

Living the Story

A Study through Scripture

Introduction:

The book of Ruth can be a difficult one to determine focus or direction for a small group study. Several themes are noticeable: the loyalty of Ruth to her foreign mother-in-law, the way Boaz serves as the kinsman-redeemer to Ruth, the way the Lord answers the prayers of both Naomi and Boaz within the book, the word play of Boaz's encouragement that Ruth will come under the cover of the Lord's wings and her requesting Boaz cover her, or even the boldness of Ruth to approach Boaz in the night.

I have wrestled with these and have determined the place I want to focus is the fulfillment of the law in Deuteronomy that is found through Boaz's treatment of Ruth in the harvest fields.

This lesson will actually be very simple in terms of the questions it asks. The challenge, I believe, will be to do as Boaz did and show kindness to those who are not like us.

Summary of the Text:

We need to start in Deuteronomy 24. If you will recall, Deuteronomy contains three speeches Moses makes to the people just prior to their entrance (without Moses) into the Promised Land. One of those speeches contains laws the people will need to follow when they enter that land. Our text today is within this section and we discover beginning in verse 17 that Moses shows a great deal of concern for the fatherless, the foreigner, and the widow. Four different verses in the Deuteronomy pericope contain instruction for the people to treat these people with respect and generosity. What is key to this is the reason for the admonition: you were once slaves and the Lord redeemed you. Said another way: you were once without a safety net and dependent on others and I, the Lord, rescued you from your oppressors.

Why is this important to the story of Ruth? In reading through chapter 1, we discover that Ruth is actually a Moabite (read: foreigner) AND a widow, living with her mother-in-law, who was also a widow. They had no way to earn a living and were dependent on the generosity of others. Naomi even laments that she went away to Moab "full," but comes back empty and bitter (Ruth 1.20-21). Naomi recognizes her diminished standing among those whom she calls townspeople.

Naomi has Ruth do the only thing she knows to do, which is send her to the fields ("coincidentally," of Boaz, who is a kinsman) in hopes Ruth could pick some grain from those harvesting it. (Again, read through Deuteronomy 24.17-22.) Boaz indeed shows generosity to Ruth and Naomi is thrilled. Actually, she is beyond thrilled. Ruth 2.20 indicates the joy Naomi feels (in contrast to her bitterness). Naomi's reaction is almost over-the-top, until you recognize that this really is an answer to Naomi's prayers for Ruth. In chapter 1, Naomi encourages Ruth to stay and find a good husband, but Ruth refuses (in contrast to her sister-in-law who does stay in Moab). I think we see in this interchange Naomi's celebration of a God who redeems his people, in this case, potentially through the kinsman-redeemer, Boaz.

NOTE: The go'el, or kinsman-redeemer, was the family member tasked with marrying a widow of his brother (or other close relative) so that the family line would not die out. It is a legal term with a strong emphasis on fulfilling the duty that has fallen on you. In reality, Boaz was NOT the kinsman-redeemer, but merely the second in line. The end result, however, was the same when the next in line refused to take own ownership of the field and marry Ruth.

LESSON #9

Date: 11/04/2012

Text: Deuteronomy 24.17-22; Ruth 2.1-23

The Story: Chapter 9

The Big Picture: We often make fun of those we tend to think have nothing in common with us. God says that we are more like these people than we realize. So what are we going to do? Shun them or be like Boaz?

Materials Needed: none

As I mentioned in the introduction, there is much that could be said about the book of Ruth, but I want to focus on this one aspect: what is Boaz had not shown generosity to Ruth? One of the major points of the book of Ruth turns out to be that because of Boaz's faithfulness, he and Ruth marry and have a great-grandson named David (remember him?) who would be an ancestor to Jesus. I am not going to say that God could not have made Jesus come into being if Boaz had not been generous, but there does seem to be an emphasis on Boaz's story as the one that brings about, eventually, David's kingdom.

In addition to asking the question about Boaz's generosity, we need to also determine who is the alien/foreigner in our culture today. If God is serious about how we treat the fatherless, the alien, and the widow (and it is emphasized throughout all of the Old Testament), then how do we best discover who those people are and what do we need to do to ensure we are generous?

Preparing for the Group Time:

Today's lesson, particularly the discussion questions, will be shorter than you are used to from these lessons. This is not because this lesson is not important, but because these lessons are SO important.

I am afraid that we sometimes ask so many questions during a discussion time that we fail to really discover any depth to them. In some ways it is easy to ask more questions, rather than fewer. It takes more time and we really do not have to reveal too much of ourselves. As a group leader, do not get caught up in this trap. Do not be afraid to take the time to allow everyone an opportunity to answer a question. You as a leader may want to ask the question again, or say: what are the implications for the answer you have just given? In other words, if what you say is true, what should we be doing about it?

Living the Story

Lesson #9

Text: Deuteronomy 24.17-22; Ruth 2.1-23

Lesson Outline:

Begin your time together this week asking group members to share how the last week went as they worked to remember the things that God had done for them? What things worked well? What did not go well? In what ways did their “forgetfulness” cause them to choose to not look to God for their strength?

For an icebreaker question this week, ask your group: Who was the outcast kid when you were growing up? What about that person caused them to be shunned?

WARNING: You may be treading on sacred ground here, so please show mercy and grace to those who answer. That kid may have very well been the person answering the question. Always be sure to affirm the person answering and thank them for sharing comments that are vulnerable to them.

Then ask: Why do you think people found it so easy to shun that person? Why do you think it is so easy for us to overlook those who do not look/act/think/believe/behave/etc. like we do?

Read the texts for today.

Spend some time asking the discussion questions.

Close in prayer as directed below.

Discussion Questions:

What clues do we find in the Deuteronomy passage as to why we should actually find ourselves drawn to those who are shunned?

If Moses was writing Deuteronomy today, who would he say were our “fatherless, foreigners, and widows.” This can be literal, but it can also be metaphorical, as well.

In what ways do you think you are like the people you have listed above?

How do you—and how do we—ensure that we are not shunning the fatherless, foreigners, and widows, but instead are being Boaz’s to them?

For the Children:

Children get this. They know the people who are excluded or made fun of at school. Some of our children may even be those who are shunned. What better way to prevent them from contributing to this ongoing cycle than for them to hear us saying we want to be Boaz’s in this world and being generous to those who may not even deserve it (at least by culture’s standard).

I would strongly encourage you to include your children in the discussion of today’s lesson. You might help make the point by not only asking them who are the people who are excluded, but also what would have happened if Boaz had not been generous?

Be sure to ask the children how they can be more like a Boaz to those around them?

Living the Story:

This week your *Living the Story* assignment is to follow through with those things you mentioned in the last discussion question. Go and be a Boaz to those people in your life who are foreigners, that is, those who are shunned, marginalized, or oppressed.

Prayer Time:

I read an interesting quote from Ruth Haley Barton today which said: “Intercessory prayer is not primarily about believing we know what someone else needs and then trying to tell God what the answer is. ... Intercessory prayer is more about recognizing that we do not know how to pray for others—or ourselves for that matter—but the Holy Spirit knows.” (Barton, 74.)

Not only do I want to spend some time thinking about how to be Boaz’s to those around us, I also want to pray for those people who are “foreigners” to us. I want us to pray not only that they will receive the blessings they need, but also that our eyes will be open to their needs as seen only through the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

As you pray today, lift up the people you are thinking of when you think of “foreigners” or those who are shunned. You may even want to mention them by name, if you are comfortable. Just simply name them and ask that God open your eyes to them. Do not “fill in the blanks,” just lift them—and you—up.

What’s Next:

Next week we will begin looking at the kings of Israel, starting with 1 Samuel 1-15 or chapter 10 in *The Story*.

References:

Ruth Haley Barton. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. Downers Grove: Illinois, IVP Books, 2006.