

# *Friends Are Not Self-Seeking*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

2<sup>nd</sup> in a five-part series

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*Proverbs 17:17 (NRSV)*

<sup>17</sup> A friend loves at all times,  
and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.

*Ruth 1:6–18 (CEB)*

[Naomi, with her husband and sons had moved to Moab to escape famine. There, the sons married. Sadly, Naomi's husband and sons died in Moab. After their deaths, Naomi decided to return to Israel, her home.]

<sup>6</sup> Then she [Naomi] arose along with her daughters-in-law to return from the field of Moab, because while in the territory of Moab she had heard that the LORD had paid attention to his people by providing food for them. <sup>7</sup> She left the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law went with her. They went along the road to return to the land of Judah.

<sup>8</sup> Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, "Go, turn back, each of you to the household of your mother. May the LORD deal faithfully with you, just as you have done with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup> May the LORD provide for you so that you may find security, each woman in the household of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

<sup>10</sup> But they replied to her, "No, instead we will return with you, to your people."

<sup>11</sup> Naomi replied, "Turn back, my daughters. Why would you go with me? Will there again be sons in my womb, that they would be husbands for you? <sup>12</sup> Turn back, my daughters. Go. I am too old for a husband. If I were to say that I have hope, even if I had a husband tonight, and even more, if I were to bear sons—<sup>13</sup> would you wait until they grew up? Would you refrain from having a husband? No, my daughters. This is more bitter for me than for you, since the LORD's will has come out against me."

<sup>14</sup> Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth stayed with her. <sup>15</sup> Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law."

<sup>16</sup> But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. <sup>17</sup> Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you." <sup>18</sup> When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her about it.

*Friends are patient, friends are kind. Friends do not envy, friends do not boast, friends are not proud. Friends do not dishonor friends, friends are not self-seeking, friends are not easily angered, friends keep no record of wrongs. Friends do not delight in evil but rejoice with the truth. Friends always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere.*

In this series, we are looking at the Bible's teachings about friendship. You might think that this would mean looking at various biblical "principles." But it does not. God doesn't really teach us in that way. The Bible is largely a book of stories meant to be understood within the larger story of God's work in this world. So we'll be looking at biblical stories of friends, considering how we can find ourselves in these stories and learn something about the meaning of true friendship.

*The story of Ruth and Naomi*

The story of Naomi (and it is Naomi's story despite the name of the book) is about the power of God, working through Ruth's faithful friendship, to redeem Naomi from bitterness and despair.

Naomi and her husband were living in Israel when a famine drove them to leave their home and head southeastward to Moab. There they made a new home, where all was well until Naomi's husband died. Yet even after Elimelech's death, Naomi was all right. Though a widow, she had two able sons to provide for her and to protect her. Her sons married local women, Orpah<sup>1</sup> and Ruth.

When did Ruth and Naomi live?

Ruth and Naomi lived more than 3,000 years ago during the period in Israel's history known as the time of the judges. It was a violent age, as Israel sought to complete its conquest of Canaan, the land promised them by God. The Israelites had no king, for God was to be their king. Instead, the chief leaders were known as judges, and their stories are told in the OT book of Judges.

The time of the judges was also marked by great faithlessness, as the Israelites descended down a spiral that would lead them further and further from God. The last verse of Judges is a biting indictment of the Israelites: "In those days there was no king of Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

The faithfulness of Ruth and Naomi, to God and to each other, is in stark contrast with the faithlessness of Israel.

But ten years later, tragedy struck Naomi again. Now, Naomi's sons were dead and the three widows were left alone. In the ancient world, being without a husband or sons was about as big a tragedy as might befall a woman.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, Naomi decided to head back to Israel, hoping to find family and rebuild her life. Naomi was accompanied by her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But, taking pity on them, Naomi urged them to turn around and stay in Moab. So Orpah headed home . . . but Ruth did not. Instead, Ruth pledged to follow Naomi, going where Naomi goes, worshiping Naomi's god as her own.

Ruth was ready to leave her home and her family to be a companion and comforter for her mother-in-law. Talk about putting someone's interests ahead of your own (Philippians 2:4). It would have made Paul proud. I wouldn't be surprised if he used this story himself to talk about selflessness, for true friends do not insist on their own way. Even this was not the end of Ruth and Naomi's story, but only the beginning.

Upon their arrival in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem, these two unlikely friends set about the rebuilding of their lives. Given all she had been through, it is no surprise that Naomi was deeply embittered: "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty," she told the women in Bethlehem. Naomi, whose name meant "sweetness," even wanted to take a new name, Mara, based on the Hebrew word for "bitter." Naomi was in great need of restoration and renewal – she needed to be redeemed.

Despite Naomi's despair, Ruth decided to go into the fields, gathering what grain was left by the harvesters, hoping that someone would notice her. Someone did. Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's, not only noticed Ruth, he eventually married her. How their union comes about is a touching, and somewhat complicated, story that consumes much of the book.

After the marriage, we are told that "when they came together, the LORD made her conceive and she bore a son" (Ruth 4:13). The women of Bethlehem knew that this child, Ruth's son, would be Naomi's redeemer, legally bound to look after her in her old age, saving her from the ravages of widowhood. But this was no mere legal matter. We

<sup>1</sup>Oprah Winfrey tells the story that she was named after Orpah in the book of Ruth, but that her parents misspelled the name. (Isn't it amazing the things you learn in these studies.)

<sup>2</sup>In ancient cultures, widowhood was greatly feared. Women simply had to be under the protection of men; a woman's social standing was derived entirely from her husband's. One of the remarkable features of ancient Judaism was God's insistence that his people care for widows and orphans. Even in Jesus' day, widows didn't have a much better lot; e.g., we meet Tabitha whose life was devoted to caring for widows (Acts 9:36-43).

understand this when we are told that “Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.” This tiny infant, a gift given to Ruth by God, is a gift also given to Naomi, a gift that will make her whole.

But even with this, the story is not complete. The infant, cuddled and hugged by Naomi, would grow to be the grandfather of the great King David, from whose family would come the Messiah, the one who would redeem all God’s people, making them (us!) whole.

### Redemption

The words “redeem” or “redeemer” are used more 20 times in this brief story. Redemption refers to the process of restoring what has been lost or stolen or captured. In the ancient world, a kinsman-redeemer was one who recovered property or prestige that the family had lost.

One important portrait of God woven throughout the Bible is that of Holy Redeemer. The focus here is on *freedom*. God was Israel’s strong Redeemer, who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. In the story of Ruth and Naomi, Boaz is the kinsman-redeemer of Ruth. Ruth’s child will be the redeemer of Naomi. But we need to see God at work in this story. Ruth, and her friendship with Naomi, is God’s instrument used to accomplish Naomi’s redemption. For Israel, what God had done for Naomi, he would do for his people.

### *A selfless friend*

One could hardly find two people less likely to be friends. Ruth and Naomi were from different lands. They worshipped different gods. They were separated in age by a generation. Yet touched by tragedy and by God’s grace, they found friendship, restoration, and renewal in each other and in God.

What is the key to the story of Ruth and Naomi? It is Ruth’s readiness to put Naomi’s interests ahead of her own. Ruth is a signpost to the way of Christ. Her actions demonstrate Paul’s hope for the Christians in Philippi.

Paul cared deeply for each church that he started and, surely, he hoped that they felt the same way towards him. In his letter to the Philippians, he told them flat out what would make him happy – “Have the same thoughts, share the same love, be of one soul and mind . . . don’t do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourself . . . look out for one another’s interests, not just your own” (from the Good News Bible).

Sometimes the Bible challenges our understanding – but not here. There is nothing confusing or ambiguous in Paul’s words or Ruth’s actions. The challenge lies not in the

understanding, but in the doing. We are called to lives of selflessness and sacrifice. Not only are we to “do unto others as they do unto us,” we are to put everyone ahead of ourselves. Indeed, this is the very meaning of love in the New Testament. True love is not merely a feeling, it is action. Love is not abstract; it is concrete. God loved us so much that he gave his only Son to die on a Roman cross. It is in the shadow of the cross that we learn about love and friendship: love is sacrifice and self-giving. It is putting others ahead of ourselves.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by reflecting upon and talking about friendships that you’ve formed in your own life. How many times have you been surprised by the people with whom you’ve developed friendships? If you look back over your own life, what friend was most different from yourself? Who has been your most “unlikely friend”? What do you think led to those friendships? Did they arise out of crisis or difficulty? How might tragedy or crisis lead to the development of deep bonds?
2. Today’s story is one of redemption, salvation, and reversal. In what ways might our friends be the means of our own redemption – whether in the sense of helping

us come to trust Jesus Christ or the reversal of life's difficulties? You might share some stories of how your friends have helped you through difficult times or how you might have done that for a close friend of yours.

3. In his book, *The Friendship Factor*, Alan McGinnis writes that loyalty and devotion are essential to building a life-long friendship. When Ruth refuses to stay in Moab, insisting that she go to Israel with Naomi, Ruth is being loyal, not only to Naomi, but more importantly, to God. Their relationship endures the tough times. Realize that Ruth was neither legally required nor customarily expected to stay with her mother-in-law. How important do you think loyalty is to a friendship? What does it really mean to be a loyal friend? When do we know that the loyalty has become blind?

## Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on Ruth and God's way*

**Monday, Ruth 1** Naomi and Ruth end up back in Israel – together.

**Tuesday, Ruth 2** Ruth meets Boaz in a field of grain.

**Wednesday, Ruth 3** Ruth meets Boaz on the threshing floor.

**Thursday, Ruth 4** Ruth marries Boaz and gives Naomi a son.

**Friday, Philippians 2:1-11** The ultimate expression of selflessness.

**Saturday, Philippians 2:19-30** Two friends of Paul who have dedicated themselves to Paul's ministry.

An archive with more than 700 of these studies can be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *The Messiah Comes to Middle Earth*

There are still a few spots open for the October 2018 cruise to Israel with Robert Hasley, Pam White, and Scott Engle. For more information go to [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org).