

Compassion
A Covenant of Compassion
Focal Verses: Ruth 1:6-11, 14-18



When bonded by love and strong compassion towards one another, people who are unrelated by birth can commit to entering a covenant relationship. What drives and sustains this relationship? Although Naomi begged Ruth to return to her people, Ruth clung to her mother-in-law and vowed her loyalty until death.

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **IDENTIFY** the relationship between Ruth and Naomi; **EMPATHIZE** with those in vulnerable situations; and **COMMIT** to demonstrating godly loyalty to our family members.

In Focus

Shortly after graduating from Hampton University, Breana got a job in her hometown. She was excited, but adjusting was challenging, and the office culture was not very inclusive. She felt isolated and alone, like she was living in a foreign world. Breana was in the cafeteria when she noticed an older woman, who worked on her floor, sitting in the corner working on her laptop.

She approached the table. “Hi ... do you mind if I sit here?” The woman barely looked up from the laptop, but Breana sat anyway. Finally, the woman stopped typing and said, “Hello, my name is Selena Humphries. I’ve seen you around. How’s the first few weeks on the job been?”

Over the next few months, the two became friends. Breana valued Selena as a friend and maternal figure.

One day, Breana sat down to talk to Selena, who looked distant. “They’ve let me go,” Selena said.

“One more year to retire with full benefits, and they’ve let me go. I’m widowed and never had kids. This job was everything I had,” Selena said softly. Breana felt so sad for her friend. The first few months had been difficult for Breana, but Selena had been a mentor to guide her through the process. Breana stared at Selena for a long time, not knowing what to say. After a few moments, she reached out and grabbed Selena’s hand. She knew it was her time to listen.

How can we show care to those who have cared for us?

Keep In Mind

And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: (Ruth 1:16 NKJV)

Lesson Text

Ruth 1:6-11, 14-18

6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law, that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab how the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread.

7 Therefore she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.

8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each to your mother’s house. The Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead and with me.

9 The Lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voice and wept.

10 And they said unto her, “Surely we will return with thee unto thy people.”

11 And Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters. Why will ye go with me? Are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?”

14 And they lifted up their voice and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth cleaved unto her.

15 And she said, “Behold, thy sister-in-law has gone back unto her people and unto her gods. Return thou after thy sister-in-law.”

16 And Ruth said: “Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following thee; for whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

17 Where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.”

18 When she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, then she left off speaking unto her.

The People, Places, and Times

Bethlehem-Judah: This city is five miles south of Jerusalem. Its hyphenated name is to distinguish it from the town of the same first name in Zebulun. Bethlehem translates to “house of bread.” It was previously known as Bethlehem-Ephrathah. Therefore, the people were called Ephrathites. This is the city Ruth and Naomi traveled to when they left Moab. Ruth eventually became the great-grandmother of King David. David and his ancestors lived in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:1–5), so it is also known as the city of David. This is the lineage into which Jesus was born.

How have you seen God provide in the midst of loss or hardship?

Background

We are introduced to a family set in the time when judges presided and governed over the children of Israel in the early days of the nation. Elimelech, the patriarch, was from Bethlehem, a province of Judah. Elimelech left his homeland with his wife Naomi and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to escape famine in the land. The family settled in the country of Moab. The people of Moab were descendants from the incestuous relationship between Abraham’s nephew Lot and his oldest daughter (Genesis 19:37); therefore, Moabites were distant relatives of the Jewish people. As the Children of Israel made their journey to the Promised Land, the Moabites sent Baalam to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22). From this and other contentious interactions, the Law of Moses prohibited Moabites from the Lord’s assembly, the worshiping community made up of men, for ten generations if not forever (Deuteronomy 23:3–6). Moab was also an idolatrous nation; one of their gods, Chemosh, was worshiped with child sacrifices. Because of this, Moabites like Ruth would have been marginalized in Israelite society.

In Ruth 1:3–5, Elimelech died while living in Moab and his sons Mahlon and Chilion married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Ten years after their unions to these women, both sons died childless. We are not told the circumstances surrounding the death of these men, but the three women were then widows. Naomi suffered the greatest having lost her husband and two sons. In this culture, women without men were at the mercy of extended family and community to care for them.

How could Naomi and her daughters-in-law go on after enduring such losses?

In Depth

1. A Mother's Farewell (Ruth 1:6–11) After the death of her sons, Naomi, an older woman, was left with no one to care for her. The text does not give the span of time between the passing of her sons and the decision to move forward. Traditionally, a Jewish burial took place within twenty-four hours of death because the Torah says, “His body shall not remain all night ... but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day” (Deuteronomy 21:23). Furthermore, ancient Jewish culture held that after the death of a husband, the sons were to care for their mother. A widow was considered blessed to have sons because they inherited the father's possessions and his tie to land. To have lost her husband and ten years later to have no sons was a mark of shame, and it weighed heavily on Naomi. She had no choice but to go back to Judah to reconnect with extended family members and her community. The people would know her story upon return. As the three women made their way toward Judah broken and in mourning, Naomi stopped during their trek and implored her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth to return to their own mothers to start over. Her daughters-in-law would also need to be cared for in this culture. Naomi encouraged them to go back to the security of their own people. However, she also spoke the blessing of the Lord over her daughters-in-law. She prayed that the Lord would deal kindly with them as a reward for their love for her sons as well as the kindness extended to her. After the death of their husbands, Orpah and Ruth could have immediately returned to their families and left Naomi to grieve alone. However, they showed great honor for their husbands' memory and their mother-in-law by caring for her and refusing to leave her side.

Naomi made the case to the two women that no hope existed for them if they remained with her (vv. 12–13). Naomi would be unable to have more sons for them to marry but if they returned home, they could possibly find husbands and marry again because they were young. Naomi was reeling in the bitterness of her losses

and felt forsaken by God, but tried to offer hope for a future for her daughters-in-law.

Have you tried to offer hope to others while in a dark place?

2. A Daughter's Response (Ruth 1:14–18) Orpah reluctantly listened to her mother-in-law's logic and with a gut-wrenching cry said goodbye, but tearful Ruth decided to stay with and "cling to" her mother-in-law. Naomi again pleaded with Ruth to return to her family and her gods like Orpah, but Ruth refused. In this moment Ruth became more than a daughter by marriage, but a daughter birthed in the spirit as she literally came into a covenant relationship. Ruth responded emphatically she did not want to leave Naomi's side and she wanted to continue the journey. Ruth honored her husband's memory by declaring to remain with her mother-in-law, not wanting to dishonor her by leaving her to travel alone. Ruth became one with Naomi by proclaiming where she lived, Ruth will live. She would become one with her people and worship her God. Where Naomi is buried, Ruth would also be buried. Ruth accepted if she does not keep her word and stay by her side, she would leave it to God to judge her. To seal the deal, Ruth vowed nothing, but death will separate her from her mother-in-law. When Naomi saw how resolute Ruth was about moving forward with her, she said nothing more. When love in action is strong and committed, it requires no further argument and nothing more is to be done but to receive it. Ruth, a Moabite woman, displayed such great love and honor for a woman she highly esteemed, leaving all that is familiar to start a new life.

Can you see the picture of God's love for His people and His church to not allow anything or anyone to separate them from His love? How do we respond to such a love?

Liberating Lesson

We are called to show one another deep love and commitment to God and His people. When one of us hurts, we all hurt. Nothing hurts more than the death of a loved one. Many churches make a resolution to care for members when they suffer such loss. With churches all around, communities across the country have been touched by gun violence that has ripped the hearts of mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, extended family, and friends. How can our churches be first responders to provide hope and healing? How can we stay in touch in the days and weeks to come? How can we work for social and legislative change?

Application for Activation

As you receive news through your medium of choice, pray for families who are experiencing the pain of loss. Pray for peace in our communities. And if your community or a surrounding community hosts a prayer vigil, join in or convene one. Volunteer your time and seek to partner with other institutions to end violence in our communities. Organize and petition lawmakers to enact more responsible and safe laws regarding guns. Be a beacon of hope and a reflection of God's love by asking the Holy Spirit to present you (or your small group/ congregation) with opportunities to provide comfort to those who grieve.

Closing Prayer

Daily Bible Reading



Monday: Numbers 5-7, Psalm 22:6-10

Tuesday: Numbers 8-10, Psalm 22:11-18

Wednesday: Numbers 11-13, Psalm 22:19-24

Thursday: Numbers 14-15, Psalm 22:25-31

Friday: Numbers 16-17, Psalm 23

Saturday: Numbers 18-20, Psalm 21:1-4

Sunday: Numbers 21-22, Psalm 24:5-10