

# Famine and Fortune

Ruth



4 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS

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**Ruth**

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matthiasmedia

*Famine and Fortune*

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# *How to make the most of these studies*

## **1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?**

These ‘interactive’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you through Ruth, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sight-seeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall half-way between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do a lot 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**

Each study contains sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. We’ve left plenty of room in the margins for you to jot comments and questions as you read.

Interspersed throughout the text are two types of ‘interaction’, each with their own symbol:



### **Investigate**

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



### **Think it through**

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries and write down your own thoughts and reactions.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own.

## **3. Suggestions for Individual Study**

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in Ruth and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

## **4. Suggestions for Group Study**

- 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 threesomes. Get together with a friend/s 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.

- It is *vital* that group members work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how side-tracked you get!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the ‘interactive’ sections—*Investigate* and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- 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. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining important sections of text to emphasize, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they’d like to spend on each part.
- 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 Ruth, 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.

For more input:

- See ‘Tips for Leaders’ on page 39.
- There is also a series of audio cassettes available which expound the relevant passages (see page 42 for details).

## **Before you begin**

We recommend that before you start on Study 1, you take the time to read right through Ruth in one sitting. This will give you a feel for the direction and purpose of the whole book and help you greatly in looking at each passage in its context.

# 1

Ruth 1:1 – 22

## *Going away and coming back*

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 centralised 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 judgment, either by driving out enemies 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 summarised as a cycle of Israel's sin, God's judgment 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 very 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. 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 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.



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 3:11). We see that God acts for his people and we note that Naomi returns because of what God has done.

### **The Journey Home (1:8-22)**

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. But this is an impossibility, given her age. Orpah recognises 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.



## Investigate

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

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

- Ruth

- Naomi

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

- Ruth

- Naomi

### 3. 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 was 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 arrive back in Bethlehem, without husbands and without prospects. As we shall see, God has some surprises in store for them.



### Think it through

1. 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. Do you find yourself viewing God in this way?
2. Are there times when you feel like changing your name to 'bitter'? What is your attitude to God at these times?
3. What does this chapter tell us about how God works?
4. In what ways is Ruth's behaviour an example to us?