

RUTH

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FAMINE AND FORTUNE



4 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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Famine and Fortune

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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but also respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. If you are a group leader, the material in the appendix ‘Tips for leaders’ will help you think through how to use these studies in a group setting.
- If your group members usually don’t work through the study in advance, it’s extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the ‘Implications’ to focus on.
- We haven’t included an ‘answer guide’ to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous editions of this Interactive Bible Study have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. So with this new edition of *Famine and Fortune*, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

» STUDY 1

GOING AWAY AND COMING BACK

[RUTH 1]

IN THE BOOK OF RUTH, WE READ one of the great love stories of the Bible. Boaz the rich and influential Israelite, and Ruth the poor but virtuous Moabite widow—so much seems to conspire to keep them apart, and yet in God’s purposes they come together and play an important part in the history of the whole nation (as we shall see).

In fact, much of the significance of the book of Ruth lies in its context; that is, in what takes place before and after it. As the very first verse tells us, the story is set “in the days when the judges ruled”. In this period (which is described in the book of Judges), Israel had no king and no formal centralized administration. She depended upon specially gifted men and women that God raised up to provide leadership. They were called ‘judges’ because they carried out God’s judgement, either by driving out ene-

mies or by settling disputes among the Israelites themselves.

In practice, however, the system (if that is the correct term for it) rarely worked smoothly. There was very little unity among the Israelite tribes in the period of the judges.

For a start, they were separated from each other by settlements of unconquered Canaanites (Judg 1:19, 27-36; 4:2-3). Unlike the Israelites, these people had farmed the land for generations, and attributed their success at raising crops to their worship of the various male and female nature gods, the Baals and the Ashtoreths. They believed that these ‘gods’ controlled the land and the weather, and hence the fertility of field and flock.

The Israelites were very attracted to these gods and increasingly mixed the worship of them with the worship of

their own God, Yahweh. This inevitably led to a weakening of their loyalty to God and to one another, and resulted in spiritual and moral decline that was so serious it threatened to destroy Israel from within. The tribes were slow to help each other in times of crisis, and even fell to fighting among themselves (Judg 5:16-17, 8:1-3, 12:1-6). Most people were concerned only for their own interests and took advantage of the absence of central government to do as they pleased (Judg 17:6, 21:25). This inner decay threatened to destroy the very fabric of Israel and in fact constituted a far more serious threat to its survival in the judges period than any external attack.

The book of Judges could be summarized as a cycle of Israel's sin, God's judgement of them at the hands of an enemy, Israel's repentance and call for help, and the raising up of a saviour-judge who rescued Israel from the enemy (e.g. Samson, Gideon or Ehud). It is within this chaotic cycle that we read the story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. In it, we see how God quietly goes about the business of saving Israel from her enemies and from herself, and unfolding

his plan for the salvation of the world.

We will come back to these big themes, especially when we reach chapter 4, but first let us begin where Ruth begins—with leaving home.

Going away

Ruth chapter 1 is a story about going away and coming back. In the Bible there are many such stories. Abraham went down to Egypt because of a famine, and later returned to the land of Canaan. The whole family of Israel went down to Egypt, again because of a famine, and later was brought back to their land by God in the Exodus. Later in her history, Israel went into exile and then returned. Jesus told the famous story of the prodigal son who went away but came back. In fact, the whole Bible is the story of mankind leaving paradise and returning.

The opening verses of Ruth, then, with their description of people leaving the land because of famine, alert us straight away to the fact that something is in the wind. Something significant is going to happen. It's the old pattern of God working some act of salvation when his people leave their land.

Read Ruth 1:1-7.

1. Why do Elimelech and his family leave the land?

2. Why is Moab a rather odd place to go? (Compare Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Judges 3:12-15, 26-30.)

3. What did Elimelech and his family gain by going to Moab (in the short term and the long term)?

4. Why does Naomi come back?

IN RUTH 1:6 WE READ THAT the Lord had come to the aid of his people (in their time of need) and given them food. At this point in the story we are reminded of the grace, goodness and kindness of God towards Israel during the period of the Judges (Judg 3:9-11). We see that God acts for his people and we note that Naomi returns because of what God has done.

The journey home

Naomi resolutely sets out for Judah, accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. What draws them after Naomi? Is it simply the bond that has grown between them, or the abundance of food now to be had in Israel? Or is it perhaps that their remarriage prospects will be better there? After all, their first husbands had been Israelites. But Naomi regards their prospects of remarriage in Israel as nil, and for this reason urges them to leave her and return to their own land and people (vv. 8-14).

Finding a husband may have been possible in Moab, but Naomi can see no chance of it in Israel. She herself would have to provide them with **husbands** again (1:11). But this is impossible, given her age. Orpah recognizes the logic of the situation and tearfully takes her leave; Naomi has correctly read Orpah's motivation for following her to Israel.

But with Ruth it is otherwise. She vows to stay with Naomi, come what may, and even to embrace Naomi's God. Keats, in his poem 'The Nightingale', describes Ruth as the heartsick daughter far away from home. However, we will see as the story continues to unfold that it is not Ruth who is sick at heart, but Naomi. Ruth comes in and shares in the blessings of God. Ironically, Naomi's understanding of God's goodness and grace seems less than Ruth's, who is a foreigner.

New husbands

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 explains Naomi's obligation to provide Orpah and Ruth with husbands. We will look at this more closely in study 3.

Read Ruth 1:8-22.

Compare the speeches of Ruth (vv. 16-17) and Naomi (vv. 20-21).

5. Do they each see God as in control of events? How do they express this?

- Ruth

- Naomi

6. What is their attitude to this God, given all that has happened?

- Ruth

- Naomi

7. How do they see the future?

- Ruth

- Naomi

NAOMI'S WORDS IN THIS SCENE ARE very revealing. She believes she has been severely disciplined by the Lord. She and her family had gone to Moab, to the land of the enemy, in search of food. They had left the land of God's blessing, and now she is returning without husband or sons—empty.

She regards the whole situation with bitterness and regret. Her life is in ruins, and she is in no doubt as to who has done this to her. Four times in her short speech she attributes her misfortune and

affliction to the Almighty, to Yahweh the God of Israel.

Ruth, on the other hand, seems keen to align herself with this same God of Israel who has taken her husband from her. Her loyalty to Naomi, and her desire to submit to Naomi's God, is in stark contrast to Naomi's own bitterness and disillusionment.

This odd couple arrives back in Bethlehem, without husbands and without prospects. As we shall see, God has some surprises in store for them.

» Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- Naomi is as full of bitterness as the Israelites were in Egypt before God redeemed them. She does not seem to expect much from God. When do you find yourself viewing God in this way, and why?

