

A *Discover Together*  
BIBLE STUDY



# Ruth

*Discovering God's Faithfulness in an Anxious World*

Sue Edwards



KREGEL  
PUBLICATIONS

*Ruth: Discovering God's Faithfulness in an Anxious World*

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The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-0-8254-2553-0

Printed in the United States of America  
20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 / 5 4 3 2 1



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## Why Study Ruth?

Recently, a young seminary student melted down in my office in a full-blown anxiety attack. I was concerned that she might pass out or throw up. I helped her to calm down, spent some time with her, and directed her to some quality counseling. She's not the first. In my Women Teaching Women course, students often tell their stories as part of their Bible teaching, and more and more I hear women sharing an unreasonable and uneasy sense of anxiety crippling them.

Research tells us that anxiety is spreading through society like a plague, especially in the younger generations. In 2018, the largest book retailer in the United States, Barnes and Noble, reported a huge surge in book sales on anxiety—a 25 percent jump in one year. Women are on more antianxiety meds than at any other time in history.

According to a 2018 *Medical News Today* article, “Anxiety in the West: Is It on the Rise?,” richer countries report a higher prevalence of anxiety. Apparently when people feel less pressure to provide the basics, their thinking moves to other issues that are more difficult to control (Newman, “Anxiety in the West”).

Another reason for this rise in anxiety is twenty-four-hour news coverage where we experience every tragedy and crisis in real time: political and racial turmoil, flesh-eating bacteria, antibiotic resistance, mass shootings, terrorism, and on and on. With all the craziness going on in our world today, worry has become a favorite pastime. It's often the favorite topic of conversation. Are you letting this craziness corrupt your spiritual, physical, and emotional health? Do you love someone who is? It's easy to do.

I'm certainly not immune. I grew up knowing nothing about God, and I battled severe depression and anxiety before Jesus found me. In my early years as a believer, I thought that worrying showed I was a caring Christian. I remember the day when our Bible study teacher taught us that worry and anxiety offend God, that they are signs we don't trust him. Ugh—convicting. As I've grown stronger in the Lord, I have learned that God does not want his daughters trapped in a crippling web of worry and anxiety.



## BREAK FREE FROM ANXIETY

But how do we break free from anxiety in our own lives and help others do the same? We must immerse ourselves in God's Word as a lifestyle—and not just a verse here and there. Our life goal must be to digest the Bible book by book as life-giving nourishment that cannot be attained any other way. We know that investing in a quality education makes us literate and alters our future. Many of us make sacrifices of years, money, and energy to educate ourselves because we understand education's benefits and rewards.

Biblical literacy is even more valuable! Over a span of sixteen hundred years, God orchestrated the creation of sixty-six documents written by the Holy Spirit through more than forty human authors who came from different backgrounds. Together they produced a unified love letter that communicates without error God's affection, grace, direction, truth, and wisdom. He did this so that we would not be left without access to his mind and heart (Hendricks and Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, 23).

## THE INCREDIBLE BENEFITS OF BIBLICAL LITERACY

Earning a quality education changes us. An education in the Scriptures will change us even more. But just like with secular learning, becoming biblically literate requires a serious investment. However, the rewards and benefits far outweigh the increased lifetime earnings that come with a diploma from even the most prestigious Ivy League university. These are some of the benefits:

- an intimate relationship with the almighty God
- a true understanding of the way the world works and how to live well in it
- a supernatural ability to love ourselves and others
- insight into our own sin nature along with a path to overcome it, and if we fail, a way to wipe the shame slate clean, pick ourselves up forgiven, and move on with renewed hope
- meaning and purpose
- relational health lived in community
- support through struggles
- continued growth in becoming a person who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23)
- freedom from anxiety as we learn to trust in God's providential care

Every book of the Bible provides another layer in the scaffolding of truth that transforms our mind, heart, attitudes, and actions. As we work through this study in the book of Ruth, undoubtedly God will speak

to each of us individually, applying the book's truths to our particular situations and needs. But one of the book's main purposes is to help us *all* learn to trust in God's providential care over us, resulting in freedom from anxiety.

## IT'S NOT A HALLMARK MOVIE ROMANCE

If you've studied the book of Ruth before, perhaps you focused on the romance between Ruth and Boaz, the fidelity of Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi, or Naomi's bitterness redeemed. And those components deserve our attention, but they completely miss the main point of the book. The book of Ruth is no script for a Hallmark movie. Instead, the big idea of this book is God's tender care over women and their significant place in God's Big Story. Like a shepherd whose eye never leaves each individual sheep in his flock regardless of the challenges, God constantly protects his own—including the ewes.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The author of Ruth is unknown, but certainly whoever wrote this book experienced a deep look into the lives and emotions of the two main characters of the book—two women. The book was probably written during the reign of David or Solomon, when many women may have been asking, “Are the female sheep as valuable to God as the males? Does God truly care about women as much as men?”

I understand why women in Old Testament times might have asked that question since they lived in a society where women were second-class citizens, often bought and sold as property in arranged marriages, and financially helpless without a male provider. In these kinds of cultures, women yearn to know if God truly cares about them. Sadly, this “women are less than” attitude is still pervasive in some churches and cultures today, causing women to ask the same question. Does God truly care about women as much as men? This true story shouts a rip-roaring *yes!*

God is the hero of the book. He illustrates his providential care over Ruth and Naomi, evidenced by his guidance of their steps every day, even when situations looked bleak and hopeless. We can know through their lives that God truly leads and feeds women who love him, even when disasters strike, loved ones die, and the cupboard is bare. Not only does he protect and provide for them, but he also honors their fidelity and humility by preserving their story in his Word and by placing them, along with honorable men, in the lineage of the Messiah, the Son of God. Amazing!

Strap on your sandals and get ready to join me for a true faith-building adventure fraught with suspense, tragedy, excitement, and surprise.



# The Vale of Tears

## LESSON 1

I label the six years after I graduated college my “vale of tears.” The term *vale* comes from a Middle English word that means a valley or dale. The term symbolizes a down time when everything goes wrong. During those six years, my father lost a four-year battle with stomach cancer, my mother reacted with rage and rejection, a seven-year romantic relationship ended in heartbreak, I mourned over losing my college friends, and I hated my job. I still recall those six years as a time of deep sadness and extreme anxiety. Have you experienced a “vale of tears”? Living in a fallen, broken world means all of us will sometimes walk through these kinds of valleys.

What thoughts invade your mind in the vale? When we are in these valleys and lose control, we can easily feel helpless and hopeless. Our thoughts can spiral from one worst-case scenario to another. Do you find yourself overcome with anxious thoughts? Do you find yourself anxious that more pain and more dark days are ahead?

Do you easily jump to the conclusion that God doesn’t love you? Are you afraid these situations are the result of some sin in your life? Do you fear God is angry with you and he’s punishing you? Do you feel abandoned, as if God neither knows nor cares about your pain? Although these are common responses, they reflect the reality that we really don’t know God that well.

God preserved the book of Ruth to help us see deeply into his heart even in the saddest, most anxious times, to learn to trust him in the vale of tears, and to overcome fears that lead to an anxious lifestyle.

### Read Ruth 1:1.

1. The book begins by telling us that this true account took place “when the judges ruled” (1:1). To truly understand any biblical story, we must learn about the kinds of things that were going on during that time period (1375–1050 BC). Generally what can you glean from the passages in Judges below? (Judges is the book before Ruth.) How did people treat one another? Envision yourself living in that culture.

### OPTIONAL

Memorize Romans  
8:35, 37–39

Who shall separate us  
from the love of Christ?  
Shall trouble or hardship  
or persecution or famine  
or nakedness or danger or  
sword? . . . No, in all these  
things we are more than  
conquerors through him  
who loved us. For I am  
convinced that neither  
death nor life, neither  
angels nor demons,  
neither the present  
nor the future, nor any  
powers, neither height  
nor depth, nor anything  
else in all creation, will be  
able to separate us from  
the love of God that is in  
Christ Jesus our Lord.





Orthodox Jews read the book of Ruth annually at the Feast of Pentecost because the feast takes place during the harvest season that coincides with Ruth and Boaz's encounter and betrothal on the barley threshing floor. —Sue

Judges 2:10–13

19:22

21:23

21:25

2. How was the time of the judges similar to our “times” today?

3. The time when the judges ruled was a downward spiral of a series of cycles—rebellion, retribution, repentance, and restoration—that evolved into centuries of greater and greater chaos. How do you think this kind of chaos was likely to affect the lives of people living during those times? How much more often would these people experience a “vale of tears”? Why?



The vale of tears, also known as the valley of tears, is a phrase that refers to a Christian doctrine that teaches that life’s tribulations are a part of the human experience and won’t end completely until one leaves this world and enters into the eternal state. The phrase appears in the English translation of the German Lutheran hymn “Be Still, My Soul,” written in 1855, and comes from Psalm 84:6–7, where it says, “the Valley of Baka,” meaning “the valley of weeping.” —Sue



Read Ruth 1:2–5.

4. We find the names and identities of the main characters in verses 2–5. Describe them and their relationships to one another.

Elimelek

Naomi

Mahlon

Kilion

Orpah

Ruth

Elimelek packed up his family and traveled to Moab hoping to find work to support his wife and two sons. Moab is the historical name for a mountainous region in what is now Jordan. The trek would have taken an exhausting seven to ten days and required them to cross the river Jordan and navigate various kinds of terrain.

5. Naomi could easily have felt anxious when moving into Moabite territory where Israelites were unwelcome. Have you ever relocated to a new city or country that forced you to make various adjustments? If so, what emotions accompanied those adjustments? How long, if ever, did it take for you to feel completely at home?

The tribe of Moab originated as descendants of Lot and the sexual relations he shared with his two daughters (Gen. 19:30–38). Incestuous beginnings for the Moabite tribe resulted in bad blood between them and the Israelites.

—Marnie Legaspi (“Ruth: The So-Called Scandal,” 61)

6. Elimelek’s family were outsiders in Moab, and later in our story Ruth experienced being an outsider in Bethlehem. Have you ever felt like an “outsider”? Describe that experience below and consider sharing with the group.

#### **DIGGING DEEPER**

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For more insight into the origins of the Moabites, study Genesis 19:30–38. What do you learn about the beginning of this ancient tribe?

## DIGGING DEEPER

James 2:1–12 clearly instructs believers concerning how we are to treat people, even those different from us. Extract five key principles and consider how to live them out.



Should we interpret all the losses of Elimelek's family as God's judgment for failing to trust him when they moved to Moab? Scholars disagree, but Robert Chisholm Jr., chair and senior professor of Old Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary writes, "The tragic deaths of Elimelech and his sons should not be interpreted as acts of divine judgment because there is not enough evidence in the immediate context or in the broader context of the Old Testament to sustain such a theory. On the contrary, it would seem that their deaths, like the famine and their move to Moab, are incidental details that set the stage for the story to follow" (*A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 599). —Sue

During the families' ten-year stay in Moab, they experienced loss after loss.

7. Describe the first loss in 1:3. How would this loss have affected the family?

8. Have you ever walked in the shoes of a widow or walked with a widow through her grief? What are some of the emotions you've experienced or observed?

9. Naomi also became a single parent the day Elimelek died. Have you ever walked in the shoes of a single mother or walked with a single mother through her challenges? What emotions did you experience or observe?

10. How do you think losing their father might have affected Naomi's two sons?

Once widely dismissed by Christians as out-of-sorts, Naomi has been upgraded from a self-absorbed malcontent to the full stature of a female Job. Parallels between the two sufferers are . . . striking. . . Yet historically, we have wept with Job and criticized Naomi. No more, say Old Testament scholars. Now we will weep with Naomi too.

—Carolyn Custis James  
(*Gospel of Ruth*, 28)

11. What did the two sons do to deal with their new family situation (1:4)? Can you think of reasons why they might have taken this action? What were they hoping for?

12. Instead of their situation improving, things got worse. What losses darkened the lives of these women even more (1:5)?

#### DIGGING DEEPER

Some scholars label Naomi the Bible's female Job. Digest Job 1 and compare his circumstances with the situations Naomi and her two daughters-in-law encounter. How did Job initially respond? How did he respond later in his story as his trials increased (Job 6:1–4; 13:20–27; 23:1–7; 42:1–6)?



*A word to women who want children but are experiencing infertility and childlessness:*

The value of women living in biblical times was measured by their ability to conceive and give birth to children, particularly sons. As we go through this study together, I've attempted to show some of the reasons why fertility—whether crops, herds, or children—was such a high value in these cultures. Please don't allow these insights into ancient cultures to cause you to measure your worth that way, and know that God doesn't measure your worth that way either. I don't know why God allows some women and not others to give birth to children, just like we can't answer why Naomi's husband and two sons died, leaving her alone and helpless. I realize that nothing I can say here will erase the pain, but please don't allow that pain to discourage you from making this journey with Naomi and Ruth, and learning more about God as he providentially turned their mourning into dancing. In the meantime, my friend and former student Julie Shannon provides care and resources out of her own similar struggles. Find them at [www.drjulieshannon.com](http://www.drjulieshannon.com).  
—Sue

13. Have you or someone you love struggled with infertility? If you are comfortable, share the experience and what infertility probably meant for Ruth and Orpah.

14. What losses have you experienced in your life? What were your thoughts about God during these difficult times?

15. What helped you move through these losses? What did you learn?

16. What has Lesson 1 taught you about the realities of life? What are you hoping to learn as we continue in our adventure with Naomi and Ruth?



*The narrative finds itself right in the middle of the cyclical pattern of sin, suffering, supplication, and salvation found in Judges. But this story stands as a ray of light, showing the power of God's great loving-kindness (Hebrew chesed; Ruth 1:8) for His faithful people. The author gives the reader a snapshot perspective—focusing on one family in a small town—as opposed to the broader narrative found in Judges.*

CHARLES SWINDOLL (*Swindoll Study Bible*, 321)

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

—1 Peter 5:7

In five short verses, death wipes the men off the scene, leaving three grieving widows behind. In a male-centered culture that ascribed value to women based on their relationships to men, these husbandless, sonless women hold no interest to anyone. In many minds . . . the story is over. Nothing is left to tell. Yet ironically, this is where the narrative heats up as the biblical spotlight settles on Naomi and an all-female cast. Now the real story begins.

—Carolyn Custis James  
(*Gospel of Ruth*, 33)