

THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

Chapter 9: The Faith of a Foreign Woman

Key Question: How does God show loving kindness directly and through the hands of his followers?

Naomi Emptied

Pages 121–123

The book of Ruth begins with Naomi’s family traveling from Bethlehem to Moab,¹²⁰ a foreign land unfriendly to Israelites. Eventually, Naomi would return and say that she left Bethlehem full, but returned empty.

1. (a) *Bethlehem* means “house of food.” Ironically, what was Bethlehem empty of that caused Naomi’s family to travel to Moab (Ruth 1:1)? (b) Of what else was Naomi emptied (1:3)? (c) How did they attempt to fill their family (1:4)? (d) Naomi’s daughters-in-law bore no children, leaving Naomi empty of what? (e) Of what was Naomi then emptied (1:5)?

Naomi heard that the Lord has provided food in Bethlehem so she and her two daughters-in-law set off for Bethlehem. She changed her mind, though, and told the girls to return to their mothers in the hope of the Lord giving them new husbands. In those days, widows usually faced poverty unless they remarried, and she probably thought the girls’ prospects of finding a husband in Bethlehem bleak because of the mistrust between the Israelites and Moabites.

2. What reason did Naomi give the girls for why they shouldn’t go with her (Ruth 1:11)?

¹²⁰ The Moabites descended from Abraham’s nephew, Lot.

God in his loving kindness gave the Israelites a law to help widows who had no sons.¹²¹ A brother of the widow's husband was to marry her, care for her financially, and provide a son who could inherit her husband's property and carry on his name. This kept her from destitution. But Naomi couldn't provide sons for them, so she wanted them to stay in Moab where she thought they'd have the best chance of finding husbands.

Orpah tearfully kissed Naomi good-bye. But not Ruth. Ruth wrapped her arms around her weeping mother-in-law and refused to let go.

3. (a) How did Ruth show loving kindness to Naomi and put Naomi's needs above her own (Ruth 1:16–17)? (b) To whom besides Naomi did Ruth commit herself, and what did that say about where her faith resided? (c) If possible, describe a time someone showed loving kindness to you as Ruth did to Naomi.

When Naomi arrived in Bethlehem with Ruth, she told the women there to no longer call her *Naomi*, which means “pleasant,” but rather *Mara*, which means “bitter.”

4. (a) How did Naomi describe the way she left Bethlehem (Ruth 1:21)? (b) How did she describe the way she returned? (c) How might Ruth have felt over this? (d) Is it important to have a bit of a tough skin when talking to the grieving? Why or why not?

In Boaz's Field

Pages 123–124

God showed loving kindness to his people by providing laws to help the poor. When workers harvested fields, they weren't to go back and pick up missed grain, but were to leave it for the poor to gather, a process called gleaning.¹²² Ruth asked Naomi to allow her to glean so they'd have food.

¹²¹ Deuteronomy 25:5–10. *Brother-in-law* in Latin is *levir*, so this is called a “levirate marriage.”

¹²² Leviticus 19:9–10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19.

5. (a) In Ruth 2, in what ways did Boaz¹²³ show loving kindness to Ruth by going above and beyond God's requirements? (b) Briefly describe a time someone blessed you by giving you more than required of something. How did that make you feel?

When Naomi saw the huge amount¹²⁴ of grain Ruth brought home, she knew someone had extended extra kindness.

6. (a) What did Naomi say the Lord had not stopped doing (Ruth 2:20)? (b) What evidence had there been so far that God was showing kindness to Ruth and Naomi? (c) What evidence do you have of God showing loving kindness to you?

Naomi told Ruth that Boaz was one of their *kinsman-redeemers*. God provided laws that called on close relatives to care for each other in time of need. One of them stated if an Israelite became poor and had to

¹²³ Boaz's extra sensitivity to Ruth's plight may have come from Rahab being his mother or grandmother or ancestress. Matthew 1:5 reads Rahab was the "mother" of Boaz, but the words for father, son, and mother had broader meanings in the Bible than we use in English, and genealogies were often telescoped—that is, shortened to the most important names. (Matthew 1:8 telescopes when it skips three generations between "Jehoram the father of Uzziah.") Jericho probably fell about 1380; if Rahab were twenty at the fall and bore Boaz at fifty, he would have been born about 1350. David was born in 1040. That would leave 310 years for Boaz to Obed to Jesse to David, which would mean Boaz, Obed, and Jesse were bearing their sons at an average age of 103!

¹²⁴ The *New American Commentary* estimates between 30 and 40 pounds.

sell land, the closest male relative with financial means was to redeem, or buy back, the land.¹²⁵ Naomi saw a way this law might help them.¹²⁶

On Boaz's Threshing Floor

Pages 124–126

Boaz's kindness stirred hope in Naomi's heart, and she saw a possible way to provide Ruth a home and financial security. It was time to winnow the barley—they arrived in April at the beginning of harvest and it was now early June. Naomi told Ruth to wash, perfume herself, and put on her best clothes.¹²⁷ She sent her off to the threshing floor where Boaz and his workers would spend the night.

When all were asleep, Ruth quietly laid down at Boaz's feet. In the middle of the night, he awoke and discovered her.

7. (a) What did Ruth ask Boaz to do (Ruth 3:9)? The word translated *corner* is literally *wings*. She was asking Boaz to marry her and give her the wings of protection that a husband can give a wife. (b) What reason did Ruth give for her request?

Back when Ruth first met Boaz in the field, Boaz had talked about protective wings.

8. (a) Under whose protective wings did Boaz tell Ruth she had taken refuge (Ruth 2:12)? (b) In what ways had the God under whose wings Ruth sought refuge protected her? (c) Briefly describe a way God protected you when you turned to him for refuge in a difficult circumstance.

Boaz commended Ruth for her kindness to Naomi through this request: not only did she not go to Moab to seek a husband as Naomi had first urged her, but even in Bethlehem she didn't seek marriage to a young man, but was loyal to Naomi's family, who would be most likely to provide for Naomi (3:10).

¹²⁵ Leviticus 25:25. The original owner could get back his land by buying it back if he prospered, or by waiting until the Year of Jubilee, a special time God set up for all land to be returned to the original owners who had lost it through poverty. In Israel, God owned the land and allowed the people to live in it as tenants as part of his covenant with them.

¹²⁶ Elimelech likely sold his property before he left for Moab, with the hope of redeeming it when times got better. Land didn't typically pass on to widows, but the right to receive back the land would go to any son or grandson Naomi might have in the name of her husband or sons.

¹²⁷ Naomi may have been telling Ruth to end her mourning and put on clothes that showed she was ready to marry.

9. (a) The law required only brothers-in-law of widows to marry widows, but what did Boaz assure Ruth he'd do, once again going farther than the strict requirement of the law? (b) Ruth had thought others saw her as just a destitute widow, a despised foreigner, disgracefully barren, and lower than a servant.¹²⁸ How did Boaz assure her the townspeople viewed her? (c) Describe someone you consider to be a woman of noble character. What makes her that in your eyes?

But there was a hitch: there was a relative closer to them than Boaz.

At the Town Gate

Pages 126–127

Boaz went to the town gate where business transactions often took place.

10. (a) What did Boaz tell Naomi's closest relative (Ruth 4:3)? (b) We're not told why this relative wasn't already reaching out to help Naomi since the whole town seemed to know her situation. Why is it important not to turn a blind eye to family member's true needs?

Naomi was destitute and called upon her closest relative to help if he could, as the law required.¹²⁹ The man planned to do it until he discovered attached strings.

11. What changed the man's mind (Ruth 4:5–6)?

¹²⁸ Ruth 2:11, 13.

¹²⁹ If Elimelech sold the land before leaving, no relative could permanently inherit the land while it was possible Naomi might marry and have a child to carry on Elimelech's name. Therefore she might have been offering to sell that right of redemption. If Elimelech didn't sell the land, she might have been asking a kinsman-redeemer to buy it before she sold to an outsider.

The money he spent redeeming Naomi's property had to be taken out of his own estate, and her property would pass on to a son he'd be responsible to give Ruth. Perhaps he had other children whose inheritance he didn't want to lessen; we don't know.¹³⁰ But he decided not to redeem, and Boaz followed through on his word to Ruth.

Naomi Filled

Pages 127

Although Ruth had been barren, the Lord enabled her to conceive and she gave birth to a boy, Obed. The townswomen told Naomi this child was her kinsman-redeemer. Not only did he bring her the joy of being a grandmother, but he would carry on the family name and inherit the property Boaz had redeemed, enabling him to care for Naomi in her old age.

12. (a) Consider the ways Naomi had been emptied. Now how has she been filled (Ruth 4:14–17)?
(b) Describe some of the ways God has filled you.

God gave Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi a blessing bigger than they could imagine, for little Obed would be the grandfather of the mighty King David, who would bless all of Israel. And many years later, another descendant of Obed would come, this time to redeem the world.

13. Because of the loving kindness Ruth showed Naomi, the name *Ruth* has come to mean friend, the word *ruth* to mean compassion, and the word *ruthless* to mean cruel and pitiless. Review the ways in which God, Ruth, and Boaz showed loving kindness to hurting people. What is a way that you can show loving kindness this week to someone in need of compassion?

¹³⁰ Technically, Moses' law didn't require him to marry Ruth. Since Naomi made this stipulation and Boaz had agreed to marry Ruth if he didn't, can you imagine what would happen to his reputation if he wanted to redeem the land without marrying her? Besides, Boaz had made it clear he fully intended to try to give Ruth a child to inherit the property, and this kinsman would then lose the property.