

# Where is God in all this?

## 21 June - Ruth

**Refined by suffering:** How we can learn positive lessons from hard times

*Notes and discussion questions for home groups or personal study – Brian Bull*

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### Readings

Ruth 1:8-19a

James 1:1-12

Luke 9:57-62

### Key verses

"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial..."

"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

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### Background

The story of Ruth and Naomi is set in the time of the Judges. Israel is surrounded by enemies and often under attack, but at this point in their history the main problem is famine. So Elimelech takes his family from their home in Bethlehem to the land of Moab, where the famine was presumably less severe.

While living as strangers in Moab, Elimelech and Naomi's two sons get married. But then disaster strikes. Naomi's two sons both die, and so does her husband. Naomi is left a widow, alone, with no family to provide her with a home, an income, or a future inheritance. She is effectively destitute.

There is no reason for her to stay in Moab, so she decides to return to Bethlehem. Her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, set off with her, but Naomi wants to be left alone, with her own grief. She persuades Orpah to return to her family, but Ruth refuses to turn back and insists on going with her. Ruth's declaration of love and support for Naomi is beautiful and inspirational, and becomes the key to restoring Naomi's life and purpose, and giving her new hope and a future.

- Ruth chose to remain with Naomi. If you could choose one person to self-isolate with (or maybe safer to ask you to choose one Bible character to self-isolate with!) who would you choose and why?
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## Alone Together

Read **Ruth 1:8-19a**

Both Ruth and Naomi choose to be alone, for different reasons.

Naomi, because of her grief, is bitter against God, and tries to send Ruth and Orpah away so she can isolate herself from company (not an unusual reaction to grief and trauma). When they arrive back in Bethlehem, Naomi shuts herself away, and sends Ruth out to glean in the fields, even though as a young foreign woman she is putting her at serious risk.

Ruth willingly leaves behind her own home, family and way of life out of pure love for her mother-in-law. Even though Naomi is bitter, grouchy, probably not easy to live with for the moment, she insists on staying with her through her grief and is 100% committed to getting her through the other side. When Naomi sends Ruth out to glean in the fields she does as she is asked, despite being unfamiliar with the local way of life and unable to look out for herself. God provides Boaz to protect her, and in the end this leads to Ruth and Naomi's eventual redemption and restoration.

- How does Ruth and Naomi's experience of being alone together match your own experience during lockdown?
  - What have you learned about one another through this forced period of isolation?
  - If you're alone, what have you learned about yourself?
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### Faithful Loving Kindness

At the beginning, of course, neither Ruth nor Naomi know of God's purposes for them. But Boaz has already noted Ruth's love and kindness towards her mother-in-law. Boaz says to Ruth:

*"I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband--how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." (Ruth 2:11-12)*

There is a very special Hebrew word that is most often used to express God's love for his people. The word is *chesed*. (The *ch* at the beginning is pronounced like the *ch* in Scottish words such as *loch*.) It can be difficult to capture the complete meaning, but it is variously translated as "loving kindness", "faithful love", "covenant love". The word is used three times in the book of Ruth, twice referring to God's love, the third time by Boaz when he describes the love that Ruth has shown for himself and previously for Naomi:

*"The LORD bless you, my daughter," he (Boaz) replied. "This chesed (the loving kindness you have shown to me) is greater than that which you showed earlier (to Naomi): You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor."* (Ruth 3:10)

The word corresponds very well to the New Testament concept of "grace" – unfailing love that is undeserved but freely given, utterly dependable, never-ending.

- In what ways does Ruth's love for Naomi, and subsequently for Boaz, reflect the character of God's love? (Look back again at Ruth 1:16-17)
- How can being alone together help us to develop this kind of love in our own relationships?

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## We love God because he first loved us

The Hebrew *chesed*, "unfailing love". primarily describes the love that God has for his people. At the beginning of the story concerning King David and Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9) David asks Saul's household servant,

*"Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show God's chesed?"* (2 Samuel 9:3)

This is the kind of love that comes from God's heart, not from ours. This is *agape*, not *eros*. We can only love like this if we have God's love within us, and that comes through the work of the Spirit in our lives. The closer we follow Jesus, the more we experience his love and fellowship, the more we will reflect the character of Jesus to the world around us.

Ruth is an example to all of us precisely because the kind of love she shows to Naomi is the kind of self-sacrificing, totally unconditional love that Jesus shows to us. By modelling Ruth's love for Naomi, we are modelling God's love for us in Christ.

## Love perseveres

Keeping up our relationship with God and developing those fruits of the Spirit may be more difficult, or at least different, in our current situation.

### Read James 1:1-12

James encourages us to persevere when things get difficult.

- What does James say are the benefits of persevering in trials and difficulties?
- What does God promise will be our reward?
- How can we help and encourage one another to continue and persevere during lockdown?

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## Witnessing within our locked down community

Celia's uncle, who had been a staunch atheist all his life, finally gave his life to Christ at the age of 85. He confessed that our witness had been instrumental in his conversion, not by anything we did or said, but because we "were always faithful and consistent, and practiced what we believed."

This is not to boast, but to emphasise that consistency and faithfulness is a powerful testimony, especially when things get tough.

- Are we faithful and consistent in our message?... in our actions?
- Are we presenting a consistent and faithful witness within the community?
- Are we committed, as Ruth was, to stay the course whatever the problems and obstacles that we might face along the way?

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## Final thought

Pray that God will help us develop the kind of love that reflects his faithful love to us, and show that love in our relationships and our witness.

At the same we need to remember that while God requires us to be faithful, he is also ready to forgive us and to restore us when we fail (1 John 1:9). Our salvation depends on *His* faithfulness. Thank God for the love that took Jesus to the cross. Praise God that His love endures forever.

