

Ruth Bible Study

Chapter 1

Questions will be posed and space will be allowed for a written response. Make every effort to answer the questions before looking below for the answer. **The answers will be in bold print at the end of the “questions” section.**

Read 1:1-5

These events took place within an 11-year period during the time of the judges. Ruth was likely written during David’s reign (c 1009–970 BC). (TLSB)

According to the book of Judges, this period of Israel’s history was marked by religious and moral degeneracy, chaos, national disunity, and oppression by foreigners. The book of Ruth deals with one family. As Ruth 1:1–5 portrays one tragedy after another, the essence of drama confronts the readers and hearers. (CC)

Recorded famines were comparatively seldom in the account of Israel’s history, but certainly they were not unusual. For the rains that came in the three winter months have always been uncertain and often insufficient. Bethlehem had fruitful land for wheat, barley, olives, almonds, and grapes, and usually received sufficient rainfall. Its name means “house of bread (food),” that is, “granary.” But, being situated on the eastern slope of the watershed of the Judean hills, it may receive less rainfall than elsewhere. The higher plateau of Moab can receive rain from clouds that fail to water the hills of Judah. Thus, drought and famine might occur in Israel without affecting Moab. Ironically, in Ruth 1:1 an Israelite family is forced to leave Bethlehem (“house of bread/food”), which had no food for them, and travel for food to the land of the Moabites, who had refused to offer food to the Israelites on their way to Canaan (Deut 23:4–5). (CC)

Elimelech and his family sought refuge (“to sojourn,” 1:1) in a fertile area of Moab. To reach this area, Elimelech and his family had to journey on foot about a hundred miles from Bethlehem, going through the deep Jordan Rift around the north shore of the Dead Sea. This move put them outside of the area of both their faith and Israel’s Law, in a potentially precarious existence. Though not enjoying full rights as citizens, strangers would normally receive from their hosts essential protection. The family probably intended to stay in Moab only temporarily, without becoming integrated into the host people. (CC)

For an Israelite, a major deterrent from leaving his home was the fact that his personal real estate was really on loan to him from the LORD ever since the land of Israel had been parceled out among the tribes, clans, and families (Joshua 13–21). It was his duty as a member of the covenant people to retain his inheritance faithfully, for it was a personal sign to his family of God’s gracious covenant, a down payment on God’s promise of eternal life in the new heavens and new earth. To abandon it or sell it to strangers, except because of extreme poverty, would be tantamount to reneging on the covenant, on one’s bond to the Israelite community, and on one’s bond and duty to both ancestors and descendants (see Lev 25:10, 13, 23–28; Num 36:7). Elimelech and Naomi must have been greatly ashamed at having to sell their inheritance’s to take refuge in Moab. Compare Naboth, who could not conceive of selling his inheritance, not even to the king for a better vineyard (1 Ki 21:2–3). (CC)

Marriage with Moabite women was not forbidden, though no Moabite—or his sons to the tenth generation—was allowed to “enter the assembly of the LORD” (Dt 23:3). (CSB)
The Moabites and the Ammonites were the descendants of the incestuous union of Lot with his daughters (Gn 19:36–38). Moabites were not to enter the assembly of worshipers “even to the tenth generation” (Dt 23:3; Ne 13:1). (TLSB)

To be deprived of both husband and sons and to be too old to remarry was the worst possible situation for a woman in ancient society; widows were very vulnerable. Naomi was deprived both of her motherhood and of the family line, for she belonged socially to that of her husband. Her family had all but died out, and this worst fate left her alone and “empty” (1:21). No longer able to bear children (1:11–12), she could not remarry; her father would no longer be alive; and she would have no recourse to make a living. She is thus deprived of the blessings of old age. Naomi has three strikes against her: she is impoverished, vulnerable without a protector, and a stranger in a foreign land. An emotional effect is created here by simply referring to her as “the woman”—a woman who now stands alone (“the woman was left without anything”). (CC)

Questions will be posed and space will be allowed for a written response. Make every effort to answer the questions before looking below for the answer. **The answers will be in bold print.**

1. There probably was not much more that could go wrong in Naomi’s life. Perhaps you or someone you know has hit bottom too. How do Psalm 50:15 and Deuteronomy 31:6 offer comfort in hard times?

Read 1:6-22

2. In difficult times we often turn to something of the past that was a comfort. What does Naomi determine to do next (v. 6)?
3. What was the reaction of Orpah and Ruth (v. 7)?
4. In verses 8-15 how does Naomi show concern for her daughters-in-law despite her own sad state of affairs?
5. In verses 8-15 how does Naomi show that through all of her trouble she had not lost her faith the Lord?
6. What is Naomi referring to in verses 11b-13a? (see Deuteronomy 25:5–6)
7. How are verses 14-15 a turning point for the daughters-in-law?
8. What do verses 16-17 show about Ruth as compared to Orpah?
9. What happens in verse 19 that should have been comforting to Naomi and even Ruth?
10. What is the name change for Naomi about in verse 20?
11. What can we learn from the events in verse 21?
12. What renewed hope is there in verse 22?
13. What is your favorite verse in this study and why?

Some Answers to the above Questions:

1. Psalm 50:15 should be a source of great comfort to God' people that their pleas for help during difficult times are valued very highly by our Lord. To encourage God's people to pray freely in evil days, God adds a divine promise: "I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." So one act of true devotion (calling on him) produces an act of deliverance, and that, in turn, leads to glorification of the Deliverer; and thus a kind of godly chain reaction has set in. (Leupold)

Deuteronomy 31:6. This was spoken to Joshua as he was about to take over leadership from Moses. God promises to be with him at all times. He gives us that same promise.

2. Despite her tragic situation Naomi still had the hope and faith in the LORD to arise and begin anew. (CC)

3. The Oriental hearer would probably have understood that Orpah and Ruth were accompanying Naomi at least out of courtesy for a certain distance before turning back to their homeland.

4. Desolate Naomi repeatedly urges her daughters-in-law to return to their original homes in Moab (here; vv. 11–12, 15); she has nothing to offer them. (CSB)

In Ruth 1:8, the "mother's house" also relates to the concerns of women who are bereft of husbands and who, by necessity, are themselves taking the initiative. It is a place of safe haven in time of crisis. It is significant that in the same context, Naomi appropriately refers to the "house" of each woman's future "husband" when she speaks of "security" (Ruth 1:9), which husbands had the duty to provide. (CC)

Ruth 1:9 is the first of three times (see also 1:11 and 1:13) that Naomi impresses upon the young women the necessity of finding new husbands. Her kissing them in this context meant that she was taking final leave of them (Gen 31:28; 2 Sam 19:40; 1 Ki 19:20). Kissing and loud weeping is the Oriental expression of sorrow (Gen 21:16; 27:38; Judg 2:4; 21:2; 1 Sam 11:4; 30:4). (CC)

5. Naomi affirmed God's participation in the events. Her statement is a confession of faith and sorrowful resolve much like Job's (Jb 1:21). (TLSB)

Naomi demonstrated that she had not lost her faith in the LORD. Her family had lost their means of making a living in Judah due to a famine, and she had lost all her immediate family—her husband and both sons—in Moab. Nevertheless, she did not take such advice as given by Job's wife, "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). For she believed that it was the LORD—the same God who had permitted her misfortunes—who now provided food for his people in Judah (Ruth 1:6), and who would also provide for her again there. (CC)

The word "kindness" is the same word is in the psalms refrain, "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, and his mercy endures forever" (e.g., Psalm 136). It occurs 256 times in the OT, and lies behind "grace" in the NT. In Ruth, it occurs again in 2:20 and 3:10. The theme is that human "kindness/mercy/faithfulness" is a reflection of God's prior grace. Those who appropriate God's gift of grace through faith are blessed by him, and this

blessing of grace even extends past this earthly life (Ruth2:20). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 4)

6. Naomi was referring to marriage that would have had Elimelech’s brother would be legally obligated to marry Naomi to perpetuate Elimelech’s name and posterity (vv 12–13). Naomi ironically described a legal and logical possibility that would never be fulfilled: following Dt 25:5–6, Naomi’s brother-in-law would marry her so that she could give birth to sons, who in due time would marry the two older widows Ruth and Orpah. (TLSB)

7. Naomi’s words convinced Orpah to seek security through her own efforts. Ruth was willing to face a life of poverty, lack of marriage, childlessness, and prejudice in Israel. She could not live without Naomi and the God of Israel, even if she was to be treated as a second-class citizen in the Promised Land. (TLSB)

Orpah had believed and worshiped as her husband did. She now renounced her faith in the God of Israel, thinking she could better care for herself than could the Lord. (TLSB)

8. Naomi’s final argument toward Ruth was to follow Orpah’s example (1:15). This must have been one of Ruth’s greatest temptations, to give in to peer pressure (cf. Mt 19:29; Lk 14:26; Jn 6:66–67). But this crucial attempt to dissuade Ruth proved to be the final provocation that evoked from her precisely the opposite response: the LORD brought about her full renunciation of her past relationships and her outpouring of total commitment to Naomi and her LORD. With the exquisite wordplay between “her god(s)” (Ruth 1:15) and “your God is my God” (1:16), Ruth placed herself in contrast not only to Orpah but also to Naomi, who had directed her back to Orpah’s god. (CC)

Ruth is the model for many converts to Christ throughout the history of the church, including the present, who thereby cross cultural as well as religious barriers and often alienate their families and ethnic or national people, but who are united in Christ with Christians of all backgrounds. Likewise, husband and wife who are united with each other through faith in Christ are empowered to reconcile differences of nationality, culture, and race, as challenging as that may be. (CC)

9. Every Near Eastern village is astir (“excited,” abuzz with conversation, 1:19) at the arrival of strangers or long-absent returnees. It was natural for Naomi and Ruth to have been greeted by the women of the town, who would have been tending to their household duties while the men were in the fields busy with the harvest. Of course, even if men had seen them and recognized Naomi, it would be unseemly for them to strike up a conversation with women to whom they were not closely related; they would have sent their wives to investigate. (CC)

10. Returning home to Bethlehem without her husband and sons, Naomi was overwhelmed by sadness. When the women called out her name, she was struck by a note of irony, for her name means “pleasant.” Her life had become anything but pleasant, so she cried out that she should rather be called “Mara,” meaning “bitter” (1:20), which recalled the bitter suffering of the Israelites in Egypt. The repetition of her negative attitude (as previously in 1:11–13) contrasts with Ruth’s positive one (1:16–17). Although she had already felt very bitter, she now makes the contrast appropriate for her new condition. This means that, in respect to redefining her for the community, Naomi rejected her former social category as a wife and mother blessed by God for one who has

been left destitute. Although she had already felt very bitter before (1:13), she now makes the contrast in a wordplay on her name. Names in Israel were often descriptions of inner character which may also influence the person's conduct or future. As a change in name or a new second name signified a change in character or status, so Naomi called for a new name appropriate for her new condition. (CC)

11. Many faithful believers from the old and new covenants have also experienced being in the pit of despair, from the plagued Job (7:5–11), the hunted David (Ps 22:7–19; Psalm 142), the surrounded Hezekiah (2 Ki 18:17–19:37), the mourning Jeremiah (Lamentations 1), and the drowning Jonah (2:2–10 [ET 2:1–9]), to John the Baptizer in prison (Mt 11:2–3) and the grieving Peter (Mt 26:75; Lk 22:62). Our Lord Jesus Christ “emptied himself” (Phil 2:7), was in agony in Gethsemane (Mt 26:37–39; Lk 22:44), under Pilate (Mt 27:26; Jn 19:1), and on the cross (Mt 27:46), and died empty-handed (see Mt 27:35). We recall our severely persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ, from ancient Rome's Colosseum to modern North Korea, southern Sudan, the mountain tribes of Laos and Vietnam, and Indonesia's West Papua. To these as well as to us, our victorious Lord calls out, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage: I have overcome the world!” (Jn 16:33). His resurrection is the pledge that we shall inherit the fullness of life everlasting in the new creation (Revelation 21–22). (CC)

12. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem just as the renewed fullness of the land is beginning to be harvested—an early hint that Naomi will be full again. Reference to the barley harvest also prepares the reader for the next major scene in the harvest fields. (CSB)