

FAITH THROUGH TRIALS

God can use life's tragedies to bring about His purposes.

RUTH 1:6-18

MEMORY VERSE: RUTH 1:16

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Ruth 1:1-22, First Thoughts (p. 124), and Understand the Context (pp. 124-125). Review the Introduction to Ruth (pp. 10-11). Circle the key words in Ruth's commitment statement. Make note of what these key words reveal about her values and beliefs.
- **STUDY** Ruth 1:6-18, using Explore the Text on pages 125-129. As you study, notice Naomi's attempts to dissuade Ruth from accompanying her home to Judah.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 130-131), More Ideas (p. 132), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and ideas online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to customize the plans according to the needs of your group.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: ☐ Personal Study Guides; and ☐ Posterboard and markers. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: ☐ **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outlines of Joshua; Judges; Ruth*); ☐ **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Winter 2016-17*); ☐ **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Joshua; Judges; Ruth*); ☐ **PACK ITEM 14** (*Poster: Ruth 1:16*).



FIRST THOUGHTS

KEY DOCTRINE

The Family

God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. It is composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood, or adoption.

Life is filled with tragedies. People receive bad news from their doctors. A midnight call brings unwelcome news of loved ones killed in auto accidents. A woman cries bitterly before her parents because her marriage has failed. A husband comes home dejected because he has lost his job. Children lay in cancer treatment medical centers across the country. Nightly news announces another disaster with multiple fatalities. Tragedies abound.

Many people believe life is only supposed to be filled with joy, success, happiness, and unencumbered progress. Tragedy knocks them off their feet. They often become depressed, disillusioned, and despondent. God can use the greatest tragedies of life to bring them to a much deeper level of dependency on Him.

(In PSG, p. 123) **What events in life cause the greatest distress or desperation? How do these things move us forward in our spiritual growth?**

BIBLE SKILL

Create a compare/contrast chart to study a passage.

On one side of a vertical line, identify words and phrases that describe Ruth's pledge to Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17). On the other side, note words and phrases that describe Peter's pledge to Jesus on the night of his betrayal (Matt. 26:33-34, 74-75; Mark 14:29-30, 68-72; Luke 22:33-34, 60-61; John 13:37-38; 18:27). How are the pledges similar? How do these pledges compare to your pledge to follow Christ?

In this week's session we are studying the triple tragedy experienced by Naomi in losing her husband and both of her sons. To make matters worse, she lost them on foreign soil away from Bethlehem, her hometown. She had fled to Moab with her husband and two sons to escape a ravenous famine. The promise of a better life became a nightmare of grief as Naomi became a widow and the mother-in-law of two widows. Yet, in the midst of this horrible devastation, God used the tragedies of Naomi's life to bring about His purposes.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

RUTH 1:1-22

The story of Ruth occurred during the time of the judges (Ruth 1:1). No attempt is made to date the story precisely. The book presents a rather idyllic picture of life compared to the chaos and bloodshed so often found in the Book of Judges. In Judges, we read of shortsighted selfishness, frequent turmoil, and constant unfaithfulness. In Ruth, we read of preserving selflessness, steady tranquility, and complete devotion on Ruth's part toward Naomi. Whereas Judges focuses on leaders, the Book of Ruth focuses on laypeople like Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth, living out their faith during trying circumstances.

Ruth was from Moab, a perennial enemy of Judah. Yet Elimelech [ih LIM uh lek] and Naomi migrated there with their two sons, Mahlon [MA lahn] and Chilion [KIL ih ahn], during a famine in Bethlehem. Over the course of time, Elimelech died of an unstated cause, and his two sons each

married Moabite women. Mahlon married Ruth; Chilion married Orpah. Within a decade, both men died of unspecified causes. Naomi decided to return home and urged her widowed daughters-in-law to return to their own homes and marry Moabite men. Orpah went home; Ruth stayed with Naomi.

The stage was set for a fascinating story of providence and grace. The story of Ruth answered important questions for the Hebrew people. First, how did three vulnerable widows, whose welfare was tied to their late husbands, survive in a harsh time? Second, how did a Moabitess get into King David's genealogy? Third, Does God's sovereignty extend beyond the promised land's borders? Is Yahweh Lord of the Moabites as well?

The Book of Ruth contains two intriguing and important concepts. First, it illustrates the practice of levirate marriage, whereby a male kinsman of a deceased man married his widow and had children in order to continue his brother's line. Second, it illustrates the concept of the family redeemer, whereby ancestral land was redeemed and kept in the family. The two concepts are closely intertwined and masterfully displayed in Ruth.

The story of Ruth closes with the celebration over the birth of Boaz and Ruth's son, Obed. The concluding genealogy covers ten generations, extending from Perez to David. Boaz, the family redeemer in Ruth's story, appears seventh in the list, and his son, Obed, is eighth. By embedding Ruth's husband and son in this genealogy, Ruth's story is shown to be part of the much larger narrative of God's redemptive activity among His people.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Old Testament Themes in the Book of Ruth" in the Winter 2016-17 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

A DESPERATE RETURN (RUTH 1:6-10)

VERSES 6-7

Bereft of her husband and sons, Naomi decided to return to her homeland, Judah. ***She had heard in Moab that the LORD had paid attention to His people's need by providing them food.*** How Naomi heard is not specified; presumably travelers or traders passing between the regions brought the report. The statement *the LORD had paid attention to His people* is an expression of divine blessing.

In this case, the blessing came in the form of *providing them food* to end the famine that drove Elimelech and Naomi to Moab in the first place. The Hebrew word for food is *lechem*, the same word appearing in the last half of the name Beth-Lechem, or Bethlehem, meaning "House of Bread." Once again there was bread in the House of Bread.

Naomi ***left the place where she had been living.*** Her ***two daughters-in-law*** accompanied Naomi as she began her journey ***to the land of Judah***, specifically Bethlehem. During the period of the judges, the land of Judah was a tribal territory, not a separate nation from Israel, as was the case after Solomon's death.

The probable location for ***the road leading back to the land of Judah*** was just north of the Dead Sea. Travelers would descend from the mountains of

RUTH 1:6-7

⁶ She and her daughters-in-law prepared to leave the land of Moab, because she had heard in Moab that the LORD had paid attention to His people's need by providing them food.

⁷ She left the place where she had been living, accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, and traveled along the road leading back to the land of Judah.

Moab in the region of Mount Nebo/Pisgah, enter the Jordan River Valley almost 1,300 feet below sea level, and then start the gradual ascent to Jericho at 740 feet below sea level. From Jericho, they would journey westward, ascending to approximately 2,500 feet near Jerusalem before turning south for the final five miles to Bethlehem. The trip was arduous and fraught with dangers (as revealed in the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10:26-37).

RUTH 1:8-9

⁸ She said to them, “Each of you go back to your mother’s home. May the LORD show faithful love to you as you have shown to the dead and to me. ⁹ May the LORD enable each of you to find security in the house of your new husband.” She kissed them, and they wept loudly.

VERSES 8-9

Naomi encouraged each of her daughters-in-law to return to their **mother’s home** where they would have the best chance of survival. She blessed Ruth and Orpah, asking the Lord to show them **faithful love**. The phrase *faithful love* (*chesed*) is the word for “covenant loyalty.” Naomi was asking God to treat Ruth and Orpah as covenant partners, though both were Moabites.

Naomi was impressed by the loyalty both young widows had shown in honoring the memory of her deceased sons, most notably in the kind way they had treated her. Widows were vulnerable members of ancient society. Rather than forsake Naomi in a land foreign to her, Ruth and Orpah stayed with her. Their respect for Mahlon and Chilion, even after their deaths, motivated Naomi to bless them. The *chesed* she wished for them was motivated by the kindness they had **shown to the dead** (her sons) and to her. The effect of Naomi’s blessing was to release both daughters-in-law from any sense of further obligation. They were free to return to the safety of their mothers’ homes with her blessing.

Naomi also asked that the Lord would **enable** each of them to **find security**. In this context, *enable* means “to give” security, referring to a resting place. Though Naomi had experienced being uprooted from her home in Bethlehem due to famine and the deaths of her husband and sons, she wished for her daughters-in-law lives of rest and tranquility.

In verse 8, Naomi told her widowed daughters-in-law to return to their mothers’ homes. Ultimately, however, they would find security in the house of a **new husband**. This two-part blessing of the young widows was sealed with an affectionate act when Naomi **kissed them**. Overwhelmed by the emotions of the moment, they all **wept loudly**. Bereft of her husband and sons, Naomi also was figuratively losing her daughters by marriage. She was about to be a lonely widow wandering home into an uncertain future. Who knows what might have happened?

RUTH 1:10

¹⁰ “No,” they said to her. “We will go with you to your people.”

VERSE 10

Both daughters-in-law refused to leave Naomi. They determined to continue on, telling her: **We will go with you to your people**. No doubt Naomi was moved by their devotion. For that moment at least, she felt loved and a bit less vulnerable.

What about us? How do we fare when life throws us an unexpected curve? When Naomi heard that Bethlehem once again had food, she attributed the blessing to the Lord’s having paid attention to His people’s need (1:6). When she blessed her widowed daughters-in-law, she implored for them the Lord’s favor and security (1:8-9). In the midst of tragedy, Naomi demonstrated her faith in God’s watch and care over her and over her daughters-in-law. Parting was painful, but Naomi did not want to saddle her in-laws with unnecessary burdens and disadvantages.

(In PSG, p. 126) **Should a believer be ashamed for feeling desperate or distraught? Explain.**

A BITTER PLEA (RUTH 1:11-14)

VERSES 11-12

Naomi was a realist. She knew she had nothing to offer her daughters-in-law should they return to Bethlehem with her. So she pleaded with them to return to their parents' households. She reminded them that she would not be able to provide for them. Her directive, **return home**, was given as a kind-hearted release of any obligations the daughters-in-law might have thought they owed Naomi. Her first question—**why do you want to go with me?**—revealed her sense of utter depletion. She had nothing to give her daughters-in-law.

Her second question—**am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands?**—alluded to the Hebrew cultural practice of the levirate marriage. This social custom encouraged men with deceased brothers to raise up children by their widows. But Naomi was old, a widow herself, and having more sons was lost in the confusion of her own desperation. This question is rhetorical, demanding a resounding no.

Naomi repeated her directive, **return home**. She revealed her love for them by referring to them as **my daughters**. Three times in the Book of Ruth, Naomi displayed her love for Ruth and Orpah by addressing them simply as *my daughters* (1:11,12,13). She pressed the reality of her situation by declaring, **I am too old to have another husband**. Though Naomi said, **even if I thought there was still hope**, her words conveyed a deep sense of her hopelessness. The completion of her thought, to have a husband tonight and to bear sons, was for Naomi a bygone time of life.

VERSE 13

The first part of this verse continues the question begun in verse 12, wherein Naomi asked her daughters-in-law: **would you be willing to wait for them to grow up?** Clearly, *them* referred to any sons she might have in her what-if scenario. She followed with an additional question focused on the price they would have to pay: **Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying?** The verb *restrain* derives from a Hebrew word meaning “to shut oneself off,” particularly from marriage. This verb, occurring only here in the Hebrew Bible, underscores Ruth and Orpah’s loyalty by portraying their willingness to forego potentially bright futures to stay with Naomi.

Naomi realized they had much life to live and much promise of a bright future. She was not willing to nullify those possibilities by encouraging an admirable but misdirected loyalty. Naomi loved her daughters-in-law, and they had been too loyal to her to take advantage of them.

Naomi completed her bitter pleas for them to return to their homes by acknowledging that her life was much too bitter to share. She had

RUTH 1:11-12

¹¹ But Naomi replied, “Return home, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands?”

¹² Return home, my daughters. Go on, for I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me to have a husband tonight and to bear sons,

RUTH 1:13

¹³ would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me.”

nothing to look forward to herself and nothing to offer them. Her pleas were motivated by love, nothing less. Naomi understood her misery as something that came because **the LORD's hand** had **turned against** her. Today's reader should not view Naomi's statement as blaming God in any way for making Naomi's life bitter. Rather, she confirmed that the Lord's hand was on her situation. Bitterness had come her way; even so, the Lord would care for her as she returned home.

RUTH 1:14

¹⁴ Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

RUTH 1:15

¹⁵ Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god. Follow your sister-in-law."

RUTH 1:16

¹⁶ But Ruth replied: Do not persuade me to leave you or go back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.

VERSE 14

When Naomi finished, all three women **wept loudly**, an open display of their deep-seated affection. •**Orpah** tearfully heeded Naomi's plea as she kissed her mother-in-law before leaving. The biblical text casts no aspersions on Orpah. She had displayed her loyalty to Naomi, leaving only after the greatest emotional turmoil.

Ruth remained committed to going with Naomi. The verb **clung** graphically displays the depths of Ruth's love and loyalty to her mother-in-law. This love and loyalty would be the foundation for the remainder of the story. In spite of Naomi's bitter pleas, Ruth was willing to surrender any bright future she might have had in order to minister to Naomi.

(In PSG, p. 127) **What steps could we take toward trusting God if life turns bitter for us?**

A LIFELONG PROMISE (RUTH 1:15-18)

VERSE 15

Naomi challenged Ruth's decision to remain with her by appealing to Orpah's departure. Apparently, Orpah's devotion to Naomi was considered as robust as Ruth's devotion, but Orpah still went **back to her people and to her god**. Naomi's point was clear—Ruth's devotion, while admirable, should not deter her from securing the best possible future for herself by returning home. This verse contains the only reference in the Book of Ruth to the god of the Moabites, known from Numbers 21:29 as Chemosh [KEE mahsh].

Naomi directed Ruth to follow her sister-in-law. The verb **follow**, literally "turn after," is an imperative or command. Naomi was persistent in her belief that her daughters-in-law could avoid further bitterness only by going back to their mothers' homes and eventually finding new husbands.

VERSE 16

Ruth was more persistent in her loyalty to stay than Naomi was in her directives to leave. Ruth told her mother-in-law: **Do not persuade me to leave you or go back and not follow you**. The directive *do not persuade* can be rendered as "stop entreating." Ruth wanted to override Naomi's strong bitterness of soul with an even stronger show of support.

Though a Moabite, she declared her allegiance to Naomi and to Naomi's God—Yahweh. The remainder of this verse contains four of six positive affirmations Ruth made to her mother-in-law. Ruth affirmed she would **go** and **live** wherever Naomi would go and live. To these two affirmations, Ruth added the affirmation that Naomi's **people** would be her people. The fourth affirmation was the greatest of all. Ruth affirmed that Naomi's **God** would be her God.

VERSE 17

Ruth made a fifth affirmation. She would **die** wherever Naomi died. This affirmation was Ruth's way of telling Naomi she would never forsake her. Ruth vowed to be with her mother-in-law for the rest of Naomi's life. Moreover, when Ruth said she would die wherever Naomi died, she was declaring her intent of never returning to Moab, to her people, or to her god, even after Naomi passed away. Since Naomi was much older than Ruth, this fifth affirmation was extraordinary.

Ruth's sixth and final affirmation was to be **buried** in the same place where she and Naomi died. This affirmation speaks of a loyalty extending to the grave. God was bringing about His purposes in Naomi's tragedies using the strength of Ruth's faithfulness. With these six affirmations Ruth tempered Naomi's bitter view of life. Scholars have noted Ruth's vow of loyalty to Naomi as being among Scripture's loftiest expressions of commitment.

Ruth buttressed her affirmations by putting herself under an oath: **May Yahweh punish me**. By invoking the name of Yahweh, Ruth demonstrated her faithfulness to Naomi's God. The additional statement **and do so severely** literally means "to repeat" the punishment.

Ruth's oath was conditioned on the circumstance of anything but death separating her and Naomi. In effect, Ruth was telling Naomi, "You will never see a day of your life without me in it to aid, to comfort, and to sustain you." Though Naomi no doubt had many apprehensions to work through, she had to be encouraged by Ruth's strength of character.

VERSE 18

Ruth's persistence won the day. **Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her**. The Hebrew verbal clause, literally "strengthening herself to go," indicates an unabated determination on Ruth's part.

Naomi **stopped trying to persuade her** to go home. Ruth had made a lifelong promise to Naomi; she had backed it up with a vow before God. In the end, Naomi knew it was time to return to the land of Judah, to the city of Bethlehem. She also knew Ruth would be by her side.

(In PSG, p. 129) **What does a person's response to life's difficulties reveal about what he or she values? How do the difficulties of life sharpen our faith in God?**

RUTH 1:17

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yahweh punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.

RUTH 1:18

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped trying to persuade her.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

GUIDE: After welcoming the group, invite volunteers to name types of tragedies that come into our lives (illness, broken relationships, death, job loss, etc.). Record their responses on a posterboard.

DISCUSS: *How do these things move us forward in our spiritual growth?* (PSG, p. 123)

INTRODUCE: Summarize the information in Understand the Context (pp. 124-125; PSG, pp. 123-124) to help the group understand that as we move into the Book of Ruth, it is still the period of the judges, but we will focus on the story of one family living during that time. Use **Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Joshua; Judges; Ruth*), **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Winter 2016-17*), and **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Joshua; Judges; Ruth*) as visuals to aid your discussion.

TRANSITION: *In today's study in Ruth, we will see how God can work to bring about His purposes, even in the tragedies of our lives.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Ruth 1:6-10, pointing out Naomi's desperate situation: she was an older woman living in a foreign land, and her husband and two sons had died. Call for two volunteers to read aloud the two paragraphs under Verses 6-7 (PSG, pp. 124-125) to help the group better understand the physical setting for this story.

DISCUSS: *What did Naomi encourage her daughters-in-law to do? How did they respond?*

GUIDE: Instruct the group to read silently the information under Verses 8-10 (PSG, p. 125) and underline any details that help to better understand why Naomi urged her daughters-in-law to return to their homes. Call for volunteers to share what they found.

DISCUSS: *Should a believer be ashamed for feeling desperate or distraught? Explain.* (PSG, p. 126)

TRANSITION: *We need not ever feel ashamed for feeling desperate or distraught. God cares for us and provides help through the support of family, friends, and healthcare providers. Now let's look to verses 11-14 to find Naomi's plan for her daughters-in-law.*

READ: Read aloud Ruth 1:11-14, while the group listens for Naomi's reasons for telling her daughters-in-law to return to their parents' homes. Use the information under Verse 11 (PSG, p. 126) to help the group understand levirate marriage.

ASK: *What reasons did Naomi give for wanting her daughters-in-law to return to their homes? How did Naomi view her situation at this point?*

DISCUSS: *What makes it so hard to honestly express our feelings when facing a difficulty? Do you think it is more difficult to express emotions to others or to God? Explain.*

TRANSITION: *Note that all three women wept over the struggle of this situation. There was no easy solution or quick fix. Orpah followed Naomi's urging and headed back to her home, but Ruth continued on the journey with Naomi.*

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Ruth 1:15-18, while the group listens for the ways Ruth expressed her commitment to Naomi and to God.

GUIDE: Call attention to **Pack Item 14** (Poster: Ruth 1:16). Discuss how Ruth's statement displayed her willingness to keep her promises. Highlight the paragraphs under Verses 15-18 in the PSG (pp. 128-129) to help the group better understand the meanings of the words Ruth used in her promise to stay with Naomi.

DISCUSS: *What does a person's response to life's difficulties reveal about what he or she values? How do the difficulties of life sharpen our faith in God?* (PSG, p. 129)

SHARE: *Although it can be hard to see the good when we are in the midst of some trial in our lives, with the benefit of hindsight, we can often appreciate that our faith grows most during these challenging times.*

STUDY: Make two columns on posterboard, one labeled "Ruth's Pledge to Naomi" and the other "Peter's Pledge to Jesus." Then guide the group to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 129 of the PSG: *On one side of a vertical line, identify words and phrases that describe Ruth's pledge to Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17). On the other side, note words and phrases that describe Peter's pledge to Jesus on the night of his betrayal (Matt. 26:33-34, 74-75; Mark 14:29-30, 68-72; Luke 22:33-34, 60-61; John 13:37-38; 18:27). How are the pledges similar? How do these pledges compare to your pledge to follow Christ?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

ASK: *Is there anything from today's study you have questions about?* Respond to the questions based on your understanding of the Scripture. If there are questions you cannot answer, work to get an answer before your group meets again.

DIRECT: Direct attention to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 130): *How can your Bible study group interact with those experiencing trials to let them know of your love, concern, and support? Share ideas with each other.* Call for volunteers to share their responses. Urge the group to think of practical ways to support each other through times of trials.

CHALLENGE: Encourage the group to be alert this coming week to those experiencing trials and then be bold to take the first step in helping.

DO: As time allows, call attention to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 130): *Define a trial or difficulty you are presently facing. What actions can you take that will demonstrate faith in Jesus? Ask God to strengthen your faith in Him through this experience.* Encourage the group to jot down a personal response in their PSG.

PRAY: Thank God for the confidence we have in His guidance and the comfort He provides during times of difficulties.



PRACTICE

- Contact the group after the session, encouraging them to ponder Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi and her allegiance to God during a desperate time. Challenge them to hold on to God's promise of His presence in every situation we face.
- Pray for your group, especially anyone who is facing difficulties or making hard decisions right now. Pray they will find God very real and relevant in their lives during this difficult time.
- Contact any absentees or visitors, and encourage your group to do the same.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the introduction, ask the group, by show of raised hands, how many of them have watched television programs about home makeovers—where a neglected house is renovated and turned into a showcase property. Note that it's fun to see the change that takes place when the experts tackle a dilapidated fixer-upper house. Say: *In today's study, we are going to see how God can take lives that are in desperate need of restoration and turn them into something truly beautiful for His glory.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- For further discussion on Ruth 1:11-14, invite everyone to pair off and answer the following questions: *What makes it so hard to honestly express our feelings when facing a difficulty? Do you think it is more difficult to express emotions to others or to God? Explain.*
- To help reinforce the idea in Ruth 1:15-18 that God is working for our good even in life's difficulties, ask: *When have you seen difficulties in your life working out as a part of God's plan? How can we encourage each other to keep trusting God even while facing difficulties?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Direct the group to the first question set in the PSG on page 130: *Reflect on trials and difficulties you have faced in your life. What did you learn about yourself and God? How have you built on these lessons learned? With whom do you need to share these lessons?* Call for volunteers to share their responses.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Sing or read the lyrics to "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," by Thomas Chisholm, focusing on the words of the chorus that remind us of God's constant faithfulness in our lives.