verses 20–21. Her lament acknowledged her grief and God’s supreme lordship.

Grief is the correct response to loss. The list of things we can lose is seemingly endless: jobs, health, relationships, finances, and on and on. Often, grief is so painful and awkward that we speed through it, rushing to get back to so-called “normal” life. But it is important to process our losses and allow time for our hearts, minds, and emotions to heal.

The steadfast love we offer each other at these times is more valuable than we can imagine. Ruth had also lost her husband, and she was determined to walk this uncomfortable journey of grief with Naomi, no matter the cost. Ruth loved Naomi unconditionally. She didn’t allow bitter grief to break the bond between them.

Resource Packet Item 1: Understanding Grief

Grief is the natural response to loss. Everyone grieves differently, but there are five main stages most people experience when they suffer a significant loss. This informational handout explains the five stages of grief and lists tips for dealing with loss.

Discuss

- Why do you think Naomi chose to make the dangerous journey to Bethlehem?
- What decisions or practices have been most helpful to you during times of grief and loss?

Part 2—Providence in Naomi’s Life God Provides for His Children

Ruth 2:17–23

Say: Think about all the ways we've seen God provide for Naomi up to this point in her story. He caused the famine to end in Bethlehem and made sure Naomi heard the news. He cared for her through the steadfast love of Ruth. He protected her on the journey to Bethlehem. He timed their journey so they would arrive in late spring, at the beginning of the barley harvest. His law provided the means for Ruth to support them both by gleaning in the fields. He led Ruth to the field of Boaz, one of Naomi's family members who was a respected man of wealth, faith, and integrity. As Naomi's story continues to unfold, we will see God continuing to provide for His children.

Ruth 2 describes how Ruth found herself, seemingly led by God, in a place where she would be looked after and generously provided for. Boaz recognized Ruth's character and hard work, and he prayed God would bless her: "May the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done" (verse 12). Naomi and Ruth pursued and took refuge in God, and He provided for them every step of the way.

Naomi knew and trusted in God's law, which instructed landowners not to harvest to the edges of their fields, leaving that grain for the poor (Leviticus 19:9–10; 23:22). When Ruth explained where she had gleaned so much grain, Naomi blessed Boaz and praised God for the kindness He had shown (Ruth 2:20). In another of the plot twists that makes Ruth such a compelling story, Naomi explained that Boaz was one of Elimelech's close relatives, "one of our family redeemers" (verse 20).

In ancient Israel, kinsman-redeemers were relatives who had certain duties to the family. A primary duty was buying back (or "redeeming") family property that had been lost through death or poverty (Leviticus 25:23–28) or family members who had sold themselves into slavery (verses 47–55). Based on the account of Ruth, it is also believed that a redeemer could preserve the lineage of a male relative who had died without children by marrying his widow and fathering a child (see Deuteronomy 24:5–11). The role of kinsman-redeemer was closely tied to the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, symbolizing the way God is the ultimate Redeemer of His people. Understanding the implications of the kinsman-redeemer relationship, Naomi encouraged Ruth to keep working in Boaz's fields throughout the spring barley harvest and early summer wheat harvest. She must have realized that God was sovereignly aligning circumstances to continue providing for her and Ruth—not just for one harvest season but for the rest of their lives.

Discuss

- The author is winking to the reader in Ruth 2:3—"As it happened, [Ruth] found herself working in a field that belonged to Boaz"—since this is so obviously part of the sovereign plan of God. Describe how Naomi must have felt when she heard about this turn of events.
- How have you seen God's providential care in your own life?

Naomi Participates in God's Plan

Ruth 3:1–5, 16–18

Say: Ruth’s love and faithfulness are so evident in this book that we may overlook just how much Naomi loved and cared for the people God had placed in her life—despite her grief. In chapter 1, she selflessly released her daughters-in-law to return home and start new families of their own. In chapter 2, after Ruth insisted on traveling to Bethlehem, Naomi advised her in the customs of her new home, undoubtedly teaching her how to serve the one true God. And in chapter 3, we will see that Naomi recognized God’s plan and laid aside her own grief to help bring Ruth and Boaz together.

After Ruth had been gleaning in Boaz’s fields for some time, Naomi explained, “It’s time that I found a permanent home for you, so that you will be provided for” (Ruth 3:1). The original language hints at the idea of Sabbath rest: Naomi would “seek rest” for Ruth “that it may be well” with her. Just as a covenant with their kinsman-redeemer would bring peace into the women’s tumultuous lives, God has provided rest for us and all who believe in Jesus, our Redeemer (Hebrews 4:1–3).

Naomi knew Boaz would be working at the threshing floor and would spend the night there, presumably to guard the grain. She gave Ruth detailed instructions for conveying the message to Boaz that she was available for marriage (Ruth 3:3–4).

Some have attached sexual implications to Naomi’s advice that Ruth should uncover Boaz’s feet and lie there. However, this interpretation does not align with the way Ruth and Boaz are characterized as godly people of integrity throughout the book. In fact, the author records that Boaz called Ruth a “virtuous woman” (verse 11) and guarded her reputation (verse 14). Other scholars suggest instead that the author’s language skillfully heightens the drama of the story by alluding to another woman in Boaz’s family tree: Tamar. Unfortunately, her story of dependence on a kinsman-redeemer played out very differently from Ruth’s (Genesis 38; Ruth 4:12). Whether Ruth understood Naomi’s plan or not, she trusted her mother-in-law’s guidance and knowledge of Israelite customs and replied, “I will do everything you say” (3:5).

Amid their grief, loss, and need, Naomi and Ruth found comfort and purpose in their relationship. They supported each other faithfully. God used their sacrificial love to open doors for their immediate provision and a brighter future than they could have dreamed. Their story challenges us to actively love other people, no matter what pain we are personally experiencing. God heals our hearts as we allow His love to flow through us to others.

Ruth carried out Naomi’s instructions exactly. When she returned home early the next morning, she told Naomi everything that had happened (verse 16). Boaz had awakened to find Ruth at his feet. She asked him to “spread the corner of your covering over me, for you are my family redeemer” (verse 9)—the equivalent of a marriage proposal. Boaz blessed Ruth and agreed to follow the proper protocol to offer her protection. Verse 13 includes an emphatic statement that illustrates his enthusiasm to marry her.

In a reversal of the emptiness Naomi had expressed at the beginning of the story (1:21), Boaz told Ruth, “Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed” (3:17) and gave her a large portion of barley. This would sustain them while he made the necessary marriage arrangements. Naomi reassured Ruth that he would not rest until the matter had been settled (verse 18).

Discuss

- How did Naomi’s love and care for Ruth help her overcome her own grief?
- How is God honored when we love others well?

Part 3—God Remembers Naomi Hope and Joy Restored

Ruth 4:13–17

Say: This chapter in Naomi’s story could best be summed up by the words that Ruth’s great grandson David would one day write: “Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning. . . . You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, that I might sing praises to you and not be silent” (Psalm 30:5, 11–12).

When the legal pathway was clear, Boaz kept his promise, purchasing Elimelech’s property and marrying Ruth (Ruth 4:13). God soon blessed their union with a son.

Naomi is sometimes compared to Job, for we can see how God restored her fortunes as He did Job’s (Job 42:10). Just as Job’s “brothers, sisters, and former friends came and feasted with him in his home. And they consoled him and comforted him because of all the trials the Lord had brought against him” (verse 11), Naomi’s friends celebrated with her in Ruth 4:14–15. In His sovereignty and steadfast love, God had uniquely provided a kinsman-redeemer not just for Ruth, but also for Naomi—a grandson named Obed who would carry on the family line.

When we are following Jesus, the Holy Spirit lives in us, filling us with His love and enabling us to love others like He does (Romans 5:5). With our eyes on Him and His love in our hearts, we can be part of His sovereign plan here on earth. Like Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, we can be God’s instruments to accomplish His purpose in other people’s lives.

Resource Packet Item 2: Character Studies in Ruth

The main characters in the Book of Ruth exemplify God’s steadfast love in various ways. Students will note the character traits of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz and seek God to develop those characteristics in their own lives. This handout would work best as a take-home page for personal devotions.

Discuss

- How did Boaz’s goodness accomplish God’s purposes for Ruth and Naomi?

- How do Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz encourage and challenge you to live differently?

God's Redemptive Story

Ruth 4:18–22

Say: This story beautifully describes how God providentially cared for Naomi in her loss and bitter grief. He redeemed what she had lost and renewed her joy and hope. Yet, these last few verses show us the greater scope of His plan. Through Naomi and Ruth's family, all future generations would be blessed.

The Book of Ruth began with, "In the days when the judges ruled in Israel" (Ruth 1:1). This was a time full of sin and judgment, when the covenant between God and His people seemed the weakest. But Ruth ends with a reminder that God was at work during this time, securing the future of His people.

Naomi's beloved grandson Obed became the grandfather of King David, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). The only other place Ruth is mentioned in all of Scripture is in the Book of Matthew, as part of the genealogy of the Messiah Jesus (1:5). Time would reveal that Naomi's troubles were part of a much grander story—the redemptive masterpiece of God.

Resource Packet Item 3: God's Providential Care

The Book of Ruth clearly shows how God led, protected, and provided for Naomi and Ruth. Students will list major events from different seasons of their lives and reflect on God's sovereignty and providential care.

Discuss

- How does Boaz's character foreshadow the character of Jesus, our Redeemer?
- What part of Naomi's story stands out the most to you and why?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: We can trust God to care for us as we take refuge under His wings (Ruth 2:12). Whether we're grieving or rejoicing, God calls us to love others, work hard, and depend fully on Him. As we reflect His steadfast love, our lives will bless others and His purposes will be accomplished.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Read through the Book of Ruth in one sitting this week. Consider what you learn about God's character. Then think about how Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz impacted those around them by reflecting God's character.
- In the spirit of Boaz's generosity, ask God to lead you to a person you can abundantly bless this week.
- Pray for someone in your life who is grieving. Then look for specific ways to encourage and care for that person.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

From Prison to the Palace.

Genesis 41:14, 33–44

Tuesday:

David Made King of Israel.

2 Samuel 5:1–5

Wednesday:

Reluctantly Used by God.

Jeremiah 1:4–10

Thursday:

A Surprising Dinner Guest.

Luke 19:1–10

Friday:

From Persecutor to Preacher.

Acts 26:9–20

Saturday:

From Slave to Brother.

Philemon 8–16