

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

DHW BIBLE CLASS

LESSON 1

RUTH

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ruth is a wonderful book. It is loved by everyone who reads it. The themes of love, commitment, kindness, loyalty and integrity fill the book. These themes are timeless. Ruth is one of two books in the Bible that bears the name of a woman. The other is the book of Esther. The inspired writer of the book is unknown. Jewish tradition named Samuel as the writer. The date is around 1050 B.C. and the historical background of the events in the book was during the period of the Judges.

Although it is a small book containing only four chapters, it is not lacking in the knowledge and understanding of God, and the marvellous and gracious way He deals with people who trust and honour Him. The first chapter of the book describes the tragedy experienced by Naomi and her return to Bethlehem with Ruth, her daughter-in-law, who expressed commitment to remain with her. The next chapter features the providential

meeting between Ruth and Boaz who treated her with great kindness. The third chapter relates how Naomi devised a plan to inform Boaz of his right as her kinsman-redeemer to take Ruth as his wife. Boaz responded favourably. The final chapter records how Boaz became the kinsman-redeemer and married Ruth. A son was born who was the grandfather of David.

Patterns and principles showing the ways in which God relates with His people can be learned by any conscientious and careful believer. These patterns and principles about life are still relevant for they are ageless. The focus of the book is on God and His plan for man's salvation. The main characters are Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. Each of them faced a crisis of some kind, and the decisions they made indicate their priorities in relation to God. Its message of love, hope, loyalty and faithfulness during the dark years of the time of the Judges will touch our conscience and convictions.

In addition, two underlying concepts prevail in this historical account. The first concept is expressed by the Hebrew word, *chesed*.¹ There is not one English word that is able to

¹ The phrase "deal kindly" is the Hebrew *chesed* (pronounce, khehsed) in Ruth 1:8. And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

capture the full meaning of the word. It connotes the notions of covenantal loyalty, faithfulness, kindness, goodness, mercy, love as well as compassion. It refers to an act of kindness performed by a more powerful person for the benefit of a weaker person who is in real and desperate need. This is most clearly illustrated in God's acts of *chesed* for His people.² The second concept is that of a kinsman-redeemer and it is expressed by the Hebrew word *go'el*.

The bigger purpose of the book in the context of the Bible is to illustrate the redemptive work of God in Christ Jesus through Israel to save His chosen people, and also the rest of the Gentile world.

OUTLINE

The present study, chapter one, contains the following scenes:

- (1) The Departure (1:1-5);
- (2) The Return (1:6-10);
- (3) Loyalties Revealed (1:11-18);
- (4) Bitter Sweet (1:19-22).

COMMENTARY

The Departure – 1:1-5

The opening words of this chapter clearly indicate that the events

² K. Lawson Younger Jr, *Judges / Ruth*, p.394.

in the book happened in the period of the Judges, and therefore it follows logically after the book of Judges. The book of Ruth, in marked contrast to the book of Judges, happened at a time when the nation of Israel was experiencing spiritual emptiness and chaos because “every man did that which was right in his own eyes”. The book of Ruth is a book where a Moabitess woman did what was right in the LORD's eyes. It is a slap to the face of Israel that the LORD had to go outside of Israel to continue the line of the Messiah. The book provides hope, commitment, faith, loyalty and trust in the LORD God of Israel who always keeps His Word and promises.

There was famine in Israel, and Elimelech (*my God is king*) led his wife, Naomi (*pleasant, beautiful*), and two sons — one named Mahlon (*sick*) and the other Chilion (*pinning*) — to settle in Moab. The Moabites were descendants of Lot, the nephew of Abraham (Genesis 11:27).³ Elimelech and his family were Ephrathites of the tribe of Ephraim, but lived in Bethlehem-judah.

They moved to Moab which was on the eastern banks of the river Jordan and the Dead Sea, south of the river Arnon (Numbers 21:13)⁴. This was the

³ Genesis 11:27 Now these *are* the generations of Terah: Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot.

⁴ Numbers 21:13 From thence they removed, and pitched on the other side of

shortest route to a place where they thought “the grass was greener.” Famine drove them out of the land of Promise. It was not meant to be permanent for they wanted to move back the moment news came that the famine was over. God is in control of all things including the powerful force called famine. His higher purposes for moving this family to Moab will be revealed as the chapters of this book unfold.

Tragedy struck this family. First, Elimelech died. Then Mahlon and Chillion, who married two Moabite girls namely Orpah (*firmness of neck*) and Ruth (*friendship or refreshment*) respectively, also died. Naomi was left with two daughters-in-law who were both childless. We do not know how the three men died. Nothing is said about it. It is ironical that they left Bethlehem in order to escape death yet death came upon them. It was a very sorrowful experience for all the three women.

The Return – 1:6-10

Naomi informed Orpah and Ruth that she was returning to her hometown Bethlehem-judah because she heard that the famine was over and the LORD had given “them bread” (1:6). She marshalled all her faculties to persuade Orpah and Ruth to leave her and return

to their natural families in Moab (vv.6-9). They were on the way to Bethlehem, when Naomi stopped them. She expressed appreciation that the LORD had dealt kindly with them and also to her and to her deceased husband and sons. She prayed that the LORD would grant them “rest” (security and comfort), and that they might each find a husband and home. Orpah and Ruth were still of marriageable age. Naomi showed remarkable love for her two daughter-in-laws. She was alone without a family, and we can understand if she had insisted that they accompanied her to Bethlehem. Naomi must have considered all the odds very carefully. Orpah and Ruth would be among strangers who were not Moabites. Naomi, in spite of her present plight, still trusted the LORD for she prayed that the LORD would bless her daughters-in-law.

Loyalties Revealed – 1:11-18

The initial response of Orpah and Ruth was that they would stick by her. But Naomi was determined that they should return to their families. She reasoned that she would not have any more sons because she was already old. She continued that even if she could have a husband on that very night, and conceive and bear children, the girls could not wait for her sons to grow up and marry them! Naomi gave an emphatic “nay” and said that the LORD had dealt with her adversely

Arnon, which *is* in the wilderness that cometh out of the coasts of the Amorites: for Arnon *is* the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.

(v.13). We may further conjecture that Naomi might have thought that Orpah and Ruth would be strangers to the people of Bethlehem-judah if they went with her. How would the people treat them? The future was uncertain and insecure. Naomi wanted the best for them.

Having heard their mother-in-law's passionate appeal to them to return home to their natural families because she had nothing to offer them and there was little or no hope for them to remarry and start a new home, Orpah and Ruth cried loudly again. They had been walking out of Moab. We are not told how far they had gone before Naomi made the last appeal. Anyway, Orpah was persuaded by Naomi. She kissed the hand of her mother-in-law and returned to Moab. She made a carnal choice. She chose the possibility of a normal life in Moab and the possibility of remarriage and a new home. She would be among familiar people and the god of her people. The alternative of being with Naomi held no promise, only uncertainty and insecurity.

But Ruth was not like Orpah. She "clave unto her" (v.14). The word "clave" (to cling) is a strong verb. It is used with reference to a man who leaves his parents and "cleaves" to his

wife.⁵ It is also used to instruct a believer to fear God, serve Him and "cleave" onto His name.⁶ It expresses a permanent relationship with deep love and affection like being welded together. Ruth would rather cling to her aged, hopeless, and poor mother-in-law than to the hope of a brighter prospect in Moab. Naomi made another attempt to persuade her to go back to Moab. She said to Ruth: "Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and to her gods: go back, Ruth, with your sister-in-law" (v.15, paraphrased). At this juncture, Ruth responded by making a declaration that would change the rest of her life and the whole of mankind completely.

Her declaration which is in Ruth 1:16, 17 is the most cherished and celebrated statement in the whole book of Ruth if not the whole Old Testament. Ruth said to Naomi: *Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.*

⁵ Genesis 2:24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

⁶ Deuteronomy 10:20 Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name.

She respectfully and firmly told her mother-in-law to stop pressuring her “to return from following after her” (v.16a). Interestingly, note that in the second part she did not say “to return to Moab and to her people.” Ruth was determined to accompany Naomi, just as Naomi was insistent that she return to her people and country. Ruth continued that wherever Naomi go, she would go, and wherever Naomi stay, she would stay. Ruth was declaring that she would always be by Naomi’s side, no matter where she would be geographically. No question about it, period!

Then she declared: *thy people my people, and thy God my God* (the phrase *-shall be -* is not in the original Hebrew manuscript) — dynamic, decisive, and devoted! Ruth remembered what Naomi had said earlier that Orpah went back to *her people and to her gods* (v.15). Ruth showed uncompromising commitment. With this phrase, she renounced her ethnic and religious roots and embraced the nationality and religion of Naomi. Her kinfolk would be Israelites, her God would be the LORD. Her declaration showed her total commitment and devotion to Naomi, and ended with the promise, *where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried* (v.17b). In short, she would be with Naomi until the end — a lifelong commitment and devotion. Her pledge

was serious and it was for life. To confirm her steadfast commitment, she swore an oath in the name of the LORD that if she did not keep her word, the LORD should judge her severely (v.17c).

Ruth would not let Naomi return alone to an empty future. Debra Reid aptly points out: “Her heart rules her head, but we don’t criticize her for it. Her own tragedy has established a faith and a loyalty which are motivated by love and conviction. She keeps faith with Naomi and this in turn reflects her deep faith in God. In her difficult times, Ruth has become not bitter but better.”⁷ When Naomi realized that Ruth was firmly fixed in her mind to go with her, she did not try to dissuade her anymore. Both women went on their way to Bethlehem-judah.

Bitter Sweet – 1:19-22

They journeyed together until they arrived at Bethlehem. It was about 80 kilometres between Moab and Bethlehem. Their presence stirred up the whole city and caused much buzz, “Is this Naomi” (v.19)? Naomi must have been a prominent and well-known figure in Bethlehem before but she was now impoverished. And so the sight of her present condition must have surprised and shocked the Bethlehemites. Surely, they could not

⁷ Debra Reid, *Ruth and Esther*, p. 37.

fail to notice Ruth who was with Naomi but there was no acknowledgment. The divine writer highlighted this omission. Was there a silent conspiracy against Ruth? The people knew that Naomi had no daughters and so Ruth was not her daughter. She was a stranger and a Moabitess. The Moabites had not been kind to the children of Israel in the past.⁸ Anyway their question, *Is this Naomi*, was not meant to boost one's ego. It was actually to the contrary. Naomi had left Bethlehem for greener pastures while the others had stayed on during the famine, but now she had returned as a prodigal daughter with nothing.

Naomi was well aware of the change of her estate, her face, and her family. She responded (angrily?): *Call me not Naomi, call me Mara* (v.20a). Naomi means "pleasant or beautiful" whereas Mara means "bitter." Naomi was feeling bitter (feeling of dislike, pain and sadness); hence her desire to be called Mara. She gave the cause of her bitter condition. She attributed her present dire straits to the Almighty, who had dealt very bitterly with her. The name, "the Almighty" (*Shaddai*),

⁸ Deuteronomy 23:3 An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever: 4 Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee.

portrays God as the Ruler of the Universe, and who has the power to assign the destinies of the wicked and the righteous, and who dispenses blessings, promises and metes out punishments.

Naomi used the name of God, *the Almighty*, correctly in her context. She looked back to when she went away "full", but presently the LORD had brought her back "empty" (v.21a). In the same speech, she now addressed God as the LORD. It is the covenant name of God which He made with Israel. The LORD promised to bless, protect, and exalt Israel. Naomi was bitter and probably angry with the LORD. She further asserted that the LORD had taken her to account (*the LORD testified against me*) in His courtroom.

Note that although she attributed her present bitterness and afflictions to the LORD God Almighty, she did not return home with a broken spirit. The divine writer closed the chapter intimating that better things would happen—*So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.*

PRACTICAL VALUE

Life is not altogether a bed of roses, and not every day is a sunny day. There are good days and there are

difficult days. Naomi's experience in Moab was really difficult. In a period of ten years, her husband died followed by her only two sons. She was left with two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. It was a very painful and sorrowful experience for Naomi. Many a woman would have cursed God, like Job's wife. But Naomi exemplified herself as a resolute woman who did not collapse under such intense adversity. When she heard that things were better in Bethlehem, she resolved to return to her homeland. In the midst of her impoverishment, she showed exceptional concern and care for the welfare of Orpah and Ruth. She told them to return to their own country so that they could remarry and start anew. And she would go back to Bethlehem so that she could also be among her own kind and start anew. Although she openly acknowledged that the LORD God Almighty brought the bitter experiences upon her and completely impoverished her, she also acknowledged that her God was sovereign and He would have mercy as He wills. She did not curse the LORD God Almighty. We should learn this precious lesson from her. We can see that the LORD indeed providentially directed her return journey. She was blessed with Ruth, a wonderful, faithful, loyal, obedient, and committed daughter-in-law. And when she arrived in Bethlehem, it was barley harvest

time. Soon, we will see more evidence of the providential hand of God in their lives.

Orpah and Ruth had to make life-defining decisions when Naomi told them to go back to their natural families in Moab. Their decisions were crucial for they would change their destinies.

Similarly, we have to make life-defining decisions. We can choose the carnal way which promises material security, such as our career, our family, our health and wealth, as Orpah did. Or, we can choose the way of Ruth which is the way of life and faith.

We do not know what happened to Orpah after she left Naomi to return to her mother's house. Orpah chose with her eyes for she had no faith in the LORD. She lost a living relationship with the LORD, the one true God. It did not matter whether she made good in Moab or not. What really counted most was that she missed the *pearl of great price*.

As believers, we have chosen the path taken by Ruth. Her path was marked with insecurity, emptiness, and uncertainty. Yet she opted for it because she was determined to trust Naomi's God—*your God my God*. She had to "die to self." To her own kind, the Moabites, she would be called a traitor and be despised. For the rest of her life, she would face such stumbling-blocks and adversities. She had resolved to

live a life of self-denial and put the needs of others first. If we take the same path as Ruth, choosing the gospel of Christ and the Cross, we will face similar difficulties and challenges in the midst of this troubled world. It means offering our bodies as living sacrifices for God and for others even if it results in *mara*. What shall it be, Orpah or Ruth? AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

MONDAY: Ruth 1:1-5; Deuteronomy 23:3-6.

TUESDAY: Ruth 1:6-13; Leviticus 23:3-4.

WEDNESDAY: Ruth 1:14-18; Deuteronomy 10:12-14.

THURSDAY: Ruth 1:19-22; Exodus 15:22-26.

FRIDAY: Ruth 1:1-22.

Analysis:

Text	Practical Value
Ruth 1:1-5	
Ruth 1:6-10	
Ruth 1:11-18	

Ruth 1:19-22	
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Discussion Questions

1. Are there accidents in the believer's life? Can a Christian use terms like lucky or unlucky in his conversation? Are there accidents in the lives of unbelievers?

2. Look at Naomi's prayers (vv. 8, 9). What are your comments?

3. Why did Naomi tell her two daughters-in-law to return to their individual natural family when she herself had no other family (vv. 6-13)? What does this tell you about her?

4. Why did Orpah succumb to Naomi's arguments? Are you prone to succumb to the same arguments?

5. Why did Ruth not succumb to Naomi's arguments? Are all believers supposed to make the same choice as Ruth?

6. Why did Naomi ask the people in Bethlehem to call her “Mara”? Do you think she was justified in doing so (vv. 19-22)?

9. What is the most important lesson that God wants us to learn from Ruth chapter 1?

7. What was Naomi’s attitude towards God in the midst of her distress (1:8-9, 13, 19-21)?

8. How should a Christian respond to the kind of tragedy experienced by Naomi (v1-7)?
