

CREATING LIVING TRUSTING

HEBREWS 10:16 

This is the covenant that I will make with them.

*After these days, says the Lord,
I will place my laws in their hearts
And write them on their minds.*

LIVING

2 SAMUEL 23:5a

Yes, my house is this way with God!

He has made an eternal covenant with me,

laid out and secure in every detail.

COVENANT TRANSLATES INTO ACTIONS—into how we behave in our everyday lives. That’s why the second module, **Living the Covenant**, focuses on how the community lives out its covenant in faithful love—how it’s applied to actual relationships in daily life.

The books included in these eight episodes examine the practical challenges of faithful covenant life. In them, we explore leadership problems among tribal chieftains, kings, and prophets during spiritual and political crises. The leaders look for practical wisdom and guidance in the teachings of Israel’s sages, the letters of Paul, and more.

And by demonstrating how people of vastly different culture come together in a common purpose, the episodes show how faithful love is the root of the covenant life.

SAMPLER

LIVING

EPISODE 9

Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs

Leader Guide

Participant Guide

Meditation Guide

EPISODE 9

Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs

FAITHFUL LOVE

Committed relationships

Bible Readings

Day 1: Ruth 1–2

Day 2: Ruth 3–4

Day 3: Esther 1–4

Day 4: Esther 5–8

Day 5: Song of Songs 1–2; 4:1-7; 5:10-16

Day 6: Covenant Meditation on Song of Songs 8:6-7a

Day 7: Group Meeting Experience with Ruth 1:8-18

Covenant Prayer

**For those who are suffering in the
midst of a dysfunctional family**

*Your faithful love is priceless, God! Humanity finds
refuge in the shadow of your wings. (Psalm 36:7)*

**For those who celebrate their
identity in God's family**

*Heaven thanks you for your wondrous
acts, LORD—for your faithfulness too—
in the assembly of the holy ones.
(Psalm 89:5)*

OUR LONGING FOR RELATIONSHIP

*A covenant creates a
new identity, making
a family out of
unrelated individuals.
A covenant expects
faithfulness but also
the possibility for love.*



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The marriage covenant creates a new identity, making a family out of unrelated individuals. A marriage covenant expects faithfulness but also allows the possibility for love.
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POSSIBILITY OF LOYAL LOVE

The biblical understanding of the covenant relationship between God and God's people, and among God's people themselves, is shaped and informed by the actual covenants, or agreements, common in Israel's social life. The books of Ruth, Esther, and the Song of Songs explore the committed relationships that are the basis of a covenant.

Sometimes we wonder why these books (especially Song of Songs) were included in the scriptures. But they are an important part of the canon because they use marriage as an analogy for God's covenant love. The marriage covenant creates a new identity, making a family out of unrelated individuals, and unlike economic or political contracts, a marriage covenant expects faithfulness but also allows the possibility for love. Some think a covenant is a contract. A contract, however, is usually a last resort, invoked after a relationship has already failed and is unlikely to recover.

By exploring these stories of marriage relationships and the loyalty and love within them, we can learn more about the nature of covenant relationships in the Bible. We can also learn more about the relationship of women and men in biblical society. While biblical society was patriarchal, investing men with primary prestige and power, these are stories of strong women who work in and around male structures with strength, dignity, and integrity. For Ruth and Esther, their futures and the futures of their people lay in their hands.

RUTH

Ruth is a beautifully written story of loss and recovery, famine and harvest, death and new life. The family of Elimelech and Naomi experiences a series of tragedies. Naomi loses the things that define her and faces an uncertain future. The family's very survival is in jeopardy. As a woman and an outsider, Ruth is the unlikely heroine. Her faithfulness to the covenant she made with her husband and with Naomi's family enables the family to survive.

The narrative of this family's destruction and reconstruction can be dated to the time of the exile, the time of Israel's national destruction. The exiled people of Israel were worried about survival and identity. In the narrative of Ruth, they heard a story of a foreign woman who ensures the family's survival and allows for a

renewed identity. The story invites its hearers to consider whether God's covenant relationship is for Israel and Israel alone.

ESTHER

The book of Esther takes place in the Persian court. It was written when the people of Israel were no longer in their homeland. The events in the narrative take place during the fourth or third century BCE, the time of the Jewish diaspora, when Jews had been dispersed throughout the countries of the Mediterranean world. Many of the practices unique to Judaism were lost over the years as later generations of Jews took on names and practices that reflected the languages and cultures of their conquerors. In this new situation, assimilation was necessary for survival. Once assimilation became a way of life, the community had to determine what the core elements of Jewish identity were when their nation, king, temple, and priesthood were long gone. What were the terms of the covenant in Persia? Would God be faithful?

Optional: *A bonus video on Ruth and Esther is available for download from www.CovenantBibleStudy.com.*

Esther can be described as a court tale, a narrative that portrays Jews living under foreign rule and subject to the laws of a king who doesn't know their God. In the majority of these stories, a crisis arises when the rules of the king stand in opposition to the covenant practices or God-given commands that are unique to Jewish identity as God's chosen people. In Esther, the reader is introduced to a community whose lives are in danger. The community is threatened not only with the loss of life but with the loss of identity, essential to survival. Esther finds herself in a place of privilege and must decide if she will identify with her people and thereby expose herself to the dangers they face as a community under foreign rule.

SONG OF SONGS

The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, is a collection of love poems that has long intrigued and confused its readers. Written in the late fourth or third century BCE, the expressions of affection and desire between the two lovers form a dialogue, or



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Ruth, Esther, and Song of Songs are grouped together in the Megilloth, or festival scroll. Ruth's story is retold during the Festival of Weeks (a harvest celebration commemorating the gift of Torah instruction at Sinai). Esther's story is told during Purim (celebrating deliverance from Haman's plot to kill the Jewish people in the Persian empire). Song of Songs is recited during Passover, celebrating the rescue and liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.
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a call and response between the woman and the man. The poetry is sensual. It appeals to the senses of taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight, describing a human love that is without restraint. The sensuality of the poetry and the imagery of the garden evoke Eden's garden, with two people in a sanctuary where all their needs are met. However, as the poetry reveals, the lovers aren't always together. When they aren't together, the energy of the poetry is focused on being together. The lovers fill the space that separates them with language, imagining the dearly loved partner, making promises for the next meeting, or simply expressing the all-consuming desire to be reunited.

Both the woman and the man use symbolic language to praise the dearly loved partner and to convey the urgency of longing and desire. Metaphor and simile are used in analogies. The lovers use the language of familiar things to describe the indescribable. This symbolic language invites us to enter the garden of delights and experience agony with the lovers. Like the speakers, we know the experience of closeness and separation in our own relationships.

And like Israel, we also know what it is to be intimate with and alienated from God. Over the years, interpreters have taken the real and intense human love reflected in this poetry as symbolic of the love between God and God's people. The dialogue of the poetry invites us to embrace the dynamic of longing that comes from being apart and the joy that comes from being united because it sheds light on our relationship with the creator.

The Festival Scroll: Purim, Weeks, and Passover. In the Hebrew text of the Bible, Ruth, Esther, and the Song of Songs are grouped together within the festival scroll known in Hebrew as the *Megilloth*. These three narratives are associated with specific festivals that are a part of the Jewish calendar. Esther is associated with the celebration of Purim. The celebration of this holiday includes the reading and retelling of Esther's story. Ruth is associated with the Festival of Weeks (Hebrew *Shavuot*), a harvest celebration, and the Song of Songs is read during Passover. These three books continue to be part of the ongoing life in communities of faith. They demonstrate that the covenant is more than a contract. Rather, these books vividly present in story and song the responsibilities and privileges of a committed relationship.

Day 1: Ruth 1–2

Famine, loss, and exile

The book of Ruth is a beautifully constructed narrative with shifts in location and plot twists that create a crisis for the family of Elimelech and Naomi. These elements are also signs of comedy. In the story of Ruth these elements are used to explore the theme of identity. The characters in the story are subject to loss of identity through famine, migration, and death. For them (and us), key markers of identity are name, homeland, and people (including family, tribe, and nationality). In Ruth 1, the family moves away from their homeland, the men die, and—since lineage and descent are reckoned through males—the name or identity of this family is facing certain extinction.

The names of the characters provide clues to the reader: *Elimelech* means “my God is king.” His wife’s name, *Naomi*, means “full and/or pleasant.” The names of the sons are *Mahlon* and *Chilion*, “sickly” and “destruction,” or “frail,” respectively. *Orpah* means “back of the neck,” and *Ruth* means “to saturate” or “to water.” As you read, consider the extent to which the characters live up to their names or reputations.

Optional: *A bonus video retelling the story of Ruth is available for download from www.CovenantBibleStudy.com.*

Ruth’s ethnicity as a Moabite is important. Though this story doesn’t speak disrespectfully of the Moabites, they were despised by some Israelite writers. When the text describes Ruth as a Moabite, it is identifying her as a person who some would have considered an outsider of the worst kind. Early hearers of this story would have had contempt for the Moabites. Ruth’s story forces us to think about how God may work through those we designate as “outsiders,” “opponents,” or “enemies.”

What type of person would you (or the people in your zip code) think of as an outsider?



Day 2: Ruth 3–4

Redemption and restoration

The second half of the narrative about Ruth is focused on levirate marriage as a form of redemption. Levirate marriage is a practice that allows for the closest living male relative to “marry” a childless widow. This is for the purposes of providing a male child and ensuring that there is someone to inherit on behalf of the deceased for his surviving family members. It is a useful image of redemption because redemption means to buy back that which was lost. Boaz is the closest male relative who is willing to play the role of redeemer, but in this role he marries Ruth, a Moabite. Ruth’s first marriage to an Israelite, Mahlon, occurs under the circumstances of famine, death, and displacement for the Israelite family. Her second marriage takes place during the season of harvest. Boaz is a dutiful redeemer, but he is impressed by Ruth’s faithfulness. The term “faithfulness” is often used to describe God’s undying commitment to Israel. In this story, a Moabite woman embodies that faithfulness and undying love that God has for God’s people.

It shouldn’t be lost on the reader that the redemption and restoration of the family involves a plan that takes place under the cover of darkness in Ruth 3, and at the city gate, a public place, during the day in Ruth 4. Similarly, God’s work of redemption and restoration can take on a variety of patterns and include unlikely characters. David’s genealogy at the conclusion of the book includes a Moabite woman.

How does Ruth’s relationship to Israel’s dearly loved king change the way Israel feels about the Moabites?

Day 3: Esther 1–4

Plot

This story is a court tale, a literary form used for the narratives in Daniel 1–6 and for the book of Esther. In this story type, the hero or heroine is in the court of a foreign king who is temperamental and easily manipulated by his advisors, who are enemies of the Jewish people. A crisis arises when the advisors convince the king to issue an edict that goes against a covenant practice



central to the Jewish faith. In the book of Daniel, the king forces the main characters to take a stand on issues such as dietary teaching and worship practices and to risk their safety in order to abide by the instructions of God's covenant. The story ends with the triumph of the hero (Daniel), and the message to Jews in the diaspora is that God is faithful to the covenant and to God's people who are loyal to the covenant.

Esther is a court tale with a heroine and with a twist. When Esther, or Hadassah (her Hebrew name), becomes queen, she finds herself in a position of privilege, but her identity as a Jew is unknown. We don't have any indication that she is observant of Jewish instruction and practices. When Haman plots to kill the Jews and a crisis arises, Esther must decide whether or not she will reveal her Jewish identity and risk her life. If she doesn't, she can't save her people (Esth 4:13-14).

The narrative uses elaborate and excessive detail to describe the Persian Empire. By contrast, there is no mention of God. In Esther 4, Mordecai takes on the traditional signs of mourning, and Esther fasts. The turning point in the narrative comes when Esther decides to disclose her Jewish identity and face the king on behalf of her people. Her fate and the fate of her people lie on her shoulders.

Think of a time when you had a choice about disclosing personal information to a group or to another individual. Perhaps it was at school, at work, with friends, or in a congregation. What are the risks of disclosing or not disclosing identity?

Day 4: Esther 5–8

Counterplot

Once Esther accepts her role as a champion for her people, the narrative moves quickly to resolution. The action of the narrative is connected with banquets. The opening banquet in Esther 1 leads to Queen Vashti's expulsion. In the second half of the narrative, Esther's disclosure of her identity takes place through two banquets that she prepares for the king. The book concludes with the festival banquet of Purim, celebrating God's salvation of the people (Esth 9).



At the beginning of the story in Esther 1, the king and his queen are at separate banquets, and he sends a request to her, which she refuses. In the second round of banquets, the queen Esther invites the king and Haman to one banquet for the purpose of inviting them to a second one, where she makes her request known. Esther's decision to identify with her people leads to Haman's demise and allows for an edict that permits Jews to defend themselves against any who would attack them. This self-defense looks like revenge at the end of the book, and it raises concerns about how the experience of oppression can lead to similarly oppressive behavior when the power is reversed.

In an environment where God isn't readily apparent, how do we as readers discern God's presence in the story of Esther?

Day 5: Song of Songs 1–2; 4:1-7; 5:10-16

Love unplugged

“Set me as a seal over your heart . . . for love is as strong as death” (Song 8:6). The Song of Songs means “the best of all songs.” It is about unrestrained, passionate love. The lovers talk to each other, and their dialogue celebrates the joy of being together. When they are apart, theirs is the language of longing, and their words fill the void created by the absence of the dearly loved partner.

It's hard to ignore the lush imagery of this poetry and how it evokes Eden's garden—the place where humanity and God were together. In the ancient Near East, gardens were walled for protection and often elevated. For this reason, in biblical tradition the garden also becomes a metaphor for Jerusalem, the holy city on a hill, where the temple is the point of contact for God and God's people.

The unmitigated passion and longing of this poetry has caused Jewish and Christian interpreters to gravitate toward allegorical and symbolic readings, seeing this human love as symbolic of the divine-human relationship. However, the experience of human passion and longing is a fitting lens through which to explore the power of relationship and

the meaning of the covenant. Through the Song of Songs, we see with new eyes the depth of the agony we experience when we are separated from our dearly loved partner. The experiences of exile and life in the diaspora were challenging not only because all of the practical uncertainties. They were also times of deep longing for what was lost and for restoration of union with God in the garden, that place where the lovers are unencumbered and free to satisfy their desires.

Jot down some feelings or images that describe a time when you were passionate about a relationship, or deeply loved through a relationship. Now imagine what it would feel like to physically lose a relationship with that person. List some words that describe this feeling.

Day 6: Song of Songs 8:6-7a

Covenant Meditation: God loves you.

Before you begin today's reading practice, make the space in which you will be reading as quiet and separated from distractions as possible. You will be using Song of Songs 8:6-7a as the text for your reading. Locate these verses and mark the place so that when you begin, it is easy to find. Now get as comfortable as you can, choosing a position in which you can be most relaxed and at ease with your imagination. If this means that you would rather sit or lie on the floor, don't hesitate to do so. Sometimes a change in posture or position can help us to move into a new way of living with God's word. (In several psalms we read about thinking of God's word as the psalmist lies in bed at night.)

Now, recall that our theme for this week is "faithful love." Our readings led us into stories and poetry about God's faithful love for human beings and about faithful love between humans arising from a deep, faithful love for God. Covenant love is at the center of our love for each other and for God.

With this in mind, now read aloud Song of Songs 8:6-7a. When you have finished this first reading, imagine that these verses are God's request to you. Imagine God speaking these words to you, describing the



love God has for you, asking that you set God's love for you as a seal upon your heart. Read the verses again, aloud or silently, as though you are hearing God telling you about the depth of love God has for you. Take this to heart. Live as deeply as you can with this idea of how much God loves you.

Now take a minute or two of silence and rest, then read these verses again, aloud or silently. But this time, let this be your prayer in response to God. Offer these same words back to God, asking that God place your life and love upon the divine heart so that you might grow in your love for God, one love bound to the other. Ask God to help you grow in such unrelenting, unquenchable love for God and for others. Let your imagination help you form an image of this fierce and passionate love that you and God have for each other, out of which your love for others and for all creation can live and move and have presence. Close with, "Amen."

Group Meeting Experience

Ruth 1:8-18 | *Solemn promise for life*

On the way back to Bethlehem, the widowed Naomi offers her widowed daughters-in-law a unique opportunity. She gives them the option to return home to their families of origin. Ruth responds with a solemn promise that expresses her covenant commitment.

1. Look for repetition in this passage. Are there actions or motifs that we have seen in other parts of the Ruth narrative? How often do we see terms like "return" or "go back"? What themes does the repetition evoke?
2. Ruth's solemn promise to Naomi is a turning point in the narrative. What are the elements of Ruth's promise, and how do they reflect the aspects of the marriage covenant Ruth made when she married Mahlon and joined the family of Elimelech and Naomi? What do the elements of the covenant tell us about the "family values" of the time? In other words, based on what Ruth promises, what are the markers of family?

3. The exchange between Naomi and her daughters-in-law takes place in between Moab and Bethlehem. What is the significance of this location?

4. Ruth seals her promise by pledging, “May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you” (Ruth 1:17). When she invokes this curse, she makes it impossible for Naomi to send her back. What are the theological implications of this part of the story? How would Israelite audiences have responded to a Moabite making a solemn pledge in the Lord’s name?

5. How do the major women characters in this story, Ruth and Naomi, reflect the love, loyalty, and faithfulness that exemplify true covenant relationships in the biblical world?

SIGNS OF FAITHFUL LOVE

*Covenant people say to God, “Wherever you go, I will go.
Wherever you stay, I will stay.”*

