

LESSON 3

LABELED BY OUTSIDERS RUTH'S JOURNEY



The first time we meet Ruth in the Bible (Ruth 1:4), she is a new bride. In the historical fiction novel, *Less Than a Widow*, we meet her as a young child. In both accounts, the outsiders of birth, culture, traditions, and circumstances labelled Ruth a LOSER. She is given this designation due to situations over which she has no control.

An abusive childhood such as the one the author suggests Ruth experienced in *Less Than a Widow* would certainly leave emotional, physical, and spiritual scars. As an adult, the stares, jeers, and insinuations from Ruth's peers in both Moab and Bethlehem could act as further affirmation in her mind that her LOSER label is actually the truth, that she truly is worth LESS THAN everyone around her.

Even though we live in a time thousands of years after Ruth, the truths of humanity haven't changed. Many of us have experienced a dead-end in our lives, been caught up in an impossible situations, been afraid, felt hopeless, or wondered where we would find the strength to continue?

WHERE DO LABELS COME FROM?

Generally speaking, there are three human avenues from which a negative label might attach to a person:

- from OUTSIDERS (culture, tradition, circumstances).
- from INSIDERS (family, friends, acquaintances).
- from OURSELVES (our belief of the labels given to us).



Ruth was labeled a LOSER by the OUTSIDERS of culture, tradition, and circumstances:

- Ruth’s looks—a blending of races—set her apart as different in both Moab and Bethlehem.
- As the child of a slave in Moab, Ruth was property, not a person. Later, as a member of a Hebrew household in Kir Hareseth, Moab, she was a misfit in her own country. Ruth was also not welcomed in Bethlehem because she was an immigrant from an unfriendly nation. (See: *Less Than a Widow*, pages 49-54)
- In the patriarchal times in which she lived, Ruth was labeled LOSER because she did not bear any children—more importantly, any sons—in the ten years of her marriage to Mahlon. (See: *Less Than a Widow*, pages 131-133)

With so many strikes against Ruth, the LOSER label may seem appropriate, at least in the culture and time in which she lived. What chance did she have to be anything else?

EXERCISE

- Do you have recurring negative or discouraging thoughts about yourself that you are willing to share?
- What names do you call yourself?
- What experiences caused OUTSIDERS (culture, tradition, circumstances) or INSIDERS (family, friends, acquaintances) to attach this label to you?
- Are these LABELS okay with you or would you like to do something to change them?

Ruth refused to accept the hopelessness of the LOSER label. Instead, she chooses to believe the replacement label that Elimelech and Naomi affixed to her: YOU ARE A CHILD OF YAHWEH. Later when Naomi lost hope, Ruth persevered.

“Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.”

~Ruth 1:16 (NLT)

PATRIARCHY AND LABELS

Patriarchy literally means “the rule of the father” and historically refers to autocratic rule by men. Today it generally refers to social systems in which men hold the positions of power in both organized society and individual relationships. The vast majority of women wear a LESS THAN label and live in subordination to men, with a husband, brother, or son serving as total authority over his wife and children.

The realities of women in patriarchal societies—in ancient times and today—may be very different than the way you were raised. Negative categorization and labeling continue in the Western world in more subtle forms—sin is present and evident in all of us.

Palestinian father and educator Yousafzai Ziauddin paints a picture of the realities of this social system in a Ted Talks presentation. (View at: http://www.ted.com/talks/ziauddin_yousafzai_my_daughter_malala.) He describes how his daughter struggled to get an education even with his full support and encouragement. Malala paid a hefty price for her empowerment efforts.

Certainly, none of us enjoy going through struggles, but you have to understand that your struggle may be an opportunity for advancement and promotion. The very thing you are fighting against so tenaciously may be the springboard that catapults you to a new level of excellence. Your challenges may become your greatest assets.

~ Joel Osteen ~
author and pastor

Ziauddin describes the expectations of obedience for women and honor for men—precepts which he states “put women in a prison from which there is little chance for escape.”

Ruth, Tamar (See *Less Than a Widow*, pages 65-80), and Rahab (See: *Less Than a Widow*, pages 105-120) also struggled for empowerment. They were deferential and submissive to their elders at one moment, but boldly and assertively broke the rules the next. Even within their patriarchal culture, they found ways to redress power imbalances and gain more autonomy in their own lives.

Even though these three women continued to live within their patriarchal societies with its restrictions, they found courage and peace in the label that God had given them: LOVED CHILD OF GOD.

EXERCISE

- Describe a situation in your life in which you are subordinate to someone because of your age, position, job, education, status, etc. How do you react to and interact with those in authority over you?
- Did Boaz's responses to Ruth's requests indicate permission only or did he actively promote Ruth's efforts? Does empowering women threaten men?
- Could Rahab's entry into prostitution be viewed as a move toward empowerment? If so, how?

TEAR OFF THAT NEGATIVE LABEL

In *Less Than a Widow*, Naomi and her husband Elimelech acted as Love-in-Gloves and moved under God's direction to rescue Ruth from a life of abuse and scorn. Elimelech brought her home, and Naomi gathered her in her arms and her heart. As a result, the LOSER label was slowly torn up and replaced by a new one: LOVED CHILD OF GOD.

The Bible doesn't tell us the details of how God's love was visible in the home of Elimelech and Naomi, but how else would Ruth have been introduced to the God of hope, mercy, love, and strength? She not only knew about Yahweh, but invited him into her heart and life. Because she believed she was a LOVED CHILD OF GOD, Ruth could make the hard choice to enter willingly into a one-way trip with Naomi to Bethlehem. She knew the consequences

LOVE-IN-GLOVES

In his book, *The Saving Life of Christ*, Ian Thomas paints a picture of Christians as gloves. God's hands are inside the gloves—which represent us. People see the gloves—how they move, and how they feel. They experience the gloves squeezing theirs in handshakes and appreciate the warmth of helping hands.

The only way others can see the hands (God) is by watching the gloves (us) move in the way God directs us. When the gloves' movements show hope and peace, it stands out because there isn't peace in our world. That peace is God.



of that decision—scorn, danger, rejection, starvation, and almost sure death—yet she found the strength and courage to serve as Love-in Gloves for Naomi.

Ruth modeled her thoughts and actions after the people in her life who had introduced her to God’s love. Elimelech and Naomi lavished love, care, discipline, and teaching on Ruth. They valued her as a person in a way that only her dead mother had done before. They expected performance—Ruth had household duties and worked hard alongside of the family—but their love for her did not depend on her performance.

The only information the Bible tells us about Mahlon is that he was Elimelech and Naomi’s son (Ruth 1:1-5). Readers are left to determine the kind of man and husband he was through his words and actions in the story. For instance, although ten years of marriage hadn’t resulted in children, Mahlon did not put Ruth aside or take a second wife, a standard practice in patriarchal cultures. With Mahlon’s respect and love for Ruth as a person, not a commodity, Ruth blossomed.

By lovingly accepting Ruth’s move from slave to daughter-in-law, Naomi further cemented Ruth’s label as LOVED CHILD OF GOD. Even after Naomi had given up all hope for her own life, she still illustrated Love-in-Gloves when she relieved Ruth of any responsibility to return with her to Bethlehem. This defied convention and showed sacrifice on Naomi’s part—she desired Ruth’s welfare even at a great cost to herself. Naomi never labeled Ruth LESS THAN anything, and her love and concern eclipsed all the nay-sayers in Ruth’s mind.

When you are judged harshly or rejected, you have to be strong in your heart. You have to accept that you’ll never be good enough for some people. Whether that is going to be your problem or theirs is up to you.
 ~ Bryant McGill ~
 author, speaker, activist

Immersed in these Godly relationships, Ruth was able to move out from under the cursed label of LOSER, through blessing, and pass into healing with a positive label. Once in Bethlehem and faced with renewed efforts by OUTSIDERS to reattach the LOSER label, Ruth took the initiative—she went to work (Ruth 2:2)! She deepened her relationship with God and put on her faith like clothes, believing that her feelings would catch up! Ruth admitted her needs and worked hard toward resolution.

EXERCISE

- Who in your life acts as Love-in-Gloves to you? Give examples.
- Think of and share an opportunity you might have to act as Love-in-Gloves for someone else?

REREAD AND REHEAR GOD'S WORDS TODAY

When we've heard a story before, we tend to read it quickly because, after all, we already know what it's about. However, by not digging into it or trying to understand it as if it was the first time we've ever heard the story, we don't allow God's words to speak to us in the present. In order to be taught, to learn endurance, and to receive encouragement and hope, we have to ask God to give us insights each time we read his words.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.
 ~Romans 15:4 (NIV)

Let's keep Romans 15:4 in our minds as we dig deeper into the four chapters of the Book of Ruth.

Ruth 1:1-2 introduces us to Elimelech and Naomi, their two sons Mahlon and Killion, and their flight to Moab to escape famine. In verse 3 Elimelech dies; in verse 4 their sons marry Orpah and Ruth, both Moabite women. Ten years go by and in verse 5 both of the sons die, leaving three childless, penniless widows. These women are now considered by their culture to be drains on the resources of their families and society.

In *Less Than a Widow* the events delineated in only five Biblical verses take up 146+ pages. There are some additional characters: We meet Boaz and

learn who he is (36 pages); We also meet Rahab who is Boaz's mother (13 pages); and finally, we meet Tamar, an ancestor of Boaz and Elimelech (Genesis 28). Tamar's story introduces us to a Hebrew law that will play an important part later in Ruth's story (17 pages).



The fiction contained in these pages came out of the author's questions when she read and reread these five verses. *Less Than a Widow* was written in response to her quest to learn from the scriptures about individuals, context, history, tradition, Biblical references and context, beliefs, characters' day-to-day life, the emotions of those involved, and Holy Spirit prompting in her spirit, etc.

We are told to read and reread this story in order to be taught, to grow endurance, to be encouraged, and to hold on to hope. The questions we are moved to ask may be the same or similar to those asked by Kathleen Evenhouse, but each of us will be led by the Holy Spirit to what God has for us today.

EXERCISE

Ask these questions about Ruth. Ask them about yourself. What can you learn from Ruth's story?

- Drawing from what the Bible tells us, use LABELS to tell us who Ruth is. (Some clues: her background; her knowledge of the Hebrew laws; her declaration to Naomi on leaving Bethlehem; etc)
- What were the circumstances in her life that helped her to grow the "muscles" she needed to fight back when it seemed like it was just her against the world?
- Write down some struggles that you have experienced. Can you look back at them and see personal growth or growth in your relationship with God? Describe how your "muscles" have grown?
- What was it that changed Ruth's outlook from "I am all alone, a loser, of less worth than anyone else," to realize that there might be alternate descriptions or labels for her?
- What does the Bible tell us about Ruth's relationship with her in-laws and her husband? How did the support and love of others help her to move out from under the negative labels placed on her?
- Read Genesis 2:18 and Hebrews 10:24-25. What does God say about community?
- Do you think Ruth had a sudden conversion or a did she gradually develop a relationship with God? How did her life change once she got to know, believe, and depend on God?

- Ruth and Naomi experienced miserable hardships and tragedies in these first five verses: famine, deaths, sons' marriages outside of the faith, isolation... Where was God in all of this? Where is God when bad things happen to good people today?
- How did Ruth hold on to her faith and her hope, in the long-term trials that she faced? What can you learn from Ruth and apply to your life?

WRAP-UP

Ruth was labeled by **OUTSIDERS**—culture, tradition, and circumstances. During her early years, her father also considered her to be useless.

However, God had a plan for Ruth and brought her into Elimelech and Naomi's household where she experienced God's love. This family acted as "Love-in-Gloves," they taught her and demonstrated truths about Yahweh and his love for his people. Slowly Ruth grew to believe in the all-powerful God of creation.

God brought Ruth into relationship with him, was by her side during tough circumstances that grew her faith muscles, and brought her to the place and purpose he had for her—in the family line of his own son Jesus Christ.

FOR NEXT SESSION

1. Read the second chapter in Book of Ruth in the Bible.
1. Read through Lesson 3 and be ready to discuss the questions listed in the **EXERCISE** sections.
2. Continue reading *Less Than a Widow*. (Suggested: Chapters 13-18)

THE LAND

HISTORICAL TIDBITS

The northern part of Arabia is occupied by rocky mountains, but in ancient times this region was the center of a flourishing commerce—the great high road of trade between Egypt and southeastern Asia.

