

Introduction to the Book of Ruth

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The Book of Ruth is a short, four-chapter story set ‘in the days when the judges ruled. It follows the story of an ordinary family navigating famine, migration, loss, and renewal. While the rest of Scripture at that time tells of wars, kings, and prophets, Ruth is a quiet, domestic story, the kind that unfolds in kitchens and fields rather than on battlefields. Yet in this small story, we glimpse something vast: how divine faithfulness is revealed through human acts of kindness. Ruth’s story takes place on the margins, geographically, socially, and theologically; but through her, God’s steadfast love reshapes the future of Israel.

Let’s catch up on what the story is about.

Ruth 1:1-2 (Message translation)

Once upon a time—it was back in the days when judges led Israel—there was a famine in the land. A man from Bethlehem in Judah left home to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The man’s name was Elimelech; his wife’s name was Naomi; his sons were named Mahlon and Kilion—all Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They all went to the country of Moab and settled there.



Map of journey from Bethlehem to Moab

Bethlehem and Moab were only about 70 miles apart, perhaps a week’s walk. The journey wasn’t epic in miles, but it was in meaning. It crossed a national and religious boundary, from

Israel into a foreign land. In biblical thought, that small physical distance represented a large spiritual and cultural step, from the land of promise into exile.

The family leaves home seeking food and safety, but their journey leads instead to loss. Naomi's husband and sons die in Moab, and she is left with her two foreign daughters-in-law. Grieving and destitute, she decides to return to Bethlehem. One daughter-in-law, Ruth, refuses to leave her side, binding her life to Naomi's with words of loyal love.

Ruth 1:16–17

But Ruth said, "Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I'll die, and that's where I'll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!"

Ruth's words echo the heart of the book, which is the Hebrew term 'hesed'. *Hesed* means steadfast love that keeps faith even when life unravels. It is more than kindness or loyalty, it endures through loss. It is love that acts, love that stays, protects, and restores.

Together they return to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. In the fields, Ruth begins to glean what the reapers leave behind, and there she meets a man named Boaz.

Ruth 2:10–12

At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, "Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?"

Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

Boaz also shows *hesed*. He protects Ruth in the fields, provides food beyond what is required, and restores dignity to both her and Naomi. Through his kindness, the quiet faithfulness of God takes human form. Naomi recognises in him a relative who might become their redeemer. In Israelite tradition, this was a close family member, called a *go'el*, who had the duty to protect the family line, to buy back land that had been lost, to ensure the family's name continued, and to rescue relatives from hardship. In Boaz, Naomi sees the possibility of restoration.

Hope, long buried under grief, begins to stir again.

Ruth 4:13–17

Boaz married Ruth. She became his wife. Boaz slept with her. By God's gracious gift she conceived and had a son.

The town women said to Naomi, "Blessed be God! He didn't leave you without family to carry on your life. May this baby grow up to be famous in Israel!

He'll make you young again! He'll take care of you in old age. And this daughter-in-law who has brought him into the world and loves you so much, why, she's worth more to you than seven sons!"

Naomi took the baby and held him in her arms, cuddling him, cooing over him, waiting on him hand and foot.

The neighbourhood women started calling him “Naomi’s baby boy!” But his real name was Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

What began with famine and tragedy ends with fullness. Ruth’s steadfast love and Boaz’s kindness become part of God’s greater story, a story that leads to King David and to Jesus. The Book of Ruth reminds us that God’s faithful love often works quietly through ordinary lives, turning emptiness into joy, and strangers into family.

The Hebrew word ‘hesed’ runs like a thread through the Book of Ruth. It is often translated as loving-kindness, steadfast love, or covenant loyalty. It describes both divine and human faithfulness, the kind of love that keeps promises even when circumstances break them.

Naomi shows *hesed* when she releases her daughters-in-law, not demanding loyalty they can no longer afford to give.

Ruth embodies *hesed* when she refuses to abandon Naomi, binding herself to her future at great personal cost.

Boaz acts with *hesed* when he protects Ruth in the fields, ensuring her safety and dignity.

God’s *hesed* weaves through all of it, unseen, but at work through ordinary human faithfulness.

The message of Ruth is that God’s covenant love is not confined to miracles or monarchs, but expressed through small acts of care, like gleaning, generosity, hospitality, inclusion. *Hesed* is grace lived out in daily life.

Unlike other biblical stories, Ruth contains no direct speech from God. There are no visions, no prophets, no overt miracles. Yet the narrative suggests that God’s providence is quietly at work behind every human action.

In Jewish communities, Ruth is read each year at *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks. This festival comes fifty days after Passover and marks both the wheat harvest and the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The book of Ruth fits both themes, it begins at harvest time, and it tells of a woman who freely chooses to live under the covenant of Israel’s God.

Ruth is a Moabite, one of the peoples beyond Israel’s borders. Her inclusion in God’s story shows that belonging is not confined to ancestry or land. Through her faithfulness and love, Ruth embodies the promise made to Abraham that all nations will be blessed through him.

For Jewish readers, Ruth’s story is one of commitment to covenant life and welcome to the outsider. Her words, ‘Your people shall be my people, and your God my God’ echo Israel’s own acceptance of the covenant at Sinai, which *Shavuot* celebrates.

When the book of Acts describes the coming of the Holy Spirit, it happens on the day of *Shavuot*, Pentecost, the day when Jews were celebrating God’s gift of the Law. Christians therefore understand Pentecost as the fulfilment and widening of *Shavuot*, the giving of the

Spirit to all people, the beginning of a new covenant written this time on human hearts, rather than Moses' tablets of stone.

Ruth's story, read at *Shavuot*, foreshadows this generosity of God. The Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost continues what Ruth's inclusion began, God's faithful love crossing every boundary, gathering people from all nations into one body. Ruth never sees the full reach of her story, yet through her steadfast love, God brings forth blessing for generations to come. Her life tells us that even the smallest act of faith can become part of God's redeeming work, by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ who became Ruth's descendent.

Christ is the fullness of that hidden promise, the Redeemer in whom loss becomes life, and strangers become family.

So, when love feels uncertain and hope seems far away, we look to Christ, trusting that the same God who worked through Ruth's faithfulness is still at work through the Holy Spirit today.

Here is a song about Ruth's decision to go with Naomi.

Hymn: Song of Ruth

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QnT323Gahg>