

# Covenant Kindness

Ruth 1:8-18

**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. **10** “No,” they said to her. “We will go with you to your people.” **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, **13** would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarriage? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me.” **14** Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. **15** Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god. Follow your sister-in-law.” **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. **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. **18** When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped trying to persuade her.



# Exploration

The students in your group probably think of themselves as kind people. You probably think of yourself this way. Most people think that they are kind at heart. What does it mean, however, to be kind? And what does Scripture say about the human heart? Is it naturally kind? Paul, quoting Psalms, says in Romans 3 that there is no one who is righteous and does good (Rom. 3:10-11; Ps. 14:1-3). Isaiah described the human heart as deeply deceitful and desperately sick (Jer. 17:9). To be kind is to desire good for and do good unto others. So, according to the Bible, our hearts are not naturally bent toward kindness. True kindness is unusual because it goes against our selfish nature as sinful human beings (Rom. 1:18-32) because to be truly kind to others requires that you sacrifice your desires for the good of others. Therefore true kindness is supernatural—it doesn't come from us. The fact that there is kindness in the world is evidence of the goodness of God. In today's session, we will see an unlikely person show tremendous kindness to someone in need when she had every reason not to. Through the story of Ruth, students will be challenged to celebrate the kindness of God by actively demonstrating His kindness to others.

## CONTEXT (RUTH 1:1-22)

The story of Ruth is set “during the time of the Judges” (Ruth 1:1). The faith displayed in the Book of Ruth contrasts sharply with the accounts of faithlessness in the Book of Judges. The events in Ruth are precipitated by “a famine in the land” (v. 1). While famine may be challenging for most Americans to understand, the Hebrews knew famine all too well. There was famine during the days of Abraham (Gen. 12:10), Joseph (Gen. 41:54-57), David (2 Sam. 21:1), Elijah (1 Kings 18:2), Elisha (2 Kings 4:38), Haggai (Hag. 1:10-11), and Nehemiah (Neh. 5:3).

We are not told the cause of the famine during the time of Ruth. Drought was the most common cause of famines in the Old Testament, but famines sometimes were attributed to God's judgment. In Deuteronomy 28, the curses for disobedience to the covenant included famine. If God's people went after other gods, He would send enemies to destroy their crops and occupy their land. This happened during the time of the judges, as we saw in session 10. Midianite armies trampled Judah's wheat fields ‘like a great swarm of locusts’ (Judg. 6:5), leaving devastation behind them.

To escape the effects of famine, an Israelite named Elimelech moved with his wife, Naomi, and two sons from Bethlehem in Judah to the land of Moab (Ruth 1:1). Though the Moabites were perennial enemies of Judah, Elimelech was forced to move his family there in search of food.

After a short time, Elimelech died (v. 3). His two sons then married Moabite women (Ruth and Orpah). Ten years later the sons died as well (v. 4). Naomi was left in a foreign land without the support of husband or sons. Deciding to return to Judah, she instructed her daughters-in-law to return to their families in Moab. Ruth insisted on going with Naomi. Together, Naomi and Ruth returned to Naomi's home in Bethlehem.



# Conversation

› **Share about a time when someone went out of their way to show you kindness. What did they do? How did it make you feel?**

› **Why do we sometimes neglect opportunities to show kindness to others?**

Serving others in meaningful ways, in ways that truly help them flourish, is costly. Think about a time when someone went out of their way to serve you or show you kindness. At the very least it cost them their time, but more than likely it cost more than that—money, energy, personal freedom. True kindness requires setting aside your own agenda and elevating the needs and desires of others. Knowing this, it is not difficult to see why we often neglect opportunities to show kindness to others—we count the cost and decide it is not worth it. We are selfish (2 Tim. 3:2). In this session, we will explore the story of a young woman who embraced an opportunity to show kindness at great cost to herself. Ruth was even given an out by the person she had the opportunity to serve, yet she chose the risky, costly choice over the easy one. She put the needs of someone she cared about first. In so doing, she points us forward to the one who has served us at greatest cost—Jesus Christ who emptied Himself for the purpose of showing us kindness (Phil. 2:7-8).

## CONTEXT

› **The story of Ruth happened during the time of the judges. What do you know about this time from our study of Judges (see Judg. 21:25)?**

As we have seen, the days when the judges ruled (v. 1) marks the time between Joshua and Samuel's leadership of Israel. The Book of Judges ends with the editorial comment "all the people did what seemed right in their own eyes." A quick glance through the book illustrates exactly what that means. From the beginning to end, the Book of Judges tells the same story over and over—Israel rebels against God by worshipping idols and living recklessly, God judges them by the hands of the surrounding nations, Israel cries out to Him in their distress, and God raises up a judge to deliver them. It was a dark time. There was no consistent spiritual leadership and despite God's mighty acts of deliverance, the people of Israel kept falling back into idolatry. Yet time and time again, God shows His kindness to Israel, by raising up Judges to deliver them. This time in Israel's history is the backdrop for the story of Ruth.

› **Read Judges 1:1-7. What happened to Naomi in these verses? Why might Naomi's situation have been even more difficult than a similar situation for a woman today?**



# Leader Prep



## RUTH 1:8-10

Naomi attempted to persuade Ruth and Orpah not to go to Bethlehem with her. The phrase go back actually translates two imperatives in Hebrew. Naomi commanded her daughters-in-law, literally, “to walk, return” to their mother’s home. She offered them her blessing with may the Lord show faithful love to you. The Hebrew word translated faithful love is the word for God’s covenant loyalty (*chesed*). Naomi was asking the Lord to treat Ruth and Orpah as members of the covenant, though both were Moabites. The fact that the Lord would bestow His faithful love on the non-Hebrew women should not be lost on modern readers. God loves all peoples, regardless of race, ethnicity, social standing, or gender.

The Old Testament world offered little to no support for widows. (By contrast, the Old Testament records numerous passages of God's concern and care for widows, see Deut. 14:28-29; 27:19; Ps. 68:5; 146:9). Naomi knew it was in Ruth and Orpah's best interests to return to their homeland and remarry. Thus, she offered an additional blessing to encourage them to find security in the house of a new husband. With her two-part blessing, Naomi was releasing her daughters-in-law from any sense of further obligation. She was willing to put their best interests above her personal preferences.

One cannot miss the love that Naomi had for Ruth and Orpah as she kissed them, and they wept loudly. She had lost her husband and her two sons. Now she was willing to give up her two daughters-in-law.

Ruth and Orpah's reply and determination may have surprised Naomi. Both daughters-in-law repeated their desire to return with Naomi. They insisted: "We will go with you to your people." It is a testimony to Naomi's good character that the women did not want to leave her.

## RUTH 1:11-14

Again, Naomi insisted the women return to their homeland. Naomi's two questions—Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who would become your husbands?—reflect the cultural expectations of a Levirate marriage. Deuteronomy 25:5 established this ancient principle: "When brothers live on the same property and one of them dies without a son, the wife of the dead man may not marry a stranger outside the family."

The story of Ruth is one of the few stories in the Bible that is told from a woman's point of view, perhaps even more striking is the fact that this woman was a Moabite. While there was no official law against marrying Moabites (Deut. 7:1- 4), the practice was discouraged due to the fact that Moabites worshiped false gods.

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# Conversation

Because of a famine in Israel, Naomi and her husband Elimelech were living in Moab. In the course of ten years, Naomi lost her husband and two sons. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law were now widows. In ancient Israel women did not have the rights and opportunities that they have today. In Naomi's time, when a woman lost her husband, it was the responsibility of the sons to provide for her. With both of her sons deceased, Naomi was in a terrifying financial predicament.

## RUTH 1:8-14

Ruth and Naomi lived in a culture in which a woman was bound to the family into which she had married. When a woman's husband died, her in-laws were to provide another male from within the family either to marry her or at least to bear a son with her. In the latter case, the son would carry on the name of the deceased husband. Equally important to the widow's well-being, however, was the fact that the son would care for her when she became old. This was a duty and a relationship that ancient people took seriously (see Gen. 38:8-10).

› **After losing their husbands, what did Naomi tell her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to do (vv. 8-9)? Why do you think she did this?**

› **What is significant about Naomi weeping with Orpah and Ruth (vv. 10, 14)? What does this tell us about Naomi's relationship with her daughters-in-law?**

Ruth and Orpah were now in the situation of being young women away from their fathers, but also without either husbands or sons. From the standpoint of ancient culture, which lacked any form of welfare and had no respectable occupations for single women, they were in a truly desperate situation. Naomi knew that their only hope was either to return to their fathers' households or to marry new husbands. By pleading with Ruth and Orpah to go back to Bethlehem, Naomi was trying to put her daughter-in-laws' needs ahead of her own. Naomi wanted to release them from any sense of duty to her, knowing that she was not equipped to provide a bright future for them.

› **Naomi said that the "hand of the LORD" was "against" her (v. 13). Was this true? Why or why not?**

› **How did Orpah respond to Naomi's plea? How did Ruth respond (v. 14)? What can you learn from her example?**



# Leader Prep

Her brother-in-law is to take her as his wife.” Levirate marriage served at least three purposes. First, it provided for the widow. Levirate marriage offered widows some sense of security. Second, levirate marriage preserved the family estate. Finally, levirate marriage preserved the family name, an important concept in the Old Testament. Levirate marriage unambiguously communicates God’s concern for widows.

When Naomi’s sons, Mahlon and Chilion died, the levirate marriage law meant that the widows Ruth and Orpah could not look outside Naomi’s family for new husbands as long as they were attached to Naomi. They could marry only close relatives of Naomi who could stand in the place of Elimelech’s deceased sons. Naomi was releasing them from this obligation.

For the third time, Naomi told her daughters-in-law to return home. The concept of levirate marriage can be seen again in Naomi’s reference to the hypothetical situation of her giving birth to more sons to marry Ruth and Orpah. Even if she remarried that very night and conceived a child, Naomi asked Ruth and Orpah: would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Naomi answered her own question with a no.

Naomi wanted a better life for Ruth and Orpah, insisting her own life was much too bitter ... to share. Naomi knew Ruth and Orpah’s prospects for finding new husbands were far better if they returned to their fathers. Then they could marry anyone acceptable to their families and to themselves. Naomi was forcing them to see the harsh truth that their future was bleak if they remained with her. Holding on to them would have been an act of selfishness on Naomi’s part—in her best interest, but not theirs. So she did the painful, unselfish, and compassionate thing: she told them to return home.

Again we read of the women weeping together. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, evidently as a gesture of farewell. It is easy for us to consider Ruth the “good” daughter-in-law and Orpah as the “bad” one. In reality, Orpah didn’t do anything wrong. She too loved Naomi, wept over her, and kissed her when they parted company. Rather than seeing Orpah as bad, we should see Ruth as extraordinarily loyal and loving.

Ruth clung to Naomi. The Hebrew word translated clung can be translated as “bonded.” Ruth had bonded with Naomi to the point she refused to leave. The Book of Genesis uses the same word to describe the intimacy of the marriage relationship in that “a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife” (2:24).



Like Ruth and Orpah who wept with Naomi, Jesus wept with those who wept (John 11:28- 36; Rom. 12:15). By weeping with Mary and Martha prior to raising Lazarus, Jesus was saying that He too hates death. Jesus would then raise Lazarus, promising to do something about the curse of death.



# Conversation

Naomi was correct in seeing God's hand in the events that had transpired. First Samuel 2:6 tells us that God is in control of all things—including life, death, blessing, and suffering. While God was in control of Naomi's situation, His allowance of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah to lose their husbands did not mean that He was against her. In fact, we see God's kindness toward Naomi through Ruth's stubborn determination to stay by her side. God can and does work all things together for the good of His people (Rom. 8:28). God's plan to accomplish our salvation through the death and suffering of His Son is the ultimate proof of this (Acts 2:22-24; Heb. 12:1-2).

## RUTH 1:15-18

- › **What did Ruth's commitment to go with Naomi mean to her? What did Ruth give up to go with Naomi to Bethlehem?**
- › **How does Ruth's statement in verses 16-17 mirror what happens when we receive and begin to follow Christ?**

Naomi referred to Orpah and Ruth as her daughters three times in these verses. The affection Naomi felt for these women was very real. She came to love them and wanted what was best for them. Since Naomi had no other sons for them to marry, she encouraged them to return to their mothers so they might be cared for. While Orpah accepted this kindness, Ruth remained with Naomi and expressed belief and confidence in the God of Israel when Naomi appeared to have very little. Naomi believed that her lot in life was evidence of God's judgment, but the rest of the story demonstrates that this was not the case. Ruth's commitment to Naomi was more than a vow of friendship, it was a decision that had far-reaching spiritual significance. Ruth was taking a massive risk in clinging to Naomi as it meant she would probably never marry and very likely live a life of deep poverty. However, Ruth seems to have seen the bigger picture. Ruth was denying the idols of her Moabite background and clinging to the one true God. Again we see the kindness and mercy of God on display, in bringing a Gentile, a woman of pagan background to faith in Himself and moving that same woman to show Christlike love to Naomi in her time of need.

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**GO DEEPER OPTION:** Read Deuteronomy 31:6 and Hebrews 13:5. Help students make the connection between Ruth's covenant faithfulness to Naomi and God's covenant faithfulness to us. Help them see how knowing that Christ will never leave or forsake them should strengthen them to be faithful to Him.

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# Application

## CENTRAL TRUTH

*God is committed to showing kindness to His people and calls them to commit to showing kindness to others.*

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➤➤ **ITEM 12 (LEADER PACK)** Display the **Ruth 1:16b** pack item where it is visible for students to see. Discuss how faithfulness in our friendships, families, and relationships is crucial to the mission God has given us.

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## NOW WHAT?

- › **How has God brought good out of painful experiences from your past? How might remembering God's past kindness help us face new trials and difficulties?**
- › **How is God at work in the details of your life, drawing you closer to Him? How might we grow to be more aware of God's presence in our everyday lives?**
- › **What are some practical ways we might commit to showing kindness to the people around us? How is this connected to the mission God has given us?**

Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45) and He calls us to do the same (Mark 9:35). We demonstrate that our hope is not in the things of the world when we are willing to part with them in order to serve others. As Ruth demonstrates, true kindness requires the willingness to sacrifice our time, money, and energy for the good of others. These sacrifices, however, are always worthwhile (Matt. 25:40-45) because in so doing, we glorify God and point people to Christ. Furthermore, Christ promises to eternally reward our every sacrifice for His sake and the sake of the gospel (Luke 14:12-14).

- › **As a group, what are some practical ways we might demonstrate our commitment to one another in times of difficulty?**



## PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Finish your group time with these thoughts and encourage students to memorize the verse listed for this session. Memorizing God's Word allows it to dwell in us and allows Him to speak through His Word in our times of need. Also encourage your group to take advantage of the Keep on Digging section in their Personal Study Guides and to take the truths of this section and apply them to their lives.

› **Dwell:** Read Psalm 40 and as you do, journal a list of where David was physically and spiritually, and where the Lord brought him. Also journal your answers to the following questions:

- › How do you see God's sovereignty on display in these verses?
- › How do you see God's mercy and grace?
- › How did David respond to these demonstrations of God's sovereignty, mercy, and grace?
- › How should you respond to the many ways God has shown you His grace? His kindness?

› **Memorize:** Ruth 1:16

› **Pray:** Thank God for being sovereignly in control of your life. Thank Him for His promise to work His ultimate good out of every situation and circumstance you face no matter how bad. Ask God to give you eyes to see the many ways He has shown kindness to you. Pray that He would help you to count the cost and consider it worthwhile to sacrifice of yourself in order to serve others. Pray that God would use you to point many people to Christ by showing self-sacrificial kindness to them.

## KEEP ON DIGGING

Read the following verses and jot down what they tell you about God's kindness. After reading these, journal one way you will seek to demonstrate His kindness to others.

- › Nehemiah 9:17
- › Psalm 31:21; 36:7; 69:16
- › Isaiah 63:7
- › Ephesians 2:7



For an expository verse-by-verse sermon outline/discussion guide that complements this session with a study in Galatians, see [lifeway.com/ETBWIN17JJR](http://lifeway.com/ETBWIN17JJR). For **free** training, go to [MinistryGrid.com/web/ExploreTheBible](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/ExploreTheBible).