



REDEEMING LOVE

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Redeeming Love

The last few months we've been speeding through the book of John in a Ferrari. There's been so much in there, and so many times we've wanted to stop on a theme or an idea, but couldn't. We're hoping that in our Redeeming Love series, spending 8 weeks in Ruth (a book with four chapters), we'll be able to slow down enough to really camp in this part of God's word, and that we can understand its message more deeply. Our journey, like all good journeys, will have a meandering quality to it. But that's a part of the fun. We're hoping that this will provide the people of Village with an opportunity to rest in this beautiful valley of God's word, and that in your community groups and in your conversations, the slower pace will give you a chance to stop and meditate on your life before God, and to be honest about the struggles in your life at the moment. The book of Ruth is short and sweet, but there is a great, humane richness beneath the surface of the story. It's a story about unwavering love, God's quiet sovereignty, and a love that we soon learn is a chapter in the unfolding hope of a Messiah.

“*Ruth is a story about unwavering love, God's quiet sovereignty, and a love that we soon learn is a chapter in the unfolding hope of a Messiah.*”

Through this series we will be working through the themes of love, gospel, community, lamenting, prayer, femininity and masculinity, and asking questions like: What's the cost of love? How does understanding the love that we see in the book of Ruth enrich and anticipate our understanding of the gospel? What's the glue that keeps us together as a community? How do you relate to God when he seems to have deserted you? What does it mean to live in a story?

We'll discover different aspects of love as we encounter them in the story of Ruth. Ruth offers a template for love that understands both the craziness of our modern world and a way forward in it. Ruth is all about surviving (and even thriving) in a collapsing world.

Our hope and prayer is that the story of Ruth will remap your story and draw you into the life of redeeming love that it paints. In a world that's losing its capacity to feed our souls, we hope that the book of Ruth feeds your soul, and overflows into your life, as we follow these two ancient widows, Ruth and Naomi, on their journey.

Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) is used in these studies.

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WEEK 1

LOVE DIES

Ruth 1:1-7

1 During the time of the judges, there was a famine in the land. A man left Bethlehem in Judah with his wife and two sons to live in the land of Moab for a while.

2 The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife's name was Naomi. The names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the land of Moab and settled there.

3 Naomi's husband Elimelech died, and she was left with her two sons. **4** Her sons took Moabite women as their wives: one was named Orpah and the second was named Ruth. After they lived in Moab about 10 years, **5** both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two children and without her husband.

6 She and her daughters-in-law prepared to leave the land of Moab, because she had heard in Moab that the Lord had paid attention to His people's need by providing them food. **7** She left the place where she had been living, accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, and traveled along the road leading back to the land of Judah.

STUDY QUESTIONS

The writer of Ruth tells us that this story is set during the time of Judges. For those of you with some Bible background, what does that immediately tell you? What was the period of Judges like?

This is the context of Ruth—a story in faithless days. How might we see faithlessness in our day? In Australia?

Moabites were the hillbilly cousins of Israel. Moab was the son of Lot by Lot's incestuous relationship with his daughter. "Mo" means "who," and "ab" means "Father." So their name meant: "who's your daddy?" Given this background, what do you think the attitude of most Israelites to Moabites would be?

What does the downward spiral look like in verses 1–5?

Names are important in culture (to Biblical culture more than us). What does your name mean?

Bethlehem means "house of bread."

Moab means "who's your daddy?"

Naomi means "pleasant."

Elimilech means "God is king."

Mahlon means "weak."

Chilion means "frail."

Re-read verses 1–7, with these words replacing the names.

What irony do you hear?

What questions come to mind when you hear that the "house of bread" has a famine? That "God is king" is dead?

This is only the beginning of the story, but from the very beginning we meet people who don't run away from suffering. These women's love for one another will be a key part to this book. Love will not grow if we give in to cynicism or to bitterness or if we seek comfort in other places. Sometimes we just need to hang in there and seek the Lord.

How does Naomi do this in verses 6–7?

"When God does not meet our expectations, it opens the door not just to despair but also to cynicism, to shutting down in our hearts." What do you think of this statement? Is this true? Have you ever felt let down by God?

What do the words of Jesus in John 12:23–26 do to our ego?

In what ways have you experienced your "self" dying, but your love growing?

How have you experienced this kind of resurrection hope in your life? (How have you found hope in the midst of suffering, or hopelessness?)



WEEK 2

LOVE BREAKS

RUTH 1:8-14

8 She said to them, "Each of you go back to your mother's home. May the Lord show faithful love to you as you have shown to the dead and to me. **9** May the Lord enable each of you to find security in the house of your new husband." She kissed them, and they wept loudly. **10** "No," they said to her. "We will go with you to your people."

11 But Naomi replied, "Return home, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands? **12** Return home, my daughters. Go on, for I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me to have a husband tonight and to bear sons, **13** would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the Lord's hand has turned against me." **14** Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

STUDY QUESTIONS

We zoom down from a 30,000 feet overview to a conversation at ground level between three women, the remnants of a family, walking along the road from Moab. In traditional eastern cultures the daughter-in-law is the servant of the mother-in-law. The daughter-in-law leaves her mother's house and lives with her husband and his parents. This can lead to a tremendous amount of abuse. In many cultures this can be the most difficult family relationship.

Given that background, what is remarkable about what Ruth and Orpah do?

What were the good things remaining in Naomi's life?

Verses 8 and 9 can each be summarised with a two-word blessing from Naomi. What are these blessings?

When Naomi blesses Ruth and Orpah in verse 8 most translations say, "May the Lord deal kindly" (Ruth 1:8), but it is more accurate to say, "May the Lord do you *hesed*, as you have done to me." *Hesed* is a word unique to Hebrew that combines two words in English: love and loyalty. Sometimes *hesed* is translated as "covenant love."

"Hesed love is one-way love. Love without an exit strategy. When you love with hesed love, you bind yourself to the object of your love, no matter what the response is. So if the object of your love snaps at you, you still love that person. The response to the other person is entirely independent of how that person has treated you. Hesed is a stubborn love." Paul A. Miller.

When Ruth and Orpah don't budge, because of their *hesed* love, Naomi uses a different tactic—lament (v. 11–14). She laments out of her relationship with God, not out of unbelief or fatalism (like a third of the Psalms, this is a relational lament). In the West, we've almost entirely lost the ability to pray prayers of lament. The Hebrews were constantly in God's face, even when it meant saying "God, it feels like I'm your enemy."

Why do you think it's hard for us to pray that way? How might a prayer of lament be filled with faith? How might lament be a difficult yet important dimension in our relationship with God?

Background: if you get time during the week, read the recent article by Graham Cole on Lament: the Missing Practice australia.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lament-a-missing-practice

Spend some time (alone, or in groups of 2-3), writing a lament about the griefs that might be on your heart.

Paraphrase verses 12–13 in everyday English.

Why do you think Naomi had to be so direct (perhaps even brutally direct) to her daughter-in-laws here?

Is there a relationship or situation in your life where God is calling you to endure?

What can you learn from Naomi in how she copes with unbelievable suffering? What strikes you about her?

How does Calvary love shape our love on an everyday basis? (See Mark 8:34–38; 2 Corinthians 4:11–12)



WEEK 3

LOVE GRIEVES

RUTH 1:14-22

14 Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. **15** Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god. Follow your sister-in-law."

16 But Ruth replied: Do not persuade me to leave you or go back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.

17 Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yahweh punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. **18** When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped trying to persuade her.

19 The two of them traveled until they came to Bethlehem. When they entered Bethlehem, the whole town was excited about their arrival and the local women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

20 "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara," she answered, "for the Almighty has made me very bitter. **21** I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has pronounced judgment on me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

22 So Naomi came back from the land of Moab with her daughter-in-law Ruth the Moabitess. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

STUDY QUESTIONS

How would you paraphrase her words in everyday English?

What is Ruth's response? (v. 16–17) What kind of a love can we see in these words?

The culture of this story had great struggles for single women. What are some modern-day challenges that single women face?

What is a modern cultural equivalent of Ruth's commitment to Naomi?

"Ruth took on the uncertain future of a bitter widow in a land where she knew no one, enjoyed few legal rights, and—given the traditional Moabite-Israel rivalry—faced possible ethnic pressure... She gave up a marriage to a man to devote herself to an old woman—in a world dominated by men." Robert Hubbard

Recall for a minute that Ruth is dealing with a woman struggling with bitterness. How do we usually relate to people who are overcome with bitterness?

When we are faced with people like Naomi how do we respond? Do we pull back? Feel it too painful to bear with someone whose problems won't go away quickly? Enter into their pain with them?

How is Ruth's response strikingly different?

"Ruth is God's answer to Naomi's lament. Ruth's love for Naomi is God at work. Ruth embodies the gospel. All acts of love done in faith are small pictures of the gospel."
Paul A. Miller.

How does God respond to Naomi's bitterness?

Naomi is in the desert caught between what she has hoped for and how her life has turned out. Have we ever felt like this?

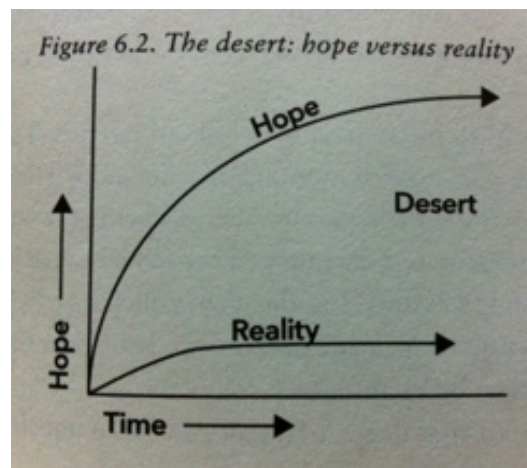
In verse 21 Naomi says "I went away full, and Yahweh has brought me back empty." Is this true?

What would this return have been like for Ruth?

How might Ruth's commitment to Naomi show us something of God's commitment to his people?

How does Ruth's commitment to Naomi foreshadow the level of commitment Jesus calls us to have to him? (eg. Matthew 10:37; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:57-62).

Jesus' call to us matches his description of himself. If Jesus really is to be the focus of our lives, the focus of our love, the one to whom we are ultimately to be faithful to, then he really is worthy of our absolute love and commitment.



WEEK 4

LOVE ENDURES

RUTH 2:1-17

1 Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side named Boaz. He was a prominent man of noble character from Elimelech's family. **2** Ruth the Moabitess asked Naomi, "Will you let me go into the fields and gather fallen grain behind someone who allows me to?" Naomi answered her, "Go ahead, my daughter." **3** So Ruth left and entered the field to gather grain behind the harvesters. She happened to be in the portion of land belonging to Boaz, who was from Elimelech's family.

4 Later, when Boaz arrived from Bethlehem, he said to the harvesters, "The Lord be with you." "The Lord bless you," they replied. **5** Boaz asked his servant who was in charge of the harvesters, "Whose young woman is this?" **6** The servant answered, "She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. **7** She asked, 'Will you let me gather fallen grain among the bundles behind the harvesters?' She came and has remained from early morning until now, except that she rested a little in the shelter."

8 Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen, my daughter. Don't go and gather grain in another field, and don't leave this one, but stay here close to my female servants. **9** See which field they are harvesting, and follow them. Haven't I ordered the young men not to touch you? When you are thirsty, go and drink from the jars the young men have filled." **10** She bowed with her face to the ground and said to him, "Why are you so kind to notice me, although I am a foreigner?" **11** Boaz answered her, "Everything you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband's death has been fully reported to me: how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth, and how you came to a people you didn't previously know. **12** May the Lord reward you for what you have done, and may you receive a full reward from the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge."

13 "My lord," she said, "you have been so kind to me, for you have comforted and encouraged your slave, although I am not like one of your female servants." **14** At mealtime Boaz told her, "Come over here and have some bread and dip it in the vinegar sauce." So she sat beside the harvesters, and he offered her roasted grain. She ate and was satisfied and had some left over. **15** When she got up to gather grain, Boaz ordered his young men, "Let her even gather grain among the bundles, and don't humiliate her. **16** Pull out some stalks from the bundles for her and leave them for her to gather. Don't rebuke her." **17** So Ruth gathered grain in the field until evening. She beat out what she had gathered, and it was about 26 quarts of barley.

STUDY QUESTIONS

What about Ruth's situation made her vulnerable?

How do you think Ruth is feeling in verse 3?

How does Ruth break the mould of what our culture normally defines as feminine?

Verse 3 literally reads: "her chance chanced the portion of the field belonging to Boaz." Then, it just so happened that Boaz showed up! What do you think the author is pushing us to think about these coincidences?

How have you seen God use seeming coincidences in your life? Can you share an example of a time when "chance chanced" you?

"As soon as Boaz sees Ruth, he says 'whose woman is this?' This question is a perfect example of how non-western cultures view community and women. In a non-western world people are never defined individually; they are always understood in relation to a group, be it a family, a village, or a clan. An unmarried woman got her identity from her father. She was tied to domestic duties in her father's household until the day of her marriage. If she chose to live outside the authority and protection of her father she was deemed to be a harlot. This gives you some sense of how vulnerable Ruth truly was." Paul A. Miller

How could women in our culture be in vulnerable positions?

Boaz (Israelite clan leader, wealthy, connected, male) is worlds apart from Ruth (foreigner, poor, disconnected, female). What does Boaz do to protect Ruth?

"When Boaz told Ruth not to go to another field to glean, he was saying more than simply, 'Hey, I have plenty. Save yourself a few steps... I don't mind sharing, so don't feel as if you're imposing.' I think he was also recognizing how much she was at risk and was saying, 'You will be safe here. I hereby invite you into my sphere of protection, and as long as you stay here in my fields you will not be harmed.'" As modern Westerners I think we miss his extreme generosity." Libbie Groves
Imagine if the first day in your new job the boss told you that he'd warned all the young men not to touch you physically. What would you think?

What motivates Boaz to treat Ruth like this? How would you describe his attitude towards Ruth? (verses 11–12)

What image does he use to describe what Ruth has done?

List the ways Boaz loves Ruth during the meal.

How do you think Ruth felt, from verses 10–14?

When Jesus reflects on what he will do at the wedding feast of the Lamb he says, "He will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them" (Luke 12:37). What parallel do you see between Boaz and Jesus? What do they both do?

How might Boaz redefine what we think of as true masculinity?

What does Boaz teach us about loving as a community? How does Boaz involve others in his act of caring?

What do Jesus' words in Luke 14:12-14 teach us about community?

What might be some of the questions we can ask ourselves from time to time, to encourage this same attitude towards community?



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2016