Background

The book of Ruth opens by telling us that the story took place during the time of the Judges. This tells us that the book was written after the time of the Judges, probably after King David was anointed, since he is mentioned at the end of the book. It also tells us that the story took place during one of Israel's darkest times—a time of war, famine, treachery, idolatry, and as Judges 21:25 sums up the era, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Some scholars say that Ruth lived during the judgeship of Gideon because the famine that is mentioned (Judges 6:3, 4) could be the one mentioned in Ruth 1:1; however, famines were common in those days. Matthew 1:6 lists Rahab (Joshua 2) as the mother of Boaz. This would seem to argue for an earlier date for the story of Ruth, unless several generations are assumed but not listed between Rahab and David in Matthew's genealogy, as some scholars feel. However, if we work backward in the genealogy from David to Ruth, the dates on the timeline are a good estimate.

Lesson One

When you're at the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on! Remember that God is faithful and remains with us, even when we suffer.

Read chapter 1
We find Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah at the end of their ropes. They are all widows, which at this time in history meant no source of income, and no protection. There was no social security, food banks, welfare, etc.

Why does Naomi think she is in her present predicament (1:13)?

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt that God was personally responsible for your suffering?

These are examples of times when God has initiated suffering. There are also some examples in the Bible when people have been allowed to suffer for a while so that God's plan could be accomplished. We will see in a later lesson that this is indeed the reason that Naomi is being allowed to suffer.

Can you think of a time when you suffered for a while and yet much later discovered that wonderful things had happened in great measure due to the suffering you had endured?

However, there are also times when there is no plan, no reason, no one to blame. Sometimes people suffer just because we live in an imperfect world. Ever since the fall of man, when sin entered the picture, the world has been an imperfect place to live with hardship, suffering, and illness.
Back to our story: Even in great affliction, Ruth and Naomi remain faithful to God, and He remains faithful to them. What hints in Ruth chapter 1 would confirm this?

Naomi encourages Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers' homes, but Ruth will not be persuaded to stay in Moab. Her loyalty and unswerving devotion are to Naomi and Jehovah God. Now the two remaining women are traveling alone towards an uncertain future.

Why did Naomi encourage the women to return to their homes (1:11-13)?

Naomi was talking about the custom of widows marrying their brothers-in-law or the next of kin, referred to as the levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). More on this later!

Where do Ruth and Naomi travel to and why (1:2, 1:22)?

What is the significance of this place (Micah 5:2)?

Naomi returns to Bethlehem after a 10-year absence. Her return causes quite a stir, indicating that Naomi's family was well known.
Also becoming evident is Ruth's devotion to something and Someone greater than her earthly family in Moab. In the middle of chapter one (vv. 16-17), we find one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible. Comment on these verses.

Lesson Two

Ruth and Naomi: An example for the ages in faith, love, and friendship.

Read chapter 2

Some commentators have suggested that Naomi really did not want Ruth and Orpah to return with her because she would be embarrassed to return with her two foreign daughters-in-law. It's hard to believe that this could be the case considering the obvious affection she feels towards Ruth and Orpah as well as the hazardous journey she was about to undertake as a widow of some advanced age. More likely, as some commentators suggest, she knew that the journey would be difficult, and that once they arrived in Bethlehem, the girls would probably not be readily accepted by the residents, not to mention the poverty that undoubtedly awaited them. In other words, she didn't want to place any further hardships on them. She knew that their life would be easier in Moab and that they would more easily find husbands there. She loved them and was seeking the best for them, so, in essence, she was telling them to "count the cost" if they decided to make the journey.

Discuss what types of sacrifices Ruth made in order to stay with Naomi and to follow God.
Just as Ruth and Naomi's trip was long and hazardous, Jesus also tells us that we should "count the cost" of being His as we make our journey through life. Read Luke 14:26-33. What is the cost of being a follower of Christ?

We will discuss next lesson how Ruth was rewarded for her leap of faith.

The relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law has given comics throughout history enough material to fill several hundred joke books, but Ruth and Naomi do not fit that comedic mold. Let's explore the special relationship between Ruth and Naomi and see what we can learn from them. In order for us to understand their relationship, a little background information is necessary. Ruth, as we know, was a Moabitess from the country of Moab. Moab was a pagan nation to the east of the Dead Sea and often an enemy of Israel. The people of Moab were the descendants of the incestuous relationship between Lot and one of his daughters after they fled Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 19:30-36). The people of Moab worshiped the god Chemosh and practiced child sacrifice.

As Naomi held her two sons as babies and pictured whom they would one day marry, she probably did not picture Ruth. Putting yourself in Naomi's place, what do you think her first reaction was to Ruth as a prospective daughter-in-law?

What evidence do we find in the scriptures that Ruth and Naomi did have a good relationship?
Ruth and Naomi show love toward each other even in the very worst of times (1:8-10, 16-17). What does Jesus have to say about the effect of love in a relationship (John 13:34-35)?

Although the Bible does not specify, it would be difficult to comprehend Ruth becoming a follower of the one true God and leaving everything that she had known in Moab if she had not seen something special in Naomi, and possibly her husband, that would persuade her to leave the teachings that she had grown up with.

In what practical ways could you be a "picture of love" to your daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, children, spouse, etc.?

Naomi also plays the role of mentor and teacher for Ruth. What evidence do you find in the story that shows this aspect of their relationship?

Like Naomi, we are also encouraged to be mentors and teachers for younger women. Read Titus 2:3-5. What is the responsibility of older women? Of younger women?

Is there a specific age at which someone becomes an "older" woman?

How could an 18-year-old woman be an "older" woman example for a 15-year-old girl?
No matter what age we are, we can have a positive impact on women that we come in contact with!

As we return to Ruth's story, keep in mind that in biblical times, there were very few occupations for women. Marriage was generally considered the only "safe" occupation for a woman. This presented a problem for Naomi and Ruth as they returned home to Bethlehem. It appears from the text that Naomi's husband, Elimelech, had probably mortgaged their farm before they left. Naomi and Ruth faced certain poverty and possible starvation when they returned.

What did Ruth find to do as a job to provide for her and Naomi?

In Leviticus 23:22 and Deuteronomy 24:19, how does God instruct Jewish farmers to make provision for the widows and the fatherless?

From Boaz's comments and Ruth's actions in Ruth 2, what do we learn about Ruth's character?

The word was out! The newcomer--the foreigner--was making an impression on her new neighbors. Ruth's good character was easing her into her new surroundings. Do we experience this same phenomenon today? What lessons can we learn from Ruth when we are entering a new, unfamiliar environment?
What instructions did Boaz give the men working in his field concerning Ruth?

Ruth worked until evening and at the end of the day, she had an ephah of grain, which is probably equivalent to about 3/5 of a bushel. After showing Naomi the grain, what did Ruth do with the leftovers from her meal with Boaz and his workers (vv. 14, 18)?

Ruth's workday was long and hard, but at the end of the day, she and Naomi were sustained, thanks to God's care and Boaz's generosity.

We have seen a very special relationship between two women who were helping one another in very difficult circumstances. May we learn how to incorporate their love and faithfulness into our own relationships!

**Lesson Three**

**Ruth and Boaz: "A match made in Heaven"**

**Read chapter 3**

Ruth first comes into contact with Boaz shortly after arriving in Bethlehem. We read in 2:3, "As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech." We see God's hand at work right away, guiding Ruth to the very place she needs to be.
When has God placed you in the exact place you needed to be for His purposes to be fulfilled?

A little background information about Boaz would be helpful to our study at this time. Boaz has an interesting heritage: He is from the tribe of Judah, and listed in Jesus genealogy are many great biblical characters. Read Matthew 1:1-5.

One of the interesting people in Boaz's family is Rahab the harlot. She was the Caananite prostitute in Jericho who hid the spies that Joshua had sent there. They rewarded her by saving her and her family (see Joshua chapters 2 and 6). She is commended for her faith in the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11:31 and for her deeds in James 2:25. Rahab married an Israelite and from the scriptures above, apparently had a great faith in Jehovah God. Like Ruth, she was a Gentile marrying an Israelite. Rahab is listed as the mother of Boaz; however, as many times happens in biblical genealogies, there is the possibility of several generations between Boaz and Rahab. In either case, Boaz would have known of his connection to Rahab, since family history (who begat whom) was very important to the Jewish people.

How do you think Boaz's awareness of his ancestry affected his treatment of Ruth?

What can we discover about the personality and character of Boaz from the text?

As chapter three opens, we find Naomi thinking about what will become of Ruth.
From Naomi's comments in chapter two, what were her feelings about Ruth gleaning in Boaz's field?

What is Naomi's purpose in the plan she devises for Ruth (3:1)?

What specific advice and instructions does Naomi give Ruth before she leaves for the threshing floor?

The threshing floor was typically a large hard area of earth or stone on the downwind (east) side of the village where threshing took place. Threshing is the loosening of grain from the straw and then it would be winnowed--the grain and straw would be tossed into the air and the straw would blow away and the grain, which is heavier, would fall to the ground.

What risks do you see in Naomi's plan?

Naomi asks Ruth to go to the threshing floor, uncover Boaz's feet, and lie down. This is a custom still practiced in some Middle Eastern cultures. There is nothing sexual connoted in Ruth's actions. Boaz awakens and finds Ruth at his feet. Ruth expresses her desire for Boaz to become her kinsman-redeemer by asking him to cover her with the corner of his garment. This practice of widows marrying close relatives is called levirate marriage. It is explained in Deuteronomy 25:5-6.
According to these verses, what is the purpose of levirate marriage?

What does Boaz commend Ruth for?

What can you conclude about Boaz’s age from this?

Boaz is willing to be the kinsman-redeemer of Ruth; however, he knows of another who is more closely related to Naomi. Boaz must follow the law and ask the closer relative if he is willing to redeem Ruth.

Do you think you would have as readily accepted Naomi’s plan as Ruth did?

What does this tell you about Ruth?

What emotions do you sense as Ruth tells Naomi everything that had happened?

How do you think the two women feel as they wait to find out what will become of them?
Lesson Four

The story of Ruth: I love it when a plan comes together!

Read chapter 4

The book of Ruth has reminded us of God's love for, and faithfulness to, His people in all situations, and this final chapter shows us how all the elements of a once seemingly-hopeless situation are part of God's plan for Ruth's life. God loves happy endings just as much as we do!

Most of us believe, in theory, that God has our best interests at heart and will work things out for us ... eventually; but, in reality, God's wisdom and timing are often unfathomable to us.

Boaz seems to be a patient man; in the first part of this chapter, he implements a plan that will bring Ruth and him together, even though there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer in the family line, someone who could legally claim Ruth as his wife. As we have already seen, understanding the customs and laws of the day makes understanding Ruth's story easier. In 4:1-2, Boaz arranges a meeting among this relative, the town elders, and himself and reveals that in the purchase of Elimelech's land, the kinsman will also acquire a wife!

The kinsman-redeemer declines and leaves the way open for Boaz to marry Ruth (4:8-9). The town elders bless the union of Boaz and Ruth in verses 11-12, and the couple soon has a son.
From 4:16-22, what is the name of Ruth and Boaz's son? Who is this baby's grandson?

Who is David's (and thus Ruth's) most famous descendent (Matthew 1:6, 16, 17)?

How do you think Ruth would have felt had she known one of her descendants would be God's promised Redeemer?

What name does God use for Himself in Isaiah 48:17?

According to The New Unger's Bible Dictionary, the word redeemer comes from the Hebrew word goel, which means "the nearest kinsman." These kinsmen avenged slain relatives, bought back land sold by a relative in distress, and continued a dead relative's bloodline and memory through levirate marriage. Boaz was the redeemer of Ruth, Naomi, and Ruth's dead husband: not only did he continue the family's bloodline through his marriage to Ruth, but he also rescued the women from their hopelessness and despair.

According to Naomi's friends (4:17), what did she gain?

Ruth’s story is one of contrasts. Boaz's actions stand in contrast to those of the potential kinsman-redeemer's. What other contrasts do you see?
Ruth's decision versus ______________'s decision (1:14)

Naomi ("pleasant") versus ______________("_______") (1:20)

Full versus ____________________ (1:21)

Naomi from Bethlehem versus Ruth from ______(1:22)

Compassion of Boaz versus self-interest of ______(4:6)

And, of course, the big contrast is that of hopelessness in the first chapter versus redemption and hope in chapter four.

**Conclusion:** Give your thoughts of the story of Ruth

* Lessons written by Colleen Frost and Shelly Robbins in 2002
ESTHER

Background

Esther is the only book in the Scripture which does not mention God's name.

Hadassah is Esther's Hebrew name.

All the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are found in Esther 3:13.

The Hebrew word Mishteh, meaning "banquet," occurs 20 times in Esther (which is equal to the total of ALL the other times it is found in the rest of the Bible).

The longest verse in the Bible appears in Esther. It has 43 words in Hebrew (and approximately 90 words in the English translation). It appears in Esther 8:9.

LESSON 1 - QUEEN VASHTI DETHRONED

READ CHAPTER 1

1. Describe the characters from Chapter 1
   King __________
   Queen _________
   7 eunuchs (v. 10)
   Princely advisers (v. 14)
   Spokesman, Memucan (vv. 16, 21)

2. How powerful was King Xerxes? (vv. 1-3)
3. What excesses did King Xerxes display throughout his lavish party? (vv. 4-8)
   Why did he make such a display?

4. What were the women doing while the men were feasting? (v. 9) Who was in charge?

5. What did King Xerxes request of Queen Vashti? (vv. 10-11)

6. Who was sent to get the Queen? (v. 10) Give a definition of "eunuch."

7. The request puts Vashti in a difficult position. What are some factors she may have been considering in giving her answer? What was her answer to the king? (v. 12)

8. Think of a time when you were expected to do something you were uncomfortable performing. How did you handle the situation? What was the outcome?

9. What was the king's reaction? (v. 12) How did he decide what to do about the situation? (vv. 13-14)

10. (Thought question) Many times a punishment of a person or group of people is not JUST for them, but is also to teach a lesson to others. From verses 17 & 18, who did the advisors think needed to learn a lesson?

11. How do each of the following view gaining and maintaining respect? King Ahauerus? Queen Vashti? The wise men?
12. (Thought question) How do you view the development of respect? (i.e., legislated, commanded, earned ...)

13. What are some ways you may try to gain respect that are not godly or helpful?

14. What was the actual proclamation sent out? (v. 22) What was the purpose of the proclamation? (v. 20) How did they make sure everyone could understand the proclamation? (v. 22)

15. What became of Queen Vashti? (v. 19)

LESSON 2 - ESTHER CROWNED

READ CHAPTER 2

1. Describe the characters introduced in this chapter: Mordecai (v. 5) Esther (v. 7) Hegai (vv. 3, 8)

2. Sometimes anger can so overwhelm that we even forget why we were angry. In verse 1, King Xerxes had to get over his anger before he "got on with his life." Is there anger in your life that needs to be resolved so that you can move on?

3. What action did the king's attendants propose in order to restore the king's happiness? (vv. 2-4)

4. How did Esther come to be included in the harem of beautiful, young virgins? (v. 8)
5. What special arrangements did Hegai make for Esther? (vv. 8 & 9)

6. What information did Esther keep hidden and why? (vv. 10 & 20) Esther showed respect for Mordecai. How do you show respect for those who have cared for you?

7. How does Mordecai show his parental love for Esther? (v. 11)

8. Tell about the beautification process preparing the virgins to be presented to the king. (vv. 12 & 13)

9. (Thought question) After spending the night with the king, why were these women then housed in a second harem under the eunuch over the concubines? (v. 14) Give a definition of "concubine." What was the criterion for the woman seeing the king again?

10. When did Esther go in to the king? (v. 16) How long had it been since there had been a queen? (1:3)

11. From verse 17, do you find that Esther had more than just physical beauty that made her attractive to the king?

12. How was Esther's coronation celebrated? (v. 18)

13. What conspiracy did Mordecai overhear? (v. 21) Who did he tell? (v. 22) Who did she tell? (v. 22) To whom did she give credit? (v. 22) How was the conspiracy punished?

LESSON 3 - HAMAN’S PLOT
READ CHAPTERS 3 & 4

1. Describe the characters introduced in these two chapters: Haman (3:1ff) Hathach (4:5ff)

2. What had King Xerxes commanded concerning Haman that Mordecai refused to do? (3:2) Who confronted Mordecai regarding this? (3:3) According to verse 4, what "reason" did Mordecai give for disobeying the command? (Thought question) What did Mordecai's being a Jew have to do with his refusal to honor or bow down to Haman?

3. What was Haman's reaction to Mordecai's refusal? (3:5)

4. Why did Haman decide he wanted to destroy ALL the Jews? (3:6)

5. Many times, even today, widespread racial generalizations and prejudices form because of the behavior of one or of only a few. How do Christians guard against these types of generalizations and prejudices?

6. The word "Pur" is mentioned in 3:7. Tell what this is.

7. How did Haman begin to turn the king against the Jews? (3:8)

8. What proposal did Haman make to the king in regard to the Jews? (3:9)

9. The king agreed with this ugly plot and even gave his signet ring to make the decree official. How completely did the king play into Haman's plot? (3:10-11)
10. What was the edict Haman had sent out? (3:12-13) How long from the time the edict was published did the Jews have to prepare before it was to come about? (3:12-13)

11. Contrast the reaction of Mordecai to the publishing of the edict (4:1) with that of Haman and the king. (3:15) What was the response of the Jews, in general, to the edict? (4:3)

12. When Queen Esther heard about Mordecai, what did she do? (4:4) When Mordecai refused her gift, what did she want to know? (4:5) What information did Mordecai give Hathach? (4:6 & 7) What was Mordecai's purpose in giving the messenger an actual copy of the edict? (4:8)

13. How did Esther reply to Mordecai? (4:10-11) (Thought question) What is implied from the last sentence in 4:11? Think of a time when you were placed in a position to help someone else, but at personal discomfort or inconvenience. Were you able to step up and follow through anyway? (See what Jesus said in John 15:13.)

14. How did Mordecai answer the queen? (4:13-14) (Thought question) Mordecai realized that God would preserve a remnant of the Jewish nation, even if not through Esther, as he had already done through Joseph. (Refer to Genesis 45:5-7.) Discuss the fact that God's overall plans and purposes are bigger than any one person.

15. Before going in to the king, what request did Esther make of her people, the Jews? (4:16) What were Esther and her maidens going to be doing during this time? (4:16) Contrast this behavior with that of Haman and the king in 3:15. Recall a time of great decision-making in your life. How did you approach this time? Did you ask others to participate with you in the process?
LESSON 4 - ESTHER’S COURAGE

READ CHAPTERS 5 & 6

1. As her people fasted, how did Esther make herself ready to enter the king’s presence? (5:1)

2. What was the king's reaction when he saw Esther? (5:2)

3. Besides extending his scepter to Esther, what did the king say that showed that she had favor with him? (5:3)

4. What was the request Queen Esther made of the king? (5:4)

5. The king was obviously eager to do as Esther requested. What question and offer did he repeat to her? (5:6)

6. (Thought question) What old adage is brought to mind by reading verse 6?

7. How did Esther put off telling the king what she REALLY wanted? (5:7-8)

8. Describe Haman's state of mind after attending Esther's first banquet with the king. (5:9) What soured his disposition? (5:9) When your expectations are not met, how do you react? How can you prepare to have godly attitudes, even when things do not go your way?

9. List several things Haman bragged about to his wife and friends. (5:10-12) What was the one thorn in his side? (5:13) (Thought question) Have you ever known bitterness and hatred to so invade someone's life that they had a problem seeing any joy?
10. How did Haman's wife and friends advise him? (5:14) Based on their counsel, what did Haman do?

11. What did King Xerxes do when he had insomnia? (6:1) (Thought question) What does this show about his character?

12. Of what surprising event was the king reminded? (6:2) How long had it been since this was recorded? (2:16 & 3:7) What question did the king ask his servants? (6:3) What was their answer?

13. From whom did the king then seek advice? (6:6) Why was Haman in the court? (6:4-5)

14. Thinking that all these honors would be given to himself, what did Haman suggest the king do? (6:7-9)

15. Imagine the terrible shock when Haman learned that the king not only wished to honor Mordecai, but that he also expected Haman to carry it out! Did he obey the king?

16. Compare the Haman of 5:10-12 with the one of 6:12.

17. After Haman told his wife and friends about this, what was their pathetic, prophetic response? (6:13)

18. Consider the counsel Esther had received from Mordecai (4:13 & 14) as contrasted with the counsel Haman received from his wife Zeresh (5:14 and 6:13). Where do you go for counsel? How do you test counsel to discern if it is godly? How do you prepare yourself to give godly counsel?
19. In verse 14, Haman is quickly called to go to the second feast. Do you think he had to "put on a happy face?" Have you ever had to "put on a happy face?" How difficult is this to do? Instead of just changing our façade, what should we do? (Ephesians 4:31)

LESSON 5 - HAMAN’S DEMISE

READ CHAPTERS 7 & 8

1. Again in the second feast, the king asked what Esther's request was. In your own words, tell how Esther answered the king. (7:1-4)

2. Define annihilation. (Thought question) Why would Esther not have bothered the king if the Jews were just being sold as slaves?

3. The king showed his surprise at Esther's revelation when he asked her who had brought this calamity upon her and her people. (7:5) What was her answer to him? (7:6)

4. What was Haman's reaction? (7:6)

5. The king was so angry he left the banquet hall and went for a walk in the palace gardens. What was Haman doing while the king took a walk? (7:7) Is it not ironic that Haman is now bowing down before a lowly Jewess?

6. Upon his return to the banquet hall, what compromising position did King Xerxes witness in Haman? (7:8)
Chapter 7:9 (along with 4:7) shows just how fast palace "gossip" got around. It was only the night before that the gallows had been built. However, Harbonah - one of the king's eunuchs - not only knows about the gallows, but he also knows its size and purpose. What prompt decision did the king make when he heard of the gallows? What effect did Haman's hanging have on the king? (7:10)

8. What happened to: Haman's estate? (8:1-2) The king's signet ring he had given to Haman? (8:2)

9. Now that Esther and Mordecai were in the king's favor and Haman was out of the picture, why did she still risk her life once again by approaching the king? (8:3-6)

10. Think of a time you have been involved in intervening on behalf of someone else. How did you feel? How did you overcome your fears? How did you grow from the experience?

11. What did the king give Esther permission to do? (8:8) Why could he not just override his former edict? (8:7 & 8)

12. A new decree was sent out with the good news that the Jews could fight and protect themselves against anyone who attacked them. (8:9-14) Who actually gave the orders for this new decree? Where was it sent? How was it made official? How fast was it sent out?

13. Tell of the Jewish response to the new declaration. (8:15-17)

14. What was the reaction of other nationalities in the land and why? (8:17)

15. (Thought question) How does fear lead some to the Lord? (See Proverbs 1:7)
LESSON 6 - JEWISH TRIUMPH

READ CHAPTERS 9 & 10

1. What did the enemies of the Jews expect? (9:1)

2. Why would no one stand against the Jews? (9:2)

3. Who helped the Jews? (9:3)

4. Why did the enemy fear Mordecai? (9:4)

5. How many men were destroyed in Susa? (9:6)

6. Who were the ten men mentioned in 9:7-10?

7. When King Xerxes heard of the number of those killed in Susa, the capital, what additional offer did he make to Esther? (9:11-12)

8. What two things did she request? (9:13) (Thought question) What was a reason for hanging the bodies of men who were already dead? (9:7-9)

9. How many deaths were recorded in 9:16? What is the recurring statement in 9:10, 15, and 16?

10. (Thought question) Why did the Jews not take the plunder even when they had been given permission in the decree? (8:11)

11. How did the Jews celebrate? (9:17-19)
12. For what reason were the Jews commanded to celebrate? (9:22)

13. What is the name of the holiday surrounding these events? (3:7 and 9:24-26) Why was this name chosen?

14. This was not just a one-time celebration. How was it to be observed in the future?

15. Who was responsible for establishing this annual holiday? (9:20 & 21, 27, & 29)

16. Give a comment on anything said in chapter 10.

**Conclusion:** Give your thoughts of the story of Esther

by Joyce Chadwell and Deborah Wilson - 2003-2004