

Helps for the Teacher: Ruth

My goal in this overview of the book of Ruth is to show the key verse, the theme, and the overall structure that I would use if I were teaching it. I am going to focus just on chapter 1. If you are teaching it as just one overview, you can summarize the details of chapters 2-4. If you are teaching it as two lessons, you can go into more detail.

Let's get started.

The key verse in Ruth 1 is **Ruth 1:16**, **"Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God."**

In Ruth 2-4 where we see the outcome of Ruth's choice, **Ruth 2:12** is a key summary verse, where Boaz says to Ruth: **"May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge."**

It highlights the underlying theme that unfold in the story details:

"Where am I going for security?"

Those who leave what they have that seems secure in order to follow the true God of Israel, will not be disappointed.

I've divided chapter 1 into 3 sections.

The story begins with

- **Naomi goes back to Bethlehem.**
 - A. We find out why she left Bethlehem
There is a famine in Bethlehem.
 - B. We find out the tragedy that happened in Moab
Her husband and two sons die.
 - C. We find out why she was returning to Bethlehem
She hears that there is food now in Bethlehem.
- **Ruth gives up a secure future in Moab.**
 - A. We see the contrast between Ruth and Orpah
 - B. We see Ruth's vow to join with Naomi's God and people
- **Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem with nothing.**

Ruth has given up all these things, and she arrives with apparently nothing to show for her choice.

Here are some useful facts to have as you study the passage:

First, it's obvious that two places are going to be really important to understand the story, and the first one is: Bethlehem! If you remember from the end of Judges, we've already seen Bethlehem in chapter 17, where there is a Levite from Bethlehem that becomes a priest to the tribe of Dan. And then in Judges 19 there is a Levite who has a concubine who is from Bethlehem. So when we get to the book of Ruth, it's really the third picture of Bethlehem.

Bethlehem means, "House of bread" so when we open up the story in Ruth 1, it is ironic that there is a famine going on in the "house of bread."

The second important place in the story is Moab. These were descendants of Lot and they had an adverse relationship towards the Israelites. Years previously they had tried to hire Balaam to curse Israel as they were entering the land, and then they had sent women out to party with the Israelite men and lead them to worship their false gods. The Moabites worship a false god: Chemosh, and they are filled with idolatry and sensuality.

Third, according to Deuteronomy (Deut. 11:13-17), drought and famine was God's way of getting his people's attention to turn BACK to Him from the Baal worship. What we see here at the beginning of the story is a man who has the true God of Israel and rather than seeking Him, is taking his family to an ungodly place filled with idol worship in order to "provide and protect" them. He is seeking security outside of God.

Fourth, after the tragedy strikes and Elimelech and his sons die in Moab, Naomi hears that there is "food in Bethlehem." Isn't there food in Moab? Of course there is. This is an indication that when she returns to the land, for Naomi, it is a return to God.

Fifth, for Ruth we have just the opposite picture than in Naomi. Rather than someone who has gone away from God and is returning to Him, we have a foreigner, a Gentile, who has come to know about the God of Israel seeking asylum and security—but at great cost to herself. The time of the Judges was lawless—each area lived by its own rules. Remember, there was no king that ruled: "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes." How would a foreigner be received? It was likely that no one would want the stigma of marrying a foreigner—and especially not a widow. Ruth was looking at the potential of being poor and having to beg for food for her and Naomi. She was giving up her own family: her father and mother. and also giving up a chance of remarrying and having a family in order to gain what? Her mother-in-law, her mother-in-law's people, and her mother-in-law's GOD. ...but the God of Israel is going to repay her because she, a Gentile, has sought refuge in Him.

Lastly, the greatest reward Ruth is given is to be part of the ancestry of King David and ultimately, King Jesus! This comes at the very end of the book and is repeated in the first chapter of Matthew. She is one of four women mentioned in Matthew's genealogical account. You remember that Boaz's mother is Rahab—another Gentile, another foreigner, who put their faith in the God of Israel and found favor.

As you prepare this lesson to teach, take a minute to ask yourself where your security is for a "good life" has been placed. What have you given up in order to follow the God of Israel? What reward does God promise to those who give up the security of this life to seek refuge in Him?

Many blessings as you teach God's Word!