

OLD TESTAMENT FIGURES

Ruth

A famine in the house of bread, a man named “my God is king,” and why studying is not the same as reading

SPEAKER	Evan Ott
DATE	Sunday, January 16, 2022
PASSAGES	Ruth 1-4; Judges 21:25; Luke 15:11-32; Genesis 19:36-37; Numbers 25:1-3; Deuteronomy 25:5-6; Genesis 18:10-14; James 2:1-13
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:05:20 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Ruth is four chapters long and takes about fifteen minutes to read, which is exactly why most of us have only ever read it as a once-upon-a-time story about a loyal daughter-in-law. Slow down to three verses and the details start talking: a famine in the town whose name means *house of bread*, a man named *my God is king* leaving in an era with no king, a widow from the one nation Israel had the most reason to despise. Read at speed, it is a folk tale. Studied, it is God's whole plan to seek and to save, in miniature.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ♦ Reading and studying are two different activities, and only one of them makes the text stick. Studying is slower, and Evan's word for what it requires is *inefficiency*.
- ♦ We are separated from Ruth by time, language, geography and culture. That distance is not a reason to despair of the book; it is a reason to go carefully.
- ♦ The famine is the detail American readers lose. In Mark Allan Powell's survey of the prodigal son, 84 percent of Russian students remembered the severe famine in that story; six percent of Americans did.

- ◆ Ruth opens inside the world of Judges — no king, everyone doing what was right in his own eyes — and then a man whose name means “my God is king” leaves the land God gave him for Moab.
- ◆ Moab is not just somewhere a few towns over. Moab is descended from Lot and his daughter, a recurring enemy of Israel, and the place whose women drew Israel into the worship of other gods. “Ruth the Moabite” is a very different sentence from “Ruth the stranger.”
- ◆ Naomi came home expecting nothing and asked to be called Bitter. The book ends with the women of the town announcing that a son has been born to *Naomi* — met with provision as though she had never left.
- ◆ Boaz redeems an Israelite widow and a Gentile foreigner, not one or the other. The pattern is the point: the God who does that in Ruth is the God of the New Testament, not a different one.

► 1:05:21

Evan Ott came to the fourth message in the Old Testament Figures series having found, in preparation, an eight-hour lecture series on Ruth. “I hope you don't have lunch or afternoon or evening plans,” he said. What he actually did was cover the whole book in a few minutes, then go back and spend the rest of the message on the first three verses — which turned out to be the sermon.

The whole story, start to finish

► 1:06:50

“Ruth is an amazing story,” Evan said, “and we're going to cover basically the whole thing today. It starts in tragedy, shows an incredible picture of God's love and provision, foreshadowing and revealing his plans for blessing all nations.” The senior high had read it together the night before. It fits in fifteen minutes.

“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. These took Moabite wives... They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.”

RUTH 1:1-5 ↗

Hearing that God had visited his people and given them food, Naomi turns for home and tells her daughters-in-law to go back. She presses the point: she is too old to bear more sons for them to marry

— a sidebar, Evan noted, on levirate marriage, where a brother married his dead brother's widow to raise up an heir for him (Deuteronomy 25:5–6). Orpah goes. Ruth does not.

► 1:10:31

“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 ↗

They reach Bethlehem and Naomi asks the women of the town to stop calling her Naomi, which means pleasant, and to call her Mara — bitter. She went away full; the Lord has brought her back empty (Ruth 1:20–21). Evan flagged the oddity in passing: she says this while standing next to Ruth.

► 1:11:46

At that exact moment the narrator decides it is a good time to mention that Naomi has a relative named Boaz, a worthy man — and then goes straight back to the women. Ruth asks permission to glean behind the harvesters, and the field she lands in happens to belong to Boaz. “Crazy random happenstance,” Evan said. Boaz tells her to stay where she will be safe, and blesses her for what she has done for Naomi.

“The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

RUTH 2:12 ↗

He seats her at the table, feeds her, and lets her glean where the harvesters have already been. When Ruth brings her gleanings home, Naomi learns whose field it was and says he is a redeemer — a close relative with the responsibility of buying back land sold out of the family — and blesses him: “May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead” (Ruth 2:20). Evan did not let that pass: “Pretty big change from *call me Mara, bitter*.”

After the harvests, Naomi plans a permanent home for Ruth. At the threshing floor Ruth asks Boaz to spread his wings over his servant (Ruth 3:9) — the same wings from chapter two. He agrees, conditional on a nearer relative declining first. He gathers ten elders and the nearer redeemer, who in the Hebrew is *peloni almoni*: so-and-so, that guy. “Some translations put it *friend*,” Evan said, “but another one gets a little closer, calling him John Doe” (Ruth 4:1–8). John Doe yields. Boaz does not.

► 1:15:36

“We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman.”

RUTH 4:11–12 ↗

God enables Ruth to conceive. The women of the town praise the Lord, call Ruth better to Naomi than seven sons, and name the boy Obed — the father of Jesse, the father of David (Ruth 4:14–17). Then ten generations of genealogy, from Perez down to David (Ruth 4:18–22). The junior high, Evan mentioned, spent an entire day on that list.

Reading is not studying

► 1:17:57

“There's a lot to study in Ruth, and that's actually the first point I want to talk to us about,” Evan said. “It's almost like a meta point — not Facebook, Zuckerberg, not *that* meta.” The point was an encouragement to study the Bible, which he was careful to distinguish from a call to read it. “No hard feelings about reading.”

He made the case by demonstration. He replayed his own introduction, then reread [Ruth 1:1–3](#), then offered the version most of us carry away at reading speed: *once upon a time there was a man in Bethlehem, he took his wife Naomi and his sons to another land, then the man died*. Not wrong. Sounds plausible. Misses nearly everything.

► 1:21:14

Then the statistics, which he allowed was on-brand — when he is not being assistant pastor he is working on a PhD in statistics. The New Testament scholar Mark Allan Powell asked Bible students to study the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) carefully and then recount everything they remembered, once with American students and once with Russian students. Every single American recalled that the son squandered his inheritance; only 34 percent of the Russians did. But 84 percent of the Russians remembered something almost no American did — that there was a severe famine, that food was scarce. Six percent. “I'm pretty sure the margin of error in that includes zero,” Evan said, “so effectively nobody.”

Then the quiet turn of the knife: “How many of you didn't notice that I skipped the famine in my recap? Don't put your hands up.”

Three verses, slowly

► 1:23:56

So: in the days when the judges ruled. The book of Judges summarizes its own era in its last verse, which the senior high read aloud from the congregation in what Evan called a flash mob, and then repeated because nobody could hear it:

“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

JUDGES 21:25 ↗

What was right in their own eyes, as Matt had reminded the church the week before, was a long way from what was right in God's — the swirling-toilet-bowl picture, getting worse and worse. And into that era comes a famine. In Bethlehem. Which, the footnotes will tell you, means *house of bread*. A famine in the house of bread.

► 1:25:57

And while we are on the meaning of names: in the days when there was no king in Israel, the story opens on a man called Elimelech, which means *my God is king*.

► 1:26:35

Where he goes matters too. Moab is descended from the incestuous union of Lot and his older daughter (Genesis 19:36–37). Moab is a not-infrequent enemy of Israel. Moab worships other gods, and in Numbers it is Moabite women who seduce the men of Israel into worshipping them (Numbers 25:1–3). Put it together, Evan said: at a time when Israel is a lawless wasteland, there is a famine in the house of bread, and although there is no king in Israel, a man named “my God is king” decides to leave the land God provided and go to the fields of those people instead.

“It's a pretty far cry from *once upon a time*.” And it changes three things downstream. Ruth the Moabite reads nothing like Ruth the stranger from a few towns over. Boaz telling her in chapter three that the whole town knows she is a worthy woman lands much harder. And Boaz's own conduct — permitting gleaning when others in Judges-era Israel did not, having lived through a famine himself and every reason to squeeze the last drop out of his crop, redeeming Naomi when he plainly did not have to — stands out in sharp relief against the man the book opens with.

How to actually study

► 1:28:32

“That's just the first three verses,” Evan said, “and I didn't even recap all of them.” Studying is a different approach than reading. “It's slower. It requires inefficiency.” It means mulling and pondering, holding the big themes and the small details at once. It is helped by study Bibles and concordances, by people who have gone before — sermons (“gave you some free ones today”), books, classes like the Women of Hope books and breakfast — and by the people sitting next to you and in your small group, most of whom have studied something and would love to be asked. Try it, he said, “whether it's new, whether it's old to you.”

He was honest about the alternative, because he practices it. He is doing a Bible-in-a-year plan, likes the discipline of it, and calls it “a great way to see the whole story of Scripture” — and, full disclosure, he is behind on it not even three weeks into January. He is in Job at the moment and could give you the big picture of what he read three days ago and not much else. But a couple of years ago Gino taught a class on how to teach and interpret Scripture, and Evan had to prepare his lesson on the opening of James 2 (James 2:1–13), and he can still tell you far more about that passage. “That act of studying, of dwelling on one part of Scripture, is really helpful to make it stick — to help us to see all the things that are going on, and to remember the bigger picture.” His verdict on himself was the same: “I end up with much better recollection and understanding when I study rather than read.” If you do not know where to start, he said, start with Ruth.

The “and yet's”

► 1:31:44

Part of why we miss the famine, he admitted, is that “famine to me is when H-E-B doesn't have, like, paper towels or something” — and that his own experience makes him assume “it was just always famine in Bible times, like every single second. That's not actually true.”

Against that background — the world of Judges, the famine, Moab, the loss of her husband and both sons — Naomi's response to the news, which reaches her while she is still in the fields of Moab, is genuinely complex. She trusts the report that God has provided in Bethlehem and she goes. But the trust has limits: she seems to think she is in for a pretty bleak future. She is too old to marry, too old to bear sons for Ruth and Orpah, and even if she could, they could not wait that long. Evan left a small crater there. “It's not like God has ever provided a son to someone too old to have children — like, you know, someone named, I don't know, Sarah, something” (Genesis 18:10–14). Then he answered himself: “Well, you know. Fair point.” She returns anyway, and she returns bitter — fixed on the son who would have been the heir, the one who could have provided for her and for her daughters-in-law.

► 1:33:35

He flagged, and then declined to dwell on, a case worth chasing: that chapter one — and Ruth as a whole — is built as a chiasm, the structure ancient writers used to underscore a point, parallel halves

folding in to meet in the middle. There was a slide for it. “If you're interested, go back to the livestream and pause it, take a picture,” he said, “or talk to me afterward, I can point you to it.” What chapter one folds in on is Naomi: her primary concern is that she is indeed too old to conceive, that “the hand of the Lord has gone out against me” (Ruth 1:13), that she went away full and the Lord has brought her back empty (Ruth 1:20–21). But she did return, even while expecting nothing.

► 1:34:50

And yet Ruth, a Gentile Moabite, chooses her and her people and her God and sets to work providing for her. And yet Boaz walks in faithfulness and generosity, going well past what was required. And yet it is all made right when God enables Ruth to conceive, Obed is born to Ruth and Boaz, and the women of the town declare that a son has been born to Naomi — and that son is in the royal line leading to David, and to Jesus no less.

► 1:35:42

Naomi went along with Elimelech to Moab — “unclear how much agency she had; maybe a little, maybe a lot, maybe none” — lost nearly everything, and came back with the barest of hope, and was met with provision as though she had never left Bethlehem at all. Which, Evan pointed out, might remind you of a certain parable: someone lost, who decides he is no longer worthy to be called a son and asks to be taken on as a servant, expecting the worst, and is met with a celebration.

Ruth brought in, and the one who brought her

► 1:37:21

The other half is Ruth. God uses tragedy to bring into Israel a woman who most likely worshiped another god, and gives her a place in the royal line. Her position is not Naomi's, but she too is redeemed, provided for, brought into the fold — and “Ruth the Moabite” becomes Ruth known as worthy. “Do you hear any echoes,” Evan asked, “of what happens in the New Testament? The gospel being spread to the Gentiles. Maybe.”

Which points at Boaz, who was worthy, who was the kinsman redeemer, who made a way to provide for Naomi and for Ruth — Israelite and Gentile, not just the one or the other. “Remind you of anybody?”

The same God, the whole way through

► 1:38:13

Some critics of Christianity argue that the God of the Old Testament is a different God from the one in the New. Evan's verdict was two words: “A silly notion.” Four chapters, fifteen minutes, and by his own admission barely opened: “We've only scratched the surface of Ruth here today, I promise you that. But

hopefully you've been able to see that this story is this amazing, wonderful microcosm of God's greater story — his plan to seek and to save.”

“He really is good enough to bring back a sheep who is lost. He really is good enough to bring outsiders to himself. He really is good enough to use the one to bless the other. He really is good enough to provide for both of them. And even before Israel had King Saul — never mind King David — God was really good enough to reveal his fuller, better, amazing plan for salvation that we see in Jesus.”

Then the last thing he said before praying, which was not a conclusion so much as a question left standing: “He's good enough to trust. Will you?”

► 1:38:55

And then he prayed his own answer to it: “Lord, we thank you that you are good, that your mercies are new every morning. Thank you that your word is trustworthy, that you are trustworthy. We ask for your blessing, and we ask for the faith to trust you. Amen.” Prayer people came forward; everyone else was sent out to love and serve the Lord.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Ruth 1:1–5](#)
- [Deuteronomy 25:5–6](#)
- [Ruth 1:13](#)
- [Ruth 1:16–17](#)
- [Ruth 1:20–21](#)
- [Ruth 2:12](#)
- [Ruth 2:20](#)
- [Ruth 3:9](#)
- [Ruth 4:1–8](#)
- [Ruth 4:11–12](#)
- [Ruth 4:14–17](#)
- [Ruth 4:18–22](#)
- [Luke 15:11–32](#)
- [Judges 21:25](#)
- [Genesis 19:36–37](#)
- [Numbers 25:1–3](#)
- [James 2:1–13](#)
- [Genesis 18:10–14](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Read Ruth 1:1–5 aloud, then say back what you heard without looking. What did your summary leave out, and why do you think that detail dropped?
2. What do the names do to this story — a famine in the house of bread, a man called “my God is king,” a woman who asks to be renamed Bitter?
3. Naomi trusted God enough to go home and not enough to expect anything when she got there. Where does your own trust run out like that?
4. Boaz had lived through a famine and every practical reason to keep his harvest. What made him generous anyway, and what does that cost look like for you?
5. Evan said studying requires inefficiency. What one passage will you slow down over this week, and what will you move to make room for it?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Evan Ott is Hope Chapel's assistant pastor and high school pastor. He took the senior high through Ruth over several weeks in the fall and had them read the whole book together the night before this message. Away from the church he is working on a PhD in statistics, and has been a teaching assistant and taught a class at UT. He opened by thanking the worship team for a last-minute reshuffle, and admitted he was already behind on his Bible-in-a-year plan.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBOwy5WGFz0&t=3920s>

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.