

# Ruth and Esther

## Introduction

The books of Ruth and Esther both tell stories of ordinary people. Their stories were lived out against the backdrop of God's character and work.

Both books feature women as the main characters. Ruth and Esther endured difficult life experiences involving crisis and loss.

The book of Ruth tells of Naomi and Ruth, a mother- and daughter-in-law. Naomi was a refugee from famine. She had not only buried her husband but also mourned the deaths of both of her grown sons. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth, was a young widow torn between leaving her country and home, and losing her beloved mother-in-law. As widows without a means of support, they both knew poverty, hardship, and uncertain futures.

Esther also faced difficult circumstances. She had been displaced by war. She was a Jewish orphan. Because of her beauty, she had been drafted into a pagan king's harem. Esther was forever denied a normal family life. While living in the palace, she was required to make a decision that could cost her life.



**Think about** the significance of our faithfulness to God. When we remain true to God in the midst of hardship we demonstrate the depth of our trust in Him. Job is well-known for his extreme suffering. Yet he remained true to God even in the worst hardship. God commends his faithfulness in James 5:11: "We consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job."

When Jesus met people who continued to put their hope in Him in spite of trials and obstacles, He was moved. He marveled at the faith of a Roman soldier (Luke 7:9). Jesus exclaimed at the faith of a desperate Gentile: "O woman, great is your faith!" (Matthew 15:28). Our trust in God, especially when life hurts, brings joy to God's heart.

Yet in both books, something bigger than hardship and personal drama is at work. God's role is subtle and understated in both books. In other books of the Bible, we see Him speaking to His people, sending prophets, and intervening supernaturally. Not here. Though people in the book of Ruth refer to God, His overt, supernatural activity is nowhere to be found. And the book of Esther never mentions God at all. Even so, He is still quietly moving and delivering. Both of these books powerfully demonstrate God's providence.

*Providence* comes from a Latin expression that means "to see ahead"—the idea of foresight. When we speak of God's providence, we mean that He is sustaining everything He has created. He is always guiding and working toward His good and perfect plans (John 5:17).

God upholds and sustains the entire world (Colossians 1:17). He sets up and deposes rulers and rearranges kingdoms (Psalm 22:28; Daniel 4:34-35). He works individually in people's lives, determining where they should live (Acts 17:26-27), directing events (Psalm 139:16), and maintaining intimate knowledge and care of them (Luke 12:6-7).

God's work in these ways is fully displayed in both of these books. The book of Ruth highlights the lives of very ordinary people in a small village during the time of the judges. Amid widespread disregard for God and His laws, here we see a handful of people who followed God and obeyed His law. What they did not know was that God was also actively caring for them. He was bringing about events for their good.

The book of Esther takes place centuries later. The Jewish people were in exile in the Persian Empire, suffering the results of their disobedience to God. But God put Esther and her cousin Mordecai, two very ordinary people, in perfect position to for His own good purposes. Their personal story took place in the context of the larger story of God's deliverance for the entire Jewish population. Even though He had judged the people for their sins, God protected and preserved them. And the same is true today. God continues to accomplish His plans through ordinary people.

Jewish holidays are associated with both books. The book of Ruth is read at the Festival of Weeks and Esther is read at Purim. Ruth and Esther's stories celebrate God's care and goodness. They show that He cares about both our individual lives and the course of history.

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### *Personalize the TRUTH!*

Sometimes it seems as though God is not involved with us. We pray. We look for Him. But circumstances make us wonder where He is. Later we find out that He was near. He was providentially working behind the scenes. He was making sure that His good plans happened. It was just hard to see Him at the time. Have you had an experience with God like that? What did you learn that could help you or someone else the next time God seems far away?

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