



Bible Studies for Ashfield Presbyterian Church

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT'S AHEAD...

The short book of Ruth is a story of love against the odds. It's also a story about coming home - returning to God after seeking blessing in far off places. The great news is, when His faraway people come home, God is ready with open arms. He even provides a "redeemer" to take on the obligations of those who have wandered! The book of Ruth foreshadows God's dealings with us in Jesus Christ, and gives a beautiful glimpse of the sort of kindness that is typical of God and his people.

THE SETTING...

According to the opening verses of Ruth, our story is set in the days when the Judges ruled over Israel. While heroes like Samson and Gideon took centre stage, ordinary people like Ruth and Naomi went about their everyday lives - lives full of tragedy, struggle, and sometimes of joy. But while Ruth's setting is in that early era, there's evidence that the book is written later. Every part of the bible was designed to shape and challenge God's people at particular times - and perhaps, Ruth's story was aimed at a later generation of Israelites in exile in faraway Babylon. Whether the story was first written then, or at some earlier time, there's a clear message in the book for the exiles who are far away from God and his people. But more of that later...

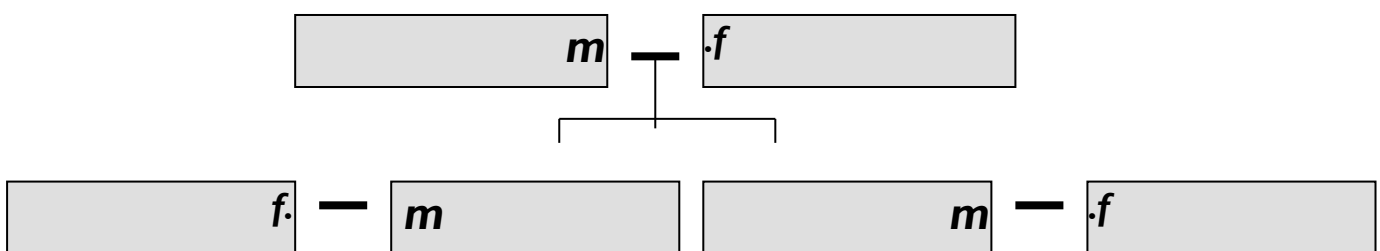
RUTH 1: THE GOD OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

Sometimes, God's promises seem hard to believe. Sometimes, it seems like a much better idea to organise your own blessing rather than wait for God to sort things out. Sometimes godly obedience seems foolish - and the way to get ahead seems obvious. All you need to do is cut a few corners and fix things for yourself...

What's the problem facing the family from Bethlehem who we meet in 1:1?

What is their solution?

Fill in the names of our key characters in the family tree. (4v10 may help if you don't have enough information)



Locate and mark the places mentioned in 1:1-2 on the map on the next page.

BACKGROUND BLITZ

Look back quickly at Exodus 15:13-18. The "holy dwelling" that Moses is leading the people towards is the promised land of Israel. While the Moabites will be "seized with trembling," the people of God will be planted in the "place God has made for his dwelling."

What statement is Elimelech actually making by taking his family to the land of Moab when times are tough?

God's law gave the people of Israel some very clear commands about intermarriage with the surrounding nations. Read Deuteronomy 7:3-6.

Why are the Israelites not to give their sons or daughters in marriage to non-Israelites?

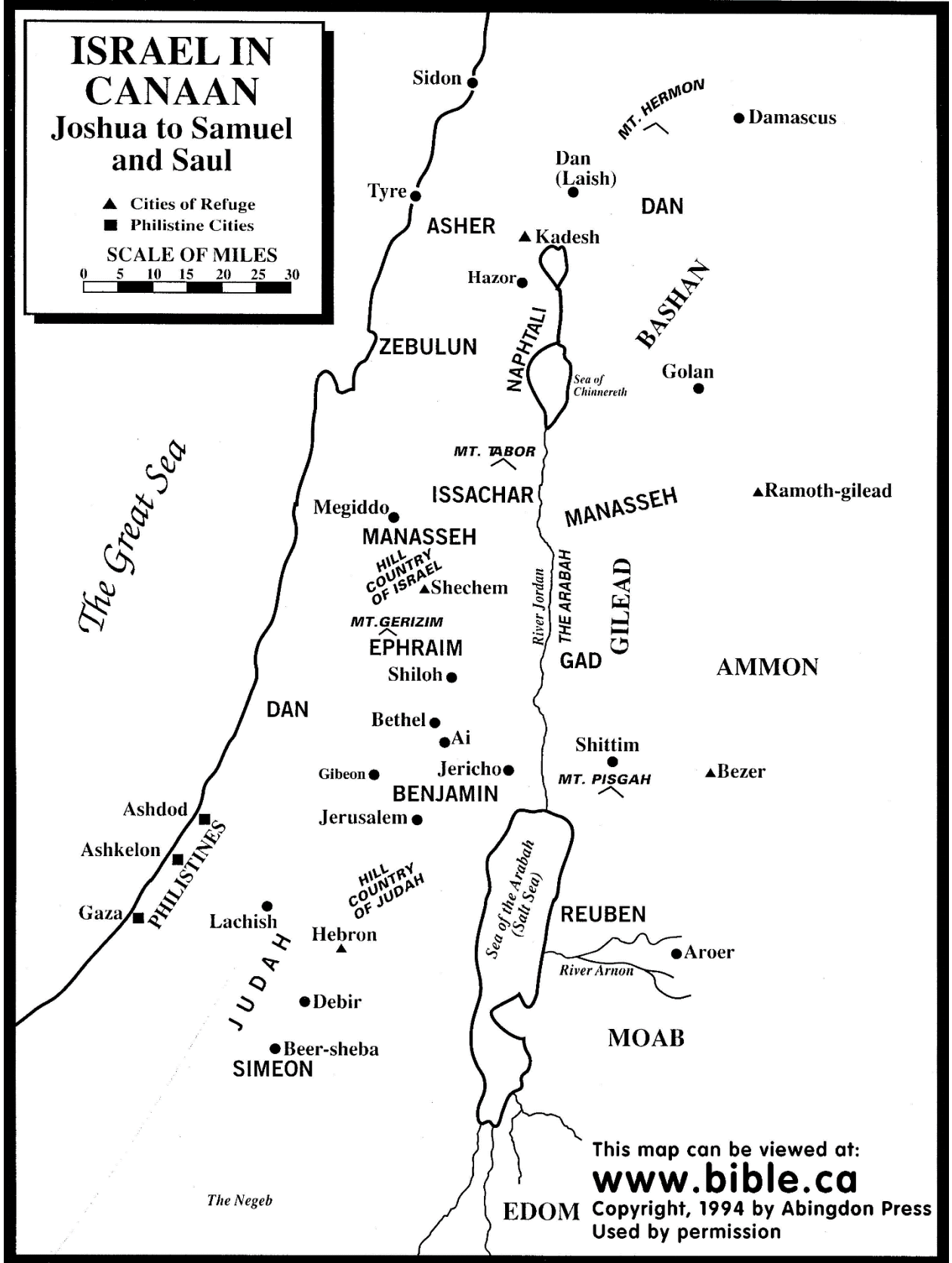
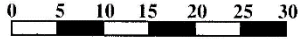
How seriously have Elimelech, Mahlon and Kilion taken God's warning?

ISRAEL IN CANAAN

Joshua to Samuel and Saul

- ▲ Cities of Refuge
- Philistine Cities

SCALE OF MILES



This map can be viewed at:
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FACING THE CONSEQUENCES...

What surprises do the next ten years or so hold for this Israelite family? (v3-5)

What was the outcome for people who stayed behind in the promised land? (v6)

By the end of the first two paragraphs of our book, Elimelech's decision to move his family to Moab has had disastrous results! Both he and his sons are dead; Naomi is destitute, with only the support of her two Moabite daughters-in-law. And after a brief time of famine, those who kept trusting God to provide for their future in the promised land have plenty! Naomi realises that they've made a terrible mistake.

What steps does Naomi take to put things back in order?

FEEL IT...

Imagine how Naomi would be feeling at this point. What sort of emotions and fears do you think she would have?

WHAT NOW?

Clearly, Elimelech has not lead his family wisely! They've messed up badly - and now Naomi is heading for home, with her foreign daughters in-law at her side as a constant reminder of bad decisions in the past. What sort of welcome can someone like this expect from God and his people? That's what we'll find out as the story unfolds.

THINK AHEAD...

What sort of welcome do people who have strayed receive from God's people today? (Do we need to do better? How?)

POINT OF DECISION

Read verses 8 to 18. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are heading back to the promised land. But part way along the road, they stop - and Naomi puts a challenge. What decision are Ruth and Orpah being pushed to make?

Notice that there are some customs at work here (v11-13) that sound very strange! There was a huge concern in the ancient world to keep the "family name" alive. Maybe this could have happened by Naomi providing her daughters-in-law with another husband from within the family... but she can't imagine how! That's one reason for the girls to turn back home. But there's another...

What clear commitment will coming back to the promised land involve?

What future hope does Orpah decide to pursue?

What future hope does Ruth decide to pursue?

Ruth's vow (v16-18) is both powerful and beautiful. Why not write it out in full...

From this point on, Ruth, a non-Israelite, has committed herself to the God of Israel. What else "comes with the package"?

From verse 19 to 22, what reception do Naomi and Ruth receive when they get back to Bethlehem?

Naomi means "pleasant", and Mara means "bitter." What lesson has life away from God's promises taught Naomi?

Compare verse 1 with the summary statement in verse 22. What glimmer of hope do you see?

LOOKING WAY AHEAD...

Jesus tells a very similar story in Luke 15:11 to 32 - a son leaves his father and goes looking for the "good life" in a far away place. All he finds is disaster. As Ruth unfolds there are a number of clear points of contact with the parable. For now, though, the question we're left with is, what sort of welcome can these returning run-aways expect from Israel's God?

From Luke 15:32, how does God respond to run-aways who come home?

At this point in our church family, there'll be two kinds of people...

- Maybe you've discovered for yourself that real blessing won't be found "a long way from God."
- Maybe you've wandered and it's time to think about coming home?
- Maybe it's easy to keep pretending things are okay doing it your way.
- Maybe things have gone badly wrong and it's easy to be bitter.
- Maybe you think you've messed up so badly that you won't really be welcome.
- Maybe it's time to think about how you're going to welcome those who come home?
- Maybe it's easy to be judgmental.
- Maybe it's easy to say "it serves you right."
- How will you respond to those seeking refuge under the wings of God?

PRAYER POINTS

RUTH 2: THE GOD OF COINCIDENCES

SERENDIPITY?

The unusual word “serendipity” means “happy accident.” In the movie of the same name, John Cusack and Kate Beckinsale are lovers brought together by “fate” - a series of “happy accidents” which bring them together against all the odds. Ruth is also a story of love against the odds. But instead of “blind fate” bringing the two partners together, there seems to be another hand at work...



REVIEW

We left Ruth chapter 1 wondering what sort of welcome God and his people would offer these two returning widows. As they arrive in Bethlehem, the barley harvest is under way - but Ruth and Naomi are destitute!

Read Ruth 2. What "happy co-incidence" gives a hint of brighter things to come in verses 1 to 3?

What do we learn about Boaz in 2:1, 2:3 and 2:20?

How is Boaz described, and what do you learn about his character from this chapter?

BACKGROUND BLITZ

In Israel, there were specific laws about harvesting. Take a look at Leviticus 19:9-10. What is the intention of this regulation?

Look also at Deuteronomy 24:19-22. What three categories of people are protected? What does this law tell us about God's attitude to people like this?

Why is it that Israelites should be particularly caring towards people like this? (Compare this with Deuteronomy 10:18-22.)

WHAT ABOUT US?

Israel didn't always do a great job of caring for the oppressed. The prophet Amos later says that a typical Israelite would "sell the needy for a pair of sandals," and "trample on the heads of the poor." Much later, Jesus accuses the leaders of Israel of "devouring widows houses."

But what about us? Before we leave this issue, take a look at James 1:27. How can you measure the "purity" of your religion? What opportunities can we make (or take) to do better in this?

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE FIELDS

How does Boaz greet his workers in Ruth 2:4?

Having just investigated some background, what evidence do you see that his "religion" is more than just pious words?

List the acts of kindness that Boaz offers to Ruth.

What hints are there in the passage that not everyone in Israel may be as kind as Boaz?

Read again the conversation between Ruth and Boaz in v10-13. Where can Boaz see that Ruth has turned for refuge?

What metaphor is Boaz using to describe God here?

In the end, this is a great welcome home for Ruth, and her mother-in-law Naomi. At the end of the day, Ruth returns home loaded with a whole ephah of barley... around 22 litres, and the happy story of the kindness of Boaz, who recognises as one of the "kinsmen-redeemers" of her family - a fact that becomes significant in the next two chapters.

Whose hand does Naomi recognise behind the day's events?

How does the attitude of Boaz reflect the attitude of his God?

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

How does Ruth's humble response in v13 remind you of the words of the returning son in the parable Jesus tells in Luke 15:18-19? What does this teach us about the right way to return to God?

The practical kindness of Boaz beautifully reflects the kindness of God. For next week, try to think of...

- a) a heart-warming story of kindness that you've experienced or seen
- b) ideas you can share with your group for better reflecting God's kindness.

PRAYER POINTS



RUTH 3: THE GOD OF REDEMPTION

REVIEW

Last week we saw Ruth - by “chance” - gleaning in the fields of Boaz, who just happens to be one of her “kinsman-redeemers.” So far, Boaz has treated Ruth - an absolute outsider - with great kindness, because she has come to “shelter under the wings of the Lord, the God of Israel.” Now, though, the love story goes one step further, as Ruth seeks shelter under the wings of Boaz as well!

WINNOWING WIDOW

Read Ruth 3:1-18. Up until this point, Naomi has seemed quite depressed and inactive. But now, things are looking up! What is Naomi’s plan for her daughter in-law?

What has changed in Ruth’s attitude between 2:13 and 3:9?

Some girls will throw themselves at the feet of any man who comes along! Ruth is a little more selective - but her action has exactly the same intention. Lying beside the uncovered feet of Boaz is a clear invitation to marriage. Notice, though, that even though Ruth apparently could have had her choice of younger men - both rich and poor - she has chosen Boaz for a reason. As we noticed earlier, he is a “kinsman redeemer” of the family of Elimelech.

BACKGROUND BLITZ

What’s this “kinsman-redeemer” business all about? Turn back to Leviticus 25:24-25 and then Deuteronomy 25:5-10 for a quick rundown. The nearest relative had the responsibility of a) recovering family land when a relative is bankrupt and b) marrying a childless widow so the family name is not extinguished.

Are these regulations binding, or not? What options are there?

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE THRESHING FLOOR...

“Spread the corner of your garment over me” (v9) is literally “spread your wing over me.” What earlier comment from Boaz does this remind you of?

What does this show about Ruth’s understanding of the link between God’s mercy, and the mercy she expects from his people?

How does Boaz describe Ruth’s character in verses 10 and 11?

What is it that’s so kind about Ruth’s approach to Boaz?

Is there anything that can stop Ruth and Boaz living happily ever after? (v 12)

How would you describe the way Boaz treats Ruth after their night-time encounter?

How has Naomi's situation improved (compare 1:21 with 3:16-17)?

Who is responsible for the improvement?

Boaz and Ruth make a great couple. They both reflect the character of God, which they show by being kind and generous - to each other and to Naomi. According to Ephesians 4:32, how should Christians behave towards one another, and why?

According to Galatians 5:22, what help will Christians have in developing a kind nature?

At the end of the last study, you were encouraged to think of some examples of kindness in action. What does kindness look like? How would you define it?

Share some heartwarming stories of kindness.

If you had trouble thinking of examples of kindness, why is that?

Have you had any opportunities to show kindness during the last week?

HUSBANDS, PLEASE NOTE...

What can Christian men learn from the way Boaz treats Ruth? And his future mother-in-law?

Are there specific ways you need to change in the way you treat the women in your life?

prayer points

RUTH 4: THE GOD OF BIG FINISHES

THINKING BACK TO LAST WEEK...

In every good romantic story there's something that threatens to stop the couple getting together. Ruth is no exception. We know Ruth and Boaz want to get married, but there's a problem. What was it?

Read Ruth 4:1-12

Boaz is a man of action who promised to sort things out fast. The arrival of the other possible kinsman redeemer is presented as a 'happy coincidence.' Literally it says 'just then the kinsman redeemer he had mentioned came along.'

Can you think of any other examples of "serendipity" in the story of Ruth so far? (Look back at study 2.)

Do you think they're *just* coincidences? If they're not, what do they demonstrate about "seeking refuge with the God of Israel"?

SIGNED WITH A SANDAL

What is the kinsman-redeemer's first response to the offer of redeeming Ruth's land?

What would this do to Ruth and Boaz's marriage plans?

What makes the kinsman redeemer change his mind?

IRONY ALERT...

Marrying Ruth would cause two problems for the kinsman-redeemer. First, he would have to support another family... but worse than this, the family wouldn't be his own. The first son would keep the name of Ruth's dead husband, and when the kinsman-redeemer died the land would be inherited by them rather than his own sons! In opting to protect his own inheritance (and name), this nameless man now disappears from our story without trace! Redeemer Boaz does everything necessary for the deal to be sealed - Ruth can just sit back and relax. Sandals are exchanged, witnesses are watching... and in verse 9 and 10, Boaz makes the formal announcement of what he has done.

Who has benefited from the 'kinsman-redeemer' relationship?

What does it tell you about Boaz that he was willing to take on this role?

What wish do the people express for Boaz and his offspring?

Read Ruth 4:13-22. How has Naomi's situation changed from when she first came back to Bethlehem (compare with 1:20-21)?

Who has been ultimately responsible for this change, and how has he made it happen?

MEET THE BABY...

All through the book of Ruth, we've seen hints that God has been controlling events behind the scenes, but the women who speak to Naomi are much clearer. It's God who has reversed Naomi's tragic situation through the kindness of Boaz and Ruth. But God's kindness extended much further than just to Naomi.

Boaz has been a wonderful kinsman-redeemer – but according to 4:14-15, what other “kinsman-redeemer” is now on the scene?

What blessings will this new kinsman redeemer bring? (v15)

According to verse 17, baby Obed eventually has a distinguished grandson. Who is he, and why is he significant?

How is God's kindness to Israel shown in the birth of this child?

BACK TO THE FUTURE...

Read Matthew 1:1-16. Who is Boaz and Ruth's great-grandson? (Approximately!)

What's unusual about Boaz's entry in the genealogy in Matthew?

Why do you think Matthew would have included Ruth as well as Boaz?

By mentioning Ruth as well as Boaz, Matthew breaks his pattern and makes that section of the genealogy stand out. It reminds us of the whole story of Ruth and Boaz. Somehow their story of redemption tells us something important about Jesus. Luke's gospel is even more clear.

Read the beginning of Zechariah's song in Luke 1:67-75. (He's just been told that his child John will “prepare the way for the Lord Jesus”). What term from Ruth do you recognise in v68-69?

How does the picture of “redemption” in Ruth help you form a mental picture of what Jesus has come to do?

What have we learned from Ruth about the way God deals with people who return to him? What place does God's redeemer - Jesus - play in all this? Compare your answer with 1 Peter 1:17-19.

WHERE IT ALL ENDS...

Naomi looked for blessing far from God and came home empty. But she's come home to the right place - by the end of the book, she is "full" again, and she holds in her arms the start of a family line who will bring blessing to Israel - in King David - and ultimately to all the world, in Jesus Christ.

Ruth, from Moab, was not even a member of God's people Israel. But Ruth looked for shelter in the right place - she made a firm decision that God would be her God, and God's people would be her people. By the end of the book, the young widow Ruth is blessed in every way - married to the honourable and kind Boaz, and the mother of a son with great promise.

Boaz, from the family line of Perez, was a righteous Israelite, who understood that God's laws for Israel were best applied with a warm heart. Right through the book, he demonstrated kindness and compassion to all his workers, but especially Ruth and Naomi. Boaz was their "redeemer" and was prepared to rescue them at great cost. Even so, Boaz was lonely, with no heir to follow him. By the end of the book, he has a son, Obed, whose grandson David was to become the great King of Israel, and later Jesus.

Ultimately, Ruth is a story that shows that God delights in blessing anyone who turns back to him. Right from the start, he provided laws for Israel that modelled his care for widows and strangers and aliens - people just like Naomi and Ruth. The "kinsman-redeemer" laws provide a small scale model of the way God has redeemed us and paid our debt in Jesus Christ. In fact, all God's people are "redeemed slaves" - which is why we should treat one another with humble graciousness - and "covenant kindness."

THINK...

Through these studies we've been challenged to think of ways to demonstrate this kindness to one another, and to our world. In what ways have you been able to put these ideas into action?

In what ways are you working at changing because of what you've read in Ruth?

Pray as a group, giving thanks for God's kindness, and asking for opportunities to show his nature to those around us.

PRAYER POINTS