

A 6-WEEK BIBLE
STUDY EXPERIENCE



REDEEMER

God's Lovingkindness in the Book of Ruth

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Introduction

MY FASCINATION WITH THE BOOK OF RUTH began when I was learning to make my faith my own. Only two books in the Bible are named after women—Ruth and Esther—and I had a deep desire to learn about both of these “herstories.” I wanted to learn more about these books that centered women in the story and didn’t merely make them supporting characters.

As a young woman, I admired Ruth for her loyalty, her strong work ethic, and her kindness toward her mother-in-law. Ruth showed us what these character qualities looked like in real life.

The book of Ruth was a beautiful, fairy-tale story to me. I revered it as such. Of course, I had no idea that a few decades later I would find myself relating to Ruth in a much more powerful and personal way than I’d ever imagined.

The book of Ruth became real to me when I was widowed at thirty-seven. My husband was diagnosed with stage four melanoma cancer in May and soared to heaven that September, leaving me with three young daughters and a shattered heart. Just a few months after his funeral, I attended a Bible study at my church where they were studying the book of Ruth. God helped me find him anew through the pages of this book. Suddenly, Ruth was no longer a fairy tale to me. This was a living, breathing story of God’s heart for vulnerable women like Ruth and like me.

My heart was captivated in the first chapter when we were introduced to three widows—one older and two younger. I felt the gravity of their situation in a new way. I wept with these women. Their sorrow was my sorrow. I understood the bond between them in a much greater way because of what I had lost and endured. I learned to navigate grief alongside these women.

Like Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, I discovered that the grief journey is lonely and strange and unpredictable. Frequently, grief either strengthens or challenges our faith in God because it forces us to grapple



with suffering. When we grieve, we wonder about pain, death, and the afterlife. This is something we will witness from both Ruth and Naomi.

Ruth is not simply a love story with a predictable Hallmark plot and a kiss to seal the deal at the end. Ruth is a book about God's providence in the midst of tragedy. Ruth is about dealing with disappointment, traversing trials, wrestling with grief, and deepening faith. Ruth is about a courageous woman and a kind man who each illustrate for us the heart and character of God. And perhaps too often overlooked, Ruth is a story about God's heart for the marginalized.

The book of Ruth is not only for women, but it's a book that is important for women. Why? Because it reminds us that God is for women and that God shows particular concern for vulnerable women. Regardless of your circumstances and experience, you need to know that you matter to God.

Ruth is also part of history—God's story—the story of the Son of God who was sent to earth to be the ultimate Redeemer for us all. It's about a foreigner, an immigrant, a widow, a daughter, who is invited to return to Naomi's home, to Bethlehem, where God shows her unexpected lovingkindness, grace, mercy, and abundant provision. Ruth's story reminds us that God has offered redemption—not just for the Israelites but for all the nations and for all of us.

God showed me his abundant kindness on the gritty trail of my life. Through wild “just-so-happened” circumstances, God brought me through by his goodness and grace, and I'm living out the details of that next chapter today. Of course, all our stories are different, and our journeys are unique. So Ruth's story isn't an instruction book telling us how to navigate challenges and hardships. Instead, in our study of this book we'll discover that our good and great God sees us, knows us, and is in the business of redeeming the pain and brokenness in our lives. Ruth's story illustrates for us God's remarkable, redemptive love.

I'm excited to be able to explore that love with you during the next six weeks. May our time together grow and deepen our understanding of our Lord as we explore his care for the vulnerable and his wondrous love for us.



How to Use This Study

REDEEMER IS DESIGNED TO BE USED by individuals or small groups. I recommend you watch the teaching video as a group and then go into discussion and prayer together each week. For groups following this study, I recommend allowing at least forty-five minutes for discussion (or more for larger groups). Following your weekly time as a group, which serves as an introduction, there are five days of study and reflection to explore on your own. Each week of this study will focus on a different part of the book of Ruth.

As you're working through this study, I encourage you to go at your own pace. Let's be curious and open our hearts to new insights. The first four days will provide verse-by-verse reading, context, and teaching. Day five will be more of a reflective day, incorporating visual art, Scripture for you to meditate on, and space for prayer.

Friend, I'm eager to study this book with you. Grab your backpack, your Bible, and a water bottle. It's a dusty road, but this path leads us straight to Bethlehem and God's miraculous provision.



WEEK ONE



*Following the
Path to Bethlehem*

RUTH 1



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GROUP SESSION: THE TURNING POINT

Today we are going to talk about turning points in our lives. A turning point is when the action, the energy, or perhaps the circumstances change. The book of Ruth drops us right into a major turning point in the lives of our main characters.

WATCH



Take some time now to **WATCH** the video that accompanies the week one study.

READ

READ Ruth 1:1-22.

DISCUSS

1. What are some of the questions you have brought with you to this study of the book of Ruth?

2. In today's video, you heard about a turning point in my life and in Ruth's life. Is there a time that felt like a turning point in your life? If so, share with the group something about that experience.

3. One of the themes that emerges in the book of the Ruth is God's heart for the vulnerable. READ the following passages aloud and notice what they tell us about God and his heart of mercy. Take a few minutes to list some of those characteristics of God in the space below.

Deuteronomy 10:18-19

Psalms 146:5-9

James 1:27

4. Looking at that list, name something that either surprises you about God, or something that you struggle to accept about him.

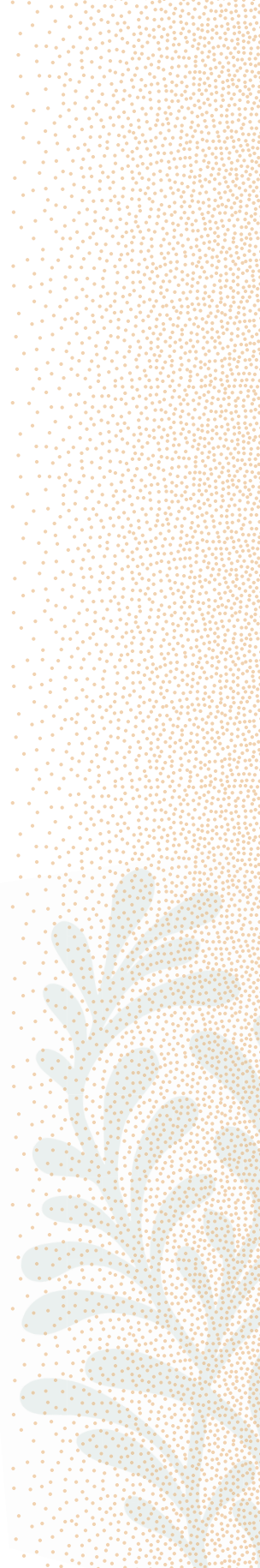


5. Who are the vulnerable women in your community?

6. What conditions led to their vulnerability?

7. What is one small thing you can do to honor these women today? Maybe it's looking someone in the eyes, stopping for a conversation, or taking time to learn more about these women in your community. Brainstorm some ideas together.

8. In the video, I shared about how Ruth starts out as helpless and moves toward hopeful. Are you or someone close to you facing anything in life that feels helpless? If you are comfortable, share this with others.



PRAY

As you close your time, I've included a few suggestions to guide you in prayer together:

- Thank God for who he is, naming those characteristics we read in Scripture.
- Ask God to meet you and others in circumstances that feel helpless.
- Ask God to comfort and provide for the women in your community who might be feeling helpless in different ways.
- Ask for courage and wisdom to honor the vulnerable women in your community.

If you prefer, write out a prayer in the margins or in a journal.

MEMORY VERSE**WEEK ONE**

Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."

Ruth 1:16-17

DAY ONE ♦ What's in a Name?

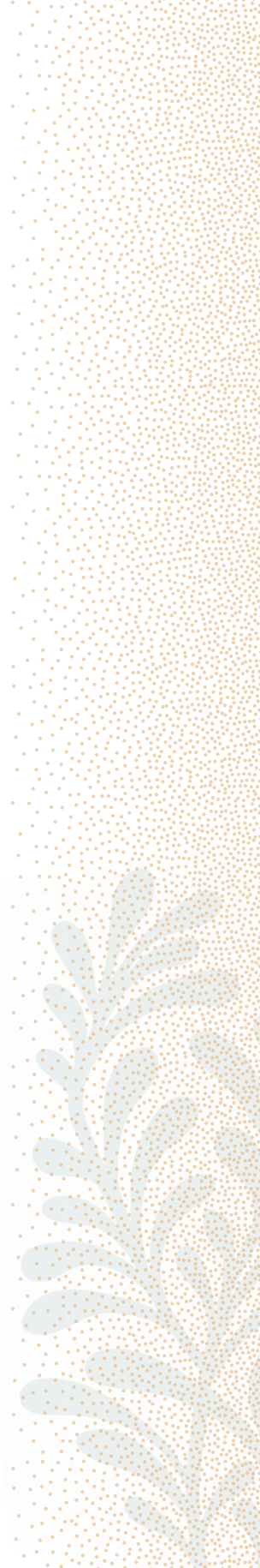
LOOK back over Ruth 1. How might you describe this chapter in a word or a feeling? What title would you give this chapter?

My first job out of college was as a newspaper reporter at *The Fresno Bee* in Central California. That led to a teaching opportunity where I walked students through the principles of investigative journalism. They learned that a top-notch article nails six questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?

Because the book of Ruth is exquisitely written, we want to start this journey with the posture of an investigative journalist. Answering these questions will enhance our understanding of the book of Ruth, the context in which these events take place, and the significance of Ruth herself in the greater biblical narrative.

REVIEW Ruth 1:1-5.

List the principal figures in this chapter and how they are related or connected.



In his timeless play *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare penned Juliet's famous protest: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Juliet's words try to say that names are not important. She loves Romeo whether he is a Montague or not. Her love for him is deep and pure. She doesn't care about his name or his family affiliation. Of course, through the play, we learn that it's not that simple. Names do matter in surprisingly deep ways. Names often carry our stories, our family legacy, our connection to our cultural heritage, and more.

In the book of Ruth and in the Bible in general, the meaning of names is significant. Names also gave an indication of who the person might become. *Naomi* means "my joy" and "pleasant" in Hebrew, while *Ruth* means "friendship." As we follow along in this story, we will see why both names are significant. *Elimelek* means "my God is King," while his sons are named *Mahlon*, meaning "sick and dying," and *Kilion*, meaning "puny and tiny." Sometimes biblical names are unfortunate and ironic, but they're worth paying attention to because they add to our understanding of the context.

REVIEW Ruth 1:19-21.

What does Naomi tell her people to call her and what does this indicate about the condition of her heart when she arrives in Bethlehem?

It's curious to me that even though Naomi (or, now, Mara) experiences so much hardship, she continues to call God "the Almighty," showing she still trusts him. Perhaps she was able to hold on to such faith



because she recalled another woman who endured much hardship and calamity in her life: Hagar. In fact, Hagar's predicament was so awful that she fled to the desert. And yet Hagar—who was entirely vulnerable because she was a female, a servant, and a foreigner—is the first person in Scripture to name God.

READ Genesis 16:13-14.

What name does Hagar give God, and what does that name mean?

God saw Hagar, had compassion on her, and was present with her in her time of need. If you don't know all of Hagar's story, I would encourage you to read Genesis 16 when you have time. Hagar's story reminds us of God's grace and mercy, especially in our most vulnerable moments.

God saw Hagar, and God saw Naomi. And God sees you and me.

As you close your time today, I've included some prompts for prayer. You can write your prayers here or in a journal.

God, in this season of life,

I feel most seen when . . .



I feel invisible when . . .

I am carrying these heavy burdens . . .

God, thank you for carrying these burdens with me. Thank you for seeing me. Keep my heart from bitterness toward you and others. Amen.

DAY TWO ♦ Moving Day

Let's explore a bit more today about when and where the book of Ruth takes place in the context of history and what instigated the family's initial move from Bethlehem to Moab.

READ Ruth 1:1-5 to refresh your memory.

What did you learn in these verses regarding the time period of the events we are reading about?



The book of Ruth occurred during the time of the judges (1375–1050 BC) after Joshua's death. If you have not read the book of Judges, it's a pretty rough period in the history of Israel—a time when “everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 17:6). The nation experienced a repeated cycle of following God, forgetting God, doing some pretty terrible things and suffering the consequences, and then begging God for help. Over and over again. And it's within this context that we meet Ruth.

According to the first five verses of Ruth 1, why did Elimelek and Naomi initially move their family to the country of Moab?

In *Finding God in the Margins*, Carolyn Custis James calls Elimelek and Naomi and their sons “famine refugees.” They left their home in Bethlehem in Judah and traveled about fifty miles to Moab seeking food. This would have been about a seven- to ten-days' journey on foot. In recent world history, we might liken their situation to the forty million people in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya who faced a food crisis in 2023. This region suffered because of more than five years of drought, the impact of Covid-19, and the Russia-Ukraine war. The devastation was far reaching and many fled to other lands in search of food.

Moving is hard. Most of us will not have to flee our homes due to famine or war, but many of us have experienced the challenges that come with moving to a new location. If you've ever had to box up all your

belongings and move to a new house, apartment, dorm room, city, or even a new country, then you know what I'm talking about. There's the physical work of packing up everything—your clothes, furniture, books, and perhaps decor—and then there's the emotional work of leaving a place that might hold memories.

I've moved probably a dozen times in my life. I still remember when I was eighteen and made my first big solo move from my parents' house in Chicago to my first dorm room in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It felt like a big deal to venture out on my own and discover life with roommates who were not family members.

I've made some even farther moves, like when I moved to Costa Rica for a semester in college or when my husband Ericlee and I first moved our family from California to Haiti to help direct a nonprofit organization.

My hardest move was a short move across town after Ericlee graduated to heaven. My daughters and I stayed in the house where he died for almost a year before I took the big step to buy a new house. Sorting, purging, and packing up all of our things from more than a decade of marriage was difficult. I cried a lot of tears as I left that home on Harrison Street full of so many memories—both good and hard.

Think of the moves you have experienced. What were the challenges of moving somewhere new?

Let's take a moment to go back to the beginning of Israel's history, which also involved a couple making a huge move. Read Genesis 12:1-8. This takes us all the way back to when God called Abram to pick up and move his family and follow him. God makes some important promises to Abram in this passage.

What are the three main promises God makes to Abram?

The promises listed here are known as the Abrahamic covenant. A covenant in the Bible is a promise made between two parties that is grounded in a relationship of trust and commitment. God made these promises so that Abram would trust and follow him. God also established the expectation that Abram and his family would follow his leading and commands.

The difference between Abram and Elimelek is that God called Abram to move with his family. We don't see any evidence that Elimelek was following God when he moved to Moab in search of provision. Let's pay attention to how this detail changes the course of Elimelek's life and his family's future.

The book of Ruth helps us explore themes such as displacement and homelessness. Ruth also illuminates finding hope in a foreign land and finding peace in the unexpected, unwanted, and unplanned. In fact, the book of Ruth reminds us of God's unfailing faithfulness to his people, and the remarkable love of a Redeemer.

READ Ruth 1:6-7.

These verses hold a sliver of hope that causes Naomi to make a life-altering choice. What key piece of news does Naomi hear in the fields of Moab? What does she decide to do?

Change can be hard, especially when it requires a move. We must grieve the past before we can step into the future. Sometimes change can also bring new opportunities and uncover new solutions we might not have imagined in our previous predicament.

Friend, no matter what challenges and change you are facing today, hold on to hope. Let the book of Ruth be an invitation and encouragement to you that God is always working behind the scenes on your behalf. Pray this prayer with me:

Dear Lord,

I am grieving . . .

As I acknowledge these things, I pray for healing.

I trust you with the present and the future.

Help me to hold on to hope and see the ways you are at work in my life and in the world.

Amen.

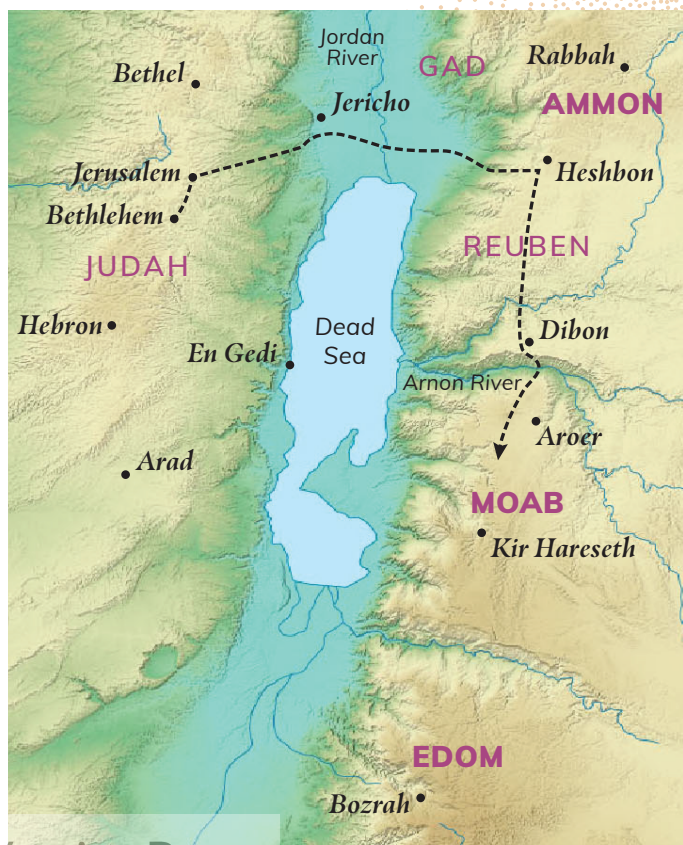


DAY THREE ♦ From the Wrong Side of the Tracks

A few years ago, we took the family to go see the new movie version of *West Side Story*. This has been one of my favorite musicals for a long time. I've seen it various times on the stage and the different movie versions. The story is set in the mid-1950s in the Upper West Side of Manhattan in New York City. The musical depicts the rivalry between two street gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, who are warring for control of the neighborhood. The plot thickens when Tony, one of the Jets, falls in love with Maria, who is from the wrong side of the tracks, and whose brother, Bernardo, is the leader of the Sharks.

The 2021 movie version was a lot more gritty than other versions I've seen. It underscored the deep rivalry and violent fighting that ensued between these gangs. Because it is a modern adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* also has a tragic ending. Despite all the festive dancing and music, viewers are left thinking about the social problems that led to such feuding between cultural groups. Although the context is vastly different, the book of Ruth is also a window into two contrasting cultures—the Moabites and Israelites—and what happened when they rubbed up next to each other.

Take a few minutes to look at the map of this region. Note that the country of Moab was to the east of the Dead Sea (near modern-day Jordan), while the village of Bethlehem was situated in the region of Judah west of the Dead Sea. The sea served as the proverbial train tracks in this story. It would have been a long journey to travel from one side to the other.



The Israelites and the Moabites, like the Jets and Sharks, had a sordid history that began hundreds of years before the time of Ruth with Abraham's nephew Lot and his daughters. Lot traveled with Abraham to the Promised Land of Canaan. There came a point when the wealth of the two men—primarily livestock—became too much for the land to support. Abraham generously offered Lot first choice of the land. Lot chose the fertile Jordan Valley and settled in Sodom.

Eventually, God destroyed the city of Sodom because of the rampant sin of the people there. Lot's wife disobeyed God and became a pillar of salt when she looked back on the city. Lot and his daughters fled to the hills of Zoar in fear. They had already witnessed the destruction of the city where they grew up and the death of their mother.

READ [Genesis 19:30-38](#).

What happened with Lot and his daughters and how did they take matters into their own hands?

This was certainly not the way God intended to fulfill his promises and multiply his family. Lot's daughter had a son named Moab, which means the Moabites were descendants of that incestuous union between Lot and one of his daughters. Through history, the Moabites worshiped other gods and were hated by the Israelites.

Later, we read in the book of 1 Kings that King Solomon took wives from Moab and worshiped other gods with them, which eventually had huge ramifications on his kingdom.



READ 1 Kings 11:1-8, 11.

What specifics do you learn about Solomon's choices in this passage and what were the consequences?

Let's take note that God was most angry about Solomon's disobedience and choice to worship false idols with his numerous wives. Solomon's loyalty to God waned over time as he engaged in idol worship. He even goes so far as to build a high place for Chemosh, the god of Moab who demanded child sacrifice. This compromise cost Solomon the kingdom. The children of Israel were warned repeatedly against intermarrying and participating in these pagan practices. God required loyalty and faithfulness from his chosen people because he had a greater plan for bringing all of the nations to himself.

According to Ruth 1:2, Elimelek and Naomi were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They were descendants of Ephraim, the second son of Joseph. As Hebrews, they were raised differently from their pagan Moabite counterparts. They worshiped Yahweh, the one true God, who cared about them in a personal way. We can only imagine how difficult it was for them to move to Moab and fit in with the locals.

Somehow, both of Naomi's sons marry Moabite women. We do not read any details in the text about how these marriages were arranged crossculturally. Naomi probably never imagined her beloved sons marrying Moabites, especially given the animosity between the two groups.



To add insult to injury, there is no mention of children or grandchildren in the ten years Naomi lived in Moab, so we can assume both Ruth and Orpah were childless. As author Carolyn Custis James explains in her book, *Finding God in the Margins*, “The fact that not a single pregnancy is mentioned within those ten years suggests a whole new layer of suffering afflicted this family. Given a woman’s normal monthly menstrual cycle, Naomi endured with her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, as many as 240 increasingly agonizing disappointments.”

Name a disappointment you experienced that dragged on for a season or even years. How has this disappointment affected your life or your heart?

Naomi suffered one loss after another. She was ripped from her hometown and community. She faced the deaths of her husband and two sons, which would have inflicted a terrible grief. But there were also secondary losses for Naomi. When the men in Naomi’s life died (the primary loss), Naomi then lost her sense of security and income. In a patriarchal culture, this would have also been the end of Elimelek’s line because there was no male to carry his name forward. So not only would Naomi have lost her status and security, but she tasted hunger, heartache, and hopelessness as a result. Naomi has been compared to Job in the Bible because of her profound losses.

We can think of secondary losses as dominoes, where one loss triggers another. The loss of a loved one, or even a relationship or a job, are difficult in and of themselves. But the effects of those losses often mean the end of dreams, ambitions, or opportunities. Perhaps feeling a loss of identity can be the most unnerving secondary loss we experience.



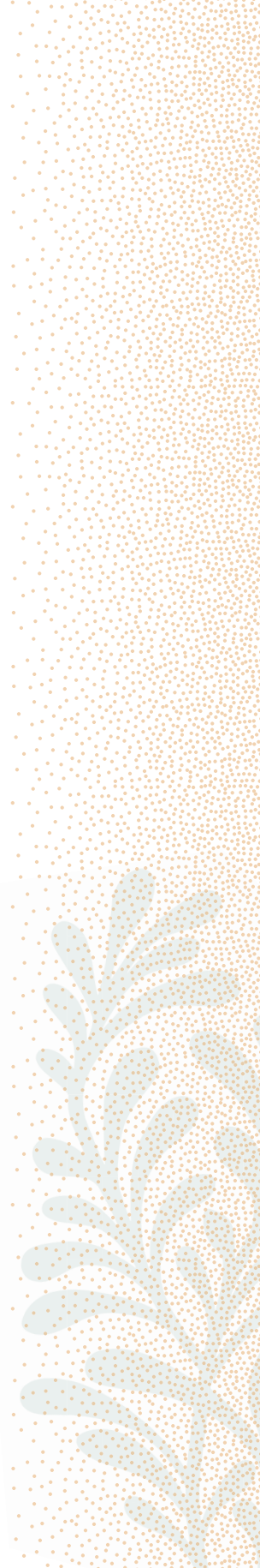
We all have seasons in our lives when we must face grief and loss. Like Job and Naomi, we have the choice to cling to hope or curse God. Tomorrow we will read more about how God nudges these women toward the path to hope. Take some time to think about some of the losses and secondary losses you have endured in your life. Naming our losses and offering them up to God can help provide a first step on the pathway to healing.

As you close your time today, here are some prompts for prayer with space for writing if you choose.

God, I realize as I look back on my life that I have endured several losses, including . . .

I have experienced some secondary losses too, like . . .

God, thank you for listening and caring about my losses. Open my eyes to ways I can move forward from my disappointments and losses. Lift my head and heart today so I do not allow them to taint my attitude. Amen.



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