

TONY MERIDA
RUTH
FOR YOU



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Ruth For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Ruth For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- ESV: English Standard Version (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition
- CSB: Christian Standard Bible
- NLT: New Living Translation

INTRODUCTION TO RUTH

Recently when I announced that we were going to study *Ruth** as our church's Advent series, several people cheered! We are not an overly expressive church, and so this vocal celebration struck me. Why are Bible readers so drawn to the book of *Ruth*?

For starters, *Ruth* is one of the best short stories ever written. Who doesn't love a good story? "Once upon a time" and "They all lived happily ever after" are phrases cherished by many. *Ruth* possesses all the elements of a well-written story. We are drawn to the *characters*: grieving Naomi, loyal Ruth, and compassionate Boaz. The *setting* is also intriguing. It takes place during the time of the judges (Ruth 1:1); and the locations include Bethlehem, **Moab**** , Boaz's field, a threshing floor, a city gate, and a bedroom. The *plot* involves a story of **redemption** which, as we learn, is part of the grand story of redemption (4:17-20). Naomi stands in the middle of the *conflict* of the book, as a widow with no son to carry on the family's line. At the heart of the *resolution* is Boaz, a figure who shows a lot of similarities to David's greatest son, Jesus.

The love story between Ruth and Boaz is remarkable. Like many love stories through the years, two unlikely people unite. Think of other stories you know: a young woman and a terrifying monster in *Beauty and the Beast*; a failed nun and a military captain in *The Sound of Music*; a roughneck cowboy and a classy nurse in *Open Range*; a stager and an Irish innkeeper in *Leap Year*; and a human and a vampire in *Twilight*! If you like these sorts of stories, then welcome to *Ruth*. Here, two very unlikely people get together—an Israelite gentleman and a Moabite widow—and she ends up being one of the many-times-great-grandmothers of Jesus.

* For the purposes of clarity and conciseness, I have chosen to italicize "Ruth" when referring to the book of Ruth, as opposed to the character Ruth, which will remain un-italicized.

** Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 135).

At first glance, the title “Ruth” may come as a bit of a surprise. She is a Moabite! This is the only Old Testament book named after a non-Israelite. That she was a Moabite makes it even more surprising, as Moab was a long-standing enemy of Israel. Further, Ruth speaks less than Boaz and Naomi, and the speeches she does make are shorter than those of the other two characters.

We could call the book “Naomi” instead—she is the one who loses everything within the first few verses and who gains a wonderful recompense in an unexpected way at the end of the story. The main tension of the plot comes from her sense of abandonment by God in contrast to the way God uses her family to provide a king for Israel. Or we could give this book the title “Boaz”—he is the one who speaks the most words and who brings resolution by marrying Ruth and providing security for the future. Or, based on the importance of a child, Obed—the son born to Ruth and Boaz at the end of the story—could bear the title. But I would submit that “Ruth” does indeed make the most sense. She is present in every scene, except for the city-gate scene in chapter 4, and it is through Ruth’s actions that Naomi’s crisis will be resolved. Ruth is the one who brings all the characters, and the whole plot, together.

Why Study Ruth?

As well as the fact that it’s a beautifully written love story, there are many other reasons to study *Ruth*.

First, *we need to study it because it is God’s word*. Paul tells us that all of Scripture is “profitable” (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV), and that includes the book of *Ruth*. While *Ruth* may be like several popular love stories, it is most certainly unlike them all in this regard: it is “God-breathed” Scripture. We, the people of God, do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4), and therefore we need the book of *Ruth* for our own spiritual nourishment.

Second, *we need to see the larger story of God’s redeeming grace*. God has given us his whole word—all 66 books—as one large story.

The Bible begins as a story—“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1)—and it ends as a story in the book of Revelation, albeit with a surprising type of ending (for the end is a new beginning!). The Bible does not come to us as a **systematic theology** book, as important as these books are. Theology books are written topically and aim to explain various **doctrines**. But the Bible is a story, and all its little stories fit into the larger story. The Bible really is a unified book of **redemptive history**, of which Jesus is the hero. We therefore need to study individual stories on their own, while keeping the big picture in mind, in order to discern how the little story contributes to this overarching story. *Ruth* advances the story of God’s redeeming grace to Adam’s **fallen** race. It magnifies God’s *hesed*—his **covenantal faithfulness** and unceasing kindness.

Third, *we need a greater appreciation of God’s providence*. We have real-life details of real-life situations in the lives of real-life characters. To paraphrase the hip hop group Beautiful Eulogy, most of us live in the book of *Ruth*, not in the book of Exodus! That is, we do not gather **manna** from heaven every morning and walk through parted seas. We live by faith in God’s “ordinary providence.” There are no miracles in *Ruth*, but that does not mean God is inactive. We must never assume that a lack of miracles means God is not at work. He is present in the lives of these seemingly insignificant characters, displaying his meticulous providence, just as he is at work in our own lives. Our God is working out all things according to the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11), and he is worthy of our trust and adoration.

Fourth, *we need to remember God’s global mercy*. The **gospel** is not for Jewish people only but for the whole world, including Moabites like Ruth. God not only allows Ruth to become part of his people but actually uses her as a vital part of his plan. He brings this non-Israelite right into the heart of his people and gives her a place of honor. We need to remember this. Reading *Ruth* should help us to understand and reflect God’s heart for the nations in our own lives and ministries.

Finally, *we need models of genuine godliness*. Many Old Testament characters provide us with examples for godly living, and such is the case here. Ruth inspires us to be loyal, sincere, gracious, courageous, and devoted. Boaz gives us a model of manhood: justice-pursuing and not passive, compassionate and not abusive. Naomi's story engenders hope in us, as she goes from emptiness to fullness in the narrative. We are thus instructed and encouraged by what has been written in these former times (Romans 15:4).

I would like to put Daniel I. Block's excellent outline of *Ruth* before you, from his book *Judges, Ruth* (page 587):

- Act 1: The Crisis for the Royal Line (1:1-21)
- Act 2: The Ray of Hope for the Royal Line (1:22– 2:23)
- Act 3: The Complication for the Royal Line (3:1-18)
- Act 4: The Rescue of the Line (4:1-7)
- Epilogue (4:18-22)

Block's outline reminds us of the heart of the narrative. *Ruth is about the coming Messiah*. This is not just any story about a woman finding a husband or a widow finding a family. We find out at the end of the book that Ruth's descendants will be kings of Israel. She is part of the royal line that eventually leads to Jesus.

To help us step through the story scene by scene, I have arranged this commentary around various locations and movements in the narrative:

1. The sojourn
2. The return
3. The arrival
4. The field
5. The meal
6. The threshing floor

7. The city gate

8. The son

I am indebted to scholars like Block, as well as other **commentators** that I have consulted: Robert Hubbard, K. Lawson Younger Jr., Iain M. Duguid, Sinclair Ferguson, and Peter Lau and Gregory Goswell. I have tried to cite each scholar with integrity. I do not claim to be a scholar but a reflective practitioner, and I am grateful for scholars who work tirelessly to bless the Lord's church by giving us such wonderful resources.

1. THE SOJOURN

Certain words are devastating. No one wants to hear the words “We’re going to have to let you go” from their employer, or “Brace for impact” from a pilot, or “I’m sorry, but there’s nothing more we can do” from a doctor.

Ruth opens with some devastating words. The first time I read the opening five verses of *Ruth* to my children and explained the names of the characters and a bit of the background, they were shocked and perplexed. Things go from bad to worse.

Coming after the book of Judges, which displays the problems of Israel on a broader national and local level, *Ruth* zooms in on one particular family’s trials and tragedies. It takes place during the time in which “the judges ruled” (**v 1***), which was a period of spiritual darkness. We also read of a “famine” in the land, likely a sign of judgment. And things get even worse, as we read of three funerals. Within a few verses we are left with a grieving widow in a foreign land, with her two widowed daughters-in-law (v 2-5).

We live in the same fallen world as these women and can relate to these hardships to some extent. But the immediate suffering of this family is not the only thing we need to notice. The central focus of *Ruth* actually concerns the origins of Israel’s royal line. The genealogy that appears at the end of *Ruth* clarifies this point (4:18-22). The crisis introduced here at the start of chapter 1 involves the widowhood of Naomi and Ruth, meaning the family line is threatened. But the genealogy shows us that Obed, whose birth resolves the crisis and continues the family line, will be the grandfather of David, Israel’s greatest king. God

* All Ruth verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

has promised to send a king to Israel to rule on God's behalf (Genesis 17:6; 35:11; 49:10; Numbers 24:17; Deuteronomy 17:14-20). In Judges, this is threatened because of widespread unfaithfulness. In *Ruth*, that threat begins to be lifted.

There is a hint at all of this in *Ruth 1:1*, as we read of Elimelech's "Ephrathite" lineage. This was a name for those whose families were from Bethlehem. The book's first readers might have known that David was of this line—a link we read about in 1 Samuel 17:12.

When the Judges Ruled

The book of *Ruth* takes place during one of the darkest periods in Israel's history: the days of the judges. The period of the judges came after the land was settled and before the monarchy was established. During this time there was no national government. Israel was a collection of tribes. These judges were local "chieftains" that were called to overthrow foreign oppressors. They were local military leaders, not national political leaders.

The book of Judges shows the downward spiral of Israel's national and spiritual life, and underlines the need for a godly king to lead the people (Judges 2:11-19). A repeated cycle of events occurs: God's people rebel against him; God gives them into the hands of their oppressors; God's people repent (at least during the first few cycles); God sends a deliverer to give the people a period of rest. Tim Keller's *Judges For You* contains a helpful diagram of these cycles (page 207). The final chapters of Judges (Judges 17 – 21) stand outside this downward spiral and show in graphic detail a nation that has totally lost its way, becoming every bit as bad as the **pagan** nations of the day.

We are not told where exactly *Ruth* fits in the season of the judges. What we do know is that the author of *Ruth* sees this whole period as something in the past. The way some of the customs in *Ruth* are explained by the author suggests that the book was written a considerable time after the completion of the story (for example, Ruth 4:7). *Ruth* was written either during Israel's monarchy or during the

post-exilic period. It is looking back on a bygone age. This means that we can see the whole period of the judges as a backdrop for reading *Ruth*.

It was a period filled with violence, idolatry, moral depravity, and civil war. The following words are repeated in the book of Judges and are the final line we read in the book: “There was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25; see also 17:6; 18:1; 19:1). It is against this black backdrop that Boaz and Ruth shine. It is somewhat surprising to find godly examples in this time period! Further, it is in this dark season that the providence of God shines. Despite sin and rebellion, God is working out his redemptive purposes.

Could not that description—“everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25)—be given to your context as well? False religion, biblical ignorance, political corruption and disgrace, civil war, and violence surround us. In many places today, people extol the virtue of “tolerance” above all other virtues. Their version of tolerance could be summed up by the same phrase from Judges—everyone doing what is right in his or her own eyes. Those who hold to it often have a negative reaction to the truths of Scripture, especially to what the Bible says about sin.

But this problem is not just outside the church. Adopting the prevailing **worldview** in today’s culture is a temptation for the church as well. When certain sins are normalized in the culture, it is tempting to tolerate them in the church. Many churches have caved in to cultural pressure and discarded certain ethical teachings that the Bible presents clearly. Many Christians lack the boldness to withstand these temptations; others lack the theological discernment to detect such errors.

It is in this kind of context that Christians are called to shine. Ruth and Boaz inspire us to do so. The nobility and courage of Ruth and the compassion and righteousness of Boaz will dazzle us. When we see their actions in the context of the judges, then it motivates us to go against the customs of our own day and follow Christ instead.