

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

COVENANT

Leader Guide

PARTICIPANT GUIDE 2

EPISODE 9—Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs

FAITHFUL LOVE

Committed relationships

Lest we think that the theology of covenant is an entirely cerebral enterprise, the stories of Ruth and Esther, and the poetry in the Song of Songs, remind us that covenant is primarily encountered through relationships. It connects us in a deeper way to God and to each other, strengthening bonds of trust and shaping the way we live. And just as with any relationship, covenant relationships are rooted in longing: a desire for unconditional love, intimacy, and fidelity. That desire is the foundation for all three books in this week's readings:

Days 1 and 2: a longing grounded in loyalty and obedience (Ruth);

Days 3 and 4: a longing conveyed through courage and self-sacrifice (Esther); and

Day 5: a longing expressed in passion and intimacy (Song of Songs).

This episode will help your group:

- recount the stories of Ruth and Esther and identify the ideals of faithful love contained in them;
- identify signs of faithful love contained in the poetry of Song of Songs; and
- discover ways to enhance their relationship with God through intimacy and obedience.

Materials needed: Covenant leader guide, Living the Covenant participant guides, *CEB Study Bible*, Living the Covenant DVD (or video download), extra pens or pencils



1. GATHERING TOGETHER (10 min)

Given that human love in general, and marriage in particular, will be a recurring theme throughout this week's episode, recognize at the outset that participants will bring in a range of perspectives, history, and emotional attachments to the experience of human love in relationships. After the Covenant Prayer, invite participants to reflect on their own difficulties with human relational love for a few moments. In what ways do they experience relational love as a true reflection of God's love? How has it illuminated their relationships with God? How has it fallen short in their experiences of pain, betrayal, or resentment?

2. REFLECTING TOGETHER (10 min)

Read together "Our Longing for Relationship" at the beginning of Episode 9 in the second participant guide. Invite participants to break up into pairs and share any passages from the week's readings that were particularly meaningful. Specifically, have them explore the question, "What did you glean from these readings about both human love and divine love?" Have them share any insights they gained from the questions in the daily readings section of their participant guides. They might also share any verses they chose to memorize for the week.

Ruth and Esther are compelling stories of heroism, sacrifice, and loyalty. Break the participants into two groups, and invite each group to write a timeline of major events in the plots of both Ruth and Esther (Days 1–4). For each main plot point, have them identify what a character's actions reveal about faithful love, both between human beings and between humanity and God. For example, one might say that Ruth's choice to stay with Naomi is an example of loyalty and fidelity, similar to God's faithfulness to us.

Next, divide the participants into four groups. Have each group take two chapters of Song of Songs (chapters 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, and 7–8). Invite them to make a list of all the verses that reveal longing and desire. For each verse, reflect on how one might apply the longing and desire in that verse to one's relationship with God. How might applying the verse in this way help us develop intimacy with God? Allow time for the groups to report their discoveries with everyone.

Tip: Most of us have a story about a time when we chose to identify with our tribe or leave it (like Esther). Remind your group that faithful love takes risks.

3. VIDEO SEGMENT (25 min)

The video for Episode 9, on the DVD or available by download, allows the group to overhear a conversation with Judy Fentress-Williams, who is Professor of Old Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. Before showing the video, have the participants listen for one or more of the following important conversation points:

1. Ruth, Esther, and Song of Songs are part of the festival scroll and are linked to the Festival of Weeks (Shavuot), Purim, and Passover respectively. Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Instruction (Torah) at Mount Sinai, which the people continue to receive. Esther is read during Purim to celebrate the people's rescue from Haman's treachery by Mordecai and Esther's risky faith. Song of Songs is read during Passover, celebrating Israel's liberation from Egypt.
2. The story of Ruth is a tale of identity and redemption where both Ruth and Boaz risk caring beyond the roles required of them. Ruth reveals a love motivated by more than contractual obligation, a faithfulness that is more than duty. Boaz takes a financial risk to redeem Ruth beyond the family obligations of levirate marriage (levirate means that a man must marry his brother's widow). Esther cleverly risks everything to identify with her people and rescue them from a genocidal plot.
3. Song of Songs puts passion and love on full display. It hints at a new creation where shame is banished, and it celebrates human love as a clue to grasping the intensity of God's longing and love for us. The passion of this "crazy love" is self-sacrificing, and it encompasses the faithfulness that helped give rise to Israel's greatest king and lead ultimately to the birth of our savior.

At the end of the viewing, choose one of the following questions to ask:

1. Think of a carol or song that brings back memories of Christmas from your childhood. What songs do you sing now to get in the mood for Advent or Christmas? Does your family read a certain book or poem, or do they tell the same story during this sacred season? Similarly, Ruth, Esther, and Song of Songs provide a sacred sound and story track for key Jewish festivals celebrating the remarkable gift of covenant love that the people must continue to receive.
2. Recall a time when you or a friend decided to take a risk for love. Has anyone ever had to take a chance on you (hire you, trust you with more responsibility, or put you in charge of something precious or costly)? What would you risk for the ones you cherish most?
3. Song of Songs uses words to fill the space of longing, to approximate what we miss when we can't be with one we love. Can a song or story fill a space in our hearts when we're separated from someone we love? How about a yellow ribbon around a tree or a crooner's promise to "be seeing you in all the old familiar places"? Song of Songs is a duet that the singers must wait to sing together. It reminds us that love—God's and ours—is a longing that intensifies with waiting and celebrates with reunion. How will you wait for God's love this week?



TAKE A BREAK (10 min)

Covenant living has a conversational soundtrack. During the break, listen for signs of group life: laughter, continued scripture discussion, casual sharing of struggles, or small celebrations.

4. DISCOVERING TOGETHER (15 min)

The Group Meeting Experience investigates the beautiful and poignant exchange between Ruth and Naomi and elevates it as an example of true covenant fidelity. Invite the group to work in pairs on the questions for Ruth 1:8-18, and then invite the whole group to share their conclusions with each other. How does the relationship between Ruth and Naomi exemplify our ideal relationship with God?

5. CENTERING TOGETHER (10 min)

The Covenant Meditation for this week is immersed in Song of Songs 8:6-7a. Lead the group in this meditation as described in the participant guide. Help them articulate whether they sense and embrace God's love deeply and passionately. Explore how our memory and experience of human love is connected to our perceptions of God's love in daily life.

6. SERVING TOGETHER (5 min)

Read together the "Signs of Faithful Love" at the end of the episode. Break the participants into pairs and have them review for a moment any notes they recorded and any insights they gained throughout this episode. Invite them to share how these insights will encourage them to pursue loyalty and intimacy in their relationships with God and fidelity in their relationships with others.

7. NEXT WEEK (5 min)

Turn to Episode 10 and briefly introduce next week's title and theme. Encourage participants to select a verse from the readings that they might commit to memory and share next week.

8. CLOSING PRAYER (5 min)

Ask for any prayer concerns or joys, and invite participants to write these items down in the space provided under next week's Covenant Prayer. This way, they will have them in front of them as they read throughout the week. Close in a prayer together.