

Ruth: A Character Study

Getting to Know the Woman Behind the Book

We have spent weeks with Ruth, but because we have moved through the book verse by verse, we have not stopped to gather everything Scripture tells us about her in one place. This resource does that. It is a companion to the Boaz character study, and like that one, it is meant to deepen what you are hearing on Sundays, not replace it.

Where Ruth Appears in Scripture

- The book of Ruth, all four chapters. It is one of only two books in the Bible named for a woman. The other is Esther.
- Matthew 1:5, in the family line of Jesus that opens the New Testament: “Boaz begot Obed by Ruth.”

That second mention is short, but it says a great deal. Ancient family lines usually listed only fathers. Matthew went out of his way to name Ruth.

What Her Name Means

We are not sure. Some connect the name Ruth with a Hebrew word for “friend” or “companion.” Others connect it with a word for “refreshment.” Either would suit her well, but this is worth holding loosely, since the Bible itself never explains her name the way it explains Naomi's.

Where She Came From

Ruth was from Moab, the country east of the Dead Sea. The Background resource for this series explains the long and painful history between Moab and Israel, including the law that kept Moabites out of Israel's worshiping assembly (Deuteronomy 23:3-6). The writer of Ruth does not let us forget where she is from. Again and again she is called “Ruth the Moabitess” (Ruth 1:22; 2:2; 2:21; 4:5; 4:10), even after she has settled in Bethlehem.

She married Mahlon, one of Naomi's two sons (Ruth 4:10). The family lived in Moab about ten years (Ruth 1:4), and Ruth had no children in that time. Then her husband died. When we meet her she is a young, childless widow whose closest remaining tie is to her mother-in-law.

Later Jewish tradition suggested that Ruth was the daughter of Eglon, a king of Moab. Scripture says nothing of the kind, so treat that as a tradition and no more. Everything the Bible itself tells us presents her as an ordinary woman with nothing to offer but herself.

The Choice That Defines Her

On the road to Bethlehem, Naomi urges both of her daughters-in-law to go home. It is sensible advice. In Moab they have family, a chance to remarry, and a future. With Naomi they have none of that. Orpah weeps, kisses Naomi, and goes back. She is not a villain. She does the reasonable thing.

“But Ruth clung to her” (Ruth 1:14). The Hebrew word for “clung” is the same word used in Genesis 2:24 for a husband being “joined” to his wife. It describes a bond that is not meant to be broken. Then Ruth speaks:

“Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever 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. The LORD do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

Look at what she is giving up: her homeland, her family, her gods, and any likely hope of marriage. Look at what Naomi has offered her in return: nothing. Naomi has just said that God's hand is against her. And notice the name Ruth uses at the end of her vow. She does not swear by the gods of Moab. She uses the personal name of Israel's God, printed in our Bibles as “the LORD.” This is more than loyalty to a mother-in-law. It is a confession of faith.

Boaz later describes her choice this way: “you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before” (Ruth 2:11). That sounds a great deal like what God asked of Abraham in Genesis 12:1. But Abraham went with a promise from God in his ears. Ruth went with no promise at all.

What We Learn About Her Character

- **Loyal love.** The Hebrew word is *hesed*: love that keeps its commitments even when it is costly. Naomi sees it in Ruth (Ruth 1:8), and Boaz says her kindness has only grown (Ruth 3:10).
- **Initiative.** Ruth does not wait in Bethlehem to be rescued. “Please let me go to the field, and glean” (Ruth 2:2). Gleaning meant walking behind the harvesters and gathering what they left. It was hard, humbling, and for a foreign woman alone, risky.
- **Hard work.** The foreman reports that she worked “from morning until now” with only a short rest (Ruth 2:7). She keeps going until evening and then threshes what she gathered: about an ephah of barley (Ruth 2:17), likely around thirty pounds, far more than a day of gleaning normally produced.
- **Humility.** When Boaz shows her kindness she bows to the ground and asks, “Why have I found favor in your eyes ... since I am a foreigner?” (Ruth 2:10). She never acts as though she is owed anything.
- **Generosity.** At lunch she eats until she is satisfied and saves the rest. That evening she gives it to Naomi (Ruth 2:14, 18). She thinks of her mother-in-law even at her own meal.
- **Courage and trust.** Naomi's plan in chapter 3 could have gone badly wrong for Ruth. Her answer is simple: “All that you say to me I will do” (Ruth 3:5). Then, at the threshing floor, she speaks up for herself and for Naomi's family with remarkable boldness (Ruth 3:9).

- **A good name.** Boaz tells her, “all the people of my town know that you are a virtuous woman” (Ruth 3:11). She had been in Bethlehem only a few months. Her character had already spoken for her.

A Woman of Worth

The phrase behind “virtuous woman” in Ruth 3:11 is the Hebrew *eshet chayil*. It is the same phrase that opens the famous portrait in Proverbs 31:10: “Who can find a virtuous wife?” Ruth is a living example of the woman Proverbs describes.

It also matches the way Boaz is introduced. He is called a man of *chayil* (Ruth 2:1), a word for strength, substance, and worth. On paper the two of them could not be more different: a wealthy landowner from a leading family, and a penniless foreign widow. The writer uses the same word for both. In the ways that matter most, they are a match.

Under His Wings

When Boaz first meets Ruth, he prays for her: “The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge” (Ruth 2:12). It is a picture of a bird sheltering its young.

At the threshing floor, Ruth uses that same word back to him: “Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative” (Ruth 3:9). In effect she is saying, “You prayed that God would shelter me. Will you be the way He does it?” God very often answers our prayers for other people by sending us.

How She Sees Herself, and How Others See Her

Follow the way Ruth describes herself. First she is “a foreigner” (Ruth 2:10). Then she says she is “not like one of your maidservants,” meaning she ranks even below his servant girls (Ruth 2:13). By chapter 3 she can say, “I am Ruth, your maidservant” (Ruth 3:9). She never grasps for a higher place.

Now follow what others say about her. The foreman calls her “the young Moabite woman” (Ruth 2:6). Boaz calls her “my daughter” and “a virtuous woman.” The elders pray she will be like Rachel and Leah, the mothers of Israel (Ruth 4:11). And the women of Bethlehem tell Naomi that Ruth is “better to you than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15). In a culture that prized sons above almost everything, and where seven was the number of completeness, there was no higher praise.

One last detail. Ruth does not speak in chapter 4. Her final words in the book are a report of Boaz’s gift to Naomi (Ruth 3:17). She begins the book giving herself away, and she ends it quietly, with the attention on others. That is who she is.

Her Legacy

- She became the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:17, 21-22).
- She is named in the family line of Jesus (Matthew 1:5).

- A woman from a nation shut out of Israel's assembly was brought into the very center of God's plan. The law had kept Moab at a distance. Grace brought Ruth all the way in.

A Picture of Us

If Boaz is a picture of Christ the Redeemer, then Ruth is a picture of everyone He redeems. She was an outsider with no claim on God's promises and nothing to bargain with. She came anyway, took refuge under His wings, and was welcomed, provided for, and given a place in the family.

The apostle Paul describes every non-Jewish believer in nearly the same terms: once “strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:12-13). Ruth's story is our story.

What We Can Learn From Ruth

- Real faith is a decision about who your God is, and it shows up in where you go and who you stand with.
- Loyal love stays when leaving would be easier and no one would blame you for going.
- Faithfulness usually looks like ordinary hard work on an ordinary day. Ruth did not know she was part of a bigger story. She went to work.
- Humility and boldness belong together. Ruth never demanded anything, and she was not afraid to ask.
- Your past and your background do not decide your place with God. His grace does.

All Scripture references follow the New King James Version (NKJV) unless noted otherwise.