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# LESSON 1: LOVE DIES

## SECTION 1: Historical Background

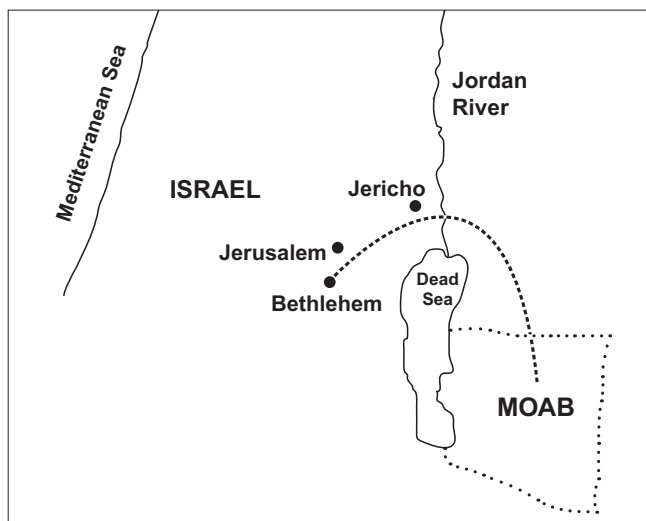
5 mins

### Read: Ruth 1:1-5

<sup>1</sup> In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. <sup>2</sup> The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. <sup>3</sup> But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

**The writer of Ruth tells us that this story is set during the time of Judges. For those of you with some Bible background, what does that immediately tell you? What was the period of Judges like?**

Chaotic, dangerous time.



Map of Moab



### Historical Background: Moab

*For additional information on Moab, see end of lesson.*

Moab is the bad cousin to Israel. Think of Uncle Eddy in the movie *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. Moab was the son of Lot by Lot's incestuous relationship with one of his daughters. Lot was Abraham's nephew, making Moab Jacob's second cousin (Genesis 19:30-38). The Moabites tried to prevent the Israelites from entering the land of Canaan, and when that failed, Moabite women tried to seduce Israelite men.

### 1. "Mo" means "Who," "Ab" means "Father." So given the origins of the Moabites, what does their name mean? How does that translate to our everyday English?

It is a slur on the origins of the Moabites. "Who's your daddy?" is the modern equivalent.

### Given this background, what do you think the attitude of most Israelites to Moabites would be?

Negative. Prejudiced.

## SECTION 2: Death of a Family

15 mins

### 2. There is a subtle change in how long the family intends to stay in Moab in verses 1, 2, and 4. Can you see what it is?

*Remind them that their translations will be different. ESV and ASV use "sojourn," NIV uses "stay awhile" (Ruth 1:1).*

Verse 1 **sojourn**: they plan to *sojourn*, which means a lengthy visit. It means they don't plan to make this permanent.

Verse 2 **they remained**: which means they hung around longer than expected

Verse 4 they **lived there ten years**

So it appears that initially they were going to just stay for a short while, but then began to sink their roots down in Moab.

### 3. What did Naomi lose in verses 1-5?

*Brainstorm for a couple of minutes, writing their answers down. Then for clarity, shift the discussion to just the hard data. Don't linger over this.*

### 4. What has happened to Naomi's life?

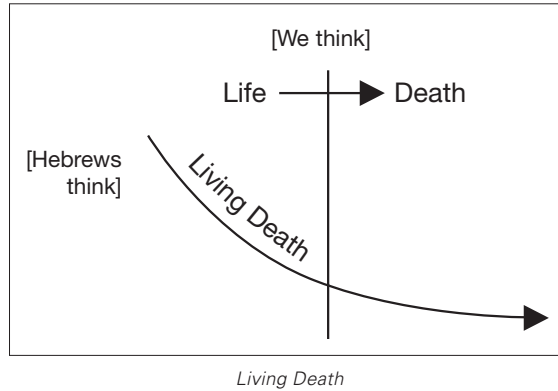
It is functionally over. She has entered a living death.



### Historical Background: Living Death

We think of life and death as having clear boundary lines. The Hebrew culture thought of life as having gradations. You could enter into a living death. Perhaps you have felt at times that life was so hard that death would be a relief. Naomi has entered this sort of living death.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Doug Green, "Ruth Lectures" class notes, (Westminster Seminary), 11.



## 5. Let's list Naomi's major losses in order.

Write 1st – 5th. As they answer, write down their answers next to the correct number. They will almost certainly miss the 4th loss, which every ancient reader would have picked up. And they might miss the 1st one as well. Use the next question as a hint.

1<sup>st</sup>: Famine. Lost food.

2<sup>nd</sup>: She left her friends and family in a foreign land. Lost home and relationships.

3<sup>rd</sup>: Her husband died.

4<sup>th</sup>:

5<sup>th</sup>: Her two sons died.

**After her husband dies, hope is not lost because both her sons marry. Then another tragedy strikes that for an ancient reader would have been as devastating as the death of a husband and two sons. What is missing when her two sons died?**

Children/grandchildren.

**So what has happened to her family?**

Gone. Disappeared.

**It is not a total loss. What does Naomi still have?**

Ruth and Orpah.



### Historical Background: The Shell of a Family

In the Ancient Near East, a wife moved into her husband's household, often living with him in a house adjoining his parents' (or a brother's). Brothers would live together, even after their father died, maintaining their inheritance as common property.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> "This underlies the stories of Abraham's dismissal of his concubines' sons (Genesis 25) and the request of the prodigal son. His older brother (and their father) had every right to expect that the brothers would remain together on their father's estate even after his death. It also underlies the statement in Psalm 133—the brothers are still together. These customs are well-attested in ANE legal documents, especially from Mesopotamia." Fred Putnam, personal correspondence with author, December 21, 2010.

This is a man-centered world. Men provide food, protection, and shelter. Three women without male relatives are very vulnerable. “Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi are headless. There are no husbands, no fathers, no sons to take a protective role.”<sup>3</sup> Naomi is left with the dead shell of a family.

## SECTION 3: Where Is God?

10 mins



### Literary Insight: Meaning of Names

- Elimelech = My God is King (eli = my god, melech = king)
- Naomi = Beautiful, pleasant
- Mahlon = Weak, sickly
- Chilion = Frail, pine away
- Bethlehem = House of Bread (beth = house, lehem = bread)
- Moab = Land of “Who’s your daddy?”

Ancient readers took names seriously. Your name really meant who you were. Late in our story, when Naomi hears her name on returning to Bethlehem, she responds to the meaning of the name. Traditional African cultures preserve this way of thinking of names. I visited Kenya in the mid-80s with a friend of mine, Steve Smallman. Steve is a big man, over six feet. When the shorter Kenyans met him, they all started laughing because he was not a Small Man. Growing up in the West, I’d never thought of the meaning of his name before.<sup>4</sup>

### Read

*Re-read the story the way an ancient reader would have heard the story, substituting Who’s-Your-Daddy?, God-is-King, Pleasant, Weak, Frail, and House-of-Bread.*

“In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of **The-House-of-Bread** in Judah went to sojourn in the country of **Who’s-Your-Daddy?**, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was **God-is-King** and the name of his wife **Pleasant** and the names of his two sons **Weak** and **Frail**. They were Ephrathites from **The-House-of-Bread** in Judah. They went into the country of **Who’s-Your-Daddy?** and remained there. But **God-is-King**, the husband of **Pleasant**, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both **Weak** and **Frail** died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.”

<sup>3</sup> Green, “Ruth Lectures,” 7.

<sup>4</sup> “So does this mean that their parents knew when they were born that they would die at a relatively young age? Does it mean that they were sickly babies, so their parents thought, ‘Why waste a good name of someone who’s probably going to die an infant?’ We do not know how and when children were given names that they used as adults. Were these adult names given at puberty or names given when a child was weaned (c. 2-4), which would have given everyone plenty of time to see his or her personality, temperament, and etc? Were they always given at birth, as Benjamin, Perez, Zerach, and Obed? How often were they assigned before birth, as in the cases of Ishmael and Isaac? We are working with very little data.” Fred Putnam, personal correspondence with author, December 21, 2010.

## As you heard the story with their real names substituted, how does it sound now? How does it sound when you hear that there is a famine in The-House-of-Bread and that God-is-King is dead?

- Mocking God.
- Ironic. *Explain this irony with the next question.*

## What question comes to mind as you hear “God-is-king” is dead?

God sure doesn’t seem to be king.



### Teach: All Exits Closed

Three barriers keep Naomi from exiting this tragedy:

1. Age. (Very possibly, her father is dead so she doesn’t have his protection.)
2. Remarriage. (It appears that marriage is not likely.)
3. No trade or means of support. (Although she does have land back in Bethlehem.)

So what are we left with? A poor, lonely old widow sits abroad in a foreign land.<sup>5</sup>

## 6. Who is the central character in this prologue and thus of the book of Ruth?

Naomi.

## 7. Is there any way that the family might be at fault in this situation?

*Various answers.*



### Teach: Is Naomi or Elimelech at Fault?

The text doesn’t bring any judgment on Elimelech or Naomi. Yet, in the larger context of the five books of Moses (there are numerous allusions to Genesis in Ruth), Elimelech’s family has left the Promised Land for a heathen nation that did not worship God.<sup>6</sup> Evidently, most other Bethlehemites did not leave. And in Moab, the sons married non-Israelites. One scholar writes, “Like Abraham’s move to Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20), the family’s move to Moab to escape the famine looks like a lapse of spiritual commitment.”<sup>7</sup> Another scholar writes, “This is a worst-case scenario. The family is dead outside of the land of promise.”<sup>8</sup>

Some scholars take exception to this and suggest that Elimelech is at fault. The text clearly mentions him taking his family out. Yet, Naomi appears to be a full partner in that when she laments in verse 21, “I left full,” there is no regret on her part. She doesn’t separate herself from Elimelech as Eve does with Adam.

Don’t forget. The text does not condemn Naomi in any way. It just tells the story. It is a perfect example of “judge not.”

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Hubbard, “The Book of Ruth,” *New International Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 97.

<sup>6</sup> Patterns that Ruth picks up from Genesis: Ruth 2:11—Genesis 2:24, 12:1, 31:13; Ruth 1:1—Genesis 12:10, 26:1; Ruth 3:1-9—Genesis 19:30-38; Ruth 2:20—Genesis 24:27; Ruth 1:6, 4:13—Genesis 3:16; Ruth 4:18—parallel pattern in Genesis genealogies. Daniel I. Block, “Book of Ruth 1,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 686.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The New American Commentary: Judges, Ruth* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 613.

<sup>8</sup> Green, “Ruth Lectures,” 13-15.

We zoom down from a 30,000 feet overview to a conversation at ground level between three women, the remnants of a family, walking along the road from Moab.

**Read: Ruth 1:6-10**

<sup>6</sup> Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup> So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup> But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup> The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. <sup>10</sup> And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.”

**8. What is the glimmer of hope in verse 6?**

- Food.
- The Lord has visited his people.

**9. What can you tell about Naomi’s relationship with her daughters-in-law from verses 6-7? There are several things.**

- It is a close relationship because they are going home with her.
- They have already decided to leave their entire social network, their families, and their countries to go with their mother-in-law.

**How many daughters-in-law would prefer to live with their mother-in-law over their own mom?**

Very few.



**Historical Background: Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law Relationship**

In traditional eastern cultures, the daughter-in-law is the servant of the mother-in-law. The daughter-in-law leaves her mother’s house and lives with her husband and his parents. This can lead to a tremendous amount of abuse. In many cultures this can be the most difficult family relationship. We joke about the mother-in-law/son-in-law relationship because it is safe to joke about. The real deal is too painful to joke about.<sup>9</sup>

**10. Given that background, what is remarkable about what Ruth and Orpah do?**

It is remarkable that Ruth and Orpah prefer their relationship with Naomi to their own mothers.

<sup>9</sup> Annie Wald, insight from email to the author, June 1, 2010.

## 11. What does that tell you about what Naomi is like as a person?

There must be something remarkable about Naomi.

## SECTION 5: First Conversation—Naomi Cares

15 mins

### 12. What is Naomi doing in verses 8-9?

- Blessing them.
- Thinking of their future. *Hint with this question: “Who is she thinking about?”*

### 13. What does that show you about her faith?

Her faith is robust and alive. Her faith empowers her love.



### 14. Look carefully at verses 8-9. Each verse is summarized by a one- or two-word blessing that she wants for them. What are the two words?

- Verse 8: “deal kindly...”
- Verse 9: “find rest...” *If they say, “husband,” ask them: What is it that Ruth and Orpah get when they get a husband?*



#### Gospel Connection: *Hesed* and the Gospel

When Naomi blesses Ruth and Orpah in verse 8 most translations say, “May the Lord **deal kindly**” (Ruth 1:8), but it is more accurate to say, “May the Lord do you *hesed*, as you have done to me.” *Hesed* is a word unique to Hebrew that combines two words in English: love and loyalty. Sometimes *hesed* is translated as “covenant love.”

- It combines commitment with sacrifice. It is one-way love. Love without an exit strategy.
- You bind yourself to the object of your love. So if the object of your love is cranky, you still love that person because your love isn’t based on the person’s response to you. If you’ve had an argument with your spouse in which you were treated badly, you refuse to retaliate through silence or withholding your affection.
- Your response to your spouse is entirely independent of how he or she has treated you.
- Love like this is unbalanced, uneven. There is nothing fair about this kind of love.
- This commitment-love is at the heart of Christianity. It is Jesus’ love for us at the cross, and it is to be our love for one another.

### 15. What is implied about Ruth and Orpah when Naomi says to them, “May the Lord show you *hesed*, as you have done to me”?

That they have been doing *hesed* with her. They have been caring for Naomi.

#### Besides *hesed*, what is the second blessing that Naomi wishes for her two daughters-in-law?

Rest.





### Literary Insight: Rest (Manoah)

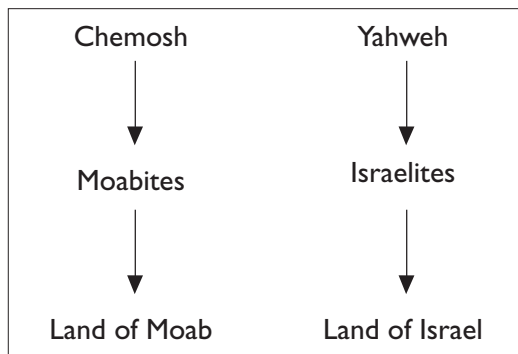
Write out both “rest” and “manoah.”

In the second blessing, Naomi asks that God would give them **rest**. The Hebrew word *manoah* is related to *Noah*, which means rest (Genesis 5:29). It means “a place of settled security” that in their world suggested finding a husband who could provide them with food and protection. Rest is the Promised Land. It is the place where *shalom* (peace) takes place. In a sense, we are all hunting for rest in Eden.



### Historical Background: How Religion was Organized

In the ancient world, gods were hard-wired to people groups and to particular lands. Winning a war meant that you could say, “Our god beat up your god.” Chemosh was strong in Moab, but weaker outside of Moab. Many people would have assumed that the same was true of Yahweh: strong in Israel, but not that strong outside the borders of the land. The Hebrew Bible, however, insists that Yahweh is not just a local deity, but is in fact the God of the whole earth.



Ancient Gods

## 16. Given how people viewed gods in the ancient world, what is surprising about Naomi’s description of the Lord in verses 8-9?

Naomi assumes that Jehovah is God in Moab as well. She believes that God is sovereign everywhere.

### So what are we seeing in Naomi’s life?

Faith.

## 17. How firm is Naomi in verse 8? What are her first two words?

Her first two words are commands “Go, return” (Ruth 1:8). She is not negotiating. She is telling them. *Most translations miss the double commands at the beginning of the sentence.*



### Historical Background: Wailing

The text says that all three women “lifted up their voices and wept” (Ruth 1:9). This indicates a very loud wailing that accompanies grieving in the Near East even today.

**18. In verses 9-10, what does Ruth and Orpah’s response to Naomi suggest about their relationship?**

*This is just more data on their relationship. We’ve already made this point, but I want them to see the depth in Naomi.*

- It has become very close.
- They love her so much that they don’t want to leave her.


**So what is the only good thing that Naomi has left in life?**

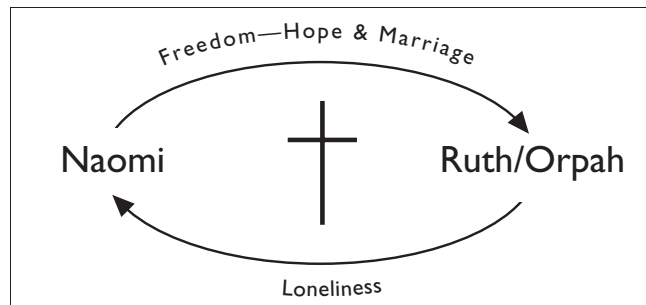
Her two daughters-in-law.

**19. What is Naomi doing with that bond? Why?**

*Teach what they don’t say.*

- She is breaking the bond. Naomi is taking what is left of her family, really her life, and destroying it for the sake of love. Because of love she has to push away the people who love her the most. She has to destroy the only thing she has left in the world, her only reason for living.
- She can’t change her life, but she can improve theirs.
- We are watching *hesed* in action.

 *Sketch the Gospel Exchange without “Freedom—Hope & Marriage” and “Loneliness” written and the cross drawn. Use the following questions to flesh these out, and write in the corresponding words and cross as you go along.*



*Gospel Exchange*

**20. What is Naomi giving to Ruth and Orpah?**

Freedom, hope, marriage, a future, a reason for living.

**21. What is Naomi taking on herself?**

Loneliness, poverty, hopelessness.

**22. What does this pattern of exchange remind you of?**

The cross. Jesus’ substitutionary death.

## Gospel Connection: The Structure of Love

Jesus' death for us on the cross is the very structure of love. He takes our place. In love, we do the same thing: we take one another's place.

## SECTION 6: Application

10 mins

*Please choose one of the following Personal Connections to focus on, or if you prefer to discuss several, split people into smaller groups. Have each smaller group pick one Personal Connection to discuss.*

### Personal Connection: Endurance

The book of Ruth is about *hesed*, about a covenant love that endures through hardship. It begins with a familiar scene of a couple who appears to not endure under hardship, who leave the Promised Land when things get tough.

Remember, God is not a Grinch. We are not to seek suffering. That is called asceticism. He often gives us a way out from suffering. We can leave our jobs. Sometimes we have to move. God wants *shalom* to be the pattern of your life. Nevertheless, he often calls us to the hard work of enduring.

**23. How have you seen God let you endure through hardship?**

**24. How have you seen others endure through hardship?**

**25. Is there a relationship or situation in your life where God is calling you to endure?**

### Personal Connection: Suffering

We don't know for sure if Naomi's suffering was self-inflicted (she and Elimelech lost faith and left Bethlehem), inflicted by someone else (her husband Elimelech lost faith), or whether it just happened. The book doesn't give a hint either way. That is a very helpful look at suffering. No matter what the source of the suffering, God uses it to bring us home, to shape us into the image of his Son.

**26. Can you think of a time when God used personal suffering in your life to bring you home to himself? Is God doing that now in your life? If so, how?**

 **Personal Connection: Mothers-in-Law/Difficult Family Relationship**

**27. Do you have a difficult family relationship? Perhaps it is a spouse, parent, sibling, or in-law. Describe it... *Wait for people's answers, then say:* As you go through this study, be reflecting on that relationship and how God might be prompting you to love.**

**28. When you think of *hesed*, of a love without an exit strategy, how might that affect this difficult relationship?**

 **Personal Connection: *Hesed***

**29. Describe a relationship in your life where God is calling you to or you have committed yourself to *hesed*.**

**30. What has (or will) doing *hesed* cost in this relationship?**

## NOTES



### **Historical Background: Moab**

- Religion: The god of the Moabites is Chemosh.
- Time: About 1100 B.C. in Iron Age I. David became king in about 1010 BC.
- Geo-Politics. The Assyrian Empire to the north and Egyptian Empire to the south were not militarily interested in the region around Israel during this time. This took pressure off Israel, but gave rise to more local, regional tensions.

The following events have recently taken place in Moab:

- The king of Moab tried unsuccessfully to get Balaam to curse Israel when they were passing through (Numbers 22-24).
- Then Balaam told women of Moab to entice the Israelite men to commit adultery (Numbers 25:1-9).

- Deuteronomy had a ten-generation prohibition on a Moabite entering the temple (Deuteronomy 23:3-6).
- Language. We know from the Moabite Stele (a stone tablet erected by the Moabite Mesha king about 200 years after Ruth) that the Moabite and Hebrew language are very similar.<sup>10</sup> *You can find a copy of the Moabite Stele on the Internet.*



### Historical Background: Mother-Son Connection in the Near East

A renowned psychologist posed this question, “Imagine that you’re in a boat with your child, your spouse, and your mother. It’s sinking, and you’re the only one who can swim. Whom do you chose to save?” When this question is asked of Americans and Western Europeans, 60 percent save the child, and 40 percent save the spouse. In most Islamic societies 90 percent of the male respondents save the mother. Why? A mother has virtually no identity outside of the home. “The only way they can live and get glory is through their sons (their daughters are also demeaned). What develops is an intense relationship between mother and son.”<sup>11</sup> That gives you some sense of the immensity of Naomi’s grief.



### Historical Background: Ephrathites (verse 2)

1 Chronicles 2:19; 50-51, 4:4 tell us that Caleb’s second wife was Ephrath. Ephrath’s son Hur was the father of Bethlehem. So part of one of the leading families of Bethlehem has died out.

## LESSON SUMMARY

*Use the space below to summarize in a few sentences what your group learned in this lesson and what captured their hearts. Read this out loud the next week as a short review.*

<sup>10</sup> E. Moore, “Ruth 2: Ancient Near East Background,” in *Dictionary* (see note 6), 687.

<sup>11</sup> Dianeoutu, “Putting Leaders on the Couch: A Conversation with Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries,” *Harvard Business Review* 82, no. 1 (January 2004): 64-73.