



# LifeLight

*"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4*

## Ruth/Esther



### LEADERS GUIDE



Among the great women of the Bible—Eve, Sarah, Hannah, Mary the mother of Jesus, Phoebe, Lydia, and Priscilla to name a few—stand Ruth and Esther. While each of these women bear witness to God’s grace on behalf of His people, only Ruth and Esther’s stories have been recorded as Bible books. Sometimes overtly and sometimes subtly, in each of their lives we see God act in love for the sake of His mission of seeking and saving the lost through His Son, Jesus Christ. The books of Ruth and Esther are not only for women, however. All people of faith—women, men, and children—will see in these books themselves, their situations, and above all, their Savior, Jesus Christ.



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## Introduction

### Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

### LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

*In-depth* means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

### LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

### LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

#### The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership-team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

#### The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

#### The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;
- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders meetings.

### **The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)**

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

### **The Small-Group Discussion Leaders**

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 61.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (see p. 59);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;

- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;
- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion-leaders training meetings.

### **Leadership Training**

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible-study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

### **The LifeLight Weekly Schedule**

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes).

Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another 5 minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). They will follow the same schedule, but they may use a recording to listen to the week's lecture presentation. The discussion leader will obtain the recording and leaflets from the director. A congregation may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process begins all over again!

## Recommended Study Resources and Worship

*Concordia Self-Study Bible, New International Version*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986. Interpretive notes on each page form a running commentary on the text. The book includes cross-references, a 35,000-word concordance, full-color maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

*Every Voice a Song: Pipe Organ Accompaniment for 180 Hymns and Liturgy*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99-1565). Use this music CD for worship hymn accompaniment.



## Women of the Bible

Genesis 1:26–27; 2:22–23; 1 Peter 3:5–7

### Preparing for the Session

#### Central Focus

In the beginning, God created male and female. God intended that the differences between men and women serve the good of society. Instead, sin has caused these differences to be regarded as obstacles to overcome. However, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem the world from sin and restore creation to its original goodness, including the complementarity of sexual differences. God's choice of a woman—Mary—as the one through whom the Savior would receive our human nature proves this. Throughout Scripture, we see that God has used women, in ways uniquely their own, to bear witness to Christ and exemplify lives lived in faith.

#### Objectives

That the participant, as a child of God and with the Holy Spirit's help, will be led deeper into the divinely given realizations that

1. God created us male and female;
2. God honors women by sending His Son to us by the Virgin Mary;
3. God has used and will continue to use women to bear witness to His love in Jesus Christ; and
4. the holy women of the Bible, as witnesses to God's mercy in Christ, are commendable not just as examples to other women but for men as well.

**Note for the small-group leaders:** Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 61.

### For the Lecture Leader

#### Session Plan

#### Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with the prayer in the study leaflet.

#### Lecture Presentation

##### Introduction

Men and women are of equal worth in God's eyes, yet men and women are different from each other. "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). Created in God's image, men and women are equal but different.

Throughout history and especially today, some wish to diminish or even dismiss the differences between men and women. There are modern feminists who assert that sexual difference is mainly a social construction, an invention by male-dominated society to keep women down. And there are misogynists (muh SAH juh nists), women-haters, who view women as falling short of standards only a man can meet. Such a hateful perspective has been around for a long time. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, for instance, called women "misbegotten men."

In contrast, Scripture teaches that in the beginning God endowed men and women with unique and complementary differences. Some traits, characteristics, and

roles are proper to women that are not proper to men, and vice versa.

These differences—the physical, emotional, and relational differences of which we are all intuitively aware—were not created in isolation. On the contrary, the uniquenesses that belong to each sex are meant to be shared, most fully in marriage. Because it was not good for the man to be alone, God gave man an “other.” When God gave Eve to Adam, the man immediately recognized that she was different from and at the same time compatible with him: “bone of my bones,” said Adam, “and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). Even the way God created Eve, by removing a rib from Adam, suggests God’s intent for a man and a woman to live together in marriage. The point for us is that in the very beginning the differences between men and women were part of God’s good creation. Although there was diversity in the world God made, there was an underlying unity.

Sin radically changed this. Because of sin, now it is difficult even to speak of differences between men and women without starting an argument. Because of sin, the divinely given differences between men and women cause competition rather than cooperation: “I can do anything you can do better.” Instead of being seen as unique and complementary, distinctly masculine and feminine qualities are cast in terms of “more” or “less,” “better” or “worse.” Marriage especially comes under attack as backward and oppressive to either sex or both. Today, for instance, many men and women reject marriage as taking an oppressive toll on one’s individuality, freedom, life goals, and so on. How far sin has taken us from God’s original plan! Men and women now use their God-given differences to serve themselves.

We do well to remember that God did indeed create men and women different from each other. The differences between men and women are not a product of sin, but resenting them is. Christ came to restore fallen creation to its original goodness, goodness that includes the complementary distinctions between male and female.

It should not surprise us, then, that throughout the history of salvation God has employed the gifts and energies of women as he has sought to accomplish His purpose to restore the fallen world to Himself through His Son.

## 1 Eve and Mary

The very first woman, in fact, was privileged by God not only to hear the Gospel promise but also to bear witness to it with her very name. This is Eve, the woman who first succumbed to the devil’s temptation and with her husband caused all humankind to fall into sin’s darkness! Despite Eve’s responsibility in the fall, when God cursed the serpent He was proclaiming to her and her husband the very first prophecy concerning Christ. God said He would put enmity (hatred) between the serpent and the woman and between the serpent’s offspring and her Offspring: “He shall bruise your head,” the Lord told Satan, “and you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15).

Eve no doubt took this promise to heart. The original Hebrew even suggests that when Eve gave birth to her first son, she thought she had given birth to the promised Savior. In Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible, when Cain is born, Eve said, “*Ich habe den Mann, den Herrn*” (Genesis 4:1). That is, “I have gotten a man, the Lord.” According to Luther’s legitimate translation of the Hebrew, Eve thought the boy to whom she had just given birth was the Lord Himself, the Offspring God had promised to crush the devil’s head.

Unfortunately, this translation is not found in many English Bibles. Instead they often say something like “I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.” It seems translators can’t believe what Eve was saying. If they won’t believe that, they should consider this: the name *Eve* means “mother of all living.” (“The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living” [Genesis 3:20]). When did Adam give her this name? Not when she was first created! When God first presented her to Adam, Adam called her *woman*. It was only after God made the first Gospel promise that Adam gave her the name *mother of all living* or *life-giver*.

What’s the big deal? Just this: If “mother of all living” simply expresses the biological truth that Eve was the mother of every human being after her, this truth held already before the fall. But the first woman was not called “mother of all living” until after the fall, only after God promised the Offspring who would bruise the serpent’s head. Luther explained:

It is clear from this passage that after Adam had received the Holy Spirit, he had become

marvelously enlightened, and that he believed and also understood the saying concerning the woman's Seed who would crush the head of the serpent. . . . He calls her Eve to remind himself of the promise through which he himself also received new life, and to pass on the hope of eternal life to his descendants. (AE 1:220)

In other words, Adam called Eve "the mother of all living" in a spiritual sense. Through her Offspring, Jesus Christ, the human race would again have access to eternal life.

As we well know, Eve's first son was not the world's Savior. Cain instead became the world's first murderer. Nor did any of Eve's other children fulfill God's prophecy, not even Abel or Seth. In fact, because they were also the sons of Adam, these children could not have been the promised Christ. The Genesis 3:15 prophecy spoke of the *woman's* Offspring, not the man's. Eve had not read a biblical genealogy, but you and I can see that these listings nearly always catalog offspring as the descendants of various men. But the Lord had called the promised Savior the Offspring of the woman. He would not be naturally born. Instead, somehow He would have only a woman as a human parent.

This point brings us to perhaps the greatest honor God has ever bestowed, an honor He bestowed on a woman. It is through a woman, not through a man, that the Savior of the world is biologically related to the rest of us. Jesus is a son and a human being not through Joseph but rather through Mary.

Mary, of course, was a remarkable woman. What humility we find in her! After Jesus entered adulthood, Mary faded into the background, which seems to have been fine with her. At the wedding at Cana, when Jesus gently chided her for requesting His help—saying, "Woman, what does this have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4)—she withdrew without a hint of anger or resentment. With faith in her Son, she went on to instruct the servants to "Do whatever He tells you" (John 2:5). Do you think you would have been as confident?

What love we find in Mary! We see it most clearly at the cross. There Mary stood with her sister and Mary Magdalene and Salome and the other women. It is hard to

imagine the tenderness of feeling that Mary had for her Son. And who can fathom the sadness and the grief that she experienced as she watched while her beloved Boy, the promised Savior, was falsely accused, publicly humiliated, and cruelly killed?

What faith Mary had! Young and astonished at the angel's greeting, she nevertheless responded in faith to the announcement that she would conceive the Messiah without knowing a man. She simply said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). What do you think you would have said? Mary gave expression to such faith at her relative Elizabeth's house, where she sang the great song of praise now known as the Magnificat.

But for all of Mary's virtues, for all her noble qualities—which, to be sure, were themselves the work of the Holy Spirit—what sets Mary apart from all other women is the great gift God gave to her quite freely. God caused her to be the virgin mother of Jesus Christ, the God-man. Thus, Mary is the Mother of God.

## 2 Women of the Old and New Testaments

God chose a woman as the vessel to bear humankind's Savior. Therefore it should not surprise us to find throughout Scripture women who not only typified holy living but also bore witness to Christ. Think about the many, many women of the Bible: the challenges they faced and what you might have thought, said, or done in their shoes.

The Old Testament is filled with their stories. Here are some examples: Sarah, the wife of Abraham, was held up by the author of Hebrews as a model believer (Hebrews 11:11) and by the apostle Peter as an example of inner beauty before God (1 Peter 3:4–6). Hagar, after being cast out of Abraham's household for mocking her mistress, was shown mercy by God and given the promise that her son, Ishmael, though not in the physical line of Christ, would nevertheless become a great nation (Genesis 16:1–12). Rebekah, the wife of Isaac, was helpful, hardworking, and trusting (Genesis 24). Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, also received mention in Scripture as a woman faithful to her mistress over the course of many years and in a strange place (Genesis 24:59; 35:8).

This is only a beginning. We remember also Leah and Rachel, the wives of Jacob (Genesis 29–35); Joseph’s wife, Asenath (AS uh nath), presumably a believer along with her husband (Genesis 41:45, 50); the Egyptian midwives who feared God and disobeyed the Egyptian king who ordered them to kill the sons of the Hebrew women (Exodus 1:15–21); Moses’ wife, Zipporah (zih POHR uh), who restored Moses to God’s favor by circumcising their son (Exodus 4:24–26); and Moses’ sister, Miriam, who led the women of Israel in a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God for delivering them across the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20–21).

There are others. As Israel entered the Promised Land, we read of Rahab, the woman of Jericho who protected the Israelite spies and who by faith “did not perish with those who were disobedient,” as noted in Hebrews 11 (v. 31). We read also of Deborah, who judged Israel for a time and figured in one of its most memorable military victories; of Jael (jah EL), the Kenite who in a bloody feat of courage killed the army commander of Israel’s enemy (Judges 4:17–22; 5:24–27); of Manoah’s wife, the pious mother of Samson (Judges 13); of Hannah, the believing and devoted mother of Samuel (1 Samuel 1:1–2:21); of Abigail, the beautiful woman of good understanding who provided for David and his men in their moment of deepest need and who became David’s wife when her first husband died (1 Samuel 25). Mention should also be made of the wise woman at Abel who saved a city from certain destruction with her persuasive words (2 Samuel 20:14–22), the widow at Zarephath (ZAR uh FATH) whom Elijah befriended (1 Kings 17:7–24), the widow with the jars of oil during Elisha’s ministry (2 Kings 4:1–7), and the Shunammite woman whose son Elisha raised (2 Kings 4:8–37).

In the New Testament, Scripture tells us of other admirable women, women who were given faith in Jesus Christ and lived their lives in accordance with His Word. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptizer, greeted her relative Mary with the humble and believing words, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” She was astonished to be visited by the mother of her Savior, saying, “Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:42–44). Anna, the prophetess, no less than

Simeon, received the consolation for which she had long been waiting when she saw the Christ Child as He was presented by His parents in the temple (Luke 2:36–38). Mary of Bethany and her sister, Martha, were blessed to be participants in two of our Lord’s greatest “object lessons.” The first was when Jesus told Martha, “One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42), and the second was when He raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11). Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2), and her life became one of genuine discipleship. She and other women became the first human messengers of the Lord’s resurrection (Luke 24:1–12). Stop for a moment and consider this: the first people to tell the great Good News of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead were women!

In the Book of Acts, we meet Rhoda, the maid who was so excited that Peter was released from prison that she failed to open the door for him (Acts 12:13–15). We also read of Tabitha, also named Dorcas, described as “full of good works and acts of charity” (Acts 9:36). Lydia, the businesswoman in Thyatira (THIGH uh TYE ruh), became the first convert to Christianity in Europe (Acts 16:11–15). Priscilla, along with her husband, Aquila (uh KILL uh), served as Paul’s helpers, traveling with him and even helping to explain the Gospel more accurately to Apollos (uh POL ohs, Acts 18:1–3, 18–19, 24–26). Eunice and Lois, Timothy’s mother and grandmother, are credited with teaching him the Scriptures and instilling in the future pastor faith in Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 1:5).

Admirable as these biblical women were in many ways, none of them lived without sin. All of them fell short of the glory of God. Yet Christ came for people just like them and just like us.

### 3 Ruth and Esther

During the next eight weeks, we will be studying in depth the stories of two women we have not mentioned yet, two women whom God made a part of His saving plan: Ruth and Esther.

Some seven hundred years separated the lives of these two women. Ruth lived during the tumultuous period of the judges, an era for Israel in which “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Esther

lived during the period following Israel's exile in Babylon, when some Jews had returned to Jerusalem, but many more had remained scattered among the cities of the Persian Empire. In both cases, doubt loomed concerning the future of God's people. In each case, God acted in faithfulness to His promises, and He acted through a woman.

Ruth herself was not an Israelite. She was from the land of Moab but was brought to faith in the God of Israel through Naomi, the mother of her late husband. Pledging herself to Naomi and to Naomi's God, Ruth left Moab for Israel. She took with her little more than the clothes she was wearing and the hope that there would be grain to gather in Bethlehem. Through the course of events, Naomi and Ruth's lack turned to plenty: Naomi recovered her family estate, and Ruth married and gave birth to a son. The God in whom Ruth trusted proved faithful, and Ruth's faith showed itself in loving service to her neighbors. Still more, the Lord confirmed through Ruth that the promise of salvation belonged to Jews and Gentiles alike. Ruth became an ancestress of David and thus of Jesus. The line leading to Christ would include this non-Israelite, a Moabitess.

Ruth faced many risks. In choosing to leave Moab for Israel, she risked her material security, her reputation, and her prospects for a family. She accepted these risks out of devotion to Naomi. No less than Ruth, Esther faced risk. In fact, she took an even greater risk: for the sake of her own people, Esther risked her life.

The beginning of the Book of Esther records how the Jewish girl Esther became queen of the Persian Empire. Some time later, a decree was published announcing the planned massacre of the Jews, and Esther was approached by her adoptive father to beg mercy from the Persian king. Esther hesitated. According to Persian law, she pointed out, anyone who approached the king without the king's permission could be put to death, and she was not above that law.

It must have occurred to Esther that if she said nothing, she would likely survive the slaughter of her countrymen, for she had kept her Jewish identity a secret all this time. But if she spoke out, she risked losing not only her position as queen but also her very life. Against such thinking, Esther's adoptive father, Mordecai, said, "Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a

time as this?" (Esther 4:14). His words encouraged Esther to forget such selfish thoughts and do the right thing for her people. Her position as queen was a gift from God. She would use it for the sake of His people.

The Book of Esther includes much more than just this one moment and this pivotal decision. The book as a whole is useful for teaching faith and the fear of God. It teaches believers not to let adversities break them but instead to use such hardships as occasions to call on the name of the Lord for help and to take to heart the hope of salvation.

At the same time, the Book of Esther teaches unbelievers that they should fear the prayers of Christians. For the ungodly, this book is a call to repentance from sin and to faith in the forgiveness offered in Jesus Christ. In the midst of all the events it relates stands the woman Esther: beautiful, courageous, faithful Esther. Through her, God preserved the race from which the Savior was born. While Esther was not blessed to be a direct ancestress of Jesus, the role she played in salvation history was no less significant than Ruth's.

Both these books have much to teach us, so we have an exciting journey ahead. For now, it is helpful to think of Ruth and Esther in the larger context of women in Scripture.

## Conclusion

In the beginning, God created male and female. Although different from each other, the two sexes are of equal worth to Him. Even when sin threw into discord the beautiful harmony that God had composed, He made a way for His love. It was a way to restore what the first man and woman had lost. God's eternal Son became man by being born of a woman.

In this opening session, we have briefly noted several of the women in the Bible. These women faithfully served God and their neighbors. They were rewarded for their love and labor. Through them, God kept alive the promise of salvation. Of course none of these women were perfect. In fact, the Bible describes how these women at times doubted the Lord's promise, broke His commandments, and otherwise fell short of His glory. None of these women were without need of God's forgiveness. Thus, they are just like you and me.

Yet God used all these women to bear witness to the

love He has through Jesus Christ for all people, both men and women. Far from minimizing their differences from men, the qualities that make women distinctly women, God instead used the womanliness with which He originally endowed them for His good and gracious purposes. Therefore we sing,

For all the faithful women  
Who served in days of old,  
To You shall thanks be given;  
To all, their story told.  
They served with strength and gladness  
In tasks Your wisdom gave.  
To Your their lives bore witness,  
Proclaimed Your pow'r to save. (LSB 855)

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## Concluding Activities

Speak a prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, we give You thanks for all the holy women of the Bible whom You used to bear witness to the salvation Your Son has won for all people. Help us Christian men and women to use our differences in service to one another and to the glory of Your holy name. Grant this for Jesus' sake. Amen.

# God's Loving Faithfulness

## Ruth 1

### *Preparing for the Session*

#### Central Focus

The Book of Ruth is remarkable for many reasons, including the clever way it is written. To better understand the message of Ruth, it is helpful to appreciate the rhetorical techniques employed by its divinely inspired author. The Book of Ruth, after all, was most likely originally a work meant to be recited orally. We need to "hear" it, not just read it. One of its leading themes is loving faithfulness, the grace God shows to undeserving sinners. This grace in turn enables believers to show kindness to others.

#### Objectives

That the participant, as a child of God and with the Holy Spirit's help, will be led deeper into the divinely given realizations that

1. the Holy Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation;
2. God keeps His promise to save sinners through Christ;
3. the working out of God's promise to send a Savior, as recorded in the Book of Ruth, is all the more astonishing when viewed in the context of the Judges period; and
4. the loving faithfulness of God to which Naomi commended her daughters-in-law is the same loving faithfulness that God shows us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

**Note for the small-group leaders:** Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 63.

### For the Lecture Leader

#### *Session Plan*

#### Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with the prayer in the study leaflet.

#### Lecture Presentation

##### Introduction: God's Loving Faithfulness

The Book of Ruth is one of the most memorable books of the Bible. Its reputation goes well beyond the Sunday School classroom. The German poet Goethe (GER tuh) considered Ruth "the loveliest complete work on a small scale." Indeed, the Book of Ruth is one of the most cleverly told stories in the history of literature. We should take time to appreciate the skill with which its Spirit-inspired author tells it.

Yet if we read Ruth only as entertainment, or even as a story primarily illustrating virtues such as friendship and family obligation, we will miss the book's main point. Ruth's purpose is to show us something about the relationship between God and people. God fills the hungry soul with good things (Psalm 107:9). He "watches over the sojourners" and "upholds the widow and the fatherless" (Psalm 146:9). God preserves those who trust in Him. His faithfulness enables us to act faithfully toward others.

Still more, the Book of Ruth points us to the promised Messiah. Ruth is an ancestress of David and therefore of Jesus (Ruth 4:17, 22). By showing mercy to Ruth's

seemingly insignificant family, God preserved the line that led to the world's Savior. Along with all the other books of the Old Testament, the Book of Ruth very much bears witness to Christ (John 5:39).

In this first of two lectures on Ruth, we want to explore what there is to know about the book's author, the date when it was written, and its particular position among the books of the Old Testament. We will discuss briefly some of the characteristics that make Ruth such a remarkable piece of writing. Finally, and most important, we want to examine the book's theological themes, especially those that present themselves in its first chapter.

## 1 Author, Date, and Position

We do not know who wrote Ruth. The Talmud (TAL mood or TAL muhd), a record of opinions on Old Testament Scripture and Jewish law, ascribed the Book of Ruth to Samuel. The Talmud, however, is much too late to be authoritative. Its earliest material is from the second century AD. In fact, it is highly improbable that Samuel wrote Ruth. The first phrase of the book, "In the days when the judges ruled," and the reference to David at the end strongly suggest that Ruth was written after the period of the judges, sometime during or after the reign of David. Although Samuel lived past the period of the judges (being himself the last judge), he died before David ascended the throne.

One interesting suggestion as to Ruth's authorship is that Nathan, the prophet who served during David's reign, wrote the book. The idea is based on striking similarities in vocabulary between Ruth 3:1-4 and Nathan's words to David in 2 Samuel 12:1-4.

Whatever his name, Ruth's author certainly wrote under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. "All Scripture is breathed out by God," the Bible says (2 Timothy 3:16). We may never know who the human author of the Book of Ruth was. It is one of the few Bible books whose human author is unknown to us. However, we do know that God used the human author to write it. The words of this book are, in fact, the very words of God.

The events described in Ruth took place during the period of the judges, that length of time in Israel's history between Joshua's death and the beginning of the

monarchy, when Saul was made Israel's first king. All told, the period of the judges lasted over 300 years, from perhaps 1380 until about 1050 BC.

We cannot be sure precisely when during the period of the judges the events of Ruth occurred. The genealogy at the book's end indicates that the events must have occurred at least three generations before David: "Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David" (Ruth 4:21-22). It is possible that the events occurred even earlier. We should note that the Hebrew word for "fathered" does not necessarily mean that each man in the list is the immediate father of the one who follows. Several generations may be missing in the list between Obed and Jesse. Generational links were omitted earlier in the genealogy. One conservative scholar believes the setting for Ruth is 1200 BC, basically in the middle of the era of the judges.

If the book's events took place at this time, the actual book would have been written later. The theory that the prophet Nathan wrote the book would date it some time during the latter half of David's reign, perhaps between 1005 and 985 BC. There is really no compelling argument for thinking that Ruth was written much later than this.

So, Ruth is a divinely inspired book whose human author is anonymous. The events of Ruth took place sometime between 1360 and 1050 BC. The Book of Ruth was written between 1000 and 600 or so BC, but most likely closer to 1000 than to 600.

Here is one last interesting detail about the book: the Book of Ruth is not universally placed where it appears in our English Bibles, located between Judges and 1 Samuel. Hebrew Bibles place Ruth either between Proverbs and Song of Songs or between Song of Songs and Lamentations. You might remember that the Jews called the Old Testament Scriptures "the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings." The "Law" refers to the five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy. The "Prophets" means the Later Prophets (Isaiah through Malachi) as well as the so-called Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). The "Writings" are the rest. These books contain some of the world's best poetry, such as Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. Ruth is placed among these "Writings" in a Hebrew Bible.

But it has not always been placed there, not even among Jews. The first-century AD Jewish historian Josephus (joh SEE fuhs) indicated that in his day Ruth was considered part of the Book of Judges. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (SEP choo uh jint), translated in the second and third centuries BC and based on manuscripts older than the oldest Hebrew manuscripts available to us today, has the Book of Ruth in the same place where we find it in our English Bibles.

Originally, of course, there was no such thing as a particular order for the Old Testament books. Until they were bound together as a book (called a codex), there would have been no such thing as a listing of their order. The various books existed as separate scrolls. The fact that Ruth came to fit quite comfortably in two different places on subsequent lists points to the book's double distinction as a work of art and a work of history.

## 2 The Skillful Telling of Ruth

The Book of Ruth is a work of art because its divinely inspired author employed many effective storytelling techniques. Ruth gives a factual account of historical events but relates them in the engaging style of a story.

We can tell from the biblical text that Ruth was written to be recited orally. Ruth contains such features as repetition of words, phrases, and sentences; frequent key words; plays on words; alliteration and assonance; the division of the story into major scenes with short transitions between them; and the extensive use of dialogue. All of these communication techniques characterize oral communication.

Let's consider especially the last two, the division of the story into major scenes and the extensive use of dialogue. Both are crucial to an effective building up of suspense. There are basically four major scenes in Ruth: the first (1:6–18) is the conversation between Ruth and Naomi as Naomi returned to Bethlehem; the second (2:1–17) relates the first meeting between Ruth and Boaz; the third (3:6–15) tells of Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor; and the fourth (4:1–12) covers Boaz's confrontation with the nearest relative and Boaz's redemption of Ruth.

Each of these scenes raises questions in the reader's

mind. After the first, we wonder what will happen to Naomi and Ruth in Bethlehem. Even if Ruth finds a husband, will she be able to conceive? Her first marriage was childless. After Ruth meets Boaz in the second scene, we are led to ask whether this is the happy ending we have been waiting for. After the threshing floor conversation, in which another wrinkle in the story is introduced (third scene), we wonder how Boaz will be able to talk the closer redeemer out of marrying Ruth. Even in the last scene, after everything appears to have been resolved, we are still left to wonder whether Boaz and Ruth will be able to have a baby. We are given the answer only in the epilogue.

Although this book presents us with one seemingly hopeless situation after another, the author pulls us forward with glimmers of hope. These glimmers come by way of brief transitional passages. For instance, after the first scene, we are told that Naomi and Ruth "came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest" (1:22). This not only suggests that relief for Naomi and her daughter-in-law is just around the corner, but it also sets up the second major scene, Ruth in the barley field. After the third scene, in which Boaz mentions the nearer relative, Naomi encourages Ruth (and us readers) with the hopeful words, "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today" (3:18).

Another compelling feature of the book is its great amount of dialogue. Fifty of the book's eighty-five verses are direct quotations, which lends an immediacy to the events described. Readers feel directly involved with the lives of the characters. We learn from Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz themselves what was going on and how they felt about it.

Moreover, in the original Hebrew, speech patterns are peculiar to each of the main characters. The grammar and spelling of the words that Boaz speaks, for instance, make him sound like a country farmer. Thus, he is contrasted with Ruth and her way of expressing herself. One commentator has even called the Book of Ruth the first "dialect story," similar to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which contains lines like this: "Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before." In a similar way, the author of Ruth distinguishes Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz as individuals.

Thus, the *Book of Ruth* sustains our attention, stimulates interest in what will happen next, and fosters a special sympathy for its main characters, using very few words to do so. The *Book of Ruth* consists of only four chapters, but it is so cleverly written that it actually seems shorter.

### 3 “In the Days When the Judges Ruled”

However impressive *Ruth* is as a work of literature, it is still most significantly a work of history, and not just any history but the history of salvation. In fact, in the very first few words of the book, we encounter one of its important theological messages. These events occurred “In the days when the judges ruled.” Anyone familiar with the *Book of Judges* who hears those words must think, “Uh-oh.”

For Israel, the period of the judges was one of apostasy and wickedness, faithlessness toward God and unconscionable behavior toward other people. The very nation delivered from Egyptian slavery by God and placed safely in the Promised Land fell away and did the most unspeakable things. *Judges* features a repeated pattern: the people fell into ways worse than those of the previous generation, worshiping other gods and otherwise breaking the Ten Commandments; God afflicted the people through a foreign enemy to call them to repentance; after a time, Israel prayed for God’s mercy; then God raised up for them a judge who both conquered the foreign enemy and led Israel back to the right worship of God. Invariably, when the judge died, the people of Israel returned to their sinful ways, and the cycle began all over again (*Judges* 2:11–19).

Far from ending on a high note, the *Book of Judges* concluded with two shocking stories that illustrated how very bad things had become during that time. The book’s last words sum everything up: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (*Judges* 21:25).

So when *Ruth* opens with the words, “In the days when the judges ruled,” any reader familiar with the *Book of Judges* might understandably feel a little apprehensive. However, it is not long before we realize that the main characters in the *Book of Ruth* stand out as much different from the ones in the last stories of *Judges*.

### 4 God’s Loving Faithfulness

We see this difference in the first words quoted from Naomi. On her way back to Bethlehem, Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me” (*Ruth* 1:8). Naomi prayed that the Lord “deal kindly” with Orpah and Ruth. That little phrase “deal kindly” turns out to be one of the big themes in the *Book of Ruth*. (We find variations on it again in 2:20 and 3:10.) The word translated as “deal kindly” means a lot more than simply “be nice to.” It is a Hebrew word used to denote especially God’s faithfulness in carrying out the promises He makes to His people.

The God of Israel promised His people that He would never break His covenant with them, that is, His promise to send a Savior. This Savior, to be born of a woman, a descendant of Abraham, would destroy the works of the devil and bring a blessing for all humankind (*Genesis* 3:15, 22:18). The Old Testament progressively traced the details of God’s plan of salvation, beginning with that first prophecy in *Genesis* 3:15 about the Offspring of the woman who would bruise the serpent’s head and culminating in the writings of the prophets who “searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories” (1 Peter 1:10–11).

What is so remarkable, then, about God keeping His covenant with His people is the very fact that He kept it despite His people’s not keeping covenant with Him. God did everything He could to keep His people trusting in His covenant, but many of them rejected His promise, as evidenced by their worshiping idols and living contrary to God’s Word. This is the crux of the *Book of Judges*. Near the beginning of this book, the angel of the LORD said,

I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, “I will never break My covenant with you.” . . . But you have not obeyed My voice. What is this you have done? (*Judges* 2:1–2)

Due to their disobedience, the people could rightly have figured that God would revoke His covenant. Yet despite

their repeated unfaithfulness, God continued to show His faithfulness to them. Even the enemies God used to afflict Israel during the period of the judges were part of His loving discipline to call His people to repentance. He wanted them to return to Him, their only source of salvation.

As Paul wrote, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13). This is what the Book of Ruth is all about. Ruth shows how, even in the midst of one of Israel's darkest periods, God was still fulfilling His plan of salvation. He still showed undeserved mercy to poor sinners.

The translation "deal kindly," then, is not adequate. Instead of "kindness," other translations offer words like "faithfulness," "mercy," or "love." These are not wrong, but perhaps "loving faithfulness" gets it best. The important thing is that God's loving faithfulness is not some abstract quality but is intimately connected with His keeping His promise to redeem His people from sin. This is what Naomi wished for her daughters-in-law in Ruth 1:8. Here she referred to God not with the generic Hebrew word for God but with "Yahweh," God's very own name. God revealed this name personally to Moses at the burning bush. Here is what Naomi was saying: "May the one true God, the God who has revealed Himself to my people, show to you His loving faithfulness—a loving faithfulness you can count on, because He has promised it for the sake of the coming Savior."

Another hint about this loving faithfulness can be seen in the prior two verses in Ruth 1. Naomi was returning to Judah. Why? "For she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD"—here again "Yahweh," not simply the general word for "God"—"had visited His people and given them food," literally "bread" (Ruth 1:6). The word "visited" is significant. It takes us back to places like the last chapter of Genesis, in which the dying Joseph told his brothers, "God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (Genesis 50:24). The term "visited" also reminds us of the effect Moses and Aaron's words had on the Hebrews living in Egyptian bondage: "When they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped" (Exodus 4:31). The Lord visiting His people constituted an act of grace, an act of His loving faithfulness.

Hindsight permits us to see that the Lord's visiting His people and giving them bread in the Book of Ruth was an act of loving faithfulness, not only meeting the material needs of Naomi and Ruth but also meeting the spiritual needs of the whole world. Naomi and Ruth went to Bethlehem. The name *Bethlehem* means "house of bread." Bethlehem would become the birthplace of Jesus, who is none other than the bread of life. For all its many distinctive characteristics, Ruth remains most importantly a book that strengthens our trust in God's loving faithfulness, now and forever.

## Conclusion

The words Ruth spoke to Naomi in chapter 1 (v. 16) are probably the most famous words in the entire book: "Do not urge me to leave you or to return 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." Many people have heard these words at weddings, as a pledge of faithfulness between husband and wife. Perhaps it would surprise them to know that in the Bible these words were spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law.

Ruth's words to Naomi constituted a promise expressing faithfulness. It was born of the loving faithfulness of the Lord. Ruth heard about this faithfulness from Naomi, and by the power of the Holy Spirit she believed that the Lord's loving faithfulness in the coming Messiah was for her too.

Someone once said that unless life amounts to something simply thrown up for grabs, promises ought to be kept. The Book of Ruth is about promises made and kept by people to whom the Lord had given the promise of the Christ.

## Concluding Activities

Speak a prayer: Gracious Lord, You remain faithful to Your promises recorded in Your Word. Despite our unfaithfulness, You pursue us with Your grace. Forgive us for our shallow faith and our thankless living, and grant us peace and quietness so that we, like Ruth, Naomi, and all faithful women who have trusted in Your Word, may serve You all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.