



Bible Month



30 DAYS WITH

RUTH

Introduction to the Bible Month

What is 'Bible Month'?

Bible Month seeks to help churches and groups of churches engage deeply with Scripture through focusing on a single biblical book over a calendar month. While churches regularly preach on passages of Scripture, the distinctive feature of Bible Month is drawing all within the church to focus on a book of the Bible intensively over a four-week period. Bible Month can involve preachers, small group leaders, and children, youth and family workers, who can together help churches engage more deeply with Scripture.

Through focusing on a single biblical book, participants gain a greater sense of the importance of its literary and historical context. Readers also gain a better understanding of the flow of a book and the links between different passages. They can explore different ways of reading Scripture, offering different angles on God's Word to us.

Bible Month is a partnership between the Leaders of Worship and Preachers Trust (www.lwpt.org.uk) and the Methodist Church (www.methodist.org.uk). Further information and resources on Bible Month are available at www.preachweb.org/biblemonth

Bible Month 2020

Bible Month 2020 focuses on the book of Ruth, a short and sometimes overlooked story that shows God's faithfulness to a Moabite who travels to Israel. The Bible Month magazine is the primary resource for equipping those running a Bible Month. It is intended as a catalyst for your own thinking, praying, and planning with the book. The magazine include Bible notes, small group studies, ideas for children and youth, as well as a reflection and further resources.

The *Bible notes* on Ruth offer a basic commentary on each chapter and some ideas for preaching. They have been written by Dr Rachel Starr, who teaches biblical studies, feminist and contextual theologies at the Queen's Foundation (www.queens.ac.uk) and is co-author of the *SCM Study Guide to Biblical Hermeneutics* (2nd ed, SCM Press, 2019).

The *small group studies* explore different ways to engage with Ruth, and can be used in a small group gathering that follows or precedes the Sunday sermon. The small group studies have been written by Charlotte Hendy and Rev Dr Jasmine Devadason. Charlotte is the Discipleship and Evangelism Enabler for Girls' Brigade Ministries (www.girlsbrigadeministries.org.uk), an organisation which works for lives and communities to be transformed and enriched as generations seek, serve and follow Jesus Christ. Jasmine is a biblical scholar as well as a Learning and Development Officer for the North West and Mann region of the Methodist Church.

The magazine includes a *reflection* on the theme of 'home' in the book of Ruth written by Jo Swinney. Jo is the Director of Church Communications at CPO, a founding editor of *Preach Magazine*, and the author of *Home: The Quest to Belong* (Hodder & Stoughton 2018) and so is well suited to tease out what home means within Ruth (for more about Jo, visit www.joswinney.com).

There is also a variety of ideas for helping *children and youth* engage with Ruth, including in intergenerational gatherings. These have been written by Claire Knight, Church and Community Outreach Team Leader at Wokingham Methodist Church, and Gail Adcock, Family and Intergenerational Development Officer with The Methodist Church.

In the final pages of the magazine, you will find gospel readings that can be used in Bible Month, further resources, and suggested ways to follow up Bible Month within your church.

Please note that you can adapt and use the material in whatever way works best! The aim of Bible Month is that you engage people with a single biblical book over four weeks, and this resource is intended as a springboard for your planning as a Bible Month team.

While the Bible Month magazine is the main resource, training events are regularly held across the country, and you can see a list of events as well as a guide for running your own event at www.preachweb.org/biblemonth.

Planning Bible Month

Churches wishing to engage in Bible Month can register their interest at www.preachweb.org/biblemonth.

The following gives a series of suggested steps for running Bible Month:

- Explore the possibility of running Bible Month with the leadership of your church and/or circuit.
- Decide on the date for Bible Month. While many Methodist churches run Bible Month in June, you can choose any month of the year that will work for you as a church or group of churches. If you are part of a Methodist church, make sure that you plan ahead sufficiently so that Bible Month can appear in the Circuit Preaching Plan.
- Check the Bible Month website (www.preachweb.org/biblemonth) for further resources and ideas for running Bible Month, and to sign up for training events in your region.
- Form a Bible Month Planning Group. Many find that such a group is helpful in preparing for Bible Month, and members of the group can work with the leadership of the church to identify preachers, small group leaders, and children and youth leaders who can take the lead on Bible Month in their areas.
- Run Bible Month!
- Following Bible Month, meet together as a planning group to discuss what went well and what could be improved. Explore ways you could follow up Bible Month.

While we suggest engaging the whole church in Bible Month, feel free to adapt Bible Month in whatever way works best in your context.

For further information visit
www.preachweb.org/biblemonth.

Introduction to Ruth

Dr Rachel Starr

Ruth is a story about finding home and hope. Often read as a romantic comedy which begins, more or less, 'once upon a time' and ends, more or less, 'and they lived happily ever after,' those who spend time with it come to see how it resists interpretation. Unsettling and transformative, Ruth offers new models of relationship, and provokes fresh insights into what it means to live out faith in the God whose generosity generates yet more life and love.

Ruth is one of several novellas to be found in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (others include the Joseph story, Jonah and Esther), written to explore questions of life and faith. Ruth explores the human need for bread and belonging. It makes visible the lengths to which individuals will go to ensure the survival of themselves and their loved ones. And it suggests that, through loving kindness, God is present.

As with Jonah, Ruth's four chapters work in pairs. The seemingly unstoppable progression of Naomi's loss set out in chapter 1 is balanced (to an extent) by the events of chapter 4, the end of which sees Naomi blessed by the townswomen. The middle two chapters focus on Ruth's actions, her alliance with first Naomi, and then Boaz.

A Time of Judgement

For some, Ruth was written to legitimate the rule of the Davidic kings. Out of the chaos of the judges (Judges 21:25), it claims, a new royal line emerged, bringing security and celebration (although the monarchy was not uncontested, see 1 Samuel 8, for example). Yet it is more likely a later work, reflecting the concerns of the Judean community during the time of Persian rule (after the exile in Babylon, which ended in 539 BCE). The Hebrew in which Ruth is written shows the influence of Aramaic, widely used during the Persian period. Most significantly, Ruth appears to enter into the debate around the identity of the people of Israel, specifically, how tightly ethnic boundaries should be guarded, at a time when, under Persian rule, national boundaries had been breached. Ruth offers a story of a foreign woman, David's ancestor no less, who brings blessing to Israel. Such a tale represents a direct

challenge to the prohibition of foreign wives found in Ezra (9, 10) and Nehemiah (10:28-30; 13:1-3; 13:23-31).

A World Away

The book of Ruth reveals the fragility of rural communities: famine is an ever-present threat and thus family networks are essential for survival. The plot follows the course of the barley harvest, from reaping, gathering and gleaning in the field, to the threshing floor. While some of these practices remain familiar, others are less so. In particular, the plot makes much of Ruth's gleaning. Leviticus (19:9-10, 23:22) and Deuteronomy (24:19-22) establish the right of the poor and the stranger to gather any overlooked grain. The social vision of the Hebrew Bible is that, properly ordered, there is enough for all. Here Ruth becomes a story of how the Torah might be lived out.

For a long time, Ruth has been understood to be a story about levirate marriage, the requirement that, if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry his widow and have a child to carry on the name of the dead man (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Naomi alludes to this tradition in her speech to her daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:11-13). And there seem further suggestions that the relationship between Boaz and Ruth should be understood in this way in chapter 4. But more recently, that view has been questioned. Boaz is only a distant relative; and the son born is not named as Mahlon's child. Boaz' actions fit better with the role of the kin-redeemer (see chapter 2), while going beyond this duty also (the redeemer is not required to marry the widow).

The story goes to great lengths to demonstrate Ruth's foreignness. She is 'the Moabite from Moab.' A close neighbour of Judah, Moab shared similarities in culture and language. However, the Bible records various conflicts and grievances between the two: Deuteronomy 23:3-6 excludes Moabites from the company of faithful because of their failure to welcome the Israelites in the wilderness. The Moabites are moreover portrayed as an unclean people because of the suggestion that

they were the result of Lot's sexual relationships with his daughters (Genesis 19:30-38).

Finding Ruth

Ruth is a book looking for a home: a story about a group of migrants, it migrates around the Bible. In the Jewish Bible or Tanakh, Ruth forms part of Five Scrolls and is traditionally read at Shavuot, a celebration of the spring harvest and of the giving of the Torah. In most Christian Bibles, Ruth finds a place between Judges (when the book is set) and Samuel (in which the story of David begins). It would be easy to misplace Ruth, but the text secures its place in the canon through multiple references to biblical characters and themes. Like Esther, it is concerned with survival as a foreigner. Like the women of Proverbs (which in some early manuscripts, Ruth follows), the character Ruth is strange, wise and capable. And like Genesis, it focuses on relationships. For Christian readers, it is in the genealogy at the start of Matthew that Ruth is encountered (alongside other foreign women: Tamar, Rahab, and 'the wife of Uriah', all of whom have to negotiate difficult situations in order to survive).

Reading Ruth for Ourselves

In a time of division, Ruth offers us the hope of repair. Personal reconciliations lead to wider restoration. Importantly, differences are not fully erased. While Ruth has traditionally been portrayed as the model convert, the notion of conversion is not central to the text. Even more so with Orpah, whose loyalty to her own people and religion opens up a reading that celebrates diverse faith traditions.

In a context of increasing inequality, Ruth encourages us not to surrender to injustice. The character Ruth challenges the inevitability of poverty and claims the justice owed to her (perhaps like the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8). The poverty of Ruth and Naomi is made visible in Adi Nes' image (2006) of the two women as scavengers surrounded by plastic rubbish. In this reading, Ruth reminds us that scarcity should always

be met with generosity. Moreover, it reminds us of the vulnerability of many communities in the face of climate change.

Faced with growing recognition of sexual violence, Ruth might be read as a story of women resisting (or colluding with) violence. There are signs in Ruth, if we are brave enough to see them, of rape, harassment and exploitation. To name such violence within the text might help us to name and challenge violence in our own context.

A final reading, which draws such themes of repair, resilience and resistance

together, is to view Ruth as a story of redemption. The story dramatizes the command to love the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:19) and demonstrates how ordinary people might live out their faith in the God who redeems. Central to the book is the notion of *hesed* often translated as loving kindness. Elsewhere in the Bible, it is God who most often displays loving kindness, but in Ruth, it is humans who enact loving kindness towards each other. In doing this, it asks us how we also might recognize God's presence in the sacred texts of our lives.

In an attempt to make visible the multiple voices and desires present in Ruth, each chapter in the notes is named for one of the four main characters. Chapter 1 considers Orpah, often made into the other, but whose story perhaps opens up beyond the pages of the Bible. Boaz is the focus of chapter 2, where he first appears with bread and blessings. In chapter 3, Ruth takes decisive action, repairing relationships and bringing redemption. And in chapter 4, it is Naomi whose name is celebrated, and whose nurture of new life is noted.

WEEK 1

Ruth 1 – The Story of Orpah



Dr Rachel Starr

Chapter 1 begins with hunger and ends with harvest. A chapter of contrasts, in the struggle against death, life goes on. At home or abroad, there are always strangers, and the possibility of friendship. Even when the bread basket is empty, there is still the chance of companions (those with whom bread is shared).

Overturing (Ruth 1:1-15)

The opening sentence of chapter 1 quickly establishes the time and place, what would appear to be the main characters, and, a crisis. Like others before them (Genesis 12, 26, 41, 43), famine forces this family to leave their home – Bethlehem, the so-called house of bread – and journey into the unknown. Is this famine a result of the violence and chaos described in Judges? Such a connection is underlined by the mention of Bethlehem, the home of the woman who is gang-raped and mutilated in the dying chapters of Judges (19, 21). In contrast to the time of the judges, when 'the people did what was right in their own eyes' (Judges 21:25), Ruth would appear to be a book in which each person seeks to do what is right in the eyes of others.

Through their naming (Ruth 1:2), the

reader is given a preview of the fate of each character. Elimelech is the most straightforward of the names, meaning, my God is king; but the clue it offers to the reader is less clear. On the surface it suggests Elimelech is someone to be trusted, a faithful husband and father. Yet perhaps it is ironic – how will a loyal subject of God the king fare in the time of judges? Naomi as a name, and character, is even more ambiguous, but is generally thought to mean pleasant (whether Naomi lives up to her name remains to be seen). Mahlon and Chilion are two names that fit together, both suggesting demise (see also the names of Judah's ill-fated sons Er and Onan, whose deaths introduce a closely related story found in Genesis 38).

In addition to such inauspicious names, the text gives a further clue that all is not well by emphasizing a point already made in the previous verse: the family journey east to Moab, and, like David, seek refuge there (1 Samuel 22:3-4).

In swift succession, the leading men die. While no explanation is offered for their deaths, the fate of the two sons would seem to be sealed by their marriage to Moabite women, who are thought to lead men astray

(Numbers 25:1-5). The verb lifted up (in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translated as took, verse 4) elsewhere refers to abduction (Judges 21:23), suggesting that Mahlon and Chilion first raped two Moabite women, then claimed them as their wives. Perhaps it is not the foreignness of the women, but this act of violence for which the brothers are judged. In the absence of the three male leads, the expected story is overturned, and three women emerge as protagonists.

PREACHING POINT

How do our stories begin? What are some of the plot twists, and how do we respond to them?

Twice (Ruth 1:3 and 1:5) the text claims Naomi as all alone, yet in the same breath, it introduces her companions: Orpah and Ruth. Over time, Orpah has been portrayed as unfaithful and ungrateful, serving as a foil to Ruth, the very model of a 'good immigrant' and righteous convert. Yet there is no reason to set the women against each other. Although there are many ways in which their names have been understood,

one possibility is that both contain a reference to water: Orpah meaning cloud and Ruth, saturation or overflowing. In this way, both may be signs of the possibility of new life (Proverbs 16:15).

Offering (Ruth 1:6-18)

Even in Moab, God's actions are heard, and the promise of food gives Naomi the strength to start home. Verse 6 is one of only two times that God is said to have acted in Ruth (the other being in 4:13). For the majority of the story, God stands in the wings.

The name for God used here is the divine name, YHWH, but in translation it is covered over by the more functional word LORD. While reverence for holiness is important, the impact of this on readers who are unfamiliar with the Hebrew is to reduce God's identity to 'lord' rather than the full breadth of meaning that YHWH, a play on the verb 'to be', offers (Exodus 3:14).

The word return is scattered throughout these verses, prompting the question: To whom will each character turn? Naomi suggests the women should return to their mother's house, a rare term (the standard term is father's house) occurring only in Ruth, the story of Rebekah (Genesis 24:28) and Song of Songs (3:4; 8:2), always in relation to hopeful encounters. Naomi offers hope that the young women will be able to marry again. She acknowledges that both Orpah and Ruth have shown *hesed* (loving kindness) towards her and her family, and calls on God to deal kindly with them.

PREACHING POINT

What offerings do we make and receive in faith?

Kisses and tears soak this section of the narrative. At the end of the first conversation, Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth and they both weep. In the second, Orpah and Ruth first weep and then Orpah (but not Ruth) kisses Naomi goodbye. In the third conversation, Ruth journeys on with Naomi, thus removing any need for goodbyes.

In her second attempt to persuade the younger women, Naomi elaborates on the possibility (or lack) of husbands. Naomi does not raise the possibility that Elimelech may have brothers who could



act as a levir (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). And she makes clear that she cannot provide any more husbands for her daughters-in-law. What Naomi avoids saying is what would have been obvious to the original audience: Orpah and Ruth would not be able to find husbands in Judah because their ethnicity made them 'unsuitable' women. They are not alone in this role: already Ruth has heavily alluded to another such woman, Tamar (Genesis 38), and in verse 12, a second woman living on the edges of so-called decent society is invoked. In Hebrew, the word for hope is linked to the word for thread, leading us to Rahab (Joshua 2, 6) and suggesting that hope connects the present to the future.

Orpah leaves the story in verse 14, staying longer than is often remembered. She is loving and obedient, yet is often overlooked. Like Ruth, she is loyal; the only difference is that Orpah keeps faith with her mother's house, rather than with that of her mother-in-law. Orpah refuses to give up her identity and traditions, and her *hesed* to her people should also be praised.

PREACHING POINT

Who are our companions, those with whom we share bread, and with whom we find our way?

With the nape of Orpah's neck fading into the distance, Naomi takes up her plea for a third time, instructing Ruth 'to be more like Orpah' (1:15). But Ruth refuses and vows to stay with Naomi (1:16-17). Naomi's silent response may suggest resignation, rejection, or perhaps relief.

The words spoken by Ruth have been heard in a variety of ways over the centuries. For some, they are a vow of loyalty (compare with 2 Samuel 15:19-21). For others, that Ruth clings to Naomi and

professes her commitment even if 'death us do part' suggests a deeper relationship. In this light, Ruth's words reverberate with those spoken by David to Jonathan (1 Samuel 18:1-5; 20), on each occasion, a deep friendship becoming the basis of a new family. In this way, Ruth's pledge to Naomi has been used in marriage and partnership services, especially amongst LGBTQI+ couples.

A less joyful interpretation of Ruth's vow is that it represents a contract she makes with Naomi. In desperation, Ruth enslaves herself to Naomi (Exodus 21:2-5) in exchange for her protection in a foreign land. In this reading, Ruth clings not to Naomi but to a chance of survival, and in turn, Naomi profits off Ruth's work in the fields and on the threshing floor.

Omitting (Ruth 1:19-22)

The two women arrive in Bethlehem (twice noted). Amid the excitement, no one mentions Ruth; indeed, Naomi seems to deny that she is accompanied by the younger woman. It is not until verse 22 that Ruth is remembered, and what is remembered most is her foreignness – it is this which clings to her. Moreover, Naomi denies herself, refusing her given name and claiming another, 'bitter' (a reference that reaches back to Ruth 1:18). Third, Naomi denies God's care of her. Like a female Job, she challenges God to provide for her. Here Naomi addresses God as Shaddai (Ruth 1:20 and 1:21), a name connected to fertility and the hope of new life (Genesis 49:25). The scene ends with mention of what is to come – harvest time.

PREACHING POINT

How does lament express faith in God?

Small Group Resource

Charlotte Hendy

An Imaginative Contemplation

The book of Ruth features a number of different characters. Some, like Ruth and Naomi, are featured throughout, and some, like Orpah, receive just a small mention. However, they all have something to teach us, for when we put ourselves in somebody else's shoes we always learn something – no matter how minor they may be.

Imaginative Contemplation helps us do just that. Typically used with the gospel accounts, it's a method of looking at the Bible that was developed by St Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. It invites you to enter into a biblical story and imagine yourself as one of the characters within it. You move from reading the account to participating within it, for example becoming a person in the crowd, a disciple, or the boy with the loaves and fishes.

Not only does this method allow you to look at the Bible in a fresh way, but it also reminds us that it's a living text, and always has something new to teach or show us.

One of my favourite things about Imaginative Contemplation is engaging with characters that I so often overlook. With the book of Ruth, for example, this could mean putting myself in Orpah's shoes, imagining what she might be experiencing, and reflecting on how our compassionate God may feel about her.

Approaching the Text



Pray: focus your mind and ask God to open up the passage to you and teach you new things.



Divide: split into three groups, and designate each of the groups as either Ruth, Naomi or Orpah. The next three steps (Read, Imagine, Discuss) should be done in these smaller groups.



Read: go through Ruth chapter 1 twice – you might want to read two different translations, for example New International Version and either The Message or Passion.



Imagine: sit quietly for a moment and close your eyes, picturing the scene and everything about it. Put yourself in the shoes of your character. You may find it helpful to go through each of your five senses and think about what you can see, smell, touch, hear and taste as your character.



Discuss: use these questions as a guide, your conversations and creativity may take you somewhere else and that's OK.

- a. What's your role within the story/scene?
- b. How do you feel?
- c. Is there anything unique that you learn from this perspective?
- d. What might reflecting on Jesus' character say about this person's situation?



Share: get the three groups to come back together and share what they've learnt/discussed from imagining themselves as a different character within the story.



Pray: pray that just as this scene has come to life today, you might also become more aware of God's presence in every aspect of your life.

Further Reading

For a brief summary of imaginative contemplation, see Silf, Margaret, *Companions of Christ: Ignatian Spirituality for Everyday Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 41-42.



WEEK 2

Ruth 2 – The Story of Boaz



Dr Rachel Starr

The middle chapters of Ruth form a pair, foregrounding several public encounters between Ruth and a new character – Boaz – but shaped by conversations Ruth has at home with Naomi. Chapter 2 is marked by boundary stones, tracing the movements of those bold enough to cross them.

Breaking (Ruth 2:1-7)

At the start of chapter 2, Naomi and Ruth are isolated: despite their welcome, none of the townswomen have brought them food. Even more surprising, Naomi's as yet un-met kinsman has not reached out, even though his name suggests he is a pillar of society (1 Kings 7:21). And so Ruth decides to act. She takes up her legal right to glean, stepping out in faith.

In verse 4, the already heralded kinsman, Boaz, arrives. His greeting to the workers suggests he is a faithful and respected leader. Whether it is his sense of civil duty or the revelation that this young woman is a relative, Boaz seems willing to take responsibility for Ruth as she works in his field. Boaz first asks his supervisor about the stranger (Ruth 2:5), the first of three questions asked of Ruth's identity (3:9, 3:16). But for the steward, she is only one thing: a Moabite. Did the steward's suspicion of the foreigner shape his claim that Ruth pushed to 'gather among the sheaves'? Instead of being willing to do the backbreaking work of finding leftover grain on the floor, did Ruth ask to take what she wants from the already bundled sheaves? Or is her willingness to demand justice from the margins something to be celebrated (like the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30)? Either way, Boaz appears willing to give Ruth a privileged place in the fields and is concerned she is not rebuked (2:16).

PREACHING POINT

How do we welcome strangers, especially those who are vulnerable such as seasonal workers or undocumented migrants?

Blessing (Ruth 2:8-16)

Finally, Boaz and Ruth meet. Their first encounter takes place in broad daylight, surrounded by witnesses. As elsewhere, an underlying structure mirrors the protection and food twice offered by Boaz (2:8-9; 14-16; and 3:11-15) and Ruth's response (2:10-13; 3:7-9). That the two scenes are mirror images is further indicated by the fact that on both occasions, Ruth leaves with the same amount of grain. Ruth's response to Boaz appears to show deference, but, just like Abigail (1 Samuel 25), there is more to her.

Boaz offers Ruth protection in three ways: she is to count herself amongst his young

women; she is to be 'off limits' to his young men; and she is to be offered water. Encounters at wells often lead to talk of marriage (see, again, the story of Rebekah; and John 4). But unusually, in Ruth, it is men who draw the water, and a woman who drinks it. That Boaz has to instruct the male field workers not to bother (more accurately, molest or assault) the new arrival, and that Naomi also warns Ruth about the risks of working in an unknown field, suggests that sexual harassment was (and still is) common.

PREACHING POINT

What might Ruth have to teach us about seeking justice for ourselves and others?

Boaz's words (2:11-12) mirror Ruth's vow to Naomi. Mention of God's wings, a metaphor of refuge common in the Psalms (91:4), is picked up later when Ruth asks Boaz to spread his cloak (the Hebrew





word, *kanap*, can mean cloak or wing) over her. Already, Boaz begins to enact the blessing he has asked for Ruth to receive her full reward, heaping her plate to overflowing (Psalm 23; Mark 6:30-44). Boaz shares generously with Ruth, and she is satisfied.

PREACHING POINT

How does our faith in God offer us refuge, and the boldness to step out?

Belonging (Ruth 2:17-23)

The chapter ends, as it begins, with Ruth returning home to Naomi. The abundance of grain gives Naomi renewed confidence

in the God of blessings. Finally, she acknowledges Boaz as one who offers the hope of redemption.

Although God is the redeemer par excellence, to redeem is first and foremost a practical task: the responsibility to restore what is at risk of being lost, whether relatives facing debt and slavery, or family land about to be sold (Leviticus 25:25-55). The Hebrew word *go'el*, translated in the NRSV as nearest or next-of-kin, but more fully meaning, the one with the right (and responsibility) to redeem, is used more intensively in Ruth than in any other biblical text. Although Boaz turns out not to be the closest next-of-kin, it is he who redeems the land at risk of being lost; and it is Obed (the

yet-born child) who redeems Naomi from being forgotten (Ruth 4:17).

PREACHING POINT

How do we seek also 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [your] God (Micah 6:8)?

From the start of the barley harvest (1:22), the story has progressed to 'the end of the barley and wheat harvests.' Throughout this time, Ruth remains in Naomi's house; despite being told to cling to Boaz's young women, she still clings to Naomi.

Small Group Resource

Rev Dr Jasmine Devadason

An Asian Womanist Approach

Taking an Asian womanist approach means to read the biblical text in light of the experiences of being an Asian woman. For example, I cannot but start reading the story of Ruth in relation to my own background, a story of an (im)migrant living in a foreign land. Today, I am an Indian with British citizenship, a woman, an ordained minister; I work with the Methodist Church. These are only a few of my identities and experiences that influence the way I read the text. As I journeyed into this British context with my husband and two children, leaving my family and friends in India, I recognise the generosity of my British friends who have received us and befriended us over the years. I should also mention that I have always been looked at as a foreigner, an outsider, for English is not my first language and 'white' is not my skin colour.

My foreign-ness was made much more obvious when I was not well received as a minister in the church, for I was a woman and a foreign woman in this context. On the whole, I still struggle to understand my identity in this foreign land for time and again the current rhetoric of 'British nationalism' reminds me that I do not meet the standards of so-called Britishness. However, my faith in Jesus Christ strengthens me to resist all difficulties in life, providing a spirituality of resistance to any form of domination and discrimination that I face, and helps me to celebrate my multiple identities.

Approaching a biblical text from the perspective of an Asian woman is to identify different layers of patriarchal power and domination embedded in the text. One way is to retell the story from the experience of a woman represented in the text. I want to hear this story from

the mouth of Ruth because she is an immigrant struggling to survive in a foreign context and can be considered to be the 'other' in the story, a Moabite woman living in an Israelite land.

Reading Ruth from an Asian woman's perspective calls for retelling the story from the perspective of a female character who is from a different ethnic origin than the story itself. Ruth's narrative is understood as a 'story' or 'testimony' which, for Methodist readers, ties in with the connexional theme for 2019-2020, *So What's the Story...?*

Feminist hermeneutics rejects the idea that there is only one mega-story and recognises that diverse meta-narratives exist inside what is traditionally seen as the story. Reading Ruth with an Asian womanist perspective primarily calls for Ruth to speak for herself.

Approaching the Text

Read: Ruth chapter 2.

Reflect: so what's the story? Retell the story as if Ruth writes it. From your personal experience, read 'into' or 'between' the text. Using your own experience to read 'what is not said' in the text is one of the main aspects of a feminist approach to reading the Bible.

Relevance: think about Ruth as a migrant or seasonal worker in the UK today. What would be her needs and fears? How might the local church support and welcome her?

Share ideas about what your churches are already doing to welcome and support outsiders



Further Reading

Brenner, Athalya (ed.) *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001)

WEEK 3

Ruth 3 – The Story of Ruth



Dr Rachel Starr

Encouraged by her mother-in-law, Ruth takes further action to secure a home for herself and Naomi. Both women resist their fate as poor widows. Under cover of the riotous festivities, Ruth rebels against social protocol, seeking out Boaz at night and demanding he redeem her.

Resisting (Ruth 3:1-5)

Once again, the chapter begins and ends with Ruth and Naomi at home, making plans and reviewing them. While the first plan, to glean, is Ruth's idea; this second plan, coming at the end of the harvest, is more desperate. The morality and motivations of the characters remain blurred. Is Naomi concerned or careless about Ruth's reputation? Is Ruth a willing participant, or a victim? Is Boaz a righteous redeemer or hapless fool? All such readings (and more) are possible.

Naomi states her intention clearly: to seek rest (in the NRSV 'security') for Ruth (and therefore, herself also). Refuge from the precariousness of their existence as widows can only be ensured through marriage. But, Naomi realizes (although she never states it directly), it will be difficult for her to marry off Ruth, because she is a foreigner. She sees in Boaz a chance for Ruth.

As a local, Naomi knows that as the harvest is celebrated, Boaz will be found at the threshing floor. The threshing floor was a large open space, far enough outside the gates for the grain to be processed without the chaff being blown into the town. It was a place of gathering and distributing, of transactions and thanksgiving. And during the carnivalesque atmosphere of the harvest feast, it was a place outside the bounds of the everyday. With the crops safely gathered, wine would flow and anything could happen (Hosea 9:1).

The books of Ruth and Esther (Esther 2:9-12) meet here, as the young woman is instructed to bathe, anoint and adorn herself. Such actions tend to introduce a change in status, elsewhere in the Bible marking the end of mourning or the time of betrothal. Ruth is told to 'go down' in secret and 'lie down' with Boaz. She is to make herself fully vulnerable to him. Read with attentiveness to gender-based violence, Naomi's instructions are concerning. Is Ruth, like Esther, to be exploited for the pleasure and gain of Naomi and Boaz? While 'to lie down' can mean sleep in the Bible, when a woman is present, it almost always implies sex. Similarly, 'to uncover' has a range of meanings, but tends to be used in relation to nakedness. And feet (and by extension, legs, a more accurate translation of verse 4) are used elsewhere as a euphemism for genitalia.

PREACHING POINT

What might the book of Ruth help us to speak of?

Redeeming (Ruth 3:6-15)

The contrast between Ruth and Boaz's second encounter and their earlier meeting is stark. Instead of a midday meeting, it is night; instead of many witnesses, there are none. If Ruth is primarily a story about food, about being empty or satisfied, that Boaz lies down 'at the end of the heap of grain' should not be overlooked. Perhaps it is the grain that Ruth wants to be close to, rather than Boaz. Ruth's careful approach toward an intoxicated man recalls Jael's deadly movement towards Sisera (Judges 4:21). Stealth, along with reference to the wing of a garment connects Ruth once again to the story of David, this time as he encounters Saul (1 Samuel 24:17).

PREACHING POINT

Who is righteous in the book of Ruth?

Awakened from sleep, Boaz is confused and remains 'in the dark' about what is going on (as the reader is). For a second time, he asks Ruth, 'Who are you?' Like Judah encountering the veiled Tamar (Genesis 38:12-19), Boaz struggles to catch sight of Ruth's face in the darkness. Although she appears to be in control of the situation, Ruth's vulnerability as a poor foreign woman remains. Her need gives her clarity (Ruth 3:9). She asks Boaz to spread his cloak over her, reminding him of his stated wish that she be rewarded by the God 'under whose wings you have come for refuge' (2:12), the same word being used for cloak and wing. By asking to be covered by a man's cloak, Ruth may be proposing marriage, or she may be asking for Boaz to protect her more generally. That she identifies Boaz as her next-of-kin does not help clarify the situation, since even if he were the next-of-kin, Boaz is not obliged to marry her.

In contrast to Ruth's abrupt demand, Boaz's response is wordy (3:10-13). Although he identifies Ruth as twice loyal, performing *hesed* to him and Naomi, and although he claims she is a worthy woman (a fitting match for a 'pillar' of the community), he places barriers in the way. Boaz notes that there is a closer kinsman who needs to be consulted before he can act. As elsewhere, he seems concerned to protect his own reputation. And underlying the whole exchange is the unspoken problem: Ruth's forbidden ethnicity (Deuteronomy 23:3, Ezra 9).



PREACHING POINT

What barriers do we put up? What stops us from participating in God's work of redemption?

What happens between midnight and morning is left to the reader's imagination. It may be that the story functions as a reversal of similar stories: while Lot had sex with his daughters; Judah with his daughter-in-law; and David with the wife of Uriah, perhaps the silence suggests Boaz does not take advantage of the

situation. Or perhaps we are meant to understand that this sexual encounter is entered into willingly by both parties and will result in marriage and a child that lives. That a child will be the result of the encounter is further suggested by the pouring of grain into Ruth's cloak, until it fills out.

Restoring (Ruth 3:16-18)

On arrival home, for a third time Ruth is asked 'Who are you?' (see footnote for verse 16 in the NRSV). Ruth's identity is slippery. Once again, Naomi sees in the

abundance of grain, hope of a future in which she is satisfied. Just as she will fill her mother-in-law's arms with a child, here Ruth fills them with food. And with that, Ruth the breadwinner falls silent.

PREACHING POINT

What does our identity as a community of faith mean to us, and to others?

Small Group Resource

Rev Dr Jasmine Devadason

Reading Ruth Through a Postcolonial Lens

A postcolonial approach wants to know how the reality of colonialism impacts upon the people, cultures, traditions and history of the biblical story. Colonialism as we experience it today will not be seen in the Bible but what we can see are the power relationships between the characters and groups inside the text. We can also ask the questions: who benefits in the text and how have we come to read the story since then? A postcolonial approach also takes into account the imbalances in the relationships of those who read it. No one reads the Bible unbiased. How we read it is influenced by our context, social location and experience.

The postcolonial approach is one of resistance, used to criticise all forms of hegemonic power, including political, social, economic, and ideological. Reading the story of Ruth from a postcolonial perspective brings out three important theological themes that are relevant for our context today.

Firstly, the narrative of Ruth resists the idea that ethnicity is the most important part of an identity. The inter-cultural marriage between Ruth and Boaz celebrates multiculturalism and denounces monocultural identity based on ethnicity.

Secondly, in the story of Ruth, we recognise YHWH, the divine, as not being confined to the temple settings. God is understood in different ways in different

contexts and yet God's sovereignty remains.

Thirdly, the narrative of Ruth resists any borders that stop people from moving and migrating. Ruth's story shows people who are free to cross borders for life, livelihood and security.

The story of Ruth calls for a spirituality of resistance, where we stand in courage to resist and protest any dominance and discrimination today. Resistance is a gift from God for all people of God. Be bold and be strong to stand for the values of the Kingdom of God with no compromise.

Approaching the Text

Read: chapter 3 and familiarise yourself with the text

Explore the world of the text: identify the characters and their role in the text. Choose the character (Ruth, Naomi or Boaz) that you identify with most and explain why?

As this particular character, do you have power in the story? Why do you behave the way you do?

Write a 'postcard' from one character to another, dated perhaps ten years after the end of the story in chapter 4. Read out the postcards and look for the different voices and types of relationships that are revealed. Discuss your discoveries in groups.

Explore the world in front of the text: how might your socio-political, cultural and religious experience influence the way you respond to the story? How does the postcolonial reading of Ruth challenge you in your context? Think about how your faith might help you resist.



Further Reading

Havea, Jione and Peter H. W. Lau (ed.) *Reading Ruth in Asia* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015)

WEEK 4

Ruth 4 – The Story of Naomi



Dr Rachel Starr

The concluding chapter of Ruth serves to demonstrate the acceptance of Ruth, and especially Naomi, by the community of Bethlehem. Naomi's needs are finally met. Land restored, daughter secured, she receives another son. Like Seth, the third son of Eve (Genesis 4:25), Obed is seen to restore something of what has been lost.

Needing (Ruth 4:18)

Like the threshing floor, the city gate was a place where men met to trade, to judge and to gossip. As the chapter progresses, it is also where Ruth is celebrated, as is the capable woman of Proverbs (31:10-31). At the gate, Boaz gathers a full cohort of elders to help him with his dilemma, on this occasion, the outcome being more hopeful than the judgements against marriage to foreign women in Ezra (10:14).

The revelation that Naomi owns some land is a surprise. Why was Ruth forced to glean in another field, if Naomi had land of her own? Perhaps the land has been left

uncultivated or was being used by another household. Although it was unusual for women to own land, other widows – and daughters – are recorded as owning land (2 Kings 8:3-6; Numbers 27 and 36). Naomi's decision to sell the land reveals that she is at her wits' end: the harvest is ended and this is her only recourse. For the rest of the kin, the need to redeem it is clearly stated (Leviticus 25:25-28).

Boaz asks whether the next-of-kin is willing to redeem the land. His response is brief and positive – yes, he will do it. But then Boaz claims, wrongly, that to take on the land is to take on the Moabite woman also. Anxious about his own inheritance (any child that resulted from a levirate marriage would be named for Ruth's dead husband and would inherit Elimelech's field in that right), 'So and so', the mocking name the narrator gives to the next-of-kin, declines (compare with Onan, of Genesis 38:4, whose name also suggest a nobody – and who similarly refuses to extend the name of a dead relative). Boaz's muddling

of levirate and redeemer obligations may be a result of ignorance but it is possible that he does so intentionally, in order to use the levirate provision to overcome the prohibition against marrying a foreigner.

PREACHING POINT

What are our needs and obligations?

Nurturing (Ruth 4:9-12)

Once 'So-and-so' has been dispatched, Boaz declares his intention to marry Ruth. The presence of witnesses suggests public recognition of the union. Why does Boaz marry Ruth, then, if he does not have levirate responsibilities; and if, the role of redeemer, which he has taken on, only requires him to redeem the land? In overcoming the barrier of Ruth's Moabite identity, and persuading the elders to support the marriage, Boaz might hope to be seen as the consummate civil leader, who goes beyond what is required of him by the law.

The first of the final pair of blessings is given by the people and elders to Ruth, although she is referred to only as 'the woman who is coming into your house' and as 'this young woman'. It is an odd blessing, and the references to Rachel and Leah, and especially to Tamar and one of her sons, Perez (but not his twin Zerah), could be seen as mocking of the union, reminding those gathered that this also is an unsuitable relationship, which will likely end in strife. But perhaps the people have been won over by the efforts of the new arrivals and the mention of trickster figures such as Leah and Rachel (Genesis 31) and Tamar (Genesis 38) is a way of celebrating Ruth and Naomi's subversive, transgressive heroism.

Ruth and Tamar, together with Rahab and the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba), meet again



in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1). By making visible these four foreign women, all of whom were placed in precarious situations, perhaps the evangelist was seeking to prepare the gospel readers for Jesus' alternative family.

PREACHING POINT

Which branches of our family tree and our faith do we celebrate? Which ancestors do we hide away?

Naming (Ruth 4:13-22)

After keeping in the background since providing food to Judah (Ruth 1:6), God now acts to bring about a child with Ruth. Ruth and Naomi remain silent throughout chapter 4, but other women speak, giving thanks to God for the child. Unconcerned with honoring the names of dead men, or even living ones, the women claim Naomi as the parent

of Obed. As expected, the child's name offers an insight: he is the one who will serve Naomi. At last Naomi's empty arms are filled and her wellbeing secured.

PREACHING POINT

Both Ruth and Job end with a reversal of loss. But can loss be so easily overcome?

What does it mean that Ruth the Moabite becomes part of Judah? For some, it is a warning: the dominant culture and religion overwhelm Ruth, and only through denying her otherness can she become part of them. But for others, her celebrated presence reminds the house of Israel that purity of ethnic identity is both impossible and unwelcome.

Ruth ends with a genealogy, the procession of men working to restore the lost men of chapter 1. And although

no women are named, the preceding chapters make visible their efforts in bringing about new life. Despite Boaz's repeated claim that his intention is to restore the names of Elimelech and Mahlon, neither are mentioned. Instead it is Perez who the line is named for, not Obed, as might be expected. The thrice mentioned Perez, whose name means breach (Genesis 38:29) serves to remind the reader that no line, however illustrious, is without interruption. The unexpected, the stranger, all help to strengthen the community of faith.

PREACHING POINT

How might we embrace the breach in our own communities, celebrating the complexity of ourselves and the other?



Small Group Resource

Charlotte Hendy

Reflecting on Our Story With Others

The book of Ruth ends with the birth of Ruth and Boaz's son – Obed. This is followed by the genealogy of David, who we learn is to be Obed's grandson. As followers of Jesus we know that the story doesn't end there – Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus himself was born of this line of David. What an amazing finale to an incredible story tucked away in the Old Testament and comprising of just four chapters.

But how did we get here? The book of Ruth contains many things, but one of the most integral themes throughout is the relationship between two women – Ruth and Naomi. They work together and support each other at different times and in different ways.

Ruth accompanies Naomi back to Bethlehem and works to provide her with food. Naomi opens up family connections in Bethlehem for Ruth. Each needs the other; both are integral to the story.

We see this most beautifully in Ruth 4:17, where the women say 'A son has been born to Naomi.'

Here's the thing: we know that Ruth gave birth to baby Obed – biologically he's hers. So why aren't the women saying 'Ruth has a son'? Because Naomi is part of the story too.

It's such a beautiful picture: an outcome that both have worked together and supported one another to achieve.

Our finale – which paves the way for Jesus – couldn't have happened without these two women working together and supporting one another.

This Bible study is written in the spirit of cooperation, encouraging you to think about your own story: the part you play and those whom you journey alongside.

Approaching the Text



Prepare: read Ruth chapter 4 together; you might find it helpful to read a number of different translations.



Pair: split everybody into pairs to discuss the following questions:

- How do Ruth and Naomi support one another throughout the book
- What stands out to you from chapter 4 and why?
- The book of Ruth points us to Jesus – where is God at work in your life right now?
- If your life were a story split into four chapters, which chapter would you be in and why?
- Who do you have alongside you in your present chapter? How might you and them work together and support one another?



Share: draw everyone back together to share their reflections in the larger group.



Prayer: if able, get everybody to stand in a circle facing the same direction with their hands on the shoulders of the person standing in front of them, so everybody is connected. Explain that everybody is going to pray out loud simultaneously for the person whose shoulders they're touching. This can be anything from something the person has shared, to a general prayer, to simply repeating 'God bless you.' Count to three upon which everybody should begin praying for one another.

Further Resources

Fischer, Irmtraud, *Women Who Wrestled with God: Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginnings* (Collegeville, Minnesota: the Liturgical Press, 2005), pp. 129-145.



Looking for Belonging: The Theme of Home in the Book of Ruth

Jo Swinney

We live in transient times. Since the year 2000, the number of people living outside their country of origin has increased by a staggering 45%. There are all sorts of reasons for human migration. I've lived as a foreigner in four countries – for my parents' work, for study, and for adventure. I'm one of the lucky ones. I've never been displaced by war, natural disaster, economic hardship or disease. Naomi and Ruth's experience is more representative of global trends than mine. For both of them, at certain times, home seems a distant dream.

The book of Ruth begins with a swift brushstroke of context: a famine in the land. We could pass it by, an inciting incident in a plot that races on, the next tragedy just a few short sentences away. But let's pause for a moment and consider. This land: promised to Abraham, founding father of Israel, its very dirt a tangible sign of God's favour: how could it be that to stay meant facing starvation?

A famine: food so scarce the survival of an entire population hangs in the balance. Hunger of an intensity the well fed can't begin to imagine, bones protruding from skin, fatigue sapping hope, a desperate scuffle for any calories on offer, from wherever they may be found.

With the advent of televised around-the-clock news, we can become numb to far away tragedy. There is a lot of talk about 'the refugee crisis.' Let's remember the suffering that drives people to take the desperate measure of fleeing their country. Let's remember that each story is about fellow humans in dire straits. As Somali-British poet Warsan Shire so powerfully puts it, 'you have to understand, that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.'

So Elimelek, Naomi, Mahlon and Kilion are driven from home, and make their way to Moab as refugees. It isn't a short stay – they are there ten years and as it turns out, the men will never see their homeland again. All three meet untimely ends. But Naomi hears there is food in Judah again and makes her plans to go back – to 'return home' (Ruth 1:6).

“Ruth now belongs wherever Naomi goes. She adopts Naomi's land, relatives and even God. Implicit in this is a rejection of her own land, relatives and god. She's all in.”

Home can be many things. I wonder what it is for you? Over my life it has come to mean more than a place; it also means family, community, culture, church. It means memory and story and precious art and objects. It means security, belonging, the ability to offer hospitality. Although Naomi talks of Judah as home, her return is of little comfort. However hard it was for her to leave, losing her family was harder still. Despite leaving hungry, she says, 'I went away full.' Her life feels bitter now, even back where she came from: 'The LORD has brought me back empty... the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.' (Ruth 1:21). For Naomi, home is in

family, and all she has now is a foreign daughter-in-law.

Naomi's widowed daughters-in-law at first seem uprooted by their grief. Orpah is persuaded to stay where she belongs. Ruth now belongs wherever Naomi goes. She adopts Naomi's land, relatives and even God. Implicit in this is a rejection of her own land, relatives and god. She's all in.

We don't know where this loyalty comes from. It certainly doesn't seem reciprocated. Ruth's company is not the slightest bit comforting to Naomi, who has done her best to dissuade her from coming along. Is she doing it out of sacrificial love for a vulnerable, older woman determined to make a long journey on her own? Is her own family unkind or worse?

I wonder if the true explanation lies in the words of Boaz, her future husband: 'May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.' (Ruth 2:12) Ruth would have been introduced to the God of Israel by her in-laws, seen them worship, watched them live according to his laws and in light of his calling. She would have received the blessing of God through her new family. For those of us who have been grafted into these same roots, it makes sense that Ruth would go where this God led. It makes sense that home would be among God's people, however far from her motherland this took her.

For all Christians there is a tension around the idea of home. We are at once created to make home wherever we are, and at the same time we must hold our citizenship lightly, as we wait for the permanence of heaven. What is true for both now and then is that we have refuge, as Ruth did, under God's wings, close to his heart.

Exploring the Book of Ruth with Children, Young People and All Generations

Claire Knight and Gail Adcock

Introduction

As events unfold in the book of Ruth they tell a tale of loss, loyalty and new-found love. Here we meet a humble ancestor of Jesus – a woman who demonstrates a willingness to remain by the side of others and to take risks and who then discovers a new life full of hope for the future. The themes in these four chapters offer great opportunities to explore some interesting yet often difficult topics. By doing this especially in intergenerational settings we can bring different perspectives and experiences together that nurture everyone's learning.

There are relatable themes here for many of us. Not least, following devastating loss, the way new family is created and blended in the light of new-found relationships. Ruth offers a route to aid children and young people to consider their own family circumstances in ways that are supportive, sensitive and non-judgmental.

When exploring Scripture with children and young people, it's good for us to provide spaces for them to wonder aloud, to be encouraged to ask questions and reflect with each other on what's been read and heard. Adults too can benefit enormously from this type of approach so there are rich possibilities in being together as all ages to mull over God's word and what it means for us. Let's encourage everyone to be open to learning from each other.

Ways in...

Help children, young people and indeed all ages, navigate their way through the coming Bible Month by offering some activities which orientate them in the right direction. All these ideas could be suitable to use with children, young people or groups of mixed ages.



Hand out a variety of Bibles or invite the group to bring their own from home (for this activity try to use books rather than Bible apps!) Ask everyone to close their eyes and open their Bibles where they think the book of Ruth is – who was way off? Who got close? Who was spot on? Let the group show/discuss this with the person they are sitting next to.



Using blank card bookmarks, each person can decorate one to keep in their Bible so they can easily find the book of Ruth.



Create a 'key figures' display with the title 'Ruth' on it. Have a supply of blank people that can be decorated and added to the display as we meet them in the story in the coming days and weeks.



Before embarking on Bible Month, ask the group to jot down any questions they might have about the book or its contents. Keep these safe in a box or an envelope and open at the end of the time, returning to the questions to see if they have been answered.



Consider creating a Bible library as a church: gather a selection of different versions – church congregations may be willing to donate one of their own or buy one to add to the collection. These can be made available to loan during Bible Month. At the end of this time, discuss people's varying views on different versions and translations. What did we enjoy/benefit from/find difficult with each one?



Establish a closed group on Facebook for Bible Month where anyone from your church can join in with the journey through Ruth, sharing their thoughts and responses. Post regular questions or ideas that people can comment on. This could be helpful for those unable to make it to regular study or discussion group. Bear in mind that Facebook is for those aged 13+ years.



Ruth 2

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.' She said to her, 'Go, my daughter.' So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. (Ruth 2:2-3a)

Children and Young People

- **Generous spirit:** gather together and think of a way that you can show generosity and hospitality to the wider church. You could even organise something in your community. It doesn't have to be a big event, just showing hospitality and love. What could you do to go beyond people's expectations? What sort of response did you get? How did that make you feel?
- **Somewhere new:** as children and young people, we start lots of new things. On a large piece of paper write down all the new experiences you might have such as starting school, changing class, forming new friendships. Is it easy to go somewhere new? Talk about how you can make it easier for someone to join your group. Is there someone you know who might feel isolated or uncomfortable? Write a card or note for them to make them feel welcome.
- **God's call:** sometimes God asks us as Christians to do difficult things. Ruth responded to God's call even though she would have felt very uneasy. I wonder why that was? She left her family and her homeland to go with Naomi. This must have been very difficult but she did as God asked. Sometimes it's really hard to tell other people about our faith. Why is it important to tell others about God? Why is it sometimes so hard? Take three Post-it notes and on each one write the name of someone you would like to tell about your faith. Stick them somewhere you will see them, maybe your mirror or wall. Each morning this week, think and pray about that person and why you should tell them about God. At the end of the week, reflect on whether you managed to tell them and what response you got. If it went well, you could invite them to come to your church or group!

Intergenerational

- **Recognition:** sometimes we take the people we live with for granted. Gather together for a meal, pass a ball around the table and each person who has the ball takes a turn to recall a time when the person opposite them at the table has done something nice for them and how it made them feel.
- **Random acts:** sit down together and each write down on tiny pieces of paper things you could do to show someone a 'random act of kindness'. Put them all in a jar and every day take it in turns to choose a piece of paper and act upon it. It could be a simple 'Good Morning' or carrying someone's shopping bag. How does being kind make you feel? Talk about what happened with your family. How could you continue to show generosity and kindness in the future?
- **Neighbours:** is there anyone in your neighbourhood who has just moved in? Get together and make a 'New Home' card for them with a special message from your family. You could even make them a cake or a meal. How do you think they will respond?



Ruth 3

And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. (Ruth 3:11)

Children and Young People

- **Respect:** in this chapter, Boaz shows Ruth the utmost respect when he had every opportunity to take advantage of her good nature. Take some strips of different coloured paper about 10cm x 2cm and write down words to describe what respect means to you. When you have a few, join them all together to make a paper chain. As you make them, think about people you respect. Parents? Grandparents? Teachers?
- **Dilemmas:** talk about the scenarios below, discuss how you would respond and why. Be honest! Discuss the impact of your actions and how they affect you and the people around you.
 1. You are hanging out with your usual group of friends in the playground when an argument breaks out between two of the group. Things escalate and one of them walks away beckoning the rest of the group to leave the other on his own. What do you do?
 2. Your parents have friends coming round and have put out dishes of your favourite snack. They have warned you not to touch them as they are for the guests. Your parents are upstairs getting ready. You could probably take one without them noticing. What do you do?
 3. You are playing on your Xbox and have nearly scored your all-time best score. Then your Mum calls you for dinner. You could go straight down and lose your game or you could just play a little longer and pretend that you haven't heard. What do you do?
 4. (Older/teens) You are at a party and everyone is pouring from an unlabelled bottle into their cups and drinking it. They start to act a bit differently and look as though they are having a great time! They offer you some. What do you do?

Intergenerational

- **Nobility:** sit together and each think of celebrities, media personalities or famous sports men or women who you would describe as 'noble'. What do you think makes someone noble? What are their characteristics? Make a collage with their pictures and write their noble features underneath each one. Is respect part of being noble? Do these people show respect to others?
- **Obedience:** Ruth was obedient to God and Naomi in this story, she left her family and homeland and then she went to Boaz as Naomi had asked her. Can you think of some other stories from the Bible where people have had to be obedient to God even though it was hard for them? What makes these people so obedient to what God is asking? How did their obedience reward them?
- **Sacrifice:** Ruth made some big sacrifices in this story. Making a sacrifice means giving up something you really like or want. Talk about each person on your list or collage, did each person make any sacrifices to get to where they are now? Why do you think they did that? How does it feel to stop doing something you really like when someone asks you to do something?
- **Appropriate:** what do you think about what Naomi has asked of Ruth? Would this have been an appropriate way to approach someone when the book of Ruth was written? Do you think it would be appropriate for someone to make such a request in the 21st century? Why might things be different now? What could be the impact of someone asking these things today? How could Naomi guide Ruth to befriend Boaz in a different way today? What advice would you give her?



Ruth 4

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, 'Acquire it for yourself,' he took off his sandal. (Ruth 4:7-8)

Children and Young People

- **Seal the deal:** the notion of a 'family redeemer' will seem odd to many of us today with its associated rituals as mentioned in this final chapter. What on earth does handing over a sandal signify even?! It's good to acknowledge that this may seem strange to us! Simply put, a family redeemer is obliged to help a relative who's experiencing financial hardship or harsh circumstances. Ask if we would be willing to do the same for a member of our family? If so why?
- **Soap opera:** there is plenty of drama in the opening verses of chapter 4 when Boaz meets the family redeemer and calls ten leaders to witness what takes place. Divide into small groups, giving each one a figure from the scene: Boaz, the family relation, a witness. Ask what each one might be thinking or feeling and jot down our responses on flipchart paper. Would they be confident, nervous, shy, uncertain, irritated? Spend time recreating the scene through drama and improvise a script. Alternatively create a 'movie still' where individuals pose as figures in the scene, holding positions to demonstrate what's happening. These could be photographed and printed to create a scene by scene account of verses 1 to 12.
- **Definitions:** explore what we mean by the word 'redeem' by finding dictionary definitions. Display each one on a large screen or sheet of flipchart paper. Explain to the group that you're going to give a definition and ask them to stand on a continuum depending on how much they believe we see the definition happening in this chapter of Ruth. 'Not at all' at one end and 'A great deal' at the other. Ask individuals to share why they choose to stand in a certain place.

Intergenerational

- **Scratch skit:** use the whole congregation to perform events that unfold from verses 1-12 in a scratch drama. Divide it into three groups: one is Boaz, one the family redeemer, and one the other leaders. Write or display on a screen, lines for each 'part' that can be acted or spoken at different moments. If time allows, each group could write their own lines on large sheets of paper. Invite someone to be the narrator and encourage each group to perform their role to each other at the right moment. Enjoy how each group acts and responds as well as the humour that this may generate!
- **Family tree:** create a giant tree shape with masking tape on the floor. Read Ruth 4:13-22 again. Place the names of Ruth and Boaz at the bottom. Ask someone to write the name of their son, grandson and great grandson (on separate sheets of paper) and add it to the tree. Who do we know was a descendent of David? Ask the group what qualities in Ruth do we see in Jesus? These can be written/drawn on paper and added to the tree along with the name of Jesus which everyone could help to decorate.

Conclusion

'Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.' (Ruth 1:16b-c)

If you have completed Bible Month in your church or circuit, we hope that it has been an encouraging and stimulating month for you. We'd love to get your feedback on the month, so please do get in touch with us at lwptoffice@lwpt.org.uk

Look out for Bible Month 2021, on the gospel of Mark. Resources will again be provided at www.preachweb.org/biblemonth

Gospel Readings

The following suggestions are offered for churches that wish to accompany readings from Ruth with a reading from a gospel.

Week	Ruth	Gospel
1	1	Matthew 2:1-12
2	2	Matthew 5:43-48
3	3	Matthew 20:1-16
4	4	Matthew 22:41-46

Further Resources

We encourage churches that have taken part in a Bible Month to consider ways in which they might continue to engage with Scripture beyond the month. Helpful resources include:

The Bible Course: an 8-session course that can help participants explore the big picture of the Bible www.biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/the-bible-course

The Community Bible Experience: a great tool for reading the Bible together in community www.biblicaurope.com/our-work/community-bible-experience/introduction

Holy Habits: Biblical Teaching: this missional discipleship resource for churches explores the 'holy habit' of biblical teaching www.brfoonline.org.uk/holy-habits

Navigate: 5 interactive sessions designed to help young people explore and engage with the Bible, free to download at www.methodist.org.uk/navigate

For further resources, visit www.preachweb.org/biblemonth

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Further Reading



As well as exploring Ruth through the Bible Notes, it can also be helpful to read and reflect on commentaries and studies, such as the following.

Introductory:

- Bible Odyssey, a resource for studying the Bible developed by the *Society of Biblical Literature* www.bibleodyssey.com
- Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page and Matthew J. M. Coomber (eds), *Fortress commentary on the Bible: the Old Testament and Apocrypha*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

Accessible:

- Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth. New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Advanced:

- Tamara C. Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth. JPS Bible Commentary*, Philadelphia, Pa.: Jewish Publication Society, 2011.
- Alice L. Laffey, and Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, *Ruth. Wisdom Commentary Series 8*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017.

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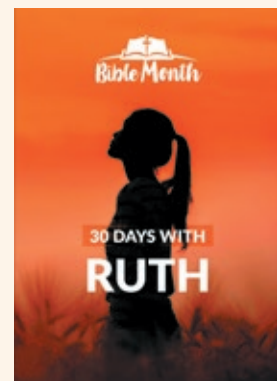
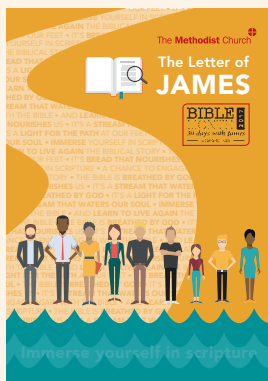
Bible Month

Resources for you and your church

Bible Month is an opportunity for individuals, small groups or whole churches to spend 30 days (in four week sections) focusing on a single biblical book.

Four week guides are also available for the Book of Jonah, the Book of James and the Book of Colossians.

Bible Month resources are produced by LWPT in partnership with the Methodist Church.



IN PRINT

You can order extra hard copies of Ruth from www.preachweb.org/biblemonth

Hard copies of Colossians are available from www.cpo.org.uk (search for Bible Month)

Or contact the Preach/LWPT office on Tel: 01923 231811 / Email: lwptoffice@lwpt.org.uk

TO DOWNLOAD

PDF versions of all four guides are available FREE to download from: www.preachweb.org/biblemonth

FURTHER INFORMATION

See preachweb.org/biblemonth for:

- Bible Month Introduction and FAQs
- Bible Month Training Days
- Videos of Bible Month Training Days
- Why Take Part in Bible Month?
- Bible Month 2017: James
- Bible Month 2018: Jonah
- Bible Month 2019: Colossians
- Bible Month 2020: Ruth

Preach resources include Preach magazine and Sermon of the Year, see preachweb.org for more details.

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www.preachweb.org/biblemonth



Bible Month provides a toolkit for you and your church to engage with the book of Ruth over four weeks. It includes Bible notes with preaching ideas, small group study guides, children and youth resources, a reflection on the meaning of home, and ideas for further resources.

Written by Dr Rachel Starr with contributions from Gail Adcock, Rev Dr Jasmine Devadason, Charlotte Hendy, Claire Knight and Jo Swinney.

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