



# ROOTED IN NEW LIFE

**GOOD-FAITH: THE WELL-SPRING OF NEW LIFE**  
*A BIBLE STUDY FROM THE BOOK OF RUTH*

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*TEACHING PLAN BY BETSY K. DUNBAR*

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GOOD-FAITH (*HESED*):  
THE WELL-SPRING OF NEW LIFE  
*A Bible Study from the Book of Ruth*

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Teaching Plan by Betsy K. Dunbar

**OBJECTIVES**

- Learn the meaning of the Hebrew word *hesed* and apply it to our faith experience.
- See God including the “outsiders” and using these persons to bring others closer to him.
- Explore how God brings about *new life* through creativity, courage and lovingkindness.
- Apply what we’ve learned to create *new life* in our church. How can we demonstrate *hesed*?

**SUPPLIES**

Bibles

Bread and spreads (your choice—a warm, freshly baked loaf with butter, or banana and pumpkin breads with cream cheese, or perhaps sliced bread with peanut butter and assorted jellies)

**BEFORE YOUR EVENT**

1. Ask participants to read the book of Ruth.
2. Write the words *hesed*, mercy and lovingkindness on newsprint, chalkboard or 8”x11” sheets of paper. Do the same on 3” x 5” cards.
3. Arrange for bread(s) and spread(s) to be served.
4. Study the biblical background information until you’re comfortable with it. Learn the definition of *hesed* so you’re confident in explaining it.

5. If possible, get a newsprint pad and markers from an office supply store to write down highlights of the group's discussion for all to see.

### **ICEBREAKER**

As members of your group arrive, greet them with bread and spreads. As your group eats, ask them to think about a time they have experienced mercy or lovingkindness. Invite those who wish to share their stories to do so briefly.

### **STUDY**

1. Introduce the Bible study by explaining that the bread is a clue to what you'll be exploring during this session. Much of the story takes place in Bethlehem (whose name means "house of bread") and centers around the heroine's experiences in the wheat fields.
2. Display the words *hesed*, mercy, and lovingkindness. Explain the meaning of the Hebrew word *hesed* (pronounced heh-SAYD).  
Discuss:
  1. How is God *hesed*?
  2. Do you agree with the statement, "Those with whom God has made covenant are expected to demonstrate *hesed*, as well"? What implications would it have on our personal or congregational witness if we demonstrated *hesed*?
3. Share with the group some of the introductory biblical background information that you found interesting. Then go through each of the four chapters of Ruth, asking the group to recount the plot of that chapter in their own words. For each chapter, discuss:
  - a. In this chapter, who exhibits *hesed*—lovingkindness?
  - b. How do they express *hesed*?
  - c. Why do they extend *hesed*?
  - d. How can we translate this expression of *hesed* into our modern culture? What would these examples of *hesed* look like in our personal and congregational daily life?

- e. Option: Courage is also displayed in these chapters. Ask the same questions, this time looking for examples of courage.
4. Discuss the role of the “outsider” in this story. How did the “outsider” (Ruth) help the “insider” (Naomi) regain her faith?

God doesn’t directly intervene in this story, yet God is ever present in the actions of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz. Where do you see examples of God’s presence?

In this story, the central characters choose their course of action over several options. The choice they make is to work together for the common good. Dr. Marshall says, “God’s will is accomplished through alliances and cooperation rather than violent competition. Often Christians have a crusader mentality that seeks to conquer the unbeliever with convincing arguments, forgetting that compassion and good faith are God’s means of grace.” What implications does this have for our congregation as we seek to bring *new life* to our community? What might we do to cooperate with those with whom we seek to share the gospel?

5. Take time to summarize the group’s ideas about *hesed*, courage (if you also took this option), and welcoming “outsiders.” Are there any ideas your group would like to implement? Are there other persons, groups or boards within the congregation with whom they could cooperate? What can we do to share *hesed*?
6. Closing Prayer. Read Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26. Read the first half of each verse, and ask your group to respond with the stanza, “Your lovingkindness endures forever.”

# BIBLE STUDY

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### *Hesed*

One of the most beloved stories in all of Scripture, the Book of Ruth, narrates the journey from despair to delight, from grief to gladness. Two resourceful women (and a helpful man) give witness to a merciful—some would say scandalous—providence through their persistence and creativity. Told from the point of view of women, it is more a story of cooperation than competition. War, blood-feuds, and familial treachery are absent in this account; rather, the life-giving power of *hesed* in community is celebrated.

*Hesed* is a weighty Hebrew word used to describe Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel (e.g., Exodus 34:6). It is sometimes translated as "mercy" or "lovingkindness," and is frequently used as a summary word in describing God's character, i.e., God is *hesed*. Those with whom God has made covenant are expected to demonstrate *hesed*, as well. Throughout this saga, Ruth functions as representative of good-faith<sup>1</sup>; her fidelity and love prompt others to live in like manner.

## THE BOOK OF RUTH

One of two biblical books named for a woman, Ruth has encouraged generations of the people of God, both in the Ancient Near Eastern world and today. Jews and Christians alike have gleaned hope for the future in their own periods of famine, poverty and desolation by hearing anew this lively tale of grace. It is a story of *new life*, joyous and unexpected.

## SETTING

The story is set in the time of the judges (hence its location in the biblical canon), yet it is free of the violent spirit manifested in the Book of Judges. It was most likely written at a later time, in the time of the early monarchy (c.11th–10th

century B.C.E.), or even in the post-exilic period (5th–4th centuries B.C.E.). If written in this later epoch, the story may have been circulated as rebuttal to Ezra and Nehemiah’s strict prohibition against marrying “foreign wives.”<sup>2</sup> The setting reflects a time when women’s influence in the kinship-based society is significant, and they are honored for their creative engagement of patriarchal strictures. Later as Israel’s political fortunes ascend, women’s influence is less pronounced in the public sphere.

There is an implicit division of the domains of the genders in Ruth, however; the women work in the home and the fields while the men oversee the business of harvesting and civil concerns in the city gate (4:1). Clearly, the initiative of women is celebrated in this text and stands as witness to God’s faithfulness to those who act with persistent courage. As the liberation theologians would say, God’s “preferential option for the poor” is dramatically displayed through provision for the widow and stranger.

In a sense, the story of Ruth gives the foreground to the story of David the King. Remarkably, this foreign woman, repeatedly referred to as a Moabite, is identified as an integral member of this notable king’s ancestry. Although not mentioned again in the Hebrew Scriptures, Ruth is one of several women caught in unusual circumstances who are named in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Mt. 1:6). Her inclusion declares that God desires that all nations be blessed and that Christ is messiah for all.

The story moves between two locations: Bethlehem and Moab. Bethlehem, literally “house of bread,” was known as a significant grain-producing area for Judah, in the southern portion of Palestine. Moab lay across the Jordan River, to the east of the Dead Sea. Though these regions are not far apart in distance, the rugged terrain had to be covered on foot, which made the journey arduous. A far greater distance to be traversed was the cultural distance between Israel and Moab.

From the Israelite perspective, Moab was a God-forsaken place and the Moabites were an undesirable lot. Israel believed that the Moabites descended from the incestuous

union of Lot and his daughter (Gen.19:37), after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Another encounter with Moabite women, when Israel was on the verge of entering the land of promise (Num. 25), had disastrous consequences. The men of Israel not only “whored after” them, but also made sacrifices to the god, Baal Peor.

In this story, however, the Moabite becomes the symbol of God’s *hesed*. Indeed, Ruth is characterized as more faithful than members of God’s own covenant people by following the law and risking her life for the security of her mother-in-law, Naomi.

## **PLOT**

This book is surprisingly brief, only four chapters, but a literary gem. Its use of geographical imagery, characterization, and word play is winsome. For example, Naomi, which means “pleasantness” calls herself “bitter”(Mara); she who had known fullness returned empty, only to be filled once again. With only three primary characters, the stage is set for a story that challenges many of the prevailing prejudices that hinder God’s expansive embrace of all people.

### *Departing the Land of Death .....Ruth 1:1-19*

Naomi and her family, Elimelech her husband, and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, journeyed to Moab to escape the famine of their home in Bethlehem. Tragedy upon tragedy strikes this family in their years as sojourners away from home. First Naomi is widowed, then the daughters by marriage, Orpah and Ruth. Some interpreters have suggested that the death of the three men was God’s judgment upon Elimelech for departing Israel, and upon the sons for marrying foreign wives. But such an interpretation runs counter to the generous theme of inclusion the text holds forth. Nevertheless, their deaths are tragic, with a lack of completion. Elimelech, whose name means “my-God-is-king” dies in a land where his God is not worshiped. And the sons die

without children, hence their lives made no contribution to the future generations.

What options did a widow have? Naomi only has one option: to return to her own people and find solace and assistance there. She had heard in the fields that God was providing food for those in Judah. What about Orpah and Ruth? The younger widows could hope for re-marriage, returning to their “mothers’ houses” (1:8), or keep their kinship with Naomi and journey with her. At first they both choose to go with her, but Orpah responds to Naomi’s strong argument about the futility of remaining with her, and returns to her people (1:14). Often Orpah is treated less than favorably, as somehow less brave or devoted to Naomi. Actually, her decision most likely served her mother-in-law’s interests as much as her own. It would be easier to find one husband rather than two!

Naomi strongly urges Ruth to do the same, believing it to be a wiser course of action for a young woman of marriageable age to return home to find a suitable husband. Perhaps Naomi is seeking to untangle the intermarriage with Moabites once and for all. Ruth answers her insistence with even stronger resolve. In some of the most beautiful and memorable words to be found in Scripture, Ruth states her intention:

*Don't press me to leave you,  
to turn back from (following) after you.  
For where you go, I will go.  
And where you stay-the-night,  
I will stay.  
Your people (is) my people,  
and your God, my God.<sup>3</sup>*

This particular translation demonstrates the depth of the younger woman’s commitment, most likely at this point to Naomi herself rather than to the God of Israel. Yet, Ruth’s determination becomes the vehicle for God’s *hesed* to replenish Naomi’s emptiness (1:21). So they journeyed on to Bethlehem.

*Returning to the House of Bread .....Ruth 1:19-2:23*

When the two arrive, there is a flurry of activity as the women of the city try to ascertain who is in their midst. Naomi has been away for many years, perhaps two decades. In her great sorrow, she brushes aside their inquiries and pours out her grief: "The Lord has pronounced against me; the Almighty has brought disaster on me" (1:21).

The first chapter ends cryptically, summarizing how it was that they—a bitter older woman and a stranger accompanying her—returned to Bethlehem. Yet, there is a note of hope: the barley harvest is just beginning (1:22).

The third principal figure now comes into view. The reader is introduced to a kinsman of Elimelech, named Boaz, described as a "man of substance" (2:1). Later we will see that this does not simply refer to his wealth, but also to his character. Evidence of this is the gracious exchange he offers to the reapers he has hired. "The Lord be with you" (2:4) is hardly the greeting a day worker might expect from the boss!

Ruth determines that if she and Naomi are going to survive, she had best get busy during the grain harvest. Naomi agrees that this is a prudent plan, and grants her permission to glean. Students of the Bible are familiar with the Hebrew law concerning the right of the poor to pick up the grain left in the fields after the reapers had finished (Lev. 19:9-10).

By chance (or providence) Ruth begins her gleaning in the fields of Boaz who happens to notice her presence. He inquires about her and learns that she has journeyed from Moab with his kinswoman. He also notices her industry, her desire to provide for Naomi. He then acts with unexpected generosity and suggests that Ruth need not go to any other field to glean; further, he instructs the men of the field to leave her alone. Evidently an unaccompanied foreign woman was fair game for the workers.

Ruth is amazed at his kindness and asks why he has taken special notice of her. His response lets her know that not only has he inquired about her identity, but he is greatly impressed at her courage. Her "good-faith" was becoming apparent to

the whole community. Hence, he offers a blessing: "...may the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, give you all that you deserve" (2:12). At this point he does not yet perceive that he might provide those wings of refuge himself. Then Boaz does something quite unusual in that male-dominated world; he invites her to eat with him and even serves her.

Gleaning grows even easier for Ruth since Boaz instructs the reapers to leave plenty for her (2:16). Her day's work, an *ephah* of grain, was enough to sustain her household for several weeks. Seeing the bounty, her mother-in-law is overcome with wonder and gratitude, and she asks for a full report. Her emptiness is ebbing as Ruth reconnects her with her kinsman. Her trust in God's faithfulness is also being restored as Ruth continues to provide their living; she feels herself blessed rather than cursed.

*Finding New Alliances.....Ruth 3:1-18*

Naomi's own healing is evident as she begins to concern herself more with Ruth's well-being. She wants to see her "happily settled," so she hatches a plan that will compel Boaz to live up to his role as "Redeemer." She instructs Ruth to anoint herself and put on her finest dress and go to the threshing floor after the evening meal. There she would find Boaz, relaxed and ready for sleep. Ruth followed Naomi's instructions precisely, locating Boaz and lying down at his feet. There she waited; Naomi said Boaz would tell her what to do.

Interpreters have struggled to understand all that this scene contains. Clearly Ruth's action was a sexually suggestive act, but it was more. It was a direct challenge for Boaz to act as next-of-kin, a role that carried certain familial obligations: restoring the property which an impoverished relative had lost and marrying the widow of a relative without male offspring. When Boaz awoke, startled to find "a woman" lying at his feet, he asks "Who are you?" "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Now spread your 'wing' over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer" (3:9).

The response of Boaz is remarkable. He blesses her for her forthright action and for this further expression of *hesed*. He is somewhat amazed at his good fortune; she has sought him out rather than a younger man. And he trusts that what Naomi and Ruth have planned is God's work in their midst. His response to Ruth is the same as her response to Naomi: "Everything that you say, I will do for you" (3:5, 11).

Boaz assures her that he will take care of things properly. As a token of his good-faith, he sends her home with six measures of barley (a substantial load!). Naomi is greatly reassured about the outcome of her plan and encourages Ruth that all will be well.

### *Creating New Life .....Ruth 4:1-22*

The next scene is a hastily called assembly at the city gate, where public transactions take place. Boaz has learned that there is one relative closer than himself, thus he must make sure that he is willing to forego his responsibility. Interestingly, this man's real name is never mentioned, thereby making sure he has no further claim or interest in land or possible heirs. Because of his self-protective impulse, he gladly relinquishes "next-of-kin" duties. Boaz receives what he desires, and the elders bear witness that all has been justly done. They bless the new family, Boaz, Ruth and Naomi, as well as the memory of Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion. Boaz and Ruth are free to marry.

The story ends with Ruth bearing a son, whose arrival the whole community celebrates. The women of the town recognize that God has restored a family line to Naomi through Ruth's *hesed*. "She has proved better than seven sons," they exclaim. Naomi's barren life has been redeemed, for even her lap is now full! Obed, the child, is God's provision of new life. In a wonderful literary conclusion, the final verses of Ruth provide the genealogy of the yet-to-be-born king of Israel, David. What had seemed the end of life now extends into the future, with glad hope.

## THE PROMISE OF NEW LIFE

The supernatural is rarely mentioned in this text. Rather it is the story of two women taking their destiny into their own hands and finding God's providence hidden in their actions. What they have in their power to devise and to do is the means by which God provides for them a future with hope. Thus, we can suggest, along with other interpreters, that God functions more by implication than by dramatic intervention.<sup>4</sup> Yet God is ever present in the actions of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz. This is helpful instruction for us today. We act with the best discernment possible and trust that God is present in our choices and actions. People of God have the vocation of living out God's providence, thus inviting belief in God's *hesed*.

A central theme of this book is God's expansive love: A person outside Israel is included and made the instrument of God's care. Christians today must be receptive to the "strangers" in our midst; though they may not confess Christ yet, they may be instruments of God's blessing and purpose. We may serve Christ best by not drawing the lines too firmly between insiders and outsiders. Our willingness to cross cultural barriers may be the avenue to *new life*. God's Spirit is at work in all the nations of the world, drawing persons to hope and trust in the living God.

God's will is accomplished through alliances and cooperation rather than violent competition. Often Christians have a crusader mentality that seeks to conquer the unbeliever with convincing arguments, forgetting that compassion and good-faith are God's means of grace. Further, God desires the collaboration of women and men, not oppositional contests that demean or diminish effectiveness. Men and women together receive God's invitation to be partners in the mending of creation; it will occur best when all participate.

God's desire is ever to make all things new. The means of accomplishing this are persistent, creative people. God chooses to work through common people who perceive God's power and blessing in all of life. Human resourcefulness may seem a humble route for God's purposes to follow, yet God's

great yearning for *new life* welcomes this kind of participation.

Death and frustrated hope are not the final word with God. Because of God's *hesed*, disclosed through the good-faith of God's followers, *new life* can spring forth. Thanks be to God, whose *hesed* endures forever.<sup>5</sup>

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This translation is by Ellen F. Davis, *Who Are You, My Daughter? Reading Ruth through Image and Text* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>2</sup>See introductory matters in the fine new commentary by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup>Again I am following the translation of Ellen F. Davis, *Who Are You, My Daughter? Reading Ruth through Image and Text*, 26.

<sup>4</sup>Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, Anchor Bible 7 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 28-29.

<sup>5</sup>Psalm 136:1.

## **NEW LIFE 2010 RESOURCES**

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