

*Use this format as a family, a couple, or with a small group.

Message Summary

Among the deep, core needs of the human soul is our need to be accepted. We were made for community—that's part of what it means to be in God's image. When we are not accepted—or worse, judge ourselves to be unacceptable—it is one of the most painful wounds a soul can have. In addition to this, we need to know where we are going in life: that our lives have purpose and meaning beyond mere activity (or inactivity). The story of Ruth is a story of acceptance, and of finding new meaning. Ruth is a descendant of Moab—an outsider—and she marries a visiting Jewish man. After about 10 years, she becomes a widow. Her mother-in-law, also a widow, decides to leave and go back to her hometown of Bethlehem. Ruth is determined to go with her, despite her mother-in-law's dismal attitude. When they get there, they are among the poorest of the poor, but are shown kindness by a wealthy farmer, Boaz. Ruth is accepted, and what's more, Boaz provides the ultimate acceptance and marries her (after making sure no others who might have a prior responsibility to take her as wife want to exercise that right). While the tender love shown is beautiful in its own right, the spiritual parallels are rich: we need acceptance, and the family of God provides it; we are outsiders—spiritual “Moabites”—but God has made us beloved daughters and sons; we are “poor” without capacity to redeem ourselves, but we have a wealthy “kinsman redeemer” who purchased us and released us from our indebtedness. And, if all this weren't enough, God made this woman the great-grandmother of King David. David was the model for the perfect, eternal king to come, and was in the lineage of Jesus. Through Ruth, God shows again inclusion of non-Jews in his forever-family, and demonstrates that in his Kingdom of Grace.

Opening Question

Describe someone who was an “outsider” to you when you were growing up. What was it about that person that caused them to be excluded?

Discussion Questions

Note: All page numbers below are from *The Story*, 2008 edition. Additional group discussion questions for this chapter can be found on page 393.

1. Ruth is from the nation of Moab (descended from the son of Lot's incestuous relationship with his oldest daughter). The nation had been an enemy of Israel during their wanderings, and as punishment God forbade Moabites access to his people (Deuteronomy 23:3). Furthermore, Moab had harassed Israel for 18 years close to the time of Ruth. If ever there was a despised people group, it was this nation. Yet here is a book of the Bible telling a favorable story about a Moabite woman who would become the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king, David—and a forerunner of the Messiah. What comparisons can you make to what God seemed to be up to in this story of inclusion, and what the gospel tells us he is doing in our day?
2. The book of Ruth begins with a famine. Those circumstances cause Ruth's future husband to move to Moab in search of food, where he met and married Ruth. His death caused Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, to move back to Israel, where she would meet and marry Boaz. These series of tragedies over several years led to a union that brought about one of Messiah's ancestors. Think about some difficult circumstances in your own life. From your limited perspective, what is a way God has used those hard times to bring about something good?
3. Even though God can use adverse circumstances, we don't always see in our lifetime what he is doing. In this story, not all the loose ends get tied up: Naomi lost her husband and sons and never remarried, and though Ruth married again, she never knew just how vitally important her descendants would be to God's plan. So in the end, our life with God remains a life of faith. Is there a circumstance or unresolved issue in your life that you must accept for now without seeing how it is part of any bigger plan? What helps you trust God for that future vindication?
4. Ruth's tender words of commitment (page 100 or Ruth 1:16-18) have often been used at weddings because they so closely parallel the ideals of marriage. Other than marriage, what kinds of “committed relationships” do you have that help you experience true community? Where would you like to have more of those?
5. Gleaning was a practice that allowed the poor to share in the increase God provided to others. The poor could follow behind the harvesters and, through their own hard work, be sustained. What observations can you make about God's heart toward the poor and how their dignity was preserved through this God-ordained practice? What values do you think God wanted to instill in those more well-off? What's a current application of these ideals?
6. Ruth was not at all passive in trying to provide for herself and Naomi, yet God magnified her efforts. Why do you think God has set it up that we must do certain things before he acts on our behalf? Is that the same thing as “righteousness by works”? Explain.
7. Boaz was impressed with Ruth's faith in God and her commitment to her mother-in-law. He commends her—and says he wants her to be rewarded by the God “under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (page 101 or Ruth 2:11-12). What has “refuge under God's wings” looked like in your life? In what circumstances are you in need of his covering right now?
8. Read the women's blessing to Naomi and Obed (page 104 or Ruth 4:13-22). They surely were saying even more than they knew because the “fame” that eventually came from Obed's offspring was Jesus. Have you ever given or received a “surprise blessing” like this? What was the effect? Who might need a similar blessing from you right now?

As a final question, you can ask group members who did the personal reflection assignment if there is anything from that material they would like to share or ask the group about. Close in prayer.