

RUTH

loyal love

Then the women said to Naomi,
“Blessed be the LORD,
who has not left you this day without a redeemer,
and may His name be renowned in Israel!”

Ruth 4:14

ISRAEL, THE JUDGES, AND LOYALTY

Background to the book of Ruth

The book of Ruth is famous as a beautiful love story. Who can resist the idea of a wealthy man asking a poor yet charming young girl to be his wife, lifting her from a life of poverty to a place of honor? In reality, this is not really the picture the book of Ruth portrays at all. In a striking contrast to the book of Judges which it accompanies, the book of Ruth gives us one faint glimmer of light in a dark and forgettable period of Jewish history.

THE NATION OF ISRAEL

God's chosen people, the Israelites, had enjoyed the blessings of the Promised Land for several generations. After their charismatic leader and founding father, Moses, led them to the brink of the land of Canaan, God ordained Joshua, a mighty military commander, to oversee the conquest. And Joshua did just that, smashing into the middle of the confederation of Canaanite city-states, breaking the back of their anti-Israelite coalition. Following the supernatural defeat of Jericho, Joshua led the new generation to a grinding series of key tactical conquests to the north and then to the south. The overwhelming Canaanite alliances broken, Joshua divided the land among the tribes, allotting to each tribe and clan specific areas to subjugate completely and occupy. On this high note, the book of Joshua closes.

THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES

The book of Judges opens with the bad news that the Israelites miserably failed to complete their responsibilities. Over and over we see the phrase of defeat, "they failed to drive out" the enemies. The nation of Israel, without national cohesion and in perpetual defeat, devolved into anarchy and apostasy (Judg 2:11–15). They had no national leader and fell prey to the temptation of idolatry surrounding them. It was a period when there was no king and "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21:25). God punished his unfaithful people by abandoning them to the marauding nations around them. Instead of subjugating the nations, Israel became a slave to them.

GOD'S LOYALTY TO HIS PEOPLE

Yet God was not unfaithful to his people. In response to their repentance and prayers for deliverance, he raised up judges to lead them to victory over their enemies. These judges (we would probably call them "generals") were local military leaders whom God raised up to lead the Israelites against a specific enemy. They were not dynastic leaders; in other words, their sons did not reign after them, so their leadership was limited to their lifespan. Unfortunately, this meant the cycle of apostasy and oppression began again, each time spiraling further and further into sin and away from God. The book of Judges is a terribly negative book, with even the victories tempered by the

personal failures of the judges and the unfaithfulness of the Israelites. And as soon as the leader passes off the scene, the nation falls into idolatry again.

The book of Ruth is set in this time period, as the first verse says: "In the days when the judges ruled. . . ." Set in a time of Israel's unfaithfulness and disloyalty, the unchangingly faithful character of God shines all the more brilliantly. The main character of the book of Ruth is God himself, and the book shows God's loyalty to Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, Elimelech, and the entire nation of Israel!

LOYAL LOVE IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

The book of Ruth is about loyalty or "kindness." In this short book, we see the main characters showing loyalty (or a lack of it). Carefully read the book of Ruth straight through, then in each of the passages listed below, write down who was showing (or not) loyalty to whom.

Ruth 1:1–5 _____ **did not show loyalty to** _____.

Ruth 1:6–22 _____ **showed loyalty to** _____.

Ruth 2:1–23 _____ **showed loyalty to** _____.

Ruth 3:1–6 _____ **showed loyalty to** _____.

Ruth 3:7–18 _____ **showed loyalty to** _____.

Ruth 4:1–6 _____ **showed loyalty to** _____.

Ruth 4:7–12 _____ **did not show loyalty to** _____.

Ruth 4:13–22 _____ **showed loyalty to** _____.

ELIMELECH IS DISLOYAL TO GOD

Ruth 1:1–5

The book of Ruth opens with a reminder that this story took place during the period of the judges, and unfortunately, the story begins with the kind of unfaithfulness that characterized that time of Israel's history. An Israelite man named Elimelech, a man of the tribe of Judah, enjoyed an inheritance in the Promised Land in the city of Bethlehem and a name that meant "God is my king." Here was a man who had enjoyed the blessings of God's faithfulness on many levels. God had given him a wife and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion.

A DROUGHT IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL (VV. 1–2)

Apparently, even with all of God's good gifts to Elimelech, that loyalty was not returned. When faced with a shortage of food in Bethlehem, Elimelech resorted to his own schemes to "fix" the difficulty. God had promised the Israelites as they entered the Promised Land that he would provide them with rain for their crops as long as they obeyed him. However, if they disobeyed and were unfaithful to God's covenant, he would withhold the rain and they would suffer the famine (cf. Deut 11:8–17).

Elimelech's actions in response to the famine demonstrate that he was part of problem, not part of the solution. Instead of realizing that the famine was a punishment from God for the nation's unfaithfulness, Elimelech hoped to avoid the consequences of God's judgment by relocating his family to the land of Moab, sworn enemies of God and of Israel. While Elimelech surely thought this move would be a temporary fix to his hardships, his lack of faithfulness reaped a harvest of pain for his family. He went to Moab to "sojourn," but he ended up "remaining" there.

A DROUGHT IN THE FAMILY OF ELIMELECH (VV. 3–5)

While in Moab, Elimelech died, leaving his wife a widow and his two sons without a father. Furthermore, his sons continued in the tradition of disloyalty to God and His covenant with Israel by marrying Moabite women, something forbidden by God's law (Deut 23:2–6). Another ten years passed, and both of the sons also died, leaving Naomi alone. Women of the ancient world had support and security through their husband and sons. In Judah, Naomi could have found support in her husband's extended family, but in Moab she was truly alone.

As we see later, Naomi was not even willing to accept responsibility for her own disloyalty to God, in fact blaming him for her plight. She told others to call her Mara ("bitter") instead of Naomi ("pleasant") because "the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me" (1:20). Reading these first verses of Ruth, we get a feeling of *déjà vu*, thinking this is the same disloyalty we see throughout the book of Judges.

Key verse: *“In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons” (Ruth 1:1).*

In what ways am I disloyal to God by my disobedience to his clearly stated will? How should I respond to this realization?

What hope do I have of God’s favor when I am disloyal to him? (Explain the gospel in terms of loyal love/faithfulness and disloyalty/unfaithfulness.)

Do I think I can avoid punishment by “getting around” God’s promises? How do I attempt to skirt God’s commands?

Am I thankful for God’s blessings even in difficult times? How would my family answer that question about me? My church family?