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RUTH

Rut — "Ruth" • A 4-Week Group Bible Study

By Greg and Kayla Gibson

WEEK 1 OF 4 • GENERAL / MIXED GROUP EDITION

Emptied, Then Returning — Ruth 1:1–22

Scripture Scope: Ruth 1:1–22 (ESV) • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

PARTICIPANT STUDY EDITION

Synchronized Section-by-Section with the Leader Guide Edition · Includes Group Reflection Workspace

Ruth — 4-Week Group Bible Study (Participant Study Edition)

Week 1: Emptied, Then Returning (Ruth 1:1–22)

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- **The setting:** The story takes place "in the days when the judges ruled" (1:1), the same dark era that closes the book of Judges. It moves from famine in Bethlehem to the country of Moab and back to Bethlehem during the barley and wheat harvests.
- **The main characters:** Naomi, a widow from Bethlehem; Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law; and Boaz, a worthy man of Elimelech's clan who is one of the family's redeemers.
- **The plot:** Emptiness turns to fullness. Naomi leaves full and returns empty (1:21); by the end, the women of Bethlehem celebrate a son born to Naomi (4:17).
- **The structure (four scenes):** The road home (chapter 1), the field (chapter 2), the threshing floor (chapter 3), and the town gate (chapter 4), framed by a short prologue (1:1–5) and a closing genealogy (4:18–22).
- **Its place in the Bible:** In English Bibles, Ruth stands between Judges and 1 Samuel, a bright story in a dark time that ends with the name of David. In the Hebrew Bible it belongs to the Writings and is one of the five festival scrolls, read at the Feast of Weeks.
- **Why it matters:** Ruth shows the LORD's quiet providence and steadfast love at work through ordinary, faithful people. A foreign widow takes refuge under the wings of Israel's God, a kinsman-redeemer acts at cost to himself, and the LORD prepares a king. The story points to Christ, our Redeemer and the Son of David.

How This 4-Week Study Works

You may notice this study is shorter than our usual eight weeks. Even though we are 8weekbiblestudy.com, stretching Ruth to eight weeks would have left it thin on content, and we never want to trade quality for quantity.

Ruth is a 4-week study, one chapter per week. It is a deliberate exception to the series' usual format: Ruth's four short chapters are four complete scenes, and studying one scene each week lets the story keep its own shape. Designed for weekly small groups, mini-churches, and community gatherings (75–90 minutes per session) rather than daily homework checklists, each week walks through one chapter together in six repeatable sections:

- **Section X.1 — Opening:** Sets the scene, the Week at a Glance, Head, Heart, and Hands objectives, the Opening Frame, and the Opening Entry Question.
- **Section X.2 — Historical & Literary Context:** Places the week's chapter inside the structure of Ruth and the ancient Near Eastern world.
- **Section X.3 — Movement 1:** The week's first guided passage: Guided Scripture Reading, Anchor Verses, Teaching Narrative, and Group Discussion Questions.
- **Section X.4 — Movement 2:** The week's second guided passage, following the same flow.
- **Section X.5 — Canonical Horizon:** Traces how the passage echoes across Scripture and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.
- **Section X.6 — Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer:** Moves the week's study into everyday life, previews next week, and closes in prayer.

Key anchor verses are printed in each section for quick reference. The rest of each chapter is read aloud together from an open ESV.

Choosing a Bible Translation: Top 5 Translations Compared

Every English Bible translation falls along a spectrum between two primary approaches: word-for-word translation (formal equivalence, which prioritizes literal accuracy to the original phrasing and sentence structure) and thought-for-thought translation (dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes immediate modern readability by translating idioms and ideas into natural contemporary expressions). Here is how five widely used English translations compare:

- **ESV (English Standard Version) — Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Follows the wording and sentence structure of the original Hebrew and Greek closely while using modern English; well suited to close study.
  - Cons: Because it tracks the original sentence structure, some phrasing can feel more formal than everyday speech.
- **NIV (New International Version) — Balanced (Between Word-for-Word and Thought-for-Thought)**
  - Pros: Widely read; balances accuracy to the original languages with natural, everyday readability.
  - Cons: Because some idioms are rendered as modern expressions, a few literal wordplays or technical terms can be less visible.
- **NLT (New Living Translation) — Thought-for-Thought**
  - Pros: Warm and conversational; reads smoothly aloud and helps readers follow the big picture of long passages.
  - Cons: Because it prioritizes meaning over literal phrasing, it can be harder to use for close word study.
- **CSB (Christian Standard Bible) — Optimal Equivalence (Balanced)**
  - Pros: Stays close to the original words where possible while smoothing awkward phrasing into natural modern English.
  - Cons: Because it is a newer translation, some well-known verses may sound different from the wording many readers remember.
- **KJV / NKJV (King James Version & New King James Version) — Traditional Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Historic cadence that shaped English literature and church history; the NKJV updates archaic pronouns ("thee/thou") while keeping the classic rhythm.
  - Cons: Often reads like older English poetry, with complex sentences and archaic or formal vocabulary that can be harder for modern readers to follow.

This study quotes the ESV.

Greg & Kayla's Recommended Study Bibles

Having a trusted study Bible on hand is one of the best ways to go deeper as you read through Ruth:

- **Greg's Favorite Study Bible:** The MacArthur Study Bible (ESV), which contains extensive explanatory notes beneath almost every verse, ideal for detailed study.
- **Kayla's Favorite Study Bible:** The ESV Study Bible, containing over 20,000 study notes, articles, and explanations.

The 4-Week Ruth Study at a Glance

Week	Title & Passage	Movement 1 / Movement 2	Canonical Horizon
1	**Emptied, Then Returning** (1:1–22)	From Bethlehem to Moab and Back (1:1–14) / Your People, My People (1:15–22)	God's steadfast love; outsiders brought near
2	**Gleaning in the Field of Grace** (2:1–23)	Ruth Gleans in Boaz's Field (2:1–13) / Kindness at the Table and a Redeemer Named (2:14–23)	Refuge under God's wings; grace to the foreigner
3	**Under His Wings** (3:1–18)	Naomi's Plan and the Night at the Threshing Floor (3:1–9) / The Worthy Woman and the Nearer Redeemer (3:10–18)	The Redeemer and the Bridegroom; rest for God's people
4	**The Redeemer and a King's Line** (4:1–22)	At the Gate: The Redeemer Acts (4:1–12) / A Son for Naomi and the Line to David (4:13–22)	Christ our Kinsman-Redeemer; the Son of David

WEEK 1 OF 4

WEEK 1 SESSION GUIDE · RUTH 1:1–22

Week 1: Emptied, Then Returning

Scripture Scope: Ruth 1:1–22 (ESV) • Focal Passages: Ruth 1:1–5; 1:6–14; 1:15–18; 1:19–22 • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

Section 1.1

Opening: Emptied, Then Returning (Ruth 1:1–22)

Passage Ruth 1:1–22

Opening

Judges ended in darkness: no king in Israel, and everyone doing what was right in his own eyes. Ruth opens in the same days, with a famine in Bethlehem, the "house of bread." A family leaves for Moab, and within ten years three men are dead. Naomi is left with two foreign daughters-in-law and no future she can see.

When she hears that the LORD has given his people food, she turns for home. One daughter-in-law goes back; the other refuses to leave. Naomi arrives in Bethlehem saying the LORD has brought her back empty. But she arrives at the beginning of barley harvest, and she is not alone.

Week 1 At a Glance

Scripture Scope	Ruth 1:1–22 (famine, loss, and the road home)
Focal Passages	Ruth 1:1–5; 1:6–14; 1:15–18; 1:19–22
Literary & Structural Anchor	The word "return" (shuv (שׁוּב)) runs through the chapter about twelve times; the question is who will return, and to whom. The chapter sets up the book's great reversal from empty to full (1:21). Names speak: Elimelech, "my God is king"; Bethlehem, "house of bread"; Naomi, "pleasant," who asks to be called Mara, "bitter." The narrator names the LORD's direct action only twice in the book, here when he gives food (1:6) and at the end when he gives a son (4:13); everything between happens through ordinary choices the LORD quietly guides.
Big Idea	In loss and emptiness the LORD has not abandoned his people, and a foreigner's loyal love shows the kind of love the LORD himself gives.

Week 1 Learning Objectives (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD	**Know the Story:** Understand the setting of Ruth in the days of the judges, the losses in Moab, Ruth's pledge, and Naomi's return.
HEART	**Bring Honest Grief to God:** Bring our emptiness and grief honestly to the LORD, and be moved by loyal love that costs something.
HANDS	**Show Loyal Love:** Take one concrete step to stay faithful to someone who needs us.

Opening Frame: From Judges to Bethlehem

Judges ended with its sharpest verdict: there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Ruth begins in that same age, "in the days when the judges ruled," and both books follow people from Bethlehem in Judah. In Judges, Levites from Bethlehem were caught up in idolatry and violence. In Ruth, a family from Bethlehem will become the family of Israel's king. But the story opens with famine, a move to Moab, and three funerals, and a widow who comes home calling herself empty. The question for this week: what does faithfulness look like in a faithless age, and what is God doing when he seems to be against us? Before we read together, take a moment to share with the group:

Opening Entry Question (Icebreaker)

1.1 Q1 (Opening Entry Question): Think of a time you came home after being away for a long time. What had changed, and what had stayed the same?

Section 1.2

Historical & Literary Context: In the Days When the Judges Ruled (Ruth 1:1–22)

Passage Ruth 1:1–22

Entering the World of Bethlehem and Moab

1. Historical Background

The events take place in the judges period, probably the late twelfth or eleventh century BC. The book was written no earlier than David's time, since it ends with his name (4:17, 22), and it explains an old custom for later readers (4:7). Many evangelical scholars date the writing to the early monarchy.

2. Cultural Setting

Moab lay east of the Dead Sea. Israel traced the Moabites to Lot (Genesis 19:30–38); Moab's king hired Balaam to curse Israel, Moabite women drew Israel into idolatry (Numbers 22–25), and Eglon of Moab oppressed Israel in the judges period (Judges 3:12–30). Moab's god was Chemosh. A widow without sons had little legal protection or income, which is why Israel's law commanded special care for widows, orphans, and sojourners (Exodus 22:22–24; Deuteronomy 10:18).

3. Literary Structure of Ruth 1:1–22

- **Famine and departure** (1:1–2)
- **Three deaths** (1:3–5)
- **News of bread** (1:6–7)
- **Naomi's blessing** (1:8–10)
- **Naomi's bitter reasoning** (1:11–13)
- **The parting** (1:14)
- **Ruth's pledge** (1:15–18)
- **Arrival in Bethlehem** (1:19)
- **Naomi's lament** (1:20–21)
- **The turning point at barley harvest** (1:22)

4. Key Themes

Return; empty and full; names that speak; women's voices; loyal love (chesed (חֶסֶד)); prayer and providence.

5. Theological Considerations

The narrator does not say whether leaving for Moab was a sin. Naomi speaks openly of the LORD's hand against her (1:13, 20–21), and the rest of the book answers her. Ruth's pledge binds her to Naomi's people and to Naomi's God.

6. Relevant Scholarly Insights

The Mesha Stele (about 840 BC), a Moabite royal inscription, names Chemosh and mentions conflict with Israel's King Omri. In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth often follows Proverbs, so the "worthy woman" of Proverbs 31 is followed by the story of Ruth.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.2)

1.2 Q1: Ruth begins "in the days when the judges ruled" (1:1), the same lawless age that closes Judges. What difference does it make to read Ruth against that background?

1.2 Q2: Naomi was a widow with no sons, and Ruth was a foreign widow. What would daily life have been like for women in their position, and why does God's law speak so often about widows and sojourners?

1.2 Q3: The names in this chapter carry meanings: "my God is king," "house of bread," "pleasant," and "bitter." How do those meanings add to the story?

Section 1.3

Movement 1: From Bethlehem to Moab and Back (Ruth 1:1–14)

Passage **Ruth 1:1–14**

Guided Scripture Reading

Open your Bible to **Ruth 1**. Read aloud in this order:

- **Reader 1: Ruth 1:1–5** (focal passage) — In the days of the judges, a famine drives Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons from Bethlehem to Moab; Elimelech dies, the sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, and after about ten years both sons die.
- **Reader 2: Ruth 1:6–10** (focal passage) — Naomi hears that the LORD has given his people food and sets out for home; she urges her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' houses and prays for the LORD's kindness and rest for them; they weep and refuse.
- **Reader 3: Ruth 1:11–14** (focal passage) — Naomi argues that she has no more sons to offer them and that the LORD's hand has gone out against her; Orpah kisses her goodbye, but Ruth holds on to her.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

> **Ruth 1:1:** In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.
>
> **Ruth 1:6:** Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food.
>
> **Ruth 1:8:** But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

Teaching Narrative: Famine, Funerals, and a Parting

1. Famine in the House of Bread (Ruth 1:1–2)

In a lawless age, the land God promised cannot feed its people. Elimelech, whose name means "my God is king," takes his family to sojourn in Moab. The text does not say whether this was faithless or simply desperate.

2. Ten Years Compressed into Three Verses (Ruth 1:3–5)

Naomi loses her husband, and then both sons, and the marriages in Moab produce no children. The narrator tells ten years of loss in a few lines; the weight of the story falls on what comes next.

3. The LORD Visited His People (Ruth 1:6–7)

The first time the narrator names the LORD acting, he gives food. Naomi turns for home. The famine has ended, and so might her exile.

4. A Blessing That Is Also a Prayer (Ruth 1:8–10)

Naomi sends her daughters-in-law home with a prayer that the LORD will deal kindly (chesed (חֶסֶד)) with them and give them rest in a husband's home. They have shown loyal love to her family; she asks God to repay it. The rest of the book shows him answering.

5. Naomi's Reasoning (Ruth 1:11–13)

She has no sons to give them as husbands and no hope of more. Her honest conclusion is that the LORD's hand has gone out against her.

6. The Parting (Ruth 1:14)

Orpah does what Naomi asks and kisses her goodbye. Ruth holds on to Naomi and will not let go.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.3)

> **1.3 Q1:** Elimelech's family left the land of promise to survive a famine. Why do you think the narrator tells us so little about whether this was right or wrong?

1.3 Q2: Ten years of loss are told in just a few verses (1:3–5). How have you seen grief pile up in someone's life, and what does it do to a person's view of God?

1.3 Q3: Naomi heard "that the LORD had visited his people and given them food" (1:6). How can news of God's goodness to others be both hopeful and painful for someone who is grieving?

1.3 Q4: Naomi prayed, "May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me" (1:8). What does it mean that God's kindness often comes to people through the kindness of others?

1.3 Q5: Orpah went home as Naomi urged, while Ruth held on. What does each choice show, and why is it important not to treat Orpah as the villain of the story?

Section 1.4

Movement 2: Your People, My People (Ruth 1:15–22)

Passage **Ruth 1:15–22**

Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order:

- **Reader 1: Ruth 1:15–18** (focal passage) — Naomi urges Ruth to follow Orpah back to her people and her gods; Ruth refuses with a solemn pledge, and Naomi stops urging her.
- **Reader 2: Ruth 1:19–22** (focal passage) — The whole town of Bethlehem is stirred at their arrival; Naomi tells the women to call her Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with her; she and Ruth the Moabite arrive at the beginning of barley harvest.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

> **Ruth 1:16–17:** But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."
>
> **Ruth 1:20–21:** She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"
>
> **Ruth 1:22:** So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

Teaching Narrative: A Pledge on the Road Home

1. Naomi Urges Ruth to Go Back (Ruth 1:15)

Naomi points Ruth to Orpah, who has returned to her people and her gods. Going back would mean going back to Chemosh.

2. Ruth's Pledge (Ruth 1:16–17)

Ruth commits to Naomi's road, home, people, God, and grave. She swears by the LORD's name, the God of Israel. This is more than family loyalty; it is a conversion: a new people, a new God, and a lifelong commitment.

3. Silence on the Road (Ruth 1:18)

Naomi stops arguing. The narrator records no words of thanks or welcome, a hint of how empty Naomi feels.

4. The Town Is Stirred (Ruth 1:19)

The whole town is stirred. The women's question shows how much loss has changed her.

5. Call Me Mara (Ruth 1:20–21)

Naomi speaks honestly about God: the Almighty has dealt bitterly with her; she went away full and has come back empty. She speaks to and about God, not away from him.

6. The Beginning of Barley Harvest (Ruth 1:22)

Naomi says she has come back empty, but Ruth the Moabite is with her, and they arrive just as the harvest begins. The narrator quietly hints that the LORD is about to fill her again.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.4)

> **1.4 Q1:** Ruth said, "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (1:16). Why is it significant that Ruth's commitment is to Naomi's God as well as to Naomi?

1.4 Q2: Ruth's loyalty would cost her her homeland, her family, and probably any hope of remarriage. When has someone's loyalty to you cost them something, or yours to someone else?

1.4 Q3: Naomi said, "I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty" (1:21). What do you make of her honesty with God, and is it right to speak to God this way?

1.4 Q4: Naomi said she came back empty, yet Ruth was standing beside her. What might we fail to see when we are deep in grief?

1.4 Q5: The chapter ends with their arrival "at the beginning of barley harvest" (1:22). How does this small detail hint at what God is doing?

Section 1.5

Canonical Horizon: God's Steadfast Love and Outsiders Brought Near

Passage **Ruth 1:16**

Tracing the Thread Across Scripture

Naomi's emptiness and Ruth's loyal love point forward to the LORD abounding in steadfast love and to the outsiders he brings near in Christ. Turn to each passage as the connections are traced.

1. The LORD Abounding in Steadfast Love (Exodus 34:6–7)

The LORD reveals himself as merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Naomi's prayer for chesed (חֶסֶד) (1:8) appeals to this character.

2. Love That Never Ends (Psalm 136; Lamentations 3:22–23)

The psalmist repeats that his steadfast love endures forever, and Lamentations, written in deep grief, confesses that his mercies are new every morning.

3. Love for People with Nothing to Offer (Romans 5:8)

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Ruth's loyal love to an empty, bitter widow points to the love God shows to those who have nothing to give him.

4. God at Work in Hidden Ways (Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 4:8–10, 16–18)

The God who seemed against Naomi was preparing to fill her again. Paul speaks of God working through suffering in ways we cannot yet see.

5. Blessing for All the Families of the Earth (Genesis 12:3)

God promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. Ruth, a Moabite, chooses the God of Israel and joins his people.

6. Strangers Brought Near (Ephesians 2:12–13, 19)

Gentiles, once strangers to the covenants of promise, have been brought near by the blood of Christ and are now fellow citizens and members of God's household.

7. Ruth in the Line of Jesus (Matthew 1:5; 28:19)

Ruth is named in Jesus' genealogy, a sign that the Messiah came for all nations, whom he sends his disciples to reach.

Anchor Verse (ESV)

> **Ruth 1:16:** But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.5)

1.5 Q1: Exodus 34:6 describes the LORD as "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." How does Ruth's loyalty to Naomi give us a picture of God's love?

1.5 Q2: Naomi felt that God was against her, yet he was already at work. How do Romans 8:28 and 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 speak to someone who feels the way Naomi did?

1.5 Q3: Ruth, a Moabite, became part of God's people and is named in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). What does that say about who is welcome in God's family, and how should it shape our church?

Personal & Group Application (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD	In the days of the judges, Naomi lost her husband and sons in Moab and returned to Bethlehem with Ruth, who pledged herself to Naomi's people and Naomi's God.
HEART	In loss and emptiness, the LORD has not abandoned his people; we can bring him honest grief, and loyal love shows us his heart.
HANDS	Faith holds on to God and to the people he gives us, even when it costs something.

Section 1.6

Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer

Application

Take a few minutes to move this week's study into everyday life. Discuss these three questions together and write down what you want to remember:

1.6 Q1: Is there an area of your life where you feel "empty" right now? What would it look like to bring that honestly to God this week?

1.6 Q2: Who in your life needs someone to stay with them through a hard season, and what is one way you can show them loyal love this week?

1.6 Q3: How can this group be a place where people can be honest about grief and still be surrounded by faithful love?

Looking Ahead to Next Week

Recap: In Week 1, a famine drove a family to Moab, three men died, and Naomi returned to Bethlehem with Ruth the Moabite, who pledged herself to Naomi's people and God. They arrived at the beginning of barley harvest.

Transition: Two widows need food. Ruth goes out to glean in the fields, and what looks like chance leads her to the field of a worthy man named Boaz.

Week 2 Overview — Gleaning in the Field of Grace (Ruth 2:1–23): Movement 1, Ruth Gleans in Boaz's Field (2:1–13), covers Ruth's initiative, her "chance" arrival in Boaz's field, his protection, and his blessing that she has taken refuge under the LORD's wings. Movement 2, Kindness at the Table and a Redeemer Named (2:14–23), covers

the shared meal, the generous harvest, and Naomi's discovery that Boaz is one of the family's redeemers. The Canonical Horizon traces refuge under God's wings and grace to the foreigner.

Focal Readings to Preview

- Ruth 2:1–7
- Ruth 2:8–13
- Ruth 2:14–18
- Ruth 2:19–23

My One Concrete Step for the Week Ahead

Write down or name aloud the specific rhythm, boundary, or conversation you want to practice before next week's gathering:

Closing Prayer

Close your time together by inviting each person to share a one-sentence takeaway or prayer request, then pray together along these lines:

Closing Group Prayer

LORD our God, you are merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Some of us carry losses, grief, and emptiness tonight, and we bring them honestly to you. Comfort widows and the bereaved, and be near to those living with childlessness or empty rooms. Thank you for the people who, like Ruth, have stayed with us in hard seasons. Give us that same loyal love toward those who need us. Thank you that in Christ outsiders are brought near and made part of your people. Help us trust that you are at work even when you seem to be against us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.