

Sunday School Introduction to Ruth
By Josh Mauldin

What is Ruth?

Ruth is a “short story”¹ of God’s work from tragedy to redemption in one particular family during the time of the Judges. However, we learn how God’s work in and for this particular family affects God’s plans for Israel and the redemption of the whole world.

Ruth is set off from the books that surround it in a couple of ways. First, it is much shorter, hence a “short story.” This does not mean it is not a true story. The story does not present itself as fiction, but as an actual account told with great literary ability. “In sum, while the skill of the storyteller is quite evident, the heart of the story is historical.”²

Second, at least on first glance it is much more “ordinary” than some of the surrounding narratives. There are no battles, no overt miracles, the characters do not seem like extraordinarily gifted people. We see God at work in the everyday life of “regular” people. Yet it is an incredibly compelling story. It is a story of loss, of love, of conflict, and redemption. For these reasons it draws readers in and is enjoyable to read or hear, even called by some “a rich literary art to be savored” or “a remarkable literary masterpiece.”³ In fact, some have suggested Ruth’s only purpose is to entertain. However, we can say that the Bible is not merely entertainment. As Hamilton says “The enjoyment to be found in these books is not mere literary ‘entertainment’ but knowing the God they reveal.”⁴ Or Hubbard’s conclusion “In sum, this book is literary art and theological insight at its finest.”⁵

In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is not included in the “Prophetic” books like Joshua, Judges, and the Samuel material. It comes in the “Writings” put together with Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. However, its place in the English Bible (following the Greek version of the O.T.) is appropriate. Chronologically, it happens within the time of Judges (Ruth 1:1) and its themes provide a good contrast to much that happens in Judges. Further, in the words of Schreiner, “Ruth fits nicely” where it is because it continues the story of Israel’s need for a king.⁶ So in some sense, the story continues, or maybe expands in Ruth and prepares us for what will happen in 1 Samuel.

Two Book Suggestions for Teaching Fodder for Ruth

John Piper’s *A Sweet & Bitter Providence: Sex, Race, & the Sovereignty of God*. 145 pgs.
C.S. Lewis’ *The Horse & His Boy*. 217 (small) pages.

¹ Hubbard, Robert L., *The Book of Ruth*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Pg. 47.

² Hubbard, 48.

³ Hubbard, ix.

⁴ Hamilton, James M., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*. Pg. 310.

⁵ Hubbard, 2.

⁶ Schreiner, Thomas R. *The King in His Beauty*. Pg. 128.

General Principles for Interpreting Narrative

Think Big Picture

Three Levels of Narrative from *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*:⁷

1. Bottom Level: individual stories of any given book
2. Middle Level: the story of Israel
3. Top Level: whole universal plan of God.

“You will not fully do justice to any individual narrative without recognizing its part within the other two.”⁸

So we start asking ourselves in every lesson, “How does this fit into the story of God’s promises to Israel, and God’s ultimate plan of salvation in Jesus?”

Abraham-Exodus-Promised Land-Judges-King David-Exile-Jesus

↑
Ruth

Ruth provides an incredibly important insight into what happens between the failure of the time of the judges and the leadership of King David (Ruth 4:17-22). And of course this culminates in King Jesus (Matthew 1:5). It helps answer the question, “How do we get from the curses in Judges to the blessings with King David and ultimately King Jesus?”

“Judges focuses on Israel’s need for a king, a ruler who will guide the nation in accord with God’s will. Ruth closes with a genealogy that culminates with the man who will serve as Israel’s king, David. The books of 1-2 Samuel pick up from Ruth by rehearsing the story of how David became king and served as king.”⁹

“In surprising ways, a thousand years before Christ, this book glorifies his saving work on the cross, as we will see. Ruth is about the work of God in the darkest of times to prepare the world for the glories of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

“Finally, its connection with David’s ancestors not only provided background about the great king but also appealed to groups treasuring hopes of the Messiah from David’s house.”¹¹

⁷ Fee, Gordon & Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Pg. 79.

⁸ Fee & Stuart, 80.

⁹ Schreiner, 128.

¹⁰ Piper, John. *A Sweet & Bitter Providence*. Pg. 16.

¹¹ Hubbard, 5.

Watch for connections to previous stories of God's work for Israel

- a. Joseph compared to Naomi & Ruth- God working out his purposes through human suffering.
- b. The promises to Abraham and the gentile Ruth. Similar to Rahab's story.¹²
- c. "In the days when judges ruled, there was a famine..." (1"1)
So we are connected to Judges and the curses that result from Israel's failure to follow the Lord including famine and infertility. "The famine in Israel was an indication that the people were experiencing the Deuteronomic curses of the covenant (Deut. 28:48, 32:24)."¹³
- d. "like Rachel & Leah" (4:11) the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel.
"Ruth is to be a founding mother like Jacob's famous wives who, along with two concubines, gave birth to Israel's twelve tribes."¹⁴
- e. "like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah" (4:12).
"Boaz's house is to equal that of Perez, Judah's revered tribal ancestor."¹⁵

"...The storyteller employs literary devices meant to recall Israel's honored ancestors."¹⁶ In addition, Hubbard cites eleven different motifs in the Ruth story that reflect similar episodes in stories of the patriarchs—like famine, childlessness, protection of a chosen women, divine conception, etc. He concludes, "In passing, one observes that the motifs recall primarily the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their wives and concubines. ...By interweaving these motifs into the fabric of the Ruth story, the writer wanted the audience to associate that story's events with those of Israel's ancestors."¹⁷ In other words, the big story continues.

Remember God is the Hero and Main Character

This helps us avoid moralizing the Biblical stories or misapplying promises to our context.

In Ruth, the main characters are people who respond appropriately to the mercy of God. They are examples, for the most part, of right faith and action. "One striking feature of the book of Ruth is that all its characters are commendable. ...As Childs says the characters in the book 'emerge as models of the faithful life of Israel."¹⁸

"There is no doubt that the writer wants us to admire and imitate Ruth."¹⁹

¹² Schreiner, 131.

¹³ Schreiner, 129.

¹⁴ Hubbard, 39.

¹⁵ Hubbard, 40.

¹⁶ Hubbard, 39.

¹⁷ Hubbard, 41.

¹⁸ Schreiner, 133.

¹⁹ Piper, 62.

In contrast to the Judges

Ruth's love for Naomi leads to devotion to God in 1:16-17. Schreiner says of this "Clearly, Ruth had put her faith in [The Lord], the God of Israel."²⁰

"Rather than Israelites abandoning their loyalty and deserting the worship of [The Lord] for other gods, the story portrays Ruth acting out of loyalty and embracing [The Lord], denouncing other Gods."²¹

BUT still see this as response to and the work of the true hero—God.

Everything that happens is based on God's mercy. "[God] is showing mercy to Ruth: mercy she does not deserve, mercy she does not expect, mercy on which she has no claim, mercy that could have been directed to some other family in response to Naomi's claim that [The Lord] has dealt bitterly with her (Ruth 1:20-21)."²²

"Ultimately, however this book is about the ways of God in human life."²³ And Hubbard goes on to say that "the book praises *hesed* [loving-kindness] shown to family and to God and promises that such acts will not go unrewarded." However, he concludes, "Indeed, despite his seeming absence, [The Lord] is in fact the central figure."²⁴

All good done in the story ultimately is from God. "The book's teaching is simple and straightforward: whenever people of faith practice God-like *hesed* toward each other, God himself acts in them."²⁵

So we are asking "What is God doing in this passage, and what does this show me about the character and work of God?"

Watch for clues from the author that give you the "point" of the story/stories

Guidelines for interpreting Historical Narrative from *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*.²⁶

- a. *Editorial Comments.*
- b. *Thematic Statements.*
- c. *Repetition*

²⁰ Schreiner, 131.

²¹ Hill, Andrew E. & John H. Walton. *A Survey of the Old Testament*. Pg. 204.

²² Hamilton, 309.

²³ Hubbard, 1.

²⁴ Hubbard, 66-67. Also, Hill & Walton, 207.

²⁵ Hubbard, 72.

²⁶ Plummer, Robert. *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*. Pg. 194.

Purpose of Ruth

The purpose of Ruth is to show God's sovereign (though often silent) work through the tragedy of one family that results in redemption for this family, God's King for Israel, and God's savior for the world.

"The dominant theme is God's gracious rescue of Elimelech's family from extinction by provision of an heir. ...The second, however, is the surprising historical destiny which that rescued family eventuated."²⁷

"The message is that God preserved families of faith and that from one such family King David came."²⁸

Structure & Cultural Keys for Ruth

Tragedy: 1:1-22, The Famine, Childlessness, & the Death of Naomi's Family

We have to keep in mind the desperate plight of the childless widow. Naomi has little hope at this point for any provision. Naomi gives us a summary in 1:18 "I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty." We can see glimmers of hope still—a break in the famine (1:6) and Ruth's devotion to Naomi (1:1-18).

Hope: 2:1-23, Ruth Meets Boaz.

She "happened" to find Boaz's field. This is the author's understatement to see God's providence at work. Boaz gives protection and provision, two things that Ruth and Naomi desperately need.

"[Ruth] risked ostracism—perhaps even physical abuse—on account of her gender, social status, or race."²⁹

Even more significant is Boaz's role as "redeemer." He therefore has the ability to buy land to return it to family members and marry a childless widow in order to continue the family line of the deceased. There is hope that all that has gone wrong can be made right.

"In the second chapter of Ruth, the mercy of God becomes so obvious that even Naomi will recognize it."³⁰

Progress & Interruption 3:1-18, Marriage Proposal & Another Redeemer

What happens late at night on the threshing floor? Ruth is asking to be Boaz's husband.³¹ Though it may be provocative nowhere are we told that it moves to sinful.

- "Spread your wings over your servant for you are a redeemer" (3:9).

²⁷ Hubbard, 39.

²⁸ Hill & Walton, 206

²⁹ Hubbard, 73.

³⁰ Piper, 59.

³¹ Hubbard, 51. Piper, 86.

- “You have not gone after young men” (3:10).
- “You are a worthy woman” (3:11).

Boaz demonstrates complete righteousness by giving the right to closest redeemer. Of course this means that Boaz and Ruth may not come to be.

Fulfillment: 4:1-17 Marriage & Children.

Boaz and Ruth are married so Ruth and Naomi have a provider. God provides a child, so their family continues. The book begins with tragedy it ends with triumph.³² In chapter 1, Naomi is crying out in bitterness, in chapter 4, the women of the town are crying out in blessing.³³

Greater Fulfillment: 4:17-22

This family not only continues the lineage from Judah, but leads to Israel’s great king, David. It becomes clear that God has been working His plans throughout the story.

Major Themes

God’s Sovereignty in Suffering

Clearly, Naomi in particular faces significant suffering in the loss of food, home, husband, children, and no way out of her predicament. Yet, we see God working his good purposes through suffering in the story as a whole and we are told in two specific and strategic places in the story how God is intervening in the midst of tragedy (1:6, 2:12, 2:20, 4:13). God is not absent in suffering He is working His purposes though often unseen at the time.

“Ironically, in spite of what Naomi thinks, while the lack of children and the curse on the land indeed spring from the curses of Genesis 3, [The Lord] is working even these difficulties together for good.”³⁴

“Thus while posting a sign of God’s presence at the beginning, the author spoke of his subsequent activity with startling indirectness. Far from downplaying God’s providence in the story, however, the indirectness only heightens the reader’s awareness of it. ...One other observation confirms this point: every prayer in the book is answered during the course of the plot (1:8-9; 2:12, 19-20; 3:10; 4:11-12, 14).”³⁵

“In a sense, [‘He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands’] summarizes the essence of the book of Ruth, for it is a story about the firm guiding ‘hands’ of divine providence at work in the world.”³⁶

³² Hubbard, 17.

³³ Hubbard, 14.

³⁴ Hamilton, 309.

³⁵ Hubbard, 69-70.

³⁶ Hubbard, 63.

“Naomi’s suffering and the suffering of Israel were not the last word. [The Lord] would be faithful to his covenant.”³⁷

“One of the main messages of this book is that God is at work in the worst of times.”³⁸

God’s Sovereignty through Human Responsibility

God’s mode of operation in most of Ruth is through the work of people. Explicitly we have Boaz saying that Ruth takes refuge under God’s wings (2:12), and then Ruth asks Boaz to spread his wings over her (3:9). Further, the refuge Ruth seeks in chapter 2 is food, which Boaz provides. Naomi recognizes that the provision from Boaz is actually from God (2:20).

“God is really the one who is rewarding Ruth for her love to Naomi. Boaz is only the instrument of God.”³⁹

How can God be the one doing it and humans be responsible? Because that’s what the Bible says.

“The Bible makes little attempt to reconcile the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. It simply teaches clearly and abundantly that both are true. The biblical authors appear to have the same mentality as Charles Spurgeon, who, when asked how he reconciled sovereignty and freedom, said ‘I never try to reconcile friends.’⁴⁰

God’s Sovereignty to Fulfill His Greater Purposes.

In the face of tragedy or simple day to day life we can lose God’s greater purposes. Ruth helps us to see that God is up to something bigger than just our story.

“God’s preservation of Elimelech’s worthy family line resulted in the advent of King David. It is that event at which the story’s implicit sense of great destiny aimed. God’s care for Naomi’s family turned out to be a piece of his care for all Israel.”⁴¹

“But at another level, the story is about something much larger than one family and their sorrows and joys. It is about God’s plan to glorify his grace in the Son of David, the Messiah, the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Ruth and Naomi and Boaz are caught up in something of eternal significance.”⁴²

³⁷ Hamilton, 130.

³⁸ Piper, 23.

³⁹ Piper, 66.

⁴⁰ Rigney, Joe. *The Things of Earth*. Pg. 51.

⁴¹ Hubbard, 65.

⁴² Piper, 111.

“The book of Ruth wants to teach us that God’s purpose for his people is to connect us to something far greater than ourselves.”⁴³

Application

**Remember the three levels and that God is the hero.
Connect the stories to New Testament teaching.**

Where is God in the tragedy?

He is at work. Fulfilling his purposes for our good and His glory. We don’t always see it, but Ruth gives us a glimpse into the unseen work of God in our suffering.

“The most prominent purpose of the book of Ruth is to bring the calamities and sorrows of life under the sway of God’s providence and show us that God’s purposes are good.”⁴⁴

The New Testament confirms this in passages like Romans 8:28-39, 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, or 1 Peter 5:6-11.

God’s ultimate purpose of redemption

“Words having to do with redemption occur more than twenty times in Ruth and therefore provide a significant theme in the book.”⁴⁵

What Boaz does in providing for Ruth & Naomi physically, the New Testament shows that Jesus does for us spiritually. Boaz’s redemption of Ruth & Naomi is a model of Jesus’ redemption of sinners. We identify with Ruth & Naomi’s helpless state and God’s gracious salvation, not bought with money, but Jesus’ blood—Romans 3:23-25, Galatians 3:13-14, Ephesians 1:3-7.

The proper response to God’s mercy

As we have seen, Ruth & Boaz demonstrate great faith and righteous action. They serve as appropriate models for how to respond to God’s loving-kindness to us by showing loving-kindness to Him and to others. We see this also in 1 John 4:7-21.

⁴³ Piper, 121.

⁴⁴ Piper, 15.

⁴⁵ Schreiner, 132.