



## BIBLE STUDY

THE HIDDEN HAND OF GOD: WISDOM STORIES FROM RUTH, DANIEL, AND ESTHER

### SESSION 1

## Ruth: The Journey Begins

by Gwen Sayler and Ann Fritschel

### Theme Verse

#### Ruth 1:16b–17

“Where you go I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people will be my people and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die—there I will be buried.  
May the **LORD** do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!”

### Opening Prayer

Hymn “Bless Now, O God, the Journey”  
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 326)

### Prayer

Gracious God,  
you invite us  
to be part of the journey  
of your people traveling together  
on our way.  
As we enter the journeys of Naomi and Ruth,  
we pray that your Spirit  
will enliven our own journeys  
as your loved and loving daughters and sons.  
Grant us grace  
to sense in our own lives  
your loving loyalty toward us  
even as you equip us  
to live in loving loyalty with one another.  
In the name of the One  
who journeys with us  
every step of the way.  
Amen.

## Ruth: The Journey Begins

Greetings and welcome to our nine-month study of the wisdom stories of Ruth, Daniel 1–6, and Esther. In similar yet unique ways, the stories recounted in these books help us reflect on our call to discipleship in the complex world in which we live. Three “H” themes will guide our study.

*Hesed* is a Hebrew word defined as “loving loyalty, faithfulness, loving kindness.” It means loving loyalty that goes beyond the expected to unanticipated depths. *Hesed* is central to all three of the books we will study; exploring how it works in these books will equip us to examine how God may be calling us to express *hesed* in our lives today.

*Heroic actions* are, as might be expected, actions for the sake of others that involve great risk to the one performing them. Witnessing what the leading characters do and why they do it will challenge us to ponder the risks that God may be calling us to take as part of our faithful discipleship.

*Hidden* refers to the presence of God in all three books. Seeing how the hidden hand of God is at work in all three stories will give us opportunities to reflect on how God sometimes seems hidden in our lives or in the lives of those we love and how we are called to live in those times.

Each month, the theme Bible verse will illustrate the “H” themes central to the session. We will spend three sessions on each of the books, considering first the book of Ruth, then Daniel 1–6, and finally the book of Esther. It is our prayer that in our study together all of us will grow in our confidence in God’s never-ending love for us and in courage to take the risks that God may be calling us to take in the complex situations in which we live.

## Overview of the Book of Ruth

Often the story of Ruth is portrayed as a simple romance, a quaint love story involving a beauti-

ful young woman and a prominent handsome man whose marriage results in the birth of the son who will become ancestor to David and, eventually, to Jesus. In our three sessions on the book of Ruth, we will see that this marvelously written story is much more. It is a story of a daughter-in-law’s loving loyalty (*hesed*) to her mother-in-law as together they struggle to survive in incredibly tumultuous times. It is the story of a young woman’s courage to take incredibly heroic risks to secure a future for her mother-in-law and herself, and of God’s hidden hand at work in human actions to bring blessing beyond what the human actors even dream possible. It is a story that challenges us to reflect deeply on how God may be calling us to exercise loving loyalty in the world in which we live.

In this first session, we invite you to read Ruth 1 closely, focusing on how the names of the characters and of significant places set the tone for the story that follows in chapters 2 through 4. As our reading of the chapter proceeds, we will introduce two biblical laws whose fulfillment or non-fulfillment will be central to the story, and will weave in the three “H” themes (*hesed*, heroism, hiddenness) that will guide the entire year’s study. As we work through the chapter together, we invite you to choose the character with whom you identify most closely and reflect on what in your life has led you to this identification.

## Before We Start

### Supplemental Background Information

The language in which Ruth originally was written is Hebrew. Like all English translations, the NRSV attempts to render the ancient language into smooth English form. As a result, the translated text we have sometimes misses nuances and word-plays that would have been obvious to the ancient Hebrew audience. Hebrew is a playful, open-ended language. Delighting in ambiguity and double meanings, ancient writers creatively used the language to express in vivid, memo-

rable ways the complexity of human life within the covenant relationships to which God invited Israel and all creation. Throughout this study, we will highlight nuances and word-plays that are obvious in the Hebrew text (or in the case of Daniel 2–6, the Aramaic text) but obscured in our English translation.

The collection of biblical books referred to as the Old Testament in many English translations is also known by other names, including First Testament and Hebrew Bible. For a variety of reasons, but particularly to emphasize that our English text is a smoothed-out translation from the Hebrew, we will refer to the collection as the Hebrew Bible.

Before we begin, it is helpful to point out the difference between the setting of the biblical stories we will study and the actual time periods in which they may have been written down. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the ancient writers frequently addressed issues of their own time by setting a story in an earlier time period. Setting the story in the past allowed them to address hot-button issues of their own time without the flaring of emotions likely if the issue were confronted more directly. As will become apparent, this is the case with each of the three books we will study.

Does this mean that these biblical stories are simply made-up “stories” rather than the true Word of God? No, it does not. It means that God’s ways of communicating truth are much deeper and broader than we sometimes think. As inheritors of the western scientific worldview, we often tend to equate “true” with “historically factual.” This extremely narrow definition of truth reduces the Bible to the level of historical documentary. But the Bible is much more. God’s living word spoken in and through biblical stories does not depend on historical accuracy for its truth claims. The living truth of who God is and who God calls us to be as God’s loved and loving people are proclaimed through story as well as through the many other kinds of biblical writings, such as letters, poetry, and prophecy.

As Lutherans, we believe in the truth of Jesus Christ revealed in and through the biblical word. That truth lies in the proclamation of God’s love for all creation and particularly for humanity, in God’s call to us to live in covenant community. Where hearts are convicted (law) and forgiveness and new life proclaimed (gospel), there truth is present. The Holy Spirit works through story as well as through history to communicate the good news. The truth of the book of Ruth relies on proclamation, not the historical verifiability of the story’s details.

Guided by the Spirit’s presence and power in our study together, we will encounter deep truths in Ruth, Daniel 1–6, and Esther, and in encountering them we will continue to grow in our identity as God’s loved and loving people.

Throughout the study, you will discover references to other Hebrew Bible texts. By the power of the Spirit, the Bible is a living conversation in which texts talk to each other. Some texts confirm other texts, while others contest them. As reading communities, we are invited to enter the living conversation, to hear the variety of voices in the biblical witness, and to discern through those multiple voices how God is calling us to live faithfully in our times. It is both exciting and challenging to be invited into this conversation.

As we always tell our seminary students, studying the Bible is one of the most risky enterprises they will ever undertake. By entering into the biblical conversations, “sitting with” the biblical conversation partners, and allowing them to inform our conversation, we will be transformed for mission in ways we may not now dream possible. It is risky—and it is our calling as God’s people together in ministry and mission. (See “Lutherans Read the Bible” on p. 12.)

**Setting the Stage: Elimelech’s Story (Ruth 1:1–5)**  
The setting of the story in the days of the judges harkens back to an earlier time in Israel’s history, remem-

bered as an idyllic past when rural life was simpler and neighbors more neighborly. From the opening verse, the Hebrew practice of choosing names descriptive of the location or character named is apparent. Action begins in the Judean town of Bethlehem, a rural village whose name means “house of bread.” The irony around which the beginning of the story pivots is the lack of bread in the house of bread. Because of the famine, a local resident emigrates with his family from Judah to a foreign land where bread can be found. As the story begins, a number of characters are introduced. In each case, the meaning of their names is a significant clue previewing how their individual story lines will develop: Elimelech (“God is king”), Naomi (“pleasant”), Mahlon (“weakness”), Chilion (“sickness”), Orpah (“over the shoulder”), and Ruth (“water to saturation,” “satisfy”).

1. *Read aloud Ruth 1:1–5. Especially given the meanings of the names, what strikes you as you read these verses? If you had never read the story before, what do you imagine would follow next?*
2. *In light of other biblical references to it, the reference to the country of Moab is particularly important. To trace several of these references, complete the chart below. What does the chart reveal about Israel’s attitude toward Moab and Moabites?*

Irony abounds in Ruth 1:1–5. Due to lack of bread in the house of bread, a man whose name means “God is king” is forced to emigrate with his family to a despised foreign land filled with worshipers of a different god, to a people with whom contact is forbidden according to the texts cited above. Interestingly, the people of despised Moab welcome the immigrants and are willing to marry their daughters into their family. Nonetheless, disaster continues to follow. Elimelech dies, raising questions about why God the king has allowed such a thing to happen, so far from home. After his death, his sons marry local women. Given the meaning of the sons’ names (“weakness” and “sickness”), it is no surprise that soon they die, too. Left alone in a foreign land with no men to support her and two daughters-in-law who, according to the texts cited above, would be abhorred in her own land, Naomi’s name (“pleasant”) makes less and less sense as a description of her reality.

### **Naomi Prepares to Return Home: Parting Words to Orpah and Ruth (Ruth 1:6–9)**

Possibly only those who have suffered the kind of losses Naomi endured can imagine how lonely and desperate she must have felt as she pondered her options for the future. As a widow whose sons had died, she lacks legal advocates; as a displaced Israelite in a foreign land, she has no male relatives nearby to help her out. No wonder that when she hears that the famine has ended in Judah, she decides to go back to the house of bread.

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Instruction</i>	<i>Reason</i>
<i>Numbers 25:1–5</i>		
<i>Deuteronomy 23:3–6</i>		
<i>Ezra 9:1–4</i>		
<i>Nehemiah 13:1–3</i>		

**3.** *Read Ruth 1:6–9. What do these verses reveal about how Naomi feels about her daughters-in-law and what she wishes for them?*

Clearly, Naomi does not share the aversion that many other Israelites would have felt toward the Moabites. In encouraging her daughters-in-law to remain in their homeland, she uses language that clues the reader in to two of the “H” words that are key to the unfolding of the story. The first clue is an allusion to the theme of heroic action. Ancient readers would have expected Naomi to send her daughters-in-law back to their fathers’ houses, not their mothers’ houses (1:8). In fact, there are only two other references to “mother’s house” in the entire Hebrew Bible (Genesis 24:28 and Song of Solomon 3:4, 8:2). In all three of these, women are the primary actors. Their actions determine how their stories will unfold. In this light, the reference to “mother’s house” in Ruth 1:8 alludes to women as the primary actors in the unfolding story. Their heroic actions will move their story forward to its conclusion.

The second clue is the first appearance of the word *hesed*, translated in the NRSV as “deal kindly” (1:8). Often used to refer to God’s loyalty and loving kindness to Israel, *hesed* expresses loving loyalty that goes beyond the expected to meet essential needs. Naomi’s prayer that God deal kindly with Orpah and Ruth as they have dealt with her is in stark contrast to the biblical laws forbidding Israelite contact with Moabites. From Naomi’s perspective, God’s loving kindness extends to Moabites as well as to Israelites. It seems that God’s criterion for judgment has much more to do with how people treat each other than with their ethnic identity. (See “On the Journey in Community” on p. 6.)

**Naomi Rebuts Her Daughters-in-law**

Read Ruth 1:10–13. To understand Naomi’s rebuttal of the younger women’s desire to return with her to

Bethlehem, it is necessary to understand the ancient law to which she alludes. Because the ancient Israelites deemed it essential that a man’s name live on through his sons, extraordinary action was decreed if a man died sonless. This “law of levirate marriage” required the brother of the deceased to have relations with the deceased’s widow (Deuteronomy 25:5–6). The son born of this union would continue the name of the widow’s deceased husband and have legal rights to his property.

According to the levirate law, aged Naomi is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Even if a brother of her husband were available, she is past child-bearing age. Nor did her sons have brothers to carry out the levirate duty with Orpah and Ruth. Naomi’s family line is at an end. There is no future for her and no future with her for her daughters-in-law. It is better that they remain in Moab and remarry among their own people.

**4.** *How does Naomi understand what has happened to her? What do you think of her interpretation?*

**The Daughters-in-law Respond**

As you read Ruth 1:14–18, put yourself in the position of Orpah and Ruth.

**5.** *Compare and contrast the responses of Orpah and Ruth. Who chose the more reasonable approach? Explain.*

To journey into the unknown with a bitter mother-in-law or to go back to the comfort of the known with birth family and friends—these are the options open to Orpah and Ruth. Looking back “over her shoulder” as befits her name, Orpah chooses the familiar. (See “Orpah’s Choice” on p. 22.) Since we hear no more of her story, we can only imagine her future in her

homeland. Ruth's choice, eloquently expressed in *hesed* language as loyalty to the point of taking on Naomi's religious identity and being buried far from family and friends, is full of risk. How will Naomi respond to her refusal to follow directions? How will she be received in a land where her people are despised? Lacking answers but risking the journey anyway, Ruth begins the long walk toward the unknown, guided only by an older woman who refuses to speak on the way.

6. *Often Ruth 1:16–17 is chosen as a reading at weddings. Why do you suppose this is so? How is a marriage service similar to and different from what is being recounted in the text?*

### **Homecoming: Naomi and the Women of the City**

Read Ruth 1:19–21. Naomi's destination is clear—the rural village from which she emigrated years earlier. We can only imagine how hot and dusty the long walk home was, how perilous the journey of two unaccompanied women, how curious the stares of onlookers as the silent older woman plods along with an equally silent younger woman in her wake.

Those who live in rural America can easily imagine the curiosity and excitement of the residents of Bethlehem as the two dusty travelers approach. Few outsiders journey through isolated rural outposts like Bethlehem, and those who do can expect to be objects of interest. So it is with Naomi and Ruth—until it dawns on the women of the town that one of the “strangers” is in fact their very own Naomi. Perhaps we can imagine the kinds of questions running through the local women's minds—where are the menfolk and who is this foreign woman dragging along behind—but all we are privileged to hear is their puzzled query, “Is that you, Naomi?”

Naomi's reply gives us great insight into her mental state. The woman whose name means “pleasant” tells the women to call her “bitter” (Mara). Not only that, she goes on to charge God with causing her bitterness.

The Hebrew text of the final clause of verse 21 makes Naomi's point more strongly than it might seem in the NRSV translation. A literal translation of the Hebrew reads: “Yahweh has afflicted me and Shaddai has done evil to me.” *Yahweh* is the name for God translated as “the LORD” throughout the Hebrew Bible. *Shaddai*, usually translated as “the Almighty,” can have connotations of “Nurturer.” The irony in Naomi's words is sharp: Rather than nurturing her spirit in her time of bereavement, God has turned against her and caused her to return home empty of the full family with whom she left. From her perspective, her meaningful life is over; bitterness toward God is all she has left. (See “Tale of Two Widows” on p. 18.)

7. *If you were one of the women of the town, how would you respond to Naomi? Why would you respond in this way?*

### **Setting the Stage for Action to Follow**

Read Ruth 1:22. As much as we might like to know the townswomen's response to Naomi's bitter words, we can only imagine what they may or may not have said. Destitute and without a husband or sons to support her, lacking legal protection and rights, Naomi has returned to the small-town world of Bethlehem. Ruth's immigration into this world is even more perilous. Where will they go? What will they do? How will people respond to the ethnically despised alien in their midst? At this point, we do not know. The one new bit of information we gain is that the barley harvest has just begun. The stage is set for the action to follow.

8. *The plight of Naomi and Ruth echoes down through the centuries in the lives of refugees in every corner of the globe. As you read the newspapers or hear the news this month, make a list of groups of people displaced by war, famine, or ethnic strife. Include your*

*ever-expanding list into your daily prayers and, if you feel comfortable doing so, bring it with you to Bible study next month to be included in the opening prayer.*

### Digging Deeper

9. *Which character do you identify with most in the story thus far? What in your life has led you to this identification? How might realizing similarities between that character's life and yours be a resource as you continue to grow in the life abundant that God desires for you?*
10. *Probably every community includes people whose sometimes understandable bitterness matches that of Naomi's. What are some ways that communities can lovingly include these people without allowing their bitterness to permeate an entire group?*

### Final Thoughts on Ruth 1

Clearly, God remains hidden in the experiences of the characters in Ruth 1. Mentioned only in Naomi's bitter lament, God has yet to make a visible move. People who have struggled to hold on to faith in times when God remains so hidden as to seem completely absent have particular insight into the depth of Naomi's pain and anger. How can we go on when God seems so incredibly against us or so far removed from us? This is one of the questions the story will address.

The character of Ruth remains somewhat an enigma. Surely she knows how despised her people are in Naomi's homeland. Why is she willing to give up everything she's ever known to follow a mother-in-law who has clearly told her not to do so? What is her love, her loyalty—her *hesed*—all about? These are questions to ponder as the story progresses.

### Closing Prayer

God of all people and all places,  
we thank you for the opportunity  
to gather this day  
for worship and study.

Grant us grace to see you hidden  
in those deemed outsiders in our world  
and there to serve you with gladness.  
In Jesus' name we pray.  
Amen.

### Looking Ahead

Elimelech's story concludes with his death and the death of his sons, resulting in the end of their seed, their lineage. Naomi and Ruth's journey to Bethlehem concludes with the observation that the harvest of barley seeds is underway. In chapters 2 and 3, these two types of seeds will come together in a totally unexpected way. 🌾

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