



Focus of week 2

Hesed is the lens through which the book of Ruth, and the Bible, can be better understood. This week, we are introduced to the book of Ruth. The familiarity of this story can be deceiving. The story, in its entirety, can be read in just 15 minutes. To think that this is a “happily ever after” drama misses the weight and reality of the situation. It also assumes that this ancient letter was written much like today’s TV dramas.

This week, we’re going to begin studying the text of Ruth. By way of study, we move beyond merely reading to understanding the historical referents, scriptural parallels, theological insights and the surprises of this ancient text that are lost to modern readers. This week will provide context around the book of Ruth and show how *hesed* is where you start when life falls apart.

Connect

Story Cards (Appoint a time keeper to ensure everyone has a chance to share.)

1. Which picture best represents something you are grateful for? Why did you pick the card you picked? (2 min per person)

The Book of Ruth represents a period in Israel’s history that is filled with anticipation of God’s deliverance, and yet, those hopes seem to fall flat in chapter 1.

2. Have you planned or purchased something in the past year, where the reality of the plan or purchase didn’t match your anticipation and expectation? What was it and why?

Learn

Ruth begins, “In the days when the judges ruled” (ca. 1350-1050 BC). The period of the judges represents a time in Israel’s history after their exodus out of slavery in Egypt where they have entered the land God had promised their ancestors—the land of Canaan, which would become known as the Land of Israel. The people of Israel have not yet designated a king to rule over them, instead God raised up a series of “judges” that would ensure justice, protection and governance. This period is characterized by the recurring phrase, “every person in Israel, did what was right in their own eyes”. In other words, they stopped doing what was right in God’s eyes.

The book of Judges, which immediately precedes the book of Ruth ends with this ominous note: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Ruth finds itself somewhere in this narrative of hopelessness, but contrary to expectation, hopelessness continues with the note of famine. The story intensifies when we discover that an Israelite family leaves the promised land—in other words, doing what was right in their own eyes—and moves into the godless, enemy nation of Moab (Deuteronomy 23:4-7;

Genesis 19:30-38). Subsequently, the reader learns that all the men in the family die. This leaves Naomi, a poor, widowed foreigner. Additionally, it leaves Naomi's daughters-in-law as widows. In other words, they are the most vulnerable of society.

Despite its name, this book is primarily about Naomi. All the other characters are described in relationship to her.¹ Their actions revolve around and serve the purposes of Naomi.

“Naomi's losses coupled with God's silence left her disillusioned. The deaths of her husband and sons represent a complete destruction of her life. Within the context of the ancient patriarchal culture, the day they buried Mahlon and Kilion [her sons], they essentially buried Naomi too...Unlike Job, there is no prospect of starting over.”²

She is the female Job, which in a patriarchal society, means her situation and suffering out pace Job.³ Her frustration with God is also exacerbated. Of all the people who, God and Israel should care for, it is the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner (Deuteronomy 10:17-19; 14:28-29; 24:17-21; Jeremiah 22:3). Naomi's bitterness exemplifies a “natural response to her circumstances: to blame God for unkindness, if not out-and-out cruelty.”⁴ Naomi's suffering is highlighted, but at the end of the story Naomi is gifted, through *hesed*, the promise of significance.

What Naomi learns in her trials is indispensable to us—because so often we struggle to put suffering and God's *hesed* together in our own stories.

Ruth 1:1-5, 20-21

¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³ Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

²⁰ “Don't call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

1. Who is Naomi and where is her home? Why does her family leave?

¹ Tooman, William A., *(Re)reading Ruth* (Cascade Books: Eugene, 2022), 21.

² James, Carolyn Custis, *Finding God in the Margins* (Lexaham Press: Bellingham, WA, 2018), 21.

³ Zakovitch, Yair, “Intermarriage and Halakic Creativity: The Book fo Ruth” in *MFS* 19 (2013), 145-51.

⁴ Tooman, *(Re)reading Ruth*, 53.

2. What prohibitions were placed on the Moabites, see Deuteronomy 23:3-6?
3. Why do you think Elimelek and his family risked associating with the Moabites?
4. How does viewing the book of Ruth as a similar but elevated story of Job contrast with how you've previously viewed the story or heard it taught?
5. How does the Job-like nature of this story put God at the center, and why is that crucial in reading and studying any part of the Bible?
6. When circumstances appear that God is not actively intervening, what assumptions might people make about Him?
7. As they will for Naomi, how do your own struggles and losses shape your view of God?

The book of Ruth hints at hope through a series of theologically loaded words. The one pertinent for this series is *hesed*. God is described as acting with *hesed* in Ruth 1:8 and 2:20. *Hesed* in these verses represents God's consistent choice to be responsible for and act on behalf of those going through tragedy, stress and difficulty.

8. Psalm 91:4 states, "He will cover you with his wings; you will be safe in his care; his faithfulness will protect and defend you." Where have you seen God's faithfulness show up in the midst of a crisis?

This week's *hesed* habit

When life is falling apart you start with *hesed*. Too often, in moments of stress and challenge, we respond with anger, bitterness, blaming and fear. However, God has challenged us to cling to his *hesed*, which stitches life back together.

What stress or challenge are you currently facing? At the end of each day, ask, "Where was God's *hesed* in the midst of my stress or challenge today?"

Day 1:

Day 2:

Day 3:

Day 4:

Day 5:

Day 6:

Day 7:

Homework

It is through memorizing and meditating on scripture that we grow closer to God and become better equipped to face challenging times.

Memorize Psalm 91:4

“He will cover you with his wings; you will be safe in his care; his faithfulness will protect and defend you.”