

LESSON ONE

Called Through Circumstances

Ruth 1:1–21



My husband and I were married for five years before we were blessed with our first daughter. While that may not be a long time by today's standards, it was a longer wait than we had expected. As we prayed for a baby, at times God seemed distant and unresponsive. But in the midst of our waiting, we also learned lessons about God's presence in our lives, moment by moment. We saw God use our experience of "emptiness;" we found we could interact with people in new ways. Now, from this side of our experience, we see how God was very near to us, at work even when it seemed he was not.

In the midst of difficult circumstances, God still makes himself known, not merely by his presence, but also by calling us to new challenges and relationships. Ruth and Naomi are examples of God "calling" in and through circumstances. In their story, we see how two ordinary women responded to life's challenges and to God's call on their lives.

Initially, you may find it difficult to relate to the stories of Ruth and Naomi. After all, they lived 2500 years ago, in a time very different from our own. While we can't lift their stories straight from the page and plop them into our own lives, we certainly can learn from them. In particular, their stories can teach us how to relate to and serve God, a God who is unchanging and whose love and compassion for us are promised in scripture no matter what our circumstances. As we study, it will be helpful to observe the text carefully, taking into account the characters' own cultural lens. Then we will interpret the text with this cultural lens in mind, and, finally, apply the text, trusting that God has something to say to each of us about our call through the stories of these women.

It will also be helpful to have a little background on the time period

and place in which Ruth's story occurs. The author states that Ruth lived in the "time of the Judges." This was a chaotic time in Israel's history, full of "apostasy, unrest, violence, and social disintegration." According to Judges 21:25, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." The book of Ruth shows us another story of that period in history, a story of two women and one man who respond in obedience and faithfulness to God's call on their lives. It begins in Moab, Ruth's homeland, a country to the southeast of Bethlehem. Ruth is a Moabite; Naomi is an Israelite. The Israelites considered the Moabites inferior, and the two nations were sometimes in conflict. However, Moab's climate was more favorable than Bethlehem's, which consistently resulted in better crops. This favorable climate very likely explains why Naomi's family moved to Moab in the first place.

First Steps



1. Describe a time in your life when your circumstances made it difficult to see God at work.

Read the Map Read Ruth 1:1–21.



- 2.a. Ruth 1:1–5 sets the stage. From these verses, describe Ruth and Naomi's circumstances.

- b. Widows in this society were left in a difficult position, with little or no means of supporting themselves. How do you imagine Naomi might be feeling at this point in her life?

- 3.a. In Ruth 1:6–13, what choice does Naomi make in response to her circumstances?
- b. Do you find Naomi's advice to her daughters-in-law surprising? Why or why not?
- c. How is Naomi's character demonstrated through this encounter with her daughters-in-law? What do we learn about her relationship with her daughters-in-law?
4. Naomi frequently mentions "the LORD" (the Hebrew is Shaddai, which means "Almighty") in this section. From what you have read so far, how would you describe her understanding of God?

Naomi encourages both her daughters-in-law to return to their homes. She hopes they will find security and will be provided for by returning to their Moabite relatives. Yet Ruth decides to remain with Naomi. Let's look at Ruth's decision more closely in verses 14–18.

- 5.a. What is Ruth choosing *into* by staying with Naomi? What is she choosing *out of*?
- b. What choice does Orpah make? (Note that neither Naomi nor the narrator condemns Orpah's choice.)
6. What clues in the text might help you understand why Ruth makes her choice?

In Ruth 1:19, Ruth and Naomi journey to Bethlehem. While the author summarizes the entire journey in one verse, I can't help but wonder what this journey might have been like for these two women with no husbands. Their prospects were not good. Ruth has chosen against the security of returning to her Moabite family. Naomi is returning to her former home, but having lost her husband and sons, this return may feel like a defeat. This journey can't have been easy for either of them.

Read Ruth 1:19–22.

7. Look at Naomi's speech to the townswomen upon her return, and also look at verse 12. Describe her frame of mind and her feelings at this point.
8. Naomi and Ruth both faced difficult circumstances. Use this chart to review/compare or contrast what we know about these two women so far.

	Naomi	Ruth
Circumstances they face		
Outlook/Attitude		
View of God		
Choices/Response (What do they appear to be called to?)		
What they offer/ Ways they help each other		

For both women, their call is at least partially determined by their circumstances rather than by a direct word from the LORD. Naomi's family is in Moab due to a famine. When the famine ends and her husband and sons die in Moab, she chooses to return home. A call is not necessarily an easy or exciting option. In Ruth's case, it is a choice away from security. Additionally, God's call may not be the "expected" thing: God provides for Naomi through a foreign daughter-in-law, rather than through her husband and sons. Like Ruth and Naomi, we can make the choice to look for God at work in unexpected ways, regardless of our circumstances. Like them, we can also look for how God may be calling us to respond to our circumstances. For these women, their response meant choosing a relationship with each other. Naomi becomes a mentor and mother to Ruth, while Ruth follows Naomi to an unknown land, and becomes a breadwinner, rather than returning to Moab. Both women have had to let go of their old dreams to embrace the new thing God is doing.

My Travel Log



9. Naomi says that God has “dealt bitterly” with her (Ruth 1:20); that there is no hope for her (v. 12). Has there been a time in your life when you have felt like this? Do you have a photograph taken during that period that you could share with your study group? How were you feeling when that photo was taken?
- 10.a. Do you see elements of your own story in either Ruth’s or Naomi’s story?
- b. Perhaps because of your season in life, or your circumstances, you are feeling called to let go of old dreams and to embrace a new thing God is doing through you. Are there things in Ruth’s and Naomi’s stories that you want to emulate or avoid?

On a personal note, it’s easier for me to want to be like Ruth—taking risks, choosing something new—but that’s probably wishful thinking! My life has actually been more like Naomi’s, and I’m probably more like her; a complainer. Nevertheless, God still seems to use me! It’s comforting for me to see God using a flawed, “realistic” woman like Naomi. She’s bitter and at times without hope, yet God still uses her. Just as Naomi influenced Ruth, I’ve tried to mentor those around me by sharing my own struggles. Now that I have two daughters (see how God provides!), I hope they experience both “Ruths” and “Naomis” in their lives.

- 11.a. The New Testament gives many examples of this call to mentor or influence those with whom we are in relationship. Jesus trained his disciples this way. Paul became a mentor to Timothy, whose early mentors were his mother and grandmother. As women, we are called to influence younger women in our midst and to learn from each other (Matthew 4:18–22; 2 Timothy 1:3–6; Titus 2:3–5). Looking around, who are the younger women in your life? Might God be calling you to spend time with one or more of them?
- b. If you are a “Ruth,” is there an older woman in your life who can serve as an example for you to follow? How might she be a mentor to you? Consider asking her to mentor you in her area of strength. She will be thrilled and honored by your request.

Here are some suggestions of people with whom you might enter into a Ruth/Naomi type of relationship:

- your daughters or daughters-in-law
- your mother-in-law
- a woman in your church without close family
- a colleague at work
- a neighbor who is a new mom

Being a mentor is a calling. The people God is calling you to mentor may not be the people you expect, or they may not be in the places you expect them to be. Perhaps you hoped to have children, but didn't. Perhaps you're living in a different “land” than you expected at this point in life. While your circumstances may not be what you expected, it's likely (actually, quite certain) that God wants you to be in relationship with someone. You can seek your calling right where you find yourself today.

12. Look carefully at the circumstances in which you find yourself this week. Are you wondering what God is up to? How might God be at work in these circumstances? Is there a new relationship God might be calling you to enter, or a relationship that could be deepened?

God's call may lead to something risky and new, as it does for Ruth, or it may be a call to follow him in our everyday circumstances, no matter how difficult. In Naomi's story, there is a lesson about following God in whatever circumstances or culture we find ourselves. Apparently, within Naomi's family, Ruth gets enough of a glimpse of life with the God of Israel that she wants to be part of Naomi's family and to worship Naomi's God. We can have that kind of influence as well. We can be an oasis that draws people to us. We can have lives that prompt people to say, as Ruth does, "I want to go with you, to have your God as my God." Choosing to live this kind of life might require making risky choices. It might prompt us to move toward God, believing that we will find life there, even when our outward circumstances make it seem unlikely.

Notes