

LifeChange

A NAVPRESS BIBLE STUDY SERIES

*A life-changing
encounter with God's Word*

RUTH & ESTHER

*Small but significant acts
of faithfulness play a decisive role
in God's bigger plan.*

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NAVPRESS 

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Ruth and Esther

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

Most guides in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies cover one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the books they explore, they share some common goals:

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book.
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides.
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need, so that your only other reference is the Bible.
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole.
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take sixty to ninety minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

Optional Application. Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

For Thought and Discussion. Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles. They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

For Further Study. These include: (a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and (b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

Overview and details

Lessons 1 through 5 and 6 through 10 are each a self-contained study of a book. You can do one right after the other or do something else in between. Each study begins with an overview of the book. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author’s *aim* for the whole work? In lessons 1 and 6, you will lay the foundation for your study of each book by asking yourself, “Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?”

In lessons 2 through 4 and 7 through 9, you will analyze successive passages in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you see its purpose. Its purpose will help you see its meaning. Frequently reviewing a chart or outline of the book will enable you to make these connections.

Finally, in lessons 5 and 10, you will review each book, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

Kinds of questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth *affect* my life?

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don't let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God's Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, "Lord, what do You want me to see here?" "Father, why is this true?" "Lord, how does this apply to my life?"

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

Study aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 117. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

Scripture versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Other versions cited are the Revised Standard Version Bible (RSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the King James Version (KJV).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase such as The Living Bible is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and meditating

A psalmist wrote, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to your passage as often as you can during your day, for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For group study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and

businessmen's studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or, omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called "For the group." These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each "For the group" at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Pages 120–121 list some good sources of counsel for leading group studies.

OVERVIEW

The Story of Ruth

Map of Israel Under the Judges

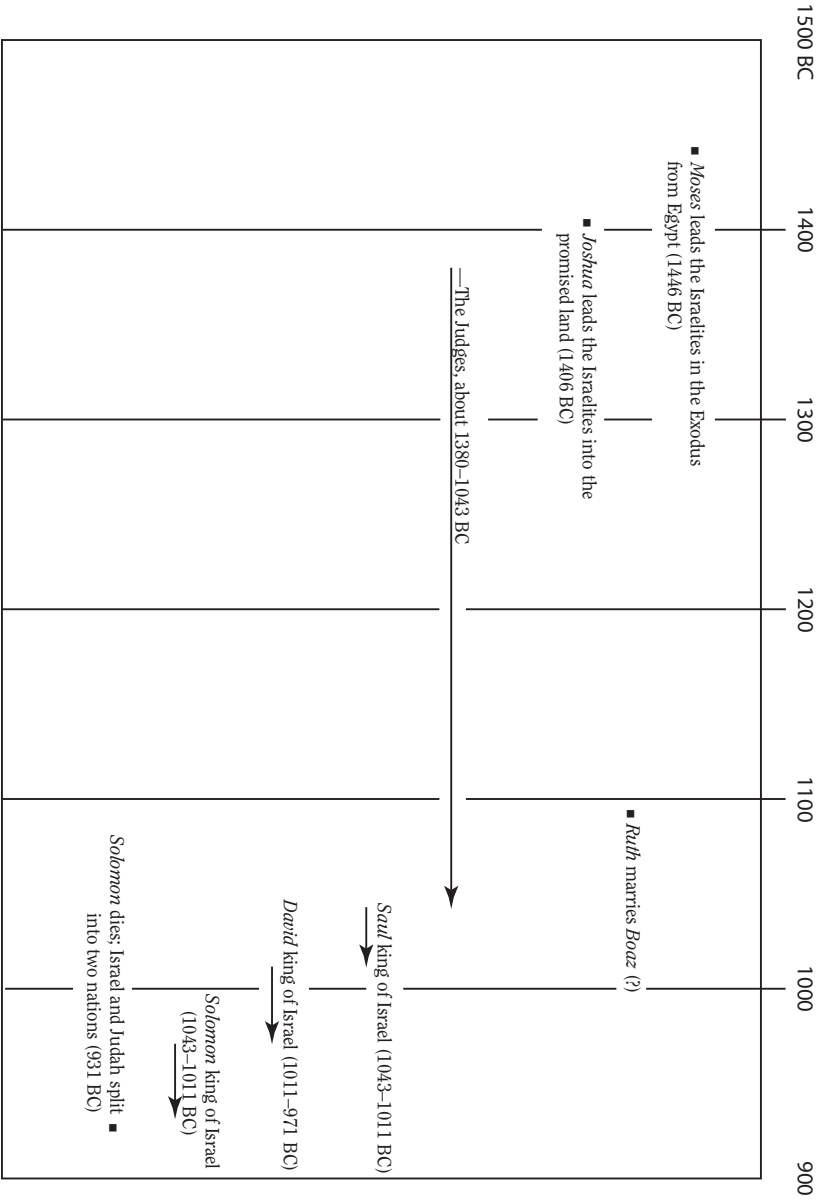


“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.”

Judges 17:6; 21:25

The story of Ruth shines like a diamond in the dark years before Israel took Saul as its king. On one level, it is a tale of selfless love in a family, but at bottom it tells what God was doing when most of His people were doing whatever they pleased.

TIMELINE FOR THE BOOK OF RUTH



The judges

After Moses died, Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land. They were supposed to kill or enslave all the Canaanites, lest those people seduce Israel into their depraved, pagan ways (see Deuteronomy 7:1-6). But the conquest was incomplete when Joshua died, and the Israelites found it more agreeable to settle down among the Canaanites, trade and intermarry with them, and borrow their morals and religious beliefs.

God had promised Israel victory over the Canaanites if His people remained faithful to Him, but defeat and enslavement if they shared their loyalties with other gods. The book of Judges shows a repeating cycle of apostasy, oppression by foreign peoples, appeals for help, and deliverance by the ever-faithful Lord. What the Israelites saw at the time, however, was an endless series of skirmishes and raids interspersed with months or years of tense peace. The “judges” who arose were men (and one woman) endowed by God with special skills to lead the tribes. They were chiefly empowered to lead in warfare, but God also gifted them with wisdom, discernment, and moral virtue.

When a judge defeated an enemy, there was often peace in his region for a generation. He was respected as one who could decide disputes between people, and he might influence some Israelites to conform their religion and ethics more to God’s Law. However, no judge ever governed more than a few of the twelve tribes of Israel. Israel was just a loose league of tribes; the mountains and Canaanite cities that separated them prevented unified action. Hence, while there was peace and godliness briefly in one tribe, parts of another tribe were practicing child sacrifice and ritual prostitution with their pagan neighbors, and another several tribes were at war with foreigners.

Judah, where the book of Ruth is set, seldom appears in the book of Judges. No judge over Judah is named, and no battle for liberation is described. Judges 15:9-13 tells us that in the time of Samson the Philistines dominated Judah and the tribe accepted its foreign rulers. The Judahites “mustered a force, not to support Samson, but to capture him for the Philistines.”¹ The Philistines worshiped the gods Dagon (“Grain,” a god of the crops) and

Baal-Zebul (“Baal the Prince,” a god of rain and thunder). However, Bethlehem in the book of Ruth shows no signs of war or Philistine influence; the village is like an island in a sea of violence and immorality.

We can date Ruth’s life only approximately. Her great-grandson David became king of Judah in 1011 BC at the age of thirty,² so Ruth and Boaz probably married around 1100–1075 BC.

The monarchy

Because Ruth 4:22 names David, we know that the book was written sometime after he became king of Israel. In his lifetime and that of his son Solomon Israel finally defeated the Canaanites and attained the peace and prosperity Moses had promised. After Solomon, most of Israel rejected the royal house of David, but Judah continued to adore him and crown his descendants. When peace and prosperity crumbled, Judah looked back to David’s time as a golden age. The book of Ruth was written by someone who revered David, but it could have been anyone who lived after 1000 BC. Because of the book’s literary style, most scholars suggest dates between 1000 and 600 BC, while Judah was still ruled by kings from David’s line.³ However, the story itself is probably a tradition passed down in Ruth’s and David’s family, since the tale so vividly reflects the customs of its setting.

Ruth the Moabitess

The author continually reminds us that Ruth was not an Israelite (see 2:2,6,10,21; 4:5,10). Israel regarded Moab as an inferior people, descended from an incestuous union (see Genesis 19:30-38). The Law stated that “no Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, not even in the tenth generation” (Deuteronomy 23:3) because Ammon and Moab had been hostile toward Israel since the days of Moses. Moab oppressed some of the Israelite tribes for eighteen years toward the beginning of the judges’ era (see Judges 3:12-30). When threatened by King Saul, David sent his parents (Ruth’s

grandson and his wife) to the king of Moab for protection (see 1 Samuel 22:3-4), but when David became king of Israel, he fought and subdued Moab (see 2 Samuel 8:2). For the next several centuries, Moab alternately won and lost its independence from Israel; the two nations were never at peace until Assyria conquered them both (see 2 Kings 1:1; 3:4-27; 13:20; 14:25; Isaiah 15:1-9).

This historical enmity and the express command of Scripture make it astonishing that God chose a Moabitess to be the ancestor of both David and Jesus, that the author of the book of Ruth stressed this fact, and that the Jews revered David's ancestress enough to acknowledge the story as Scripture. In light of Deuteronomy 23:3, why was David allowed to be not only a member of the congregation of Israel but even king? Certainly the Israelites of Ruth's day were casual toward God's Law, but why did God select this family above all others? As you study the book of Ruth, keep these questions in mind.

1. The book of Ruth is a story, crafted with artless genius. It demands to be studied not by dissecting it into bits but by appreciating it as a whole. So, begin by reading it through (it has only four chapters), jotting down any important repeated words and phrases you notice, key ideas and themes, and any questions you have about customs, words, and so on. Don't let taking notes distract you from enjoying the story; take notes after your first reading if necessary.

important repeated words and phrases _____

key ideas and themes _____

For Thought and Discussion: Both 1:1-5 and 4:13-17, which frame the story, contain 71 words in Hebrew. Compare and contrast these two compact sections. How do they relate to each other and to the rest of the story?

questions _____

2. Now skim the story again and write a title for each episode that tells what it is about.

1:1-5 _____

1:6-22 _____

2:1-23 _____

3:1-18 _____

4:1-12 _____

4:13-17 _____

4:18-22 _____

3. Briefly describe your first impressions of the characters.

Naomi _____

Ruth _____

Orpah _____

Boaz _____

the unnamed relative in chapter 4 _____

Study Skill—Themes and Purposes

Consciously or unconsciously, we usually study a book of the Bible in light of what we think the book as a whole is about. It is therefore wise to come to some tentative, conscious conclusions about this. In a narrative (true story) like Ruth, we should think about the *plot* (what happens in the story), the *main characters* (who are most important), *themes* (ideas or topics that recur through the book), and the *author's purpose* (what is he trying to explain, convince us about, encourage us to do or accomplish). A book may have several themes and purposes, and the more of them

(continued on page 16)

(continued from page 15)

we can discern, the more we will benefit from the study.

Bible teachers often recommend that we read a book first for an overview and an initial impression of the themes and purposes. Then, after studying the book in detail, we reconsider our view of the themes and purposes.

4. At this point, what do you think are the main themes of Ruth or the main purposes for which it was written?

5. “In the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives.”⁴ What does your first reading of Ruth tell you about God?

Study Skill—Application

Second Timothy 3:16-17 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Therefore, the last step of Bible study is asking yourself, “What difference should this passage make to my life? How should it make me want to think or act?” Application will require time, thought, prayer, and perhaps even discussion with another person.

At times, you may find it most productive to concentrate on one specific application, giving it careful thought and prayer. At other times, you may want to list many implications a passage of Scripture has for your life, then choose one to concentrate on for prayer and action. Use whatever method helps you to grow more obedient to God’s Word.

One question to ask as you try to apply Old Testament Scripture is, “What do I have in common with the original audience of these words?” In the case of a narrative, you can ask, “What do I have in common with the people in this story?” Christ’s death and resurrection, as well as a change in culture, make some things in the book of Ruth no longer applicable. However, God’s character has not changed, and much of what He expects of people remains the same.

6. What lessons can you already see that the book of Ruth has for us? (Think about how the themes and what you learn about God are relevant to you.)

For the group

This “For the group” section and the ones in later lessons are intended to suggest ways of structuring your discussions. Feel free to select what suits your group. The main goals of this lesson are to get to know the book of Ruth and the people with whom you are going to study it.

Worship. Some groups like to begin with prayer and/or singing. Some pray only briefly for God’s guidance at the beginning, but leave extended prayer until after the study. Ask God to speak to each of you through your discussion of Ruth.

Warm-up. The beginning of a new study is a good time to lay a foundation for honest sharing of ideas, for getting comfortable with each other, and for encouraging a sense of common purpose. One way to establish common ground is to talk about what each group member hopes to get out of your group—out of your study of Ruth, and out of any prayer, singing, sharing, outreach, or anything else you might do together. Discuss also what you hope to give to the group. If you have someone write down each member’s hopes and expectations, then you can look back at these goals later to see if they are being met. You can then change your meetings accordingly.

You may decide to take about fifteen minutes at the beginning of your discussion of lesson 1 to discuss goals. Or, you may prefer to take a whole meeting to hand out study guides, introduce the study, examine the “How to Use This Study” section, and discuss goals. You can structure a discussion of “How to Use This Study” by reminding the group of the main points from this section and then asking if anyone has questions about what to do.

For example, point out the optional questions in the margins. These are available as group discussion questions, ideas for application, and prompts for further study. It is unlikely that anyone will have either the time or desire to answer all the optional questions and do all the applications. It is reasonable to expect a person to do *one* “Optional Application” for any given lesson. You might choose *two* “For Thought and Discussions”

for your group discussion. If someone wants to write answers to the optional questions, suggest that he use a separate notebook. It will also be helpful for discussion notes, prayer requests, answers to prayers, application plans, and so on.

Note the observation-interpretation-application pattern in each lesson. Many of the numbered questions are observations and basic interpretations that lay the groundwork for deeper study. The meaty questions are often in the margins. In your group discussion, you may prefer to move quickly through the numbered questions (even skipping some) in order to concentrate on questions that interest you.

Point out the study aids on pages 117–121. If you own any, bring them in to show the group.

You may need to discuss how and why Christians memorize and meditate on Scripture. Christian meditation is not meant to empty the mind, as in oriental mysticism. Rather, after emptying your mind of distractions, you fill it with God's thoughts by dwelling on a short piece of His Word.

First impressions. Start with a question that everyone can answer, like, "What did you like best about the book of Ruth?" Then use questions 1–5 to get a broad sense of what the book is about. It is often dull to ask, "What did you get for number 1? . . . 2? . . ." It is more interesting for the group if you rephrase the questions: "What repeated words did you find? What is Boaz like? Can someone describe Naomi?"

Your goal is for everyone to get a general grasp of the book's themes and for everyone to sense the characters as real people. It will be easier for you to make applications if you try to identify with each character.

Application. You'll find more Study Skills on application in later lessons (pages 28, 33–34, 41, 82, and 97). If the group finds application difficult, you can look ahead at those Study Skills. Otherwise, take at least ten minutes to discuss how one theme of Ruth applies to you. Try to find at least one way in which your situation is like Ruth's, Naomi's, or Boaz's.

If group members do not know each other well, they may be reluctant to discuss specific circumstances in their lives. Instead of forcing intimacy too soon, spend the next few weeks building trust among yourselves. You may want to lay

some ground rules, such as that no information learned from a prayer request or application may be repeated outside the group.

Questions. Give the group a chance to voice any questions about the book of Ruth or the time of the judges. You may decide to postpone answering some questions until after you have studied the book in more detail, but you may want to assign certain people to research answers to some questions. The sources in Study Aids may help. It's often easiest to let the group leader do all the research, but the group will mature together if other members are encouraged and helped to share this responsibility.

Wrap-up. This is a time to bring the discussion to a focused end and to make any announcements about the next lesson or meeting.

Worship. A time of prayer rounds out a meeting. You can share requests as a group or break up into smaller groups of two, three, or four. If group members don't feel comfortable praying aloud, you can pray silently for a while, and then the leader can close with a brief prayer aloud. Use what you've learned in the lesson as a springboard to worship. For instance, praise God for His active participation in the lives of His people, even ordinary people like Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Thank Him for not giving up on His people in the depraved time of the judges. Thank Him for participating in your lives. Then share any specific prayer requests, and take time to pray for each group member to understand and apply the book of Ruth.

1. Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 353.
2. Second Samuel 5:4; J. I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenney, and William White Jr., *The World of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 43.
3. Leon Morris, *Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968), 229–239; Barker, 363. Morris's commentary is published together with *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* by Arthur E. Cundall in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series.
4. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 78.