

Ruth

SPEAKER	Wes Neely
DATE	Sunday, May 4, 2025
PASSAGES	Ruth 1; Ruth 2; Ruth 3; Ruth 4; Leviticus 19
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:20:28 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Judges is the sickness; Ruth is the antidote. In a era when everyone did what was right in his own eyes, God worked through a bitter widow, a foreign woman and a landowner who kept the law anyway — and the rescue he engineered turns out, in hindsight, to be a picture of Christ redeeming Israel and the nations in one act.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Ruth sits deliberately next to Judges. Read four chapters after that long cycle of failure and you are meant to think: *this* is the plan.
- ◆ The names carry the story. Elimelech is “my God is king,” Naomi “pleasant,” Ruth “friendship” or loyalty, Orpah “back” — and Orpah is the one who turns her back.
- ◆ Elimelech is not the villain some readings make him. He stands for Israel, a good man with a tragic end.
- ◆ Naomi’s grief is real, not petulance. Every person closest to her is dead, and Wes admitted he had read her as overdramatic until he was old enough to know better.
- ◆ Boaz’s field is full of gleaners, which tells you he obeyed Leviticus when obedience cost him profit. That is the contrast with Judges in one image.
- ◆ The threshing floor is a marriage proposal in a legal shape we no longer use — not a romance and not, as Wes said, dating advice.
- ◆ At the gate Boaz names the land first and Ruth second, and the nearer redeemer folds. A redeemer who will not redeem is no redeemer.

- ◆ Ruth is Gentile, and she lands in the line of David and so of Jesus. The grafting in of the nations was written into the story centuries before anyone could read it.

► 1:20:29

Wes came in cheerfully claiming the assignment was about year-end numbers — a whole book of the Bible in one Sunday looks good on the tally. Then he admitted the real reason. Ruth is the book he returns to a few times a year the way other people rewatch a favorite film: “Whenever I read it, I just feel like warm and cozy inside and like everything’s going to be all right.” It is also, he said, the best example he knows of seeing Christ in the Old Testament — which has been the middle school’s theme from fall to spring.

1. Judges in ninety seconds, and why Ruth follows it

► 1:22:02

He got four words into chapter one — “In the days when the judges ruled” — and stopped, to the room’s amusement, for the only interruption he allowed himself. Israel had reached the land, unpacked, and immediately gone wrong: raids, oppression, a deliverer, a stretch of peace, then worse than before. The refrain of the book is that everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

“If Judges is the sickness, Ruth is the antidote,” Wes said. You finish that long catalogue of the cycle running down, and then four short chapters tell you what is actually going to break it.

2. Names, and a famine that opens like more of the same

► 1:23:11

“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... But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons... and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.”

RUTH 1:1-5 ↗

If you came expecting the antidote, this reads like more sadness and despair. The names do the framing. Elimelech means “my God is king” — and Wes pushed back hard on the common reading that he was faithless for leaving in a famine and got what he deserved. Elimelech stands for the nation: a

good man with a tragic end. Naomi is “the pleasant one.” The two sons’ names both run toward weak or frail, likely born in hard years. Ruth is friendship, loyalty. Orpah is “back.”

And the catastrophe is not sentimental. With every man in the household dead, three women in that world had no way to eat that did not depend on somebody else’s mercy.

3. One turns back, one clings

► 1:29:08

Naomi releases both daughters-in-law, arguing her own case bluntly: too old for a husband, and no sons to wait for (Ruth 1:12–13). Orpah kisses her and goes — turns her back, living up to her name. Ruth clings.

“Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.”

RUTH 1:16–17 ↗

► 1:31:05

They reach Bethlehem and the town is stirred: *is this Naomi?* She will not take the name. “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me... I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty” (Ruth 1:20–21). We said this is the part that slid past him for years — a Bible story where some people died and Naomi got cranky. Read it as an adult and it is nearer to Job. Ruth is an extraordinary companion, and still a small consolation against what Naomi lost. The book carries Ruth’s name; the redemption is Naomi’s family’s.

4. A field that keeps the law when the law costs money

► 1:33:40

Ruth goes out to glean and “happened” onto a field belonging to Boaz, of the clan of Elimelech (Ruth 2:2–3). Nobody sent her there. The practice itself comes from the law:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest... You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.”

LEVITICUS 19:9–10 ↗

► 1:36:32

Harvest sloppily on purpose, in other words — and that is bad for profit. A man doing what was right in his own eyes would tell his crew to pick up every dropped stalk. That Boaz’s field is full of gleaners is the whole character sketch. Then he goes further: bread and wine at the meal, and instructions to let her glean among the sheaves and pull grain out of the bundles for her (Ruth 2:14–16). She goes home with an ephah — roughly thirty pounds, after beating out the grain, which Wes noted is a startling day’s work.

He is doing it because he has heard how she stayed with Naomi. And the recipient is a Moabite. In Judges the Moabites are the people who show up armed to take Israel’s food; here an Israelite is handing it over by the sack. Naomi hears the name and blesses it: “This man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers” (Ruth 2:20).

5. The threshing floor

► 1:40:56

Naomi’s plan is precise: wash, dress, go down to the threshing floor, wait until he has eaten, note where he lies, uncover his feet and lie down (Ruth 3:1–4). Ruth answers with no questions at all.

“At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.’”

RUTH 3:8–9 ↗

► 1:42:58

“If you’re young and unmarried, this isn’t dating advice,” Wes said. In plain English: it is a marriage proposal in a legal form we no longer have. A widow in that world was not expected to remarry easily and had no way to farm land or start a business on her own; the law provided that a near relative of the dead husband could marry her and take on her care. Boaz says yes immediately — “I will do for you all

that you ask... you are a worthy woman” — and then names the obstacle: there is a redeemer nearer than he is (Ruth 3:11–13).

6. The gate, and how Boaz wins

► 1:47:06

Boaz sits at the gate with ten elders and puts the land first. Land in Israel did not change hands permanently; it belonged to a family and returned to that family. So buying Elimelech’s parcel looks like a straightforward lease — except that Naomi is old and there is no heir, so the land might never revert. It could quietly become the buyer’s forever. The man says, “I will redeem it” (Ruth 4:1–4).

► 1:50:34

“The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.” Then the redeemer said, “I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance.”

RUTH 4:5–6 ↗

Ruth is young enough to bear a son, and that son would legally carry Elimelech’s line and inherit the land. The nearer redeemer does the arithmetic, sees he gains nothing and loses something, and hands over his right. We called it almost a trick — the second point held back until the first had been accepted.

7. Christ in front of us the whole time

► 1:56:09

Here is why the legal details are his comfort food. Substitute as you read: for Boaz, Jesus. For Naomi and Elimelech, the nation of Israel. For Ruth the Moabite, the Gentiles.

The book opens with a Jewish family driven out of the land and returning broken and in need of saving — which is what would happen to Israel under Assyria and Babylon. They return to Bethlehem. They arrive at the beginning of the barley harvest, which is spring, which is Passover; the first fruits of that harvest were what you presented, and Christ is the first fruits in his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20). A redeemer with a prior claim will not redeem, so the one who loves does — purchasing the land and the woman together. The Gentile is grafted in (Romans 11:17), the abandoned family gets an heir, and both are saved by the same act.

► 1:58:33

And the son born to Ruth and Boaz is counted to Naomi. Out of that line comes David, and out of David, Jesus ([Ruth 4:17](#)). We kept circling the thing that undoes him about it: this was written centuries before Jesus, before anyone expected a Messiah who would work this way. “It was here the whole time in front of us” — obvious only in hindsight.

He closed on where the picture is going. We are Ruth in this story, and the marriage is not incidental to the meaning. What is planned for us is a wedding and a feast, the church as the bride of Christ. His prayer asked that these stories would stay with the room through the week — that God is working in our midst even when we do not understand it — and he sent everyone out with an invitation to read the Old Testament looking for this, “because it’s all there.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Judges 21:25
- Ruth 1:1–5
- Ruth 1:12–13
- Ruth 1:16–17
- Ruth 1:20–21
- Ruth 2:2–3
- Leviticus 19:9–10
- Ruth 2:14–16
- Ruth 2:20
- Ruth 3:1–4
- Ruth 3:8–9
- Ruth 3:11–13
- Ruth 4:1–4
- Ruth 4:5–6
- 1 Corinthians 15:20
- Romans 11:17
- Ruth 4:17

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Wes said Ruth reads as the antidote to Judges. Where do you see “everyone doing what was right in his own eyes” in your own life, and what would the antidote look like there?
2. Naomi asked to be called Mara. What do you make of a Bible that lets a faithful woman name her own bitterness out loud?
3. Boaz kept the gleaning law when keeping it cost him money. What is the equivalent cost you are being asked to absorb for someone else’s sake?
4. Ruth was a Moabite — from the people who raided Israel — and she is in the line of Jesus. How does that change how you read who is welcome?
5. Wes said the Christ-pattern is all through the Old Testament if you look. What passage will you read this week with that question in mind, and who will you read it with?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely teaches Hope Chapel's middle school students, where the theme from fall through spring has been reading Old Testament stories and asking how they point to Christ. He came to preach the whole book of Ruth in a single Sunday, and said it is one of his favorites — a book he rereads several times a year the way other people return to a familiar film. He had previously taught the group through Jonah.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcKCCzvu8b0&t=4828s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.