

Study Guide
Series: Lessons From the Wilderness
“Through the Valley of the Shadow”

Monday - Ruth 1:1-5. A severe famine in Israel sent Naomi and her family to live in the foreign land of Moab. In Moab, her husband and both sons died. That left Naomi and her daughters-in-law alone. That would be an overwhelming kind of loss today. But in a male-dominated Middle Eastern culture, it was even worse. Women, with no male relative to give them a “family” identity, also lost all legal rights and standing. The Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary notes, “Naomi was a widow, and after the deaths of her two sons, we may infer that she is stripped of all male protection except reliance on Yahweh.” A widow in Bible times had, in our modern phrase, “hit bottom.” When was the time when you felt closest to having hit bottom? How did that time affect your trust in God? On a map, Moab looks close to Bethlehem, but in Bible times, Moab was several days journey on foot. Moving meant cutting ties with home. Have you ever moved far from home? How did you deal with the losses and changes a move like that brings?

Tuesday - Ruth 1:6-18. After the famine in Israel ended, Naomi decided to return home. Though her daughters-in-law set out with her, she argued that they would be better off, and more likely to find new husbands, in Moab. She convinced one of them, but Ruth insisted that she was going to stay with Naomi no matter what. Ruth’s choice grew from her love and loyalty to Naomi, but it also had a larger meaning. “Naomi said, ‘Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and TO HER GODS. Turn back’. Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and YOUR GOD WILL BE MY GOD’. Who were there “Naomis” in your life—people who influenced you to make their God your God? Ruth did something else that most of us struggle with: she chose the unfamiliar over the familiar. She left all that she had known behind and stepped into an unknown future. Have you ever had to leave something familiar behind in order to follow God’s leading? How did taking that step affect your relationship with God?

Wednesday - Ruth 1:19-2:23, Deuteronomy 24:17-22. Naomi’s awful losses left her outwardly vulnerable, with few practical or legal resources. They also left her spiritually vulnerable. In Ruth 1:13 she said “the Lord’s will has come out against me.” In Bethlehem, she told those who knew her, “Don’t call me Naomi (‘pleasant’), but call me Mara (‘bitter’)” (Ruth 1:20). When Boaz, a kinsman, was kind to Ruth, hope began to revive in both women. In verse 12, the pivot point of chapter 2, we find Boaz’s words to Ruth: “May the Lord reward you for your deed [everything you did for your mother-in-law after your husband’s death]. May you receive a rich reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you’ve come to seek refuge.” What life experiences have helped you learn to trust God the way a baby bird trusts in the shelter of its mother’s wings? Ruth was an immigrant from a people Israel often despised, yet she was welcomed, cared for, and was to play a key role in Israel’s history. Do you believe the way Boaz (and God) treated Ruth is relevant to the debates in our country about the proper attitude toward immigrants? Why or why not?

Thursday - Ruth 3:1-18. The culture and customs of early Israel sound strange and puzzling to us. But the gist of this story was that Ruth and Naomi knew they needed God to provide for their future. Yet, while trusting God, they didn't just wait passively for their luck to change, but actively pursued Boaz's favor. And as things turned out, God used Boaz's favor and love to provide for Ruth and Naomi's future. The Bible called God's people to wait and trust in the Lord (Proverbs 3:5-7), but also to "work out your own salvation" (Philippians 2:12-13). At times, we need to wait and trust God; at others to be proactive and accountable, doing what we can. How did Naomi and Ruth's actions open doors for God to work on their behalf? In what parts of your life do you need to embrace the call to wait and trust in the Lord? What are the areas in which you can actively take initiatives through which God may work?

Friday - Ruth 4:1-12. Again, the book of Ruth assumed readers knew the customs and laws, but we aren't likely to. For example, we don't close car deals or home sale contracts by removing a shoe! According to Israel's laws, Boaz was second in line to be Ruth's "redeemer. Boaz shrewdly negotiated with the relative who was first in line, and happily won the right to marry Ruth. The kinsman first in line was eager to buy Naomi's property when he thought he would profit from doing so. When Boaz told him that the purpose was to marry Ruth and create a new heir, he quickly backed away. But Boaz wasn't in this for financial profit—he wanted to bless Ruth and Naomi. Have you ever been willing to give up your own comfort or enrichment in order to bless someone else? Has anyone else ever done that for you? In what ways have you learned to understand and value God's steadfast love for you? How has that love shaped the ways you act in your human relationships?

Saturday - Ruth 4:13-22, Matthew 1:5-6. What Naomi could see was that God had watched over her even when her life hit bottom, and through Ruth and Boaz given her a grandson to carry on the family line. What the writer of the book of Ruth could see in that story of human love and divine faithfulness was that God had provided for Israel's greatest king. Matthew, with a longer view, could trace how the story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz led all the way to the birth of Jesus, Israel's long-awaited Messiah and the world's redeemer. Are there moments in your life in which, looking back, you can see that God was up to more than you could perceive at the time? How do stories like Naomi and Ruth's encourage you at the moments when you cannot see what God is up to?