



SESSION 3

RUTH: ALL-IN COMMITMENT

▶ **The Point**

Christ-centered living chooses commitment, not convenience.

▶ **The Passage**

Ruth 1:8-17

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

“For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

We’ve all sat through a wedding and heard those words spoken. Many of us have spoken those words ourselves. There at the altar, the starry-eyed couple makes a promise to each other, to the congregation, and to God. Though they say the words, most couples think their life together will always be better, or richer, or healthy. That kind of talk comes easy on wedding days when the sun is shining, everyone is beautiful, and the occasion is joyful. But the day will come when the circumstances change and that commitment is put to the test.

Marriage is just one form of commitment. The Christian life is filled with other commitments—to our friends, to our local churches, or even a simple promise we make to someone else. We live in a world where talk is pretty cheap, but loyalty and faithfulness should be second nature to those who follow Jesus. As His disciples, we must choose to live lives of commitment, not convenience.

▶ **The Setting**

The Book of Ruth is set in the period of the judges. The promised land experienced a devastating drought. A man named Elimelech moved his wife, Naomi, and their two sons from Bethlehem to Moab, east of the Dead Sea. In time, Elimelech died. The two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. After about 10 years, the sons died. Naomi was bereft of immediate family members, with only her daughters-in-law with her. The situation was precarious for the three widows.

What does the Bible say?

Kindness (v. 8)—The Hebrew word means “goodness,” “mercy,” “loving kindness,” “loyal (covenant) love.” It is close to the New Testament word for “grace.”

Ruth 1:8-17

⁸ Naomi said to them, “Each of you go back to your mother’s home. May the LORD show kindness to you as you have shown to the dead and to me.

⁹ May the LORD grant each of you rest in the house of a new husband.” She kissed them, and they wept loudly.

¹⁰ They said to her, “We insist on returning with you to your people,”

¹¹ But Naomi replied, “Return home, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands?

¹² Return home, my daughters. Go on, for I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me to have a husband tonight and to bear sons,

¹³ would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me.”

¹⁴ Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Follow your sister-in-law.”

¹⁶ But Ruth replied: “Don’t plead with me to abandon you or to return and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”

GET INTO THE STUDY



10 minutes

Notes



DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 83 of the PSG: **“Where do you see examples of extreme loyalty in today’s world?”**

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Engineer a moment of fun—and illustrate the way loyalty binds people together—by asking for two volunteers. Have the volunteers stand next to each other, with the right shoulder of one volunteer touching the left shoulder of the other. Then use bungee cords (or something else soft) to

bind the first volunteer’s right arm with the second volunteer’s left arm. Do the same with their legs. Finally, direct the volunteers to do simple tasks while bound together, such as walking around the room, picking up a chair, and pouring a glass of water.

Note: It will probably be best to select two male volunteers or two females. Or, you could ask a married couple to volunteer.

GUIDE: Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 84 of the PSG. Introduce the theme of choosing commitment by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read on their own.

GUIDE: Call attention to “The Point” on page 84 of the PSG: **“Christ-centered living chooses commitment, not convenience.”**

LEADER PACK: Use Pack Item 9, “Ruth,” to provide some background information on the Book of Ruth in general, and on Ruth as a person specifically.

PRAY: Transition into the study by confessing that commitment has become an undervalued principle in today’s world. Pray that God’s Word and God’s Spirit would guide each of you as you engage a story about biblical commitment.

RUTH

BOOK OF RUTH TIMELINE

- 1:1 – A famine in Judah forced Elimelech to take his wife, Naomi, and his two sons to go live in Moab. Elimelech later died here.
- 1:4-5 – Elimelech and Naomi’s two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Within ten years, both sons died, leaving Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah as widows.
- 1:8 – Naomi encouraged Ruth and Orpah to go back to their family in hopes of remarriage and gaining financial stability.
- 1:15 – Orpah chose to return to her homeland and family, but Ruth refused to leave Naomi.
- 1:22 – Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, Naomi’s homeland.
- 2:8 – Ruth meets Boaz, a wealthy relative of Elimelech, while gathering fallen grain from his harvested barley and wheat fields.
- 3:13 – Boaz promised to marry her if a closer male relative waived his own right to marry her.
- 4:9-10 – Boaz buys all of the property that was owned by Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion, thereby gaining the right to take Ruth as his wife.
- 4:13 – Boaz and Ruth were married.
- 4:13-17 – Ruth gave birth to a son, Obed. Later, Obed would become the father to Jesse, who would become the father of David, Jesus is a descendant of David.

Ruth 1:8-10 Commentary

Our commitments should be an expression of God's commitment to us.

[Verse 8] Early in her journey from Moab to Bethlehem, which was about 50-60 miles, Naomi had evidently considered the costly decision her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, had made. They were giving up relative security and the comforts of their families for uncertainty and the unfamiliar; they would be strangers in a strange land. Naomi graciously suggested that **each** of the two young widows return to her **mother's home**. Naomi did not imply Orpah and Ruth's fathers were dead. Likely, in a culture in which men had multiple wives, Naomi meant each specifically should go back to her mother. If Orpah and Ruth chose to turn back, Naomi would continue alone on a precarious journey. Naomi combined compassion for her daughters-in-law with courage to go on. If Naomi planned to walk, the trip would be physically taxing and extremely difficult. If she intended to join a caravan, her travel would be much easier. Either way, she faced some degree of peril as a woman unaccompanied by a man.

Naomi expressed a blessing with a note of certainty for her daughters-in-law. She prayed Yahweh, Israel's covenant God, would demonstrate **kindness** (loyal love, loving kindness) to the two younger widows. God had been loyal and gracious to His people; Naomi wanted Orpah and Ruth to experience God's goodness and graciousness—the same kind of goodness and graciousness the two women had demonstrated **to the dead** and to Naomi. The two younger women had been faithful and gracious to their husbands—Naomi's sons—and to their mother-in-law.

[Verse 9] Naomi continued her prayer for Orpah and Ruth. In the culture of that time, it was essential for women to have men to provide for and protect them. Naomi was confident **each** of the young widows would find **a new husband** who would provide **rest** or security for them. The levirate law not only was operative among the Israelites but also was a custom throughout the Middle East—an area that included Moab. The levirate law required a childless dead man's next of kin to marry the widow. The first son born to the union would be considered to be the dead man's son to continue his name or line. The young widows return home might provide them the opportunity to marry kinsmen from their families.

Naomi **kissed** Orpah and Ruth, then all three women **wept loudly** (wailed) in an expression of grief. Their separation would be devastating loss for each of them.

[Verse 10] Orpah and Ruth protested that they would not leave Naomi and return to their homes. They would accompany her to her **people** in Bethlehem. The two young widows' decision was not easy. They faced sharp changes dictated by a new culture. They would have to adapt to a new kind of life. Also, they would be leaving their god behind to enter a land with a different God. In that time, each land area had its own god; to leave that area was to leave its god behind and to enter territory thought to be ruled by a different god.



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Ruth 1:11-15

11 But Naomi replied, "Return home, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands?"

12 Return home, my daughters. Go on, for I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me to have a husband tonight and to bear sons, 13 would you be willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the LORD's hand has turned against me." 14 Again they wept loudly, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Follow your sister-in-law."

READ: Ruth 1:11-15 on page 86 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 88 of the PSG: **"What characteristics separate fair-weather friends from relationships that endure?"**

Note: When discussing this question, group members may talk about the characteristics of the relationships themselves, or the characteristics of the people within those relationships. Both are helpful.

GUIDE: Ask group members to read the bullet list on page 88 of the PSG to see three things Christians are called to give up in their journey of following Jesus.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

Between your preferences, your rights, and your plans, which one is hardest to surrender to Jesus? Explain.

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity "Commitment Trouble" on page 87 of the PSG. If time permits, encourage volunteers to share what level of commitment they hope to experience with God and others.



Using the list below, draw a circle around obstacles that have hindered your commitment to the important people in your life. Draw a square around obstacles that have hindered your commitment to God.

- | | | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Busyness</i> | <i>Fear</i> | <i>Uncertainty</i> | <i>Past experiences</i> |
| <i>Apathy</i> | <i>Self-doubt</i> | <i>Temptation</i> | <i>Selfishness</i> |
| <i>Expectations</i> | <i>Anger</i> | <i>Vulnerability</i> | <i>Other:</i> |

What level of commitment do you hope to experience with others? With God?

Ruth 1:11-15 Commentary

Commitment endures hard times.

[Verse 11] In answer to Orpah and Ruth's protest that they would not turn back, Naomi repeated her appeal. The phrase **my daughters** expressed tender affection and close relationship. Orpah and Ruth had become as daughters to Naomi. Her question concerning the reason they wanted to accompany her likely was designed to prompt them to realistically assess their situation. Unspoken but present under the surface was the implication of the difficulties the two young widows would encounter in the land of Israel, such as poverty and finding husbands.

[Verse 12-13] Naomi repeated her urgent plea that Orpah and Ruth **return home**. No doubt, Naomi's letting them go was an extremely difficult decision for her. Naomi strengthened her counsel that Orpah and Ruth return home where they had a good possibility of remarrying. Even if Naomi entertained the **hope** of finding a **husband** immediately and beginning the process of bearing **sons**, would the daughters-in-law **be willing to wait** until the sons were of marriageable age? Naomi's use of the word **no** (literally, "not") repeated her urgent counsel that Orpah and Ruth turn back and go home. Again calling the two women **my daughters** is evidence her tone was tender and kind. She loved them and had their best interests at heart. She did not want them to face what she faced. She described her life as being **bitter**. Literally, she said: "It has gone much more bitterly with me than with you."

Naomi viewed her situation as God's doing. She stated, **The Lord's hand has turned against me**. To Naomi, that God's hand had been against her indicated God now was her enemy. Naomi felt God had reached out to afflict her. She referred to the deaths of her husband and sons. Because she—and other early Israelites—viewed God as the direct cause of everything, she attributed the deaths to Him. Likely, she believed the loss of her husband and sons and her resulting dire circumstances were punishment for sins she had committed, even if she could not identify those sins. As a result, her life had become reduced to a wretched state. Emotionally, Naomi was hurting deeply.

[Verse 14] The women again wailed in grief. In a gesture of farewell, Orpah **kissed** Naomi. Ruth, however, **clung** to her mother-in-law. That is, she stayed close to Naomi in an expression of loyalty and affection. Her determined commitment also expressed her great courage.

[Verse 15] Naomi directed Ruth's gaze to Orpah as she turned back and began her journey home. Orpah was returning to her mother's house and to Moab's **gods**. The term **gods** could be singular and refer to Chemosh, the area's chief god. Scripture emphasizes the one, true God; He is the actual, sovereign God. The Scriptures recognize, however, that various people groups worshiped numerous gods. Naomi urged Ruth to go quickly to join her sister-in-law and accompany her back to Moab, where both widows would have the security of their homes and the best possibility of finding husbands. To Naomi's great credit, she stubbornly held their welfare as her priority. She was willing to deal with her bitter circumstances alone.

Ruth 1:16-17 Commentary

Commitment is demonstrated by our actions.

[Verse 16] Ruth refused to go with Orpah back to Moab. **Don't plead with me** has the sense of asking Naomi to cease her repeated requests that Ruth return home. The word "plead" basically means "to meet" either in kindness or hostility and then "to encounter with request." Ruth kindly asked Naomi to quit barraging her with urgings to return home. In Ruth's mind, to turn back would be to **abandon** or forsake Naomi. It would leave Naomi to face her bleak future alone and unaided. The phrase **to return and not follow you** defined abandonment for Ruth.

A great deal is wrapped up in Ruth's pledge that **wherever you go, I will go**. Ruth was going to a land unfamiliar to her, a place where she would be a stranger with no friends, knowing only Naomi. It was a land with a new God and new religious rules to follow. She would have to learn new customs in a new culture. Ruth didn't make her firm decision hastily and without thought. She was aware of what she faced. The Hebrew word for **live** basically means "to lodge" or "to pass the night." Figuratively, it means "to abide," "to remain." Ruth would put down stakes and settle wherever Naomi chose. She would share Naomi's life conditions. In effect, Ruth was severing ties with family members, extended relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Ruth would adopt Naomi's **people** as hers.

Arguably, Ruth's final declaration in 1:16 was her most significant pledge: **Your God will be my God**. She committed to worship and serve the one, true God. Previously, she probably had worshiped Chemosh, the chief God of Moab. She probably had some religious standards. Her care for and allegiance to Naomi were evidences of a basic goodness by which Ruth lived. Possibly, Ruth had seen in Naomi a deeply held faith in Yahweh and the exemplary lifestyle such faith produced. Perhaps she had been leaning toward accepting Naomi's God for some time, and in her pledge to Naomi solidified her decision. Her statement may have signaled that she embraced Naomi's faith fully.

[Verse 17] Ruth made clear her commitment to Naomi was binding and permanent. She would remain with Naomi as long as her mother-in-law lived. Then Ruth would live out her life in Naomi's land and **be buried** there. Ruth's commitment to Naomi had no conditions and no loopholes. Her commitment was life-long. With the use of an ancient formula, Ruth took an oath by the God she now worshiped. She asked that God punish her **severely** if she did not keep her pledge to Naomi of faithful, devoted companionship. Ruth identified closely with Naomi, and that identification issued in a lifelong commitment.

One application for us as believers is that Christ identified with us so we can be identified with Him. A second is that even as Ruth placed Naomi's needs before her own, so our love for Christ and people He has brought into our lives leads us to place their needs before our own.



A previous *Biblical Illustrator* article "Family Customs in Ruth's Time" (Spring 2001) relates to this lesson and can be found on the CD-ROM in the Leader Pack or can be purchased at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator. Other articles include "Old Testament Themes in the Book of Ruth" (Winter 2016-2017), "Moab: Its History and People" (Summer 2012), and "The Life Situation of Ruth" (Spring 1998).



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 90 of the PSG. Encourage them to consider these options for demonstrating commitment to others in the coming week:



Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Write.** Who has committed all-in to you and stuck with you through thick and thin? Take time to write that person a thank-you note for maintaining such steadfast commitment.
- ▶ **Pray together.** What’s one commitment you have been wavering on? Share that commitment with your group so they can pray with you.
- ▶ **Express commitment.** Think of one person to whom you’ve committed yourself. Make an appointment to meet with him or her to make sure there’s no doubt you are “all-in” committed to that relationship.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the Conclusion from page 90 of the PSG:

Commitment has mostly fallen out of style. It’s simply too hard—and too inconvenient—to commit ourselves to a person, a church, or even faith. But for Christians, this kind of all-in commitment is more than an ideal; it’s part of who we are. It’s second nature.

PRAY: Conclude by confessing that all of us are tempted by convenience. It’s easy for us to do what’s easy. Pray for the courage and strength necessary to keep your commitments as individuals and as a group.



Free additional ideas for your group are available at BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra