

DISCOVERY GUIDE
5 LESSONS FOR GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS

ISRAEL'S MISSION

Becoming a Kingdom of Priests
in a Prodigal World



THAT THE
WORLD
MAY KNOW.

EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE IN
HISTORICAL CONTEXT™
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ABRAHAM AND SARAH AND THREE STRANGERS

The Bible opens with the story of God bringing order out of watery chaos. His amazing creative work accomplished, God entrusted it to the care of our human ancestors, Adam and Eve. He gave them the responsibility to care for it and the freedom to choose how to rule and manage it. From that point on, the biblical story reveals a series of disappointing choices made by God's human partners that resulted in the return of chaos to God's created order.

Adam and Eve chose to eat from the one tree God had forbidden. Their oldest son, Cain, murdered his brother, Abel. With each passing generation, humankind became increasingly corrupt and wicked. By the time Noah entered the story, the heart of God was deeply troubled because “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5). In order to end the evil, God wiped the human race from the face of the earth, sparing only the family of Noah because he was a righteous man who walked with God. But even the cleansing of the Great Flood didn't change things for long. Noah's grandchildren refused to “fill the earth” as God had instructed, preferring to settle together and make a name for themselves by building a city with a great tower— as if to challenge God himself (Genesis 9:1 - 11:8).

Surprisingly, God did not give up on his human partners! After generations of silence, the story picks up again with Terah, Abraham's father, leaving Ur of the Chaldeans (believed to be near the city of Mosul in northern Iraq) to move his family to Canaan. They did not complete the journey, but settled in Harran, a few miles north of

today's Turkish/Syrian border (Genesis 11:27 - 32). After Terah died, God commanded Abraham to leave his present life — land, community, and even family — and “go to the land I will show you.” The offer came with the promise of great blessing — a message of hope and mission not just for Abraham, but for him to be a conduit of God's blessing to all people on earth (Genesis 12:1 - 3).

God was asking Abraham to turn his back on the life he had known and to become his partner in redeeming a world in chaos! In a dramatic reversal of the choices many earlier characters in the biblical story made, Abraham committed himself to do what was right and just in the eyes of the Lord. Responding in faith, he left Harran. From that point on, Abraham would be different; he walked God's path and taught his children to do the same:

Then the LORD said . . . “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

Genesis 18:17, 19

Whereas Adam and Eve failed to faithfully obey God, Abraham eagerly demonstrated what a faithful partnership with God looks like. By choosing to be God's partner in restoring *shalom* to a world in chaos and bringing alienated sinners back into relationship with God, Abraham became a model for all who have come after him. The Jewish writer, Matthew, certainly intended to communicate more than just biological descent when he began Jesus' family tree with Abraham. Although Abraham could never effect the changes in a sinful world that the Messiah did, this Bedouin nomad lived in a way that showed how the world could be when God's people live according to his design. Since everyone who places his or her faith in Jesus is in effect a child of Abraham (Galatians 3:7 - 9), let's discover more about this faithful partner who lived to be a blessing to everyone he met.

Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

The Very Words of God

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Genesis 12:1–3

Think About It

In the Bible story, the Lord is portrayed as the One who *redeems* his people and calls them to be his "partners" in redeeming others. In Western Christianity, we tend to think of redemption as being synonymous with salvation. While there is no doubt that the reality of God's salvation is included in what it means to *redeem*, the word actually has a broader meaning in the context of the Bible.

Talk for a moment about what is involved in redeeming something or someone. What examples of redemption can you think of (in history, contemporary life, or the Bible)? What does the act of redeeming indicate about the value of what is redeemed? Who redeems, and why? What is the response to and result of redemption? What insight do these observations give you into the broader meaning of *redeem*?

DVD notes (31 minutes)

Partners in making God known

Life in an ancient city

The patriarch's role and responsibilities

Go'el—“to redeem”

Beth ab—“the father's house”

Using the resources of the Father's house

Abraham

Boaz

Hosea

Jesus

Redeem with everything you've got!

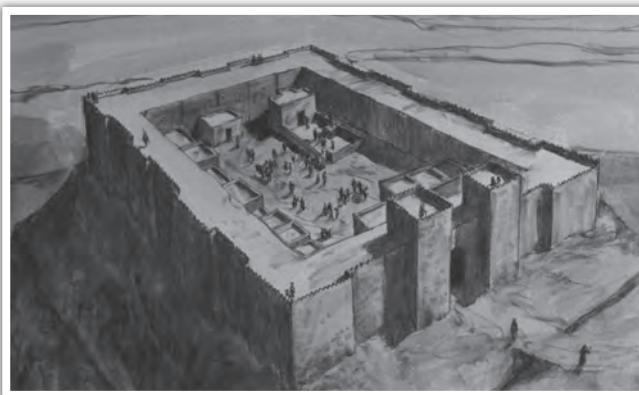
DVD Discussion (8 minutes)

1. In what ways does what you learned about Arad and the lifestyle of people who lived there help you to better understand the world of Abraham? What particularly impressed you?

FACT FILE: ANCIENT ARAD

This study was filmed at Tel Arad in the Negev Wilderness. Although few people visit this fascinating archaeological site, it has been extensively excavated and provides insight into the lives of people who inhabited this area throughout the time of the Hebrew Bible.

- Founded before 3000 BC as a trading center, Arad is located at the edge of the desert between the land of the shepherds and the arable land to the north. Here, farmers brought their flour and olive oil to trade for the shepherd's wool and cheese. During later times, it served as a military fortress.
- In Abraham's time, Arad covered twenty-five acres and had an estimated population of two to three thousand.
- The king of Arad attacked the Israelites in the desert before they entered the Promised Land. He was eventually defeated by Joshua (Numbers 21:1–4; 33:40; Joshua 12:14) and the city was given to the Kenites, the family of Moses' father-in-law, Jethro (Judges 1:16–17).
- The upper part of Arad was a fortress the kings of Judah built to control the border between Israel and Edom. Solomon built the first fortress, which the Egyptians destroyed and Jehoshaphat rebuilt. Around 567 BC, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed Arad. Nearly two hundred potsherds with writing on them (*ostraca*) have been found in excavations of the Israelite fortress of Arad. These ostraca are significant because they illustrate three hundred years of Hebrew language usage.



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THE CITY OF ARAD, WHICH EXISTED AT THE TIME OF ABRAHAM

- In their fortress, the Israelites built a temple comprised of a large courtyard, a Holy Place, and a Holy of Holies. Bowls found in the ruins have inscriptions probably meaning, “set apart for the priest.” Archaeologists believe Hezekiah (eighth century BC) destroyed this temple during his reform of the religious system and filled in its courtyard so the temple could not be used.
- The temple is a wonderful reminder that God’s people have been serving him for nearly four millennia and continue to “partner” with him in his plan of redemption. Although often unfaithful, his followers have not been failures. God used their service in his plan just as he continues to use his followers today. May we be found faithful to continue the mission.

2. What has been your impression of a patriarchal society, and in what ways do the cornerstones of the ancient Hebrew patriarchal society — *go’el*, meaning to “redeem,” and *beth ab*, meaning “the father’s house” — differ from what has been your understanding?

- Throughout human history, God has always sought to redeem and restore his lost children to his house. We sometimes think of the lost as pagans and sinners who need to be saved. Although that is true, redemption is bigger than that. How does our attitude and motivation toward those who are lost change when we see them as God does — as his very own children — children who are in great trouble, overwhelmed by debt they can never pay, lost and cannot find their way home?

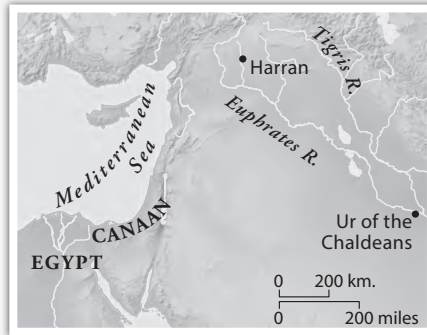
FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

A Land I Will Show You ...

When he was seventy-five years old, Abraham obeyed God's command and set out from Harran with his family and possessions to go to "the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). The land was Canaan.

A wealthy shepherd, Abraham lived primarily in or near the Negev desert where nomadic shepherds graze their flocks today. He also wandered into the Judah Mountains, possibly to graze his sheep in the harvested fields during the summer and fall—a practice that still exists.

After Abraham and Lot parted company, Abraham walked through the entire land of Canaan to see the extent of God's promise to him and his descendants (Genesis 13:14–18). He returned to Hebron, where he lived when the three strangers came to visit.



POINT TO PONDER

Beyond Hospitality

Even a quick reading of the story of Abraham, Sarah, and the three strangers reveals the couple's commitment to serve others with all their resources. But there's more to the story than first meets the eye.

Older men in the Middle East don't run. To do so is considered shameful. Even more remarkable, this story takes place in the desert during the heat of the day, and Abraham recently had been circumcised (Genesis 17:26–27). Yet he, like the father of the Prodigal Son (whom we will study in a future session), ran to greet these strangers. He willingly endured shame and significant discomfort to reach out to the strangers who crossed his path.

Abraham didn't just serve his guests the leftovers. He selected a choice, tender "calf," not necessarily the offspring of a cow, but a young animal that was a rare delicacy—the highest sign of hospitality in the world of desert nomads. He had Sarah prepare a huge amount of the finest fresh bread. This was not the everyday barley flour bread; it was made of the very best wheat flour. The amount Sarah made could have fed more than a hundred people, not just three! To top it off, they also offered curds (like yogurt) and milk, which is highly esteemed in the desert culture and served as a symbol of high honor.

In every way, at significant expense, Abraham and Sarah communicated concern for their visitors. They displayed the Father's house to the best of their ability. No wonder their response became the model for compassionate treatment of those in need for all of God's people to this day.

2. Matthew began his gospel by identifying Jesus as a descendant of Abraham (see Matthew 1:1–17). With what mandate does Matthew end his gospel, and what earlier command and promise does it echo (see Genesis 12:1–3; Matthew 28:19–20)?

- a. According to Paul, what connection do believers have to Abraham through Jesus? (See Galatians 3:14, 29.)

 - b. What, then, is the mission of God's people today?
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3. When Jesus taught about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 13:33 and mentioned the large amount of flour made into bread, what story would the Jewish people — who knew their Scriptures very well — have likely remembered? What picture would it have given them about the kingdom of heaven, the Father's house?

DID YOU KNOW?

Teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven

Jesus often taught about the kingdom of heaven. In the context of Jewish thought, the kingdom of heaven appears in any situation—here and in the life to come—in which God's will is done. First-century Jewish people referred to heaven as a way to avoid saying and possibly misusing the sacred name of God.

Through the Matthew 13:33 parable, Jesus compared this kingdom with yeast. Immediately his audience connected with the daily process of baking bread and the practice of saving a bit of leavened dough to use as yeast for the next day's bread. The obvious point is the inevitable spread of God's coming reign. Like yeast, one cannot see how it works, yet it slowly spreads and affects the entire batch. As God's people accept Jesus as Savior and do his will as Lord, his reign will expand.

Because the Jews of Jesus' day were well-versed in the Text, it also was possible for a teacher to allude to a Scripture passage simply by using a key word, phrase, or image from an ancient story. The teacher knew the audience would recognize the reference and understand that the content of the earlier story was part of the present teaching. So when Jesus told the parable of the woman mixing yeast with a large amount of flour, his audience no doubt recognized its connection to the story of the Lord and two angels visiting Abraham and Sarah.

Not only did Jesus indicate that the kingdom of heaven spreads like yeast, he hinted that the nature of this kingdom is similar to the compassionate, concerned actions of Abraham and Sarah for the three strangers in need! They model for us how to display the loving protection and care of the *beth ab* to those who are marginalized and thereby become God's partners in redeeming his lost children.

Faith Lesson (4 minutes)

The mission that the God of the universe entrusts to his people — to display his character by demonstrating compassion for those in need — began in ancient times in the Negev desert with Abraham and Sarah. It continued throughout biblical history with significant moments in which God's people acted similarly and brought lost children back into the "Father's house." We have been given a truly amazing privilege and responsibility to share through our actions and words the message of redemption that God offers to everyone in our broken world.

I want to share with you an image that conveys a sense of the opportunity we have. It occurred during the filming of this session. In the tent of a Bedouin family, the family patriarch offered us fresh camel's milk. One could sense from his wife and eight children the honor we were being given. Neither our host nor his family drank but simply sat and watched in silence as they honored us with this symbol of great hospitality. We were of a different culture, race, nationality, and religion. They honored us anyway. It is hard to describe the overwhelming sense of appreciation we felt. It was as if God gave us a lesson in how we are to present ourselves and hence our God to those among us (or strangers who enter our lives) who are in need.

1. Jesus said to his disciples, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14 - 16).
 - a. What impact might those of us who claim to follow Jesus have on our increasingly secular culture if we imitate Abraham and Jesus — and display God and his ways by being a blessing to other people, whether they be friends or even enemies, strangers or well-known public figures?
 - b. As you think about your daily life, what opportunities do you have to put God on display — to be the light on a hill — and invite people to be redeemed and to experience the blessings of the Father's house?

2. Who are the marginalized people you see who live outside the family of God, and what blessings do they need that God has given you to share with them?
 - a. How eager are you to share God's blessing with them, and how much are you willing to sacrifice to do so?

Closing (1 minute)

Read Genesis 12:2–3 aloud together: “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Then pray, thanking God for the blessing of his *beth ab*, praising him for the miracle of his redemption that restores even the most broken, lost, and hopeless children to his faithful care. Thank God for the privilege of being a blessing to his lost children. Ask him to give you a willing heart, generous spirit, compassionate wisdom, and mighty strength as you seek to display to a watching world the God who redeems.

Memorize

I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

Restoring the Lost to the Father's House

In-Depth Personal Study Sessions

Day one | Partners in God's Redemptive Plan

The Very Words of God

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:9–10

bible Discovery

Understanding the Big Picture of Redemption

Christians commonly think of God's message of redemption in the Bible in terms of the well-known words: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Although these words are an excellent summary of the gospel message, it is limiting to view God's redemptive work on our behalf as solely deliverance from sin's bondage, or salvation. Such a view is biblical, but in the words of Christopher Wright, "it is not biblical enough."¹ Redemption in God's framework encompasses salvation — *deliverance from* — and more than that, it is *restoration to*.

The Text frequently uses redeem (Hebrew, *ga'al*) to describe God's actions as our Redeemer (Hebrew, *go'el*). God's plan for restoring *shalom* to his broken world includes rescuing alienated sinners *and* bringing them back into relationship with him, as well as restoring relationships with others and even with the creation itself. Restoring *shalom* is a mission in which God has given his people a vital role.

1. What understanding do you gain about the big picture of God’s redemption from the following verses?

God’s Plan of Redemption	Israel’s Deliverance from Slavery	Jesus’ Redemptive Work for All Humanity
Bondage or circumstance from which a family member needs to be freed	Exodus 3:8; 6:6	John 8:34–36; Romans 6:16–18
The redeemer’s action to secure redemption	Deuteronomy 7:8	Galatians 4:4–5
The effort or cost to set the marginalized person free	Exodus 6:6	1 Corinthians 6:19–20; Mark 10:45
Full restoration to the community	1 Chronicles 17:21–22	Colossians 1:13–14

2. God acted to restore his lost children fully so that they would believe in him as the one true God, come to know him as their Redeemer, and in response serve him in faithful obedience and worship. What do the following verses reveal about God’s full redemption of Israel, which involved political, economic, social, and spiritual deliverance and restoration?

- a. Political (Exodus 1:8 - 14)

- b. Economic (Exodus 3:8; 12:35 - 36; Deuteronomy 26:15)

Reflection

God's redemption of his people involves restoration at all levels. Although spiritual restoration, or *salvation* as it is often labeled, is the foundation of his redemption, God acts to restore his lost children fully. He not only set the Hebrews free from slavery in Egypt, he provided the opportunity for them to live as a forgiven and godly community that would experience and display his blessing for all the world to see. They were redeemed, and God was their Redeemer.

Jesus' message of redemption echoes the redemption of Israel. The salvation he offers sets us free from slavery to sin. As his followers, we are to become a blessed community of people who serve and worship our Redeemer and display his character and blessing to the world as we love and care for those who are marginalized.

Psalm 103:2–6 is an offering of praise for the fullness of God's redemption:

Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits — who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.

The many dimensions of God's redemption provide not only freedom from bondage to sin but the blessing of deliverance from the effects of sin in general. Take some time to read the following passages from the Text — both the Old and New Testaments — and seek to comprehend what God's restoration of *beth ab* looks like. Think about how God wants his kingdom to be put on display so that his lost, marginalized children choose to experience his redemption.

The Text	Imagine God's will being done on earth so that:
Ex. 22:22–24	
Lev. 19:18	
Deut. 10:19	
Deut. 14:28–29	
Deut. 15:7–8	
Ps. 68:5	
Isa. 58:6–7	
Matt. 19:21	
Luke 14:13–14	
Heb. 13:2–3	
James 1:27	

Then remember, Jesus Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14). May his grace be with you as you seek to do what is right and share his blessing with others.

Memorize

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

Luke 1:68

Day Two | Outside the Father's House

The Very Words of God

But 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

bible Discovery

Ruth and Naomi: Two Widows Face Insurmountable Difficulties

The story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz is one of the most moving accounts in the Bible. The events occurred during the period of the judges, about a century before David became king of Israel. Set in the midst of great hardship and tragic loss, the story focuses on loyalty and faithfulness in stark contrast to the pagan Moabite culture from which Ruth originated, and the frequent unfaithfulness of God's people during that time. The story is also a clear example of God's faithfulness in bringing about his plan of redemption using unexpected partners in amazing ways.

The book of Ruth begins with an Israelite family — Elimelek, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion — living in Moab. Originally from Bethlehem of Judah, the family left the land of its inheritance because of a famine. Tragedy soon struck. Elimelek died. Both of Naomi's sons married Moabite women, and within ten years the sons died also, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law outside the kin group of her husband.

It is hard for us as modern readers to comprehend the hopeless situation in which the three women found themselves. They lacked not only the intimacy of a family group, which is a tragic situation in any time and place, but were outside the father's house — cut off from its protection and provision. Their losses were devastating in every way. They were a non-family with no means of providing for themselves. Options for such marginalized women were few and unpleasant. Completely dependent on the generosity of others, they faced starvation or worse.

1. Please begin this study by reading the entire book of Ruth. Then consider how these widows responded to their desperate situation.
 - a. What one piece of good news did Naomi hear and act upon? (See Ruth 1:6 - 7.)
 - b. When Naomi set her feet toward Judah, what did she encourage her daughters-in-law to do, and why? (See Ruth 1:8 - 15.)
 - c. What indication is there, based on Ruth's response, that even in Moab Naomi's family had carried out the mission God had given his people — to live in such a way as to display him to a broken world so that people outside his family would desire to know (*yadah*), or experience, God? (See Ruth 1:16 - 18.)

DID YOU KNOW?**Choices in the Face of Tragedy**

In the beginning of the book of Ruth, we are introduced to the family of Elimelek from Bethlehem Ephrata of Judah. Bethlehem means “house of bread,” and Ephrata (a region) means “fruitfulness.” The name of Elimelek’s wife, Naomi, means “pleasant” or “satisfied.” These names reflect the plenty God was known to provide for his people in the land he gave to them.

Against that background, a famine raged in the land. The names of Elimelek and Naomi’s sons may describe the hardships of the time: Mahlon comes from a root that means “to be sick,” and Kilion from a root that means “weak.” The family’s response to the famine is interesting. They moved to the land of Moab across the Dead Sea, less than thirty miles away.

This decision raises the question, why? Famine prompted Abraham and Jacob to flee to Egypt where annual flooding of the Nile provided a more reliable source of water for farming than local rain. But during the exodus, God commanded his people not to return to Egypt (Deuteronomy 28:68). If Naomi and Elimelek had chosen Moab as their refuge in obedience to this command, that may explain the depth of bitterness Naomi expresses in response to the tragic losses she suffered there. Losses often can be difficult to bear when they seem to come as a result of our efforts to be faithful to God.

2. Naomi’s losses must have seemed insurmountable. Nevertheless, accompanied by Ruth, she returned to the land God had given to his people. The two widows arrived in Bethlehem during the spring barley harvest, but Naomi was not the same person she was when she left Bethlehem. (See Ruth 1:19 - 22.)
 - a. What had Naomi renamed herself, and why?

- b. What insight into her spirit do we gain from this name change and her explanation for it?

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Naomi Becomes Marah

She started life as Naomi, meaning “satisfied” and “pleasant.” But famine, death, and desperation made her life bitter, so she chose the name Marah. When applied to a person, Marah means “complete opposition, deliberately obstinate, defiant disobedience.” When the women of Bethlehem began to recognize her as Naomi, the attitude of her heart poured out. “Why call me Naomi?” she challenged. “The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (Ruth 1:21).

3. Having an attitude described as *marab* is not to be taken lightly. In the following passages of Scripture, certain phrases are derived from the root word *marab*. What insights do you gain as you consider the meaning, implications, and consequences of *marab* as used in each of the following contexts?

The Text	Translated Phrase	Meaning, Implications, Consequences
Gen. 26:34–35	source of grief	
Num. 20:24–26	rebelled	
Deut. 9:7–12	rebellious	
Deut. 21:18–21	rebellious	

4. Perhaps the best-known illustration of *marab* occurred during the exodus at a place named Marah (Exodus 15:22 - 24). The Hebrews, led by Moses (and God), had traveled for three days in the desert without finding water. They were in great distress, but the water they found at Marah was too bitter to drink. It is interesting to note that the Jewish understanding of this situation views Marah as descriptive not only of the water but of the Hebrews' hearts toward Moses and God at the time.
 - a. What did God do for the Hebrews when they discovered the bitterness of the water at Marah? What did he promise them? Where did he lead them next? (See Exodus 15:25 - 27.)
 - b. When they were hot, thirsty, and frightened, do you think the Hebrews had any inkling of the gracious blessings God had in store for them? Why or why not?
 - c. What do you think God's intent was in leading them through that difficult and "bitter" experience?
 - d. What impact do you think the experiences of Exodus 15:22 - 27 had on the attitudes of the Hebrews' hearts?

Reflection

Imagine being in Naomi and Ruth's situation, returning to Israel after God again provided food for his people there. Naomi was a survivor, but she was returning with nothing. For Ruth there was no turning back. She had left the gods of Moab behind and chosen to put her fate in the hands of Naomi's God and his people without any idea of how things would work out. What reason for hope did these destitute widows really have?

No wonder Naomi was deeply discouraged. She was certain that "the LORD's hand" had turned against her. She believed that God himself had made her life bitter. How could they have known that just the opposite was actually true? In the midst of their loss, God was orchestrating an amazing plan that generations later would affect all of humanity through the coming of God's chosen Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

When have you, or someone you know well, experienced the feeling of being outside of God's grace — abandoned beyond the protection and provision of the *beth ab*?

How well did you thrive on your own?

To what extent did you struggle with attitudes of anger and bitterness against God for allowing seemingly insurmountable circumstances to surround you?

Why do you think it is so easy to become angry and embittered against God when painful circumstances arise in our lives, and why does it seem so difficult to remember and trust in his faithful love?

We know that God used the bitter water at Marah, and other circumstances of the Exodus wilderness experience, as training tools to move the Hebrews from attitudes of *marab* to obedient trust in him. In what ways has he put you through similar training in order to change your *marab* to trust in him?

Day Three | God's Provision for the Marginalized

The Very Words of God

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:17–19

bible Discovery

A True Love Story

People often describe the book of Ruth as a love story, and certainly it contains elements of two people growing in love in the unique way of their ancient Near Eastern culture. But as this love

story unfolds, we realize that it is about more than the love shared between two people. Ultimately it is about God's amazing love for all humankind, specifically his desire for his people to not only experience his love for themselves, but to reach out and display it in such a way that God is made known to his lost, hungry, and hurting children.

This story portrays the love and faithfulness Boaz demonstrated for God who, out of his love for all humankind, commands his people to care for the poor and thereby make his name known. We also see Boaz display what is in Hebrew called *hesed*, a merciful, compassionate, grace-filled loving kindness toward a foreign Moabite widow. We see Ruth's growing love and commitment to Naomi and to the God of Israel, whose amazing love was drawing Ruth into his *beth ab*.

DID YOU KNOW?

God Gave Israel a Mission

At Sinai, Israel received her mission to be a kingdom of priests and to display the nature of the Lord to the entire earth so that all people would come to know him and experience a relationship with him in the community of his people. Among those who heard God's words were Gentiles from other nations who had joined Israel and her mission. Boaz recognized that mission. It seems that he viewed Ruth—a Moabite—as an example of how God's mission was to be accomplished.

1. What do you learn from the following commands to the Hebrews about God's boundless love and passionate concern for marginalized people? Why did God especially want the Hebrews to provide for them?

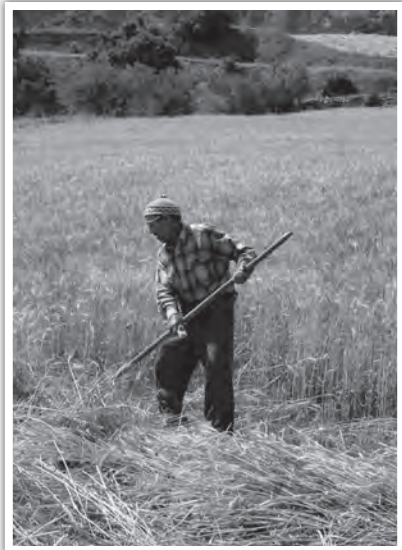
Deuteronomy 10:17 - 19

Exodus 22:22 - 27

Deuteronomy 24:14 - 15; 17 - 22

DATA FILE**Harvest Laws**

God entrusted specific laws to Israel to ensure food for poor people and foreigners who lived among them. One is called *peah* (“corners”) and the other is *leket* (“gleanings” or technically “waste”). As God’s “partners,” the Israelites were not to cut the corners of their fields or pick up what was dropped as they harvested. God’s instructions did not indicate how large the uncut corners



HARVESTING GRAIN IN AN ANCIENT ISRAEL WAS NOT EASY. THE GRAIN HAD TO BE CUT, PILED TO DRY, AND TAKEN TO THE THRESHING FLOOR. ONLY AFTER THRESHING WAS IT READY FOR USE.

of the fields were to be or how much grain might be dropped. His people were to decide those matters according to their own hearts.

In ancient Israel, the land, its produce, and the means of production belonged to the Lord; thus it was to be used to honor him in the way he desired. It was each owner's family responsibility to recognize it had more than it needed and to be generous. If the family obeyed, God promised to continually provide more than was needed so that marginalized people would be cared for within the community. If the community falsely believed its wealth to be its own rather than God's and began withholding the "corners" and the "gleanings," then the marginalized would suffer.

Although there was no dishonor in being poor, marginalized people also had to do back-breaking work to receive their provisions. They gathered, threshed, winnowed, sifted, ground, and baked—just as those who had plenty. This partnership that God established with his people before they ever set foot in the Promised Land is what saved Naomi and Ruth from starvation.

2. When Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem, they had no means of support. But God had already put in place provision for them—the opportunity to glean in the fields during harvest. In fact, Boaz and Ruth first met when Ruth was gleaning in a field that belonged to Boaz. Read Ruth 2:4–16.
 - a. What do you notice about the way Boaz carried out his God-given responsibility to care for those in need who were outside the "father's house"?
 - b. How aware do you think Boaz was of his responsibility to be God's provision—and ultimately God's "partner" in providing protection, provision, and shelter for Ruth as a foreign widow? Why?

- c. How did Ruth respond to the blessings she was receiving in the community of the Lord, and how do you think it influenced her desire to fully embrace the God of Naomi and his people?

3. Although the standards of measure differ, scholars have noted that the generous amount of grain Ruth gleaned (Ruth 2:17) approximates the amount Abraham and Sarah offered the three strangers (Genesis 18:6). What might this detail suggest about what may have guided Boaz in obediently showing his faithfulness to God?

DID YOU REALIZE?

When Ruth appeared to glean in the fields of Boaz, he greeted her—a pagan foreigner and outsider—warmly as “daughter” and took immediate action to go beyond what the Torah commanded. Not only did he provide water and shelter, he invited her to eat with the harvesters (probably members of his extended family) and told them to increase the size of the *leket* (dropped portion). He also invited her to return to his family plot all through the harvest, apparently intending to extend his generosity even further. These generous offers displayed his faithfulness in obeying not only the letter but the intent of God’s instructions to protect and provide for the disenfranchised.

Reflection

Remember!

More than two hundred times in Scripture, God calls his people to “remember.” In English usage, *remember* means “to mentally recall” or “to cognitively bring to mind.” The Hebrew word *zakar* means more than recollection. It refers to mental activity that leads to a response; it is to recall *and* to act. The Bible uses *zakar* to refer to God’s “remembering.” When God remembers, he does more than recall; he acts accordingly. So to ask God to remember is to ask God to act in a certain way.

In Deuteronomy 15:15, God commanded his people to “remember” that they had been redeemed. This was not simply a request to think about their past. It was a call to act in response to the price God had paid to deliver them from trouble so that they could be fully restored to his community. They were to remember their redemption and respond by living faithfully as God was teaching them.

It is no different for God’s redeemed people today. God expects us to be agents of redemption in the lives of others. We are to remember what God has done — not just for us but throughout redemptive history. Then we are to act and reach out to those who are marginalized because we are God’s provision for them. We are God’s partners who make known his character and love so those who are lost may be restored fully — spiritually, socially, economically — to the community of God’s people.

Boaz apparently remembered two things that led him to respond as he did to Ruth’s desperate need: he remembered God’s commands for providing for those in need, and he remembered how generously Abraham and Sarah provided for the strangers at their tent. As you remember these things, how do they instruct you in responding faithfully to the needs of people around you in ways that put God’s love for them on display?

What other commands, stories, or people in the Bible are important for you to remember and act upon so that you can love those who are alienated from God in ways that welcome them into the Father's house? Write them down, and *remember!*

What difference does it make in terms of your love, concern, generosity, and compassion for those who do not know God when you remember yourself as a child who also was lost in sin and in need of redemption?

What did God provide in your life experience when you were still alienated from him that led you to recognize his love for you and to desire to know him and his redemption? How does remembering (and acting according to) those experiences help you to engage as an agent of redemption with those who are outside the community of God?

Day Four | God Raises up a Kinsman Redeemer

The Very Words of God

Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband — how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people

you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

Ruth 2:11 – 12

bible Discovery

Boaz: Devoted to Fulfilling His Responsibilities

In the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel, the Torah required the “kinsman redeemer” (sometimes translated “guardian redeemer”) to bear the responsibility for the well-being of his extended family. He was legally obligated to redeem relatives in serious difficulty, to ensure that needy members of the kin group were cared for, to redeem (restore) any lost property from those who owned or leased it to the family that had lost it, and even was expected to provide an heir for a man who had died childless.

1. Naomi knew God’s commands regarding redemption or restoration of a destitute widow (Leviticus 25:25 – 28, 35 – 38; Deuteronomy 25:5 – 10). She knew that a member of the family of her deceased husband was obligated to provide for her and for Ruth as her daughter-in-law, and she recognized Boaz as a kinsman.
 - a. What plan to claim her redemption did Naomi put into motion for Ruth, a childless widow, in order to continue Elimelek’s family line in Israel? (See Ruth 3:1 – 4.)
 - b. How did Ruth respond to Naomi’s instructions? (See Ruth 3:5 – 9.)

DATA FILE

Threshing Grain

In ancient Israel, harvesters cut barley by hand, tied it into small bundles, and piled it near a threshing floor to dry. A typical threshing floor was a flat rock surface, usually surrounded by a low wall, on a high place exposed to the wind. Since a threshing floor was not necessarily close to the homes where people lived, some family members might sleep at the threshing floor in order to protect their food supply until the harvest was complete.

Dry grain was spread on the floor where a threshing sled, which looked a bit like a toboggan with stones embedded in the bottom, was used to separate the kernels from the husks. Typically family members (often children) rode the sled as a donkey pulled it over the grain. This caused the kernels to separate but remain mixed with stalks and husks. On a windy day, family members used small pitchforks to throw the mixture into the air. Wind blew the lighter chaff (husks and stalks) off to the side to be gathered for use in the family oven. The heavier kernels of grain fell to the threshing floor where they were gathered up, sifted with a screen to remove additional impurities, and stored in jars.



An Ancient Stone Threshing Floor and a Typical Threshing Sled. Winnowing Allows Grain to be Gathered Apart From the Stalks and Chaff.



After Threshing and Winnowing, the Grain Was Stone-Grounded.

2. Boaz was certainly surprised by Ruth's nighttime presence at the threshing floor. Yet her actions and her request, although they may seem odd to us, made perfect sense to him. As her kinsman redeemer, he responded graciously and appropriately in every way. Read Ruth 3:8 - 4:12 as well as "Did You Know?"

DID YOU KNOW?

"Uncover His Feet"

Much has been written about what Ruth actually did when she uncovered the feet of Boaz and lay down at the threshing floor (Ruth 3:7). The phrase is a euphemism that had sexual overtones in the culture and in the Bible (Exodus 4:25). Boaz and Ruth are presented as righteous people, and there is no suggestion of any sexual impropriety in this story. Yet the act of "uncovering his feet" and lying "at his feet" communicated to Boaz his responsibility within his covenant with the Lord, as symbolized by his circumcision, to become her redeemer.

Ruth's request to "spread the corner of your garment over me" had several meanings, each of which highlighted her desire to be a faithful part of the community of God's people. God had commanded his people to sew tassels on the corners of their garments as a constant reminder of their covenant to obey God's commands. The word for "corner" in Hebrew also means "wings," so Ruth was asking Boaz: "Protect me like a bird protects her young; be my redeemer as God commanded in the Torah so that in your actions, your provision, and your family I will find God's protection; and take me as your wife for in your protection I will find God's provision and protection."

- a. How did Boaz respond to Ruth's request, and how did he honor her in his response? (See Ruth 3:10 - 13.)

- b. By agreeing to spread his garment over her, Boaz was saying to Ruth, “As I faithfully before God seek to provide for you and care for you, may you find the protection of God’s wings.” What did his gift of six measures of barley — more than a person could normally carry — say about his desire to obey God and his commitment to Ruth? (See Genesis 18:2 – 8; Ruth 3:15 – 18.)

DATA FILE

The Town or City Gate

In the ancient world, the town or city gate was the commercial, judicial, religious, and social center of the city. It was where pagan kings demonstrated how well their gods could defeat the forces of chaos, including poverty and hunger. A community that could provide for needy people was considered to have powerful gods.

In the Torah, God provided instructions about caring for the poor who were “in the gate”: “Rob not the poor, because he is poor: neither oppress the afflicted in the gate” (Proverbs 22:22, KJV). Whether Israel followed the cultural pattern literally and cared for people by the gate or God was using the idea as a metaphor, the gate represented the Lord’s justice and compassion for those in need. Thus Boaz went to the gate for legal reasons and to ensure that Ruth and Naomi would be cared for properly.

3. Taking the role of kinsman redeemer in Ruth and Naomi’s situation was not a simple matter for Boaz because another man was actually more closely related to the family than he. So he went to the city gate, where the elders gathered and legal matters of the community were settled, and approached the unnamed redeemer.

- a. What was the anonymous redeemer willing to do? What did he refuse to do, and why? (See Ruth 4:2–6.)

- b. How did the audience in the gate respond to Boaz's declaration of redemption, and how aware were they of God's providence through Boaz? (See Ruth 4:7–12.)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Finding a Faithful Redeemer

By law Naomi still held the right of redemption to get back her land—the “inheritance,” *nahala*, that God had given the family when they entered the Promised Land—from whoever now owned or leased it.

It's unclear why the unnamed redeemer believed that redeeming Naomi's property *and* marrying Ruth would endanger his *nahala*. Perhaps if he had a son by Ruth and that son was his only heir, his own inheritance would go to Elimelek and Naomi's family. Or, perhaps a son by Ruth would receive the land he bought back in the name of Ruth's deceased husband, Mahlon. In any case, he refused to fulfill his obligations as a redeemer.

Although we might assume that Boaz was wealthy because he hired harvesters and is described as a “man of standing” (Ruth 2:1), Jewish thought prefers to understand that Boaz was a man of moral character—a man of valor. Hence his legal responsibility to redeem Naomi's land likely required significant sacrifice.

4. How did God restore Naomi and Ruth to the community of his people, and how did God use Ruth—a former Moabite outcast (see Deuteronomy 23:3) and one of the first Gentiles to join God's people² in his ongoing plan of redemption? (See Ruth 4:13–17; Matthew 1:1–16.)

Reflection

Boaz and Ruth are a beautiful example of the way that redemption worked in a patriarchal culture. God included the practice of redemption, common in ancient Near Eastern culture, in his instructions to the Israelites. In so doing, he explained his role as “Father” (or patriarch) of all and his desire to redeem family members and the entire creation, restoring them fully in relationship to him and to each other. Thus the righteous and faithful character of Boaz is a picture of God himself in his work of redemption.

After God used Israel to bring Ruth fully into his community, she joined in the mission to redeem others. She became the great-grandmother of Israel’s heroic king, David, demonstrating that a foreigner could be completely assimilated into God’s people and become his instrument for redemptive purpose. Jesus’ descent from David’s family in both blood through his mother, Mary, and legal kinship through his father, Joseph, gave him legitimacy as Messiah to Israel among his first Jewish followers. Jesus’ descent from Ruth made it clear that the Messiah would redeem all humanity, not only the Jews.

For Christians, the book of Ruth represents an early sign that the Messiah would liberate all of humankind, not solely Jews, and that Gentiles would join God’s community of redeemed people in the mission of restoring God’s lost children back into full relationship with him. Think of the honor given to God and the blessings we’d receive if we took seriously his desire to redeem those outside his *beth ab*.

Restoring lost people to his community is so important that God sent his Son to die to pay the debt for their redemption.

In grateful response to the gift God has given you, take time out to identify, pray about, and act upon the ways God may want you to “spend yourself” to further his mission of redemption and restoration.

Memorize

If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

Isaiah 58:10–11

Day Five | Hosea and Gomer: Seeking the Lost

The Very Words of God

The LORD said to me, “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.” So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley.

Hosea 3:1–2

bible Discovery

A Tireless Redeemer

The book of Hosea tells the story of the holy Hebrew prophet Hosea and his adulterous wife, Gomer. Prominent in the story are Hosea's faithful, tireless efforts to restore his marginalized wife to the protection and care of his *beth ab* — the “father's house.” The story provides another significant biblical example of a redeemer (*go'el*) and expands our picture of what redemption (*ga'al*) entails. Not only does the story challenge us to greater faithfulness, it illustrates God's desire to redeem his lost children and for them, in turn, to become agents of his redemption in the world.

1. During the final days of Israel's northern kingdom, in the eighth century BC, God commissioned Hosea to live as a picture of what was happening in God's relationship with his chosen bride, Israel. Read Hosea 1–3.

- a. What did God command Hosea to do, and what impact do you imagine his actions had on his reputation among his neighbors as a prophet of God? (See Hosea 1:2 - 9.)
 - b. What point was God making concerning his desire to seek out and restore his people, Israel, through the example of Gomer and her sexually immoral lifestyle? (See Ezekiel 20:6 - 12.)
2. Hosea redeemed Gomer and provided for her in his safe, loving *beth ab*. She went from being a despised, abused outcast to being the beloved wife of a respected prophet and the mother of three children. But the pull of her past was strong. What did Gomer do that took her back outside of the *beth ab* — and no doubt deeply hurt and shamed her godly husband? (See Hosea 3:1.)
- a. Eventually Gomer hit the bottom of life outside God's house; she was put up for sale as a sex slave. What did God command Hosea to do, despite his wife's sinfulness, in order to restore her through grace to his loving community and to wholeness? (See Hosea 3:1 - 2.)
 - b. What does the example of Hosea's faithful pursuit of his wayward wife reveal to you about God's heart for his lost children and the price God is willing to pay to bring us back into his loving family — even when we stray in pursuit of the “pleasures” of our sinful world? (See Romans 5:8; 1 John 1:9.)

- c. What does this story indicate about the cost in terms of resources or reputation that may be required of those who commit to being instruments of God's redemption for those who are outside the protection and provision of God's house?
-
3. To whom has God the Father entrusted the responsibility of seeking the lost and restoring them to the Father's house, and who are the family members in his *beth ab*? (See John 14:1 - 3; Colossians 1:13 - 15, 18 - 20; Ephesians 2:13, 19 - 22.)

THINK ABOUT IT

To Be a Hosea

It would have been scandalous for a man of God like Hosea to even consider redeeming a woman like Gomer. She was an outcast, a woman with no future. She probably would never have had a husband, and the community would have spurned her and any children she bore.

Then God intervened in the person of Hosea, who redeemed her, made her his wife, and loved her! No longer a despised outcast, unworthy of being a wife, she found her life filled with God's blessings. Her place in the *beth ab* was a miracle of grace she experienced every day!

When she again chose an immoral lifestyle, she was even lower than before. Eventually she was auctioned as a sex slave, and brought only half the normal price of a slave (see Exodus 21:32; Hosea 3:2). Imagine Hosea's grief and shame when he stood before his community and bought her back. Imagine the gossip, the shaking heads, the questions. What an expression of God's love! What a personal price he paid!

Like Gomer, each of us is an unworthy sinner whom God has sought to bring out of darkness and into the light and love of his *beth ab*. Jesus paid the full debt of our unfaithfulness to redeem us. Although our tendency is to seek out other lovers, God is amazing. He is faithful to seek us out and restore us to his house as Hosea did for Gomer and the Lord did for Israel.

Like Hosea, God intends for each of us to be nurtured and blessed within the context of his family and to become instruments of his redemption in our world. Regardless of the cost in resources or reputation, God calls us to seek those who are outside the protection and provision of the Father's house. Like Hosea, we are to seek out the Gomers of our world.

Reflection

The immediate intent of the story of Hosea and Gomer was to address the condition of the relationship between God and his “bride,” Israel. But its message is not limited to that situation. It also describes the great personal sacrifice and effort Hosea put forth to restore his marginalized wife to the *beth ab*, the “father’s house.” And it reminds us that all of us have been unworthy sinners outside God’s family. Yet God spared no effort to seek us out and no expense to redeem us. By his grace and loving kindness, he brought us out of our spiritual darkness and restored us into his family — the household of faith.

God desires for us to be nurtured and blessed within the context of his family. But his desire for the lost doesn’t end with us. We are surrounded by a world of spiritually lost people; God wants us to be faithful instruments of his blessing and redemption wherever we are and whatever our situation may be. Our willingness to partner with God in seeking spiritually lost people is in part motivated by our awareness of God’s merciful compassion and the grace he extended to us.

How much have you thought about the price God paid to restore you to his family?

How deeply must God love you to have paid that price?

How are you showing your appreciation to God for what he has done to bring you into the protection and provision of his *beth ab*?

God's very nature is to be deeply concerned for those who are outside the protection of his *beth ab*. This underlies the seriousness of the mission that he entrusts to his people — to seek out the marginalized, the broken, the oppressed, and those in bondage and to be agents of God's redemption so they can be fully restored to the family of God.

How willing are you to expend your resources and time to seek out God's lost children and help to restore them to God's community?

It could not have been easy for Hosea to seek out Gomer the first time, and certainly not the second time. How willing are you to seek out God's lost children, even if others misunderstand or look down on you for doing so?

Think of people you encounter through your daily life who are outside the family of God. Make a list of them and the ways in which they are marginalized, suffering, or in bondage to sin.

Begin identifying specific actions you might take in order to be an instrument of God's redemption in their lives. Think of ways you can put God on display so that they will desire to be restored to the Father's house.

Consider how you and others in your faith community can join together in seeking out God's lost children and displaying for them the love, protection, and provision available to everyone who is redeemed and brought into his household.

Memorize

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'"

Luke 15:3–6