

## The Faith of Ruth

Devotional Reading: Acts 10:34–38

Background Scripture: Ruth 1; 4:13–22

Ruth 1:6–18, 22

<sup>6</sup> When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. <sup>7</sup> With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

<sup>8</sup> Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. <sup>9</sup> May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud <sup>10</sup> and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—<sup>13</sup> would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!”

<sup>14</sup> At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

<sup>15</sup> “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

<sup>16</sup> But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” <sup>18</sup> When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

<sup>22</sup> So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

### Key Text

*Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you*

stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”—**Ruth 1:16**

## Faith That Pleases God

### Unit 1: Profiles in Faith

Lessons 1–5

#### Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the three named people in the text.
2. Summarize their situation in light of the period of the judges.
3. State a way that he or she can imitate Ruth’s model of courage and faithfulness.

#### Lesson Outline

##### Introduction

- A. Before and After
- B. Lesson Context

##### I. First Exchange (Ruth 1:6–10)

- A. Naomi Reasons (vv. 6–9a)
- B. Daughters-in-Law Respond (vv. 9b–10)

##### II. Second Exchange (Ruth 1:11–14)

- A. Mother Pleads (vv. 11–13)  
*Dressed in Christ*
- B. Daughters Diverge (v. 14)

##### III. Third Exchange (Ruth 1:15–18, 22)

- A. Naomi’s Final Plea (v. 15)
- B. Ruth’s Promise (vv. 16–18)
- C. Outcome (v. 22)  
*Catching the Vision*

##### Conclusion

- A. Walk with One Another
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

#### How to Say It

Chemosh *Kee-mosh*.

Elimelek *Ee-lim-eh-leck.*

Moabites *Mo-ub-ites.*

Orpah *Or-pah.*

## Introduction

### A. Before and After

Tragedy creates a “before” and an “after”—before the job loss, the accident, the fight; after the break-up, the death, etc. When tragedy strikes, we might question God’s sovereignty or fear that he is using his strength to punish us through our pain. No matter how strong our faith, tragedy can leave us raw and feeling that we are merely surviving.

Reading the stories of tragedy found within the Bible can offer comfort. When we see examples of how others remained faithful to God, we are inspired to persevere. And even more, when we see how God demonstrated his faithfulness to others, we can regain confidence in his provision no matter our current circumstance. We don’t need easy answers in pain; we need God’s love, often expressed through the love of other believers. Ruth’s story is one biblical example of love expressed in the after time of tragedy.

### B. Lesson Context

The author of the book of Ruth is unknown. The date of composition has been proposed as early as King Solomon’s reign (approximately 970–930 BC) to as late as 250 BC, long after the return from Babylonian exile. This huge range speaks to the many factors one might point to as evidence of an earlier or later date as well as the text’s own ambivalence concerning these questions.

The setting of the events within Ruth are comparatively much better defined as occurring during the time of the judges ([Ruth 1:1](#)), that is, sometime between 1373 and 1043 BC. The conquest of Canaan was completed with the Israelite tribes settled in the land ([Joshua 23](#)). But the Israelites experienced oppression from outside nations, Moab occasionally being one of them (example: [Judges 3:12–31](#)). The Moabites were descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot ([Genesis 19:33–37](#)). Conflict with Moab was already ancient by the time the time of the judges in Israel ([Numbers 22–25](#)). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Moabites were banned from entering the assembly of the Lord ([Deuteronomy 2:26–30; 23:3–6](#)), though marriage to Moabites was not banned specifically (contrast [7:1–3](#)).

Despite these deep antipathies, a persistent famine in Israel motivated a certain Naomi’s Israelite family to leave Bethlehem and settle in Moab ([Ruth 1:1](#); see commentary on [1:6, 22](#), below). Ten years are covered quickly in the text, apparently beginning with the death of Naomi’s husband, Elimelek, and ending with the death of her sons ([1:3, 5](#)). In the meantime, these two sons had married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, before leaving them childless with their untimely deaths.

#### What Do You Think?

What circumstances could entice you to start your life over away from home?

## Digging Deeper

What faith challenges and opportunities for growth could you anticipate experiencing?

Widowhood was an especially precarious state for women. In the ancient Near East, including both Moab and Israel, men had far more economic power than women. A woman left without male relatives to care for her could be reduced to abject poverty, and prostitution might result. Fathers or sons were the best lines of defense to protect widows; in the case of younger widows, this protection lasted until new husbands could be found (compare [Genesis 38:11](#); [Leviticus 22:13](#)). God had given Israel specific instructions for caring for widows, both within the family and the larger community (examples: [Deuteronomy 14:28–29](#); [24:17](#); see commentary on [Ruth 1:11](#), below).

### I. First Exchange ([Ruth 1:6–10](#))

#### A. Naomi Reasons (vv. 6–9a)

**6. When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.**

Regarding the journey from the country of *Moab* to Bethlehem, see commentary on [Ruth 1:22](#) (below). Returning to her people was Naomi's best option to be cared for in her widowed state. And God's renewed provision in her homeland meant that her family's legal obligations to care for her (see [Lesson Context](#)) would not burden an already famished community. The inclusion of *her* (Moabite) *daughters-in-law* might surprise us, as their families of origin would be expected to care for them in their widowhood. This tension drives the action to come.

**7. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.**

There is no clear indication regarding how soon after her sons' deaths Naomi received news that the famine in Judah had ended ([Ruth 1:6](#), above). For Naomi, the journey *back to the land of Judah* was a return to her family and the safety net they represented. But using the same rationale of familial obligation and care, Naomi's *two daughters-in-law* would have been expected to stay in their homeland, Moab.

That the Moabite women began this journey with their mother-in-law speaks to the depth of their love for and devotion to her (compare [Ruth 1:11–13](#), below). Traveling with Naomi potentially put her well-being over the younger widows' own future prospects for marriage and family. Following her initially may also indicate that the daughters-in-law were not thinking clearly, stricken as they were by grief at the tremendous loss they had suffered with Naomi (contrast [1:14](#), below).

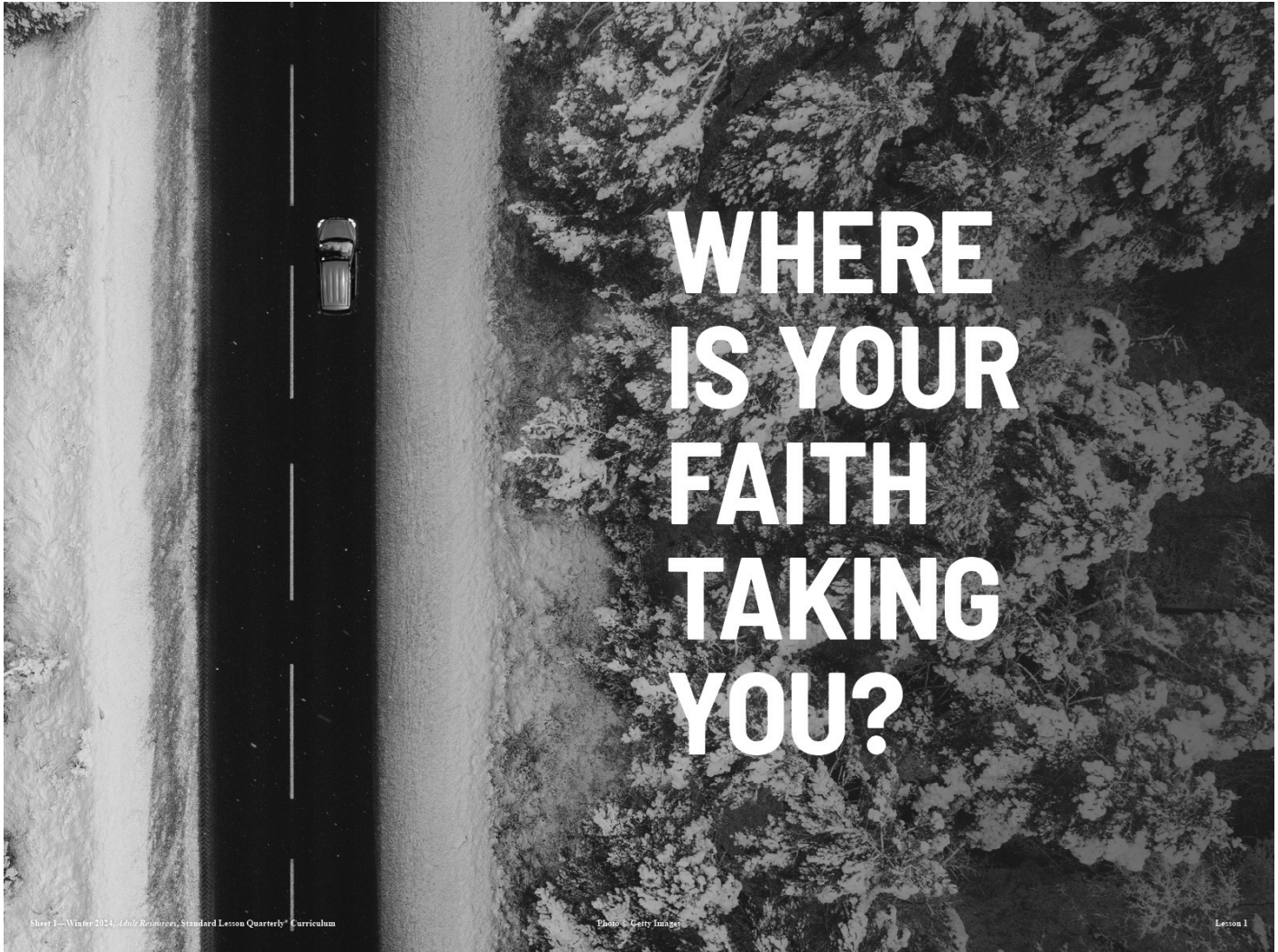
**8a. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother's home.**

We might have expected Naomi to urge the young widows back to their fathers' homes (see [Lesson Context](#)). But returning each to her *mother's home* might mark a subtle shift in focus from the mate-



rial benefit of marriage to the relational ([Genesis 24:28–38, 67](#); [Song of Songs 3:4; 8:2](#)). Or it may be a tacit acknowledgement of polygamy. In this case, the mother’s house would be a separate dwelling from the father’s primary residence.

More than these options, though, the language suggests that Naomi was relinquishing her rights to any support *her two daughters-in-law* might offer her. She was not their mother, and because of that, they were not obligated to share in the difficulties that widowhood would represent for Naomi.



Visual for [Lesson 1](#). Ask the class to consider this question with the first pair of discussion questions and again before closing the class with prayer.

**8b–9a.** “May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Then she kissed them goodbye

As Moabite widows, Ruth and Orpah would be incredibly vulnerable in Israel (see [Lesson Context](#)). Naomi’s words *show you kindness* have a ring of covenant language. She intended to leave the women in the Lord’s care even though she also intended to leave them in the land of Moab. Naomi did not explicitly say but clearly believed that *the Lord* was not only able but also willing to bless the

younger widows, even outside of Israel. As is true throughout the book, the Lord’s kindness would be experienced through human relationships (example: [Ruth 2:4–12](#)). Rest for the widows was expected to be found in their mothers’ homes before moving on to new families in the houses of new husbands.

Naomi’s future was far from assured (compare [Ruth 1:11–13](#), below); the gift she felt she could give her daughters-in-law was to free them to find more likely sources of stability than she could offer. In a typical farewell gesture, Naomi sealed her hopes for them with a kiss. It signified her love in what she expected to be her final act of care for them (compare [1:14](#), below).

## B. Daughters-in-Law Respond (vv. [9b–10](#))

**9b–10. and they wept aloud and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”**

*They wept aloud* is clearly lament language. In context it could be for the general position in which they all found themselves—husbandless and with uncertain futures—or it could specifically have been in response to the pain these two younger women felt at the thought of separating from Naomi. *We will go back with you to your people* does not constitute a binding oath but does communicate great devotion to Naomi. It was not a pragmatic response or a thought-out plan; it was the pleading of two daughters-in-law who didn’t want to see their mother-in-law leave.

## II. Second Exchange ([Ruth 1:11–14](#))

### A. Mother Pleads (vv. [11–13](#))

**11. But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?”**

Naomi asked her *daughters* (a subtle change from the “daughters-in-law” designation up to this point) literally to turn from their current course and return to their mothers’ homes.

Naomi emphasized the darker, more painful truth about her motivation to send them away: she could not bear *any more sons* to grow up and care for her dead sons’ wives. This concern was in keeping with a provision within the Law of Moses concerning care for widows. The brother of the widow’s deceased husband was required to marry the widow in a levirate marriage ([Deuteronomy 25:5–10](#); example: [Genesis 38:6–14](#)). This not only ensured care for the widow but also allowed her dead husband’s lineage to continue. Due to Naomi’s own widowhood and age, she knew that she would not provide new *husbands* for Orpah and Ruth. Naomi saw clearly (if erroneously; see [Ruth 4:16–17](#)) the end of her family line.

**12–13a. “Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them?”**

The phrase *I am too old to have another husband* continued the “reality check” for the two daughters. Naomi’s childbearing years were behind her, such that no man of her times would be inclined to marry her. And even if she had hope that she could remarry that very day and conceive *sons* that

night, how could the widows be expected to wait years for those sons to be old enough to marry? These hypothetical sons wouldn't be ready for marriage until their early 20s, likely putting Ruth and Orpah somewhere in their 40s. Even today, a pregnancy is considered geriatric after the age of 35. Back then as now, pregnancy at that age and beyond was increasingly unlikely and dangerous.

*Return home* emphasizes the benefit of Ruth and Orpah's rejoining their families of origin in Moab (see commentary on [Ruth 1:11](#), above). Remarriage in Moab was thus the best option for Ruth and Orpah's flourishing after being widowed. Their families were invested in their well-being and could arrange marriage contracts for their widowed daughters. Naomi's own care would be more easily obtained if she did not come home with two grown female dependents (compare [Ruth 4:1–6](#)).

**13b. “No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!”**

*The Lord's hand* can refer to God's blessing, guidance, and protection (examples: [Ezra 7:6, 9](#); [Nehemiah 2:8](#)). But his hand conversely can refer to curse, discipline, and judgment (examples: [Exodus 9:3](#); [Judges 2:15](#)). *Turned against me* illustrates Naomi's feeling that God had not so much abandoned her; rather, he was judging her. The writer doesn't outright confirm or deny Naomi's feeling. But when she returned home, Naomi asked to be called *Mara* (which means “bitter”), “because the Almighty has made my life very bitter” ([Ruth 1:20](#), not in our printed text). We can make too much of the fact that the writer never called Naomi *Mara*. But it subtly suggests that the writer didn't accept that Naomi's life was bitter, or at least that it wasn't irretrievably bitter.

Ascribing motivations to God is a dangerous business—we need only read Job to be reminded of this. But in the middle of so much grief, one way of arriving at meaning, either legitimately or illegitimately, is to find God's judgment in pain. We do well to remember that we cannot know why God allows hard circumstances in our lives ([Job 42:1–6](#)). We are wise to remember that his ways are not ours and his thoughts are above ours ([Isaiah 55:9](#)). And we can rest in the hope that God uses all things to our benefit if we place our hope in him, regardless of our circumstances ([Romans 8:28–35](#)).

#### **What Do You Think?**

When have you interpreted God's hand in your life as punishment?

#### **Digging Deeper**

Have circumstances since then changed your mind about God's intentions for you? How, or why not?

### **Dressed in Christ**

At the end of our street, my trick-or-treating children and I met an elderly woman sitting in a lawn chair, a bowl of candy in her lap. “Trick or treat!” the children called. Unexpectedly, the woman began to cry. “Oh, what's wrong?” I asked. She replied, “My husband passed away. This is my first time passing out treats without him. He loved seeing the children in their costumes.” My children spontaneously hugged the woman, and we prayed for her.

I had been reluctant to allow my children to go trick-or-treating. But even in costumes, we were all dressed in Christ to meet our new friend. Who in their distress needs to experience Christ through



### B. Daughters Diverge (v. 14)

**14. At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.**

At first *Orpah* and *Ruth* had responded in unified lament following Naomi's goodbye kiss ([Ruth 1:9a–10](#), above). But then Orpah *kissed* Naomi. As with Naomi's previous gesture, this was a kiss goodbye (see [1:15](#), below). We might be tempted to conclude that Orpah acted faithlessly toward Naomi. But the text does not indicate here or elsewhere that Orpah made a poor decision. She acted in keeping with the wisdom of her time and with Naomi's greatest hopes for Orpah's future thriving.

By contrast, Ruth would not be swayed by any argument Naomi could make. Ruth *clung to her* and would not change her mind.

#### What Do You Think?

How do you discern whether to move forward with a risky plan or fall back on a more conventionally wise action?

#### Digging Deeper

What biblical examples can you find of both moving forward and retreating as faithful action?

## III. Third Exchange

([Ruth 1:15–18](#), [22](#))

### A. Naomi's Final Plea (v. 15)

**15. “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”**

Naomi made one last plea to Ruth to turn back. Returning *to her people* would be a comfortable cultural fit for Ruth, complete with a return to worship of Moabite gods. In the ancient world, gods were often associated not only with certain spheres of activity (agriculture, military, etc.) but also with geographic regions (see commentary on [Ruth 1:8b–9a](#), above). The principle deity worshipped in Moab was the detestable Chemosh ([Numbers 21:29](#); [1 Kings 11:7](#), [33](#)). The Israelites were meant to be distinct from their neighbors by rejecting all gods other than the Lord—never worshipping a pantheon of multiple deities ([Exodus 20:1–6](#)). Ruth's choice was between what she had known before and what she had come to know in her husband's household.

### B. Ruth's Promise (vv. 16–18)

**16–17a. But Ruth replied, “Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.**

## Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.

The introductory statement is an emphatic statement of Ruth's immovable will to follow Naomi, strengthened by Ruth's listing her commitments to Naomi. Ruth's response reflected Naomi's hopes for Ruth but unexpectedly anticipated their fulfillment to be found in a future that included the two women together. The commitment to Naomi's people and God directly tied back to Naomi's plea for Ruth to follow Orpah's example (see [Ruth 1:15](#)). The commitments to *go* and *stay* with Naomi tied Ruth's future to Naomi's. Whatever provision Naomi would find among her people, Ruth would accept as well. Naomi would expect to die well before Ruth. Yet Ruth's commitment was to *die* in Judah and *be buried* there (compare and contrast [Genesis 50:1–6](#)). In these ways, Ruth declared Naomi to be her mother and outlined the devotion that she would demonstrate as Naomi's true child.

### What Do You Think?

What did you leave behind when you made the decision to follow God?

### Digging Deeper

What habits from your old life still need to be broken?

**17b–18.** “May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Unlike Orpah and Ruth's spontaneous declaration in [Ruth 1:10](#) (above), this is the most solemn of vows (compare [1 Samuel 3:17](#); [20:13](#)). *Ruth* had carefully considered the cost of going with *Naomi* (compare [Luke 14:26–33](#)). Realizing this, Naomi stopped trying to convince Ruth to take a different journey.

### What Do You Think?

How easy do you find it to accept God's provision that comes through other believers' care for you?

### Digging Deeper

What attitudes or circumstances might be preventing you from experiencing God's care through his people?

## C. Outcome (v. 22)

**22.** So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

*Bethlehem* (in Judah; [Ruth 1:1](#)) can be literally translated as “house of bread,” giving an ironic cast to the famine that had occurred there. Drought was a likely cause of the famine, as rain clouds would sometimes pass straight over Bethlehem and climb to higher elevations—such as in *Moab*—before bursting. The women's westward journey from Moab around the northern shore of the Dead Sea apparently passed without incident.

The mention of the *barley harvest* confirmed that the famine was broken ([Ruth 1:6](#), above). The beginning of that harvest took place sometime in mid-March to mid-April. In later Jewish tradition,

the book of Ruth was read at the Festival of Weeks in celebration of God’s provision of the harvest (compare [Leviticus 23:15–22](#)).

## Catching the Vision

Janice and Wendy met in a widows’ support group and became friends instantly. Janice had not been active in her faith for many years until Wendy started inviting her to church events. Together they joined a women’s Bible study and served on their church’s missions team. There, they started to catch a vision for world missions.

A visiting missionary who had served many years in Turkey began sharing with them how many widows and orphans had migrated from Syria and Iraq as a result of the civil wars. Neither of the women had formal training as missionaries or in the Bible. But they could give smiles and hugs and share tears with women who had been through losses similar to their own. Janice and Wendy departed for Turkey and began learning the language and culture. They bonded with dozens of women who had endured severe hardship.

God fulfills his promise to set “the lonely in families” ([Psalm 68:6](#)). Are you in a position now to be brought into a family or to invite others into yours? Ask the Lord for eyes to see the harvest he has set before you ([John 4:35](#)).

—A. W.

## Conclusion

### A. Walk with One Another

We are created to be in community with God and with others. Ruth’s faithfulness to the Lord and to Naomi is an example to all of what living and loving in community might require of us. Ruth’s words and actions demonstrated true commitment to carrying Naomi’s burdens (compare [Galatians 6:2](#)). Showing up in the midst of pain and anguish is difficult, especially if we are dealing with our own feelings of loss. How we respond to tragedy will determine whether we are following Ruth’s example as she followed Christ’s example without even knowing her many-times great grandson (see [lesson 3](#); [1 Corinthians 11:1](#)).

### B. Prayer

Lord, help us to demonstrate your love in our relationships and in our communities, that we may be active in your plan to bless others. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Remain steadfast in your love for the Lord and his people.

## Visuals FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 124) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the Adult Resources packet for the Winter Quarter. Order No. 9780784739631 from your supplier.

## Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with **NIV Bible Student** (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the **NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition**).

### Into the Lesson

Ask three or more volunteers to use a whiteboard or large pad of paper and markers to play a “Major Life Changes” drawing charades game. Have a volunteer draw a clue while the class guesses the event. Some clue suggestions are baptism, graduation, moving, marriage, parenthood, death, or divorce. Following the activity, give the class the opportunity to share memories of relevant personal life events. Be prepared to ask questions to encourage students to speak about their feelings and how their lives changed from the events.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “How Do You Shop?” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete the exercise as indicated before discussing conclusions as a whole group.

After either activity, say, “Today we’re going to look at the life of Ruth and how love motivated her to take a leap of faith.”

### Into the Word

Set the stage for today’s lesson by sharing some background on Naomi’s family using the Lesson Context. Recruit participants to act out **Ruth 1:6–14** in reader’s theater style. Be sure to cover the roles of a narrator, Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. Encourage the use of drama and vocal inflection to help the Scripture come to life. Ask the class to discuss the motivations of the women to this point before continuing the activity with **Ruth 1:15–18, 22**.

Distribute handouts (you create) of the following questions for in-group discussions. Divide the class into two groups: **Naomi’s Perspective** and **Ruth’s Perspective**. Each group should answer the questions from their assigned perspective: 1—What motivated you to leave Moab? 2—What concerns did you have for the woman you were traveling with? 3—How did your experience of God’s care influence your decision-making? 4—What hope and future possibilities did you have in Moab? 5—How did your hope and future possibilities change for the better or worse in Judah?

Bring the class back together to share their viewpoints. Be prepared to emphasize the following points if the discussion doesn’t bring them out: Naomi was traveling *toward* her community, where she could expect to be cared for, even in the face of what she believed was God’s punishment. Ruth was



traveling *away* from her community, against conventional wisdom, thus lessening her prospects of starting her own family.

*Option.* Distribute copies of the “What Would You Give Up?” exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing conclusions with the class.

After either activity, talk through how Ruth’s courage and faithfulness helped both her and Naomi deal with their situation.

## **Into Life**

Distribute index cards to the learners and ask them to write *Naomi* at the top of one side. Challenge participants to write down the biggest and most fearsome challenge they, or someone close to them, are facing. On the other side, ask them to write *Ruth* at the top of the card and list at least three reasons for hope in this situation. They might think of past similar experiences God has led them through, abilities and resources God has provided, or others in their lives who love them. Then ask them to conclude with one courageous action they can take in response to their reasons for hope. Challenge learners to concentrate on the “Ruth” side of the card during the week.

Lead the class in a closing prayer thanking God for the people he has placed in our lives to remind us of our hope in him and to carry our burdens with us.