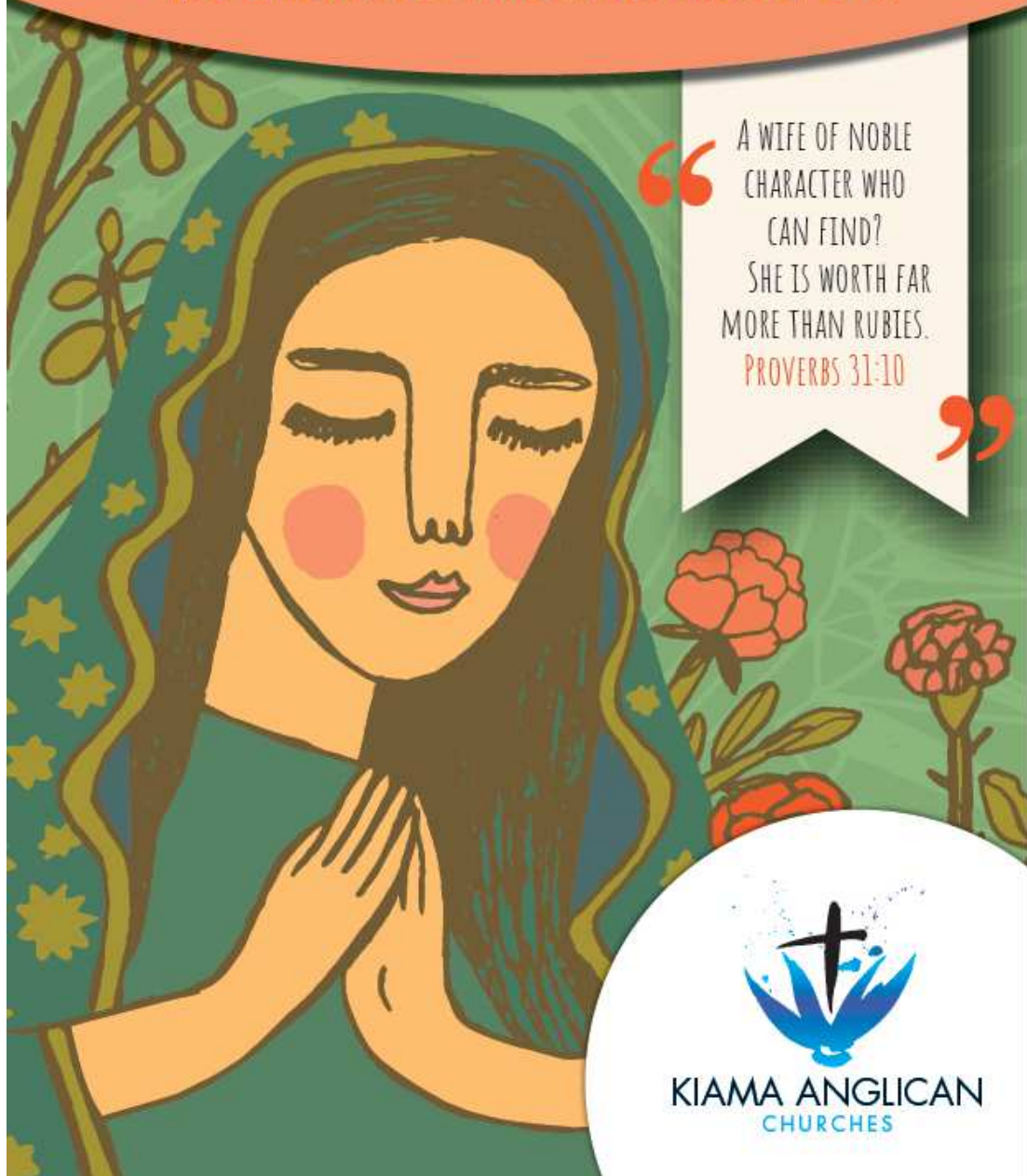


MARY • ESTHER • RUTH

#FaithfulWomenofGod



Thoughts, Notes & Answers for Leaders

STUDIES 1-10

Bible Studies : Term 4 : 2018

RUTH: ESTHER: MARY

'A Good Woman Who Can Find?'

In many ways these studies are accounts of not-so-usual events. A young female refugee finds a God-fearing husband and has a baby. A woman in a high social position uses her influence for the good of her family. A young woman has a baby not too many months after marrying her fiancé. These sorts of things happen, to varying degrees often enough and throughout history. But with Ruth, Esther and Mary there are important peculiarities. One is a Moabitess who marries a Jew, another is a Jewish beauty who is queen to the king of the Persian Empire, and the last is bearing the long promised Messiah, Jesus, who has come to save his people from their sins.

These prominent Bible women, and their stories, all have something to teach us about how we live as God's people, as disciples, to put it in New Testament terms, of Jesus in a variety of circumstances.

May God bless us as we are challenged and encouraged by these three remarkable women.

Greg Holmes - May 2018

Ruth says,

"Your people will be my people and your God my God."

Esther says,

"And if I perish, I perish."

And Mary says:

"I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said."

RUTH: ESTHER: MARY - 'A Good Woman Who Can Find?'

THE STUDIES

Week Ending	Study	Passage	Title	Page No
Sun 14 Oct	1	Ruth 1	Naomi	
Sun 21 Oct	2	Ruth 2	Ruth	
Sun 28 Oct	3	Ruth 3	Boaz	
Sun 4 Nov	4	Ruth 4	Redeemer	
Sun 11 Nov	5	Esther 1:1-3:15	Danger	
Sun 18 Nov	6	Esther 4:1-7:10	Pivot	
Sun 25 Nov	-	Vision		
Sun 2 Dec	7	Esther 8:1-10:3	Deliverance	
Sun 9 Dec	8	Mary – Pre Birth	Pregnancy	
Sun 16 Dec	9	Mary - Birth	Birth	
	10	Mary – Post Birth*	Motherhood	
Sun 23 Dec	-		Christmas	

*This topic is not scheduled to be preached on but is included here for 'completeness'.

Helpful References:

Webb, Barry, Five Festal Garments (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2000)

A highly recommended read – It is available on iBooks.

Duguid, I.M. Esther & Ruth (Reformed Expository Commentary Series)(?? Presbyterian and Reformed, 2005)

Bush, F.W. Ruth, Esther (Word Biblical Commentary) (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1996)

Nielson, K.B. Ruth and Esther (12 Week Study) (Knowing The Bible Series) Wheaton, Crossway, 2014)

Dever, M. Promises Kept : The Message of the Old Testament (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2006)

And the Mark Dever sermons on these two books at

<http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/>

Again highly recommended.

The outline of Ruth and Esther on the Bible Project website.

<https://thebibleproject.com/all-videos/>

Again highly recommended.

RUTH: ESTHER: MARY - 'A Good Woman Who Can Find?'

Some Background : **Ruth**

Excerpts from Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart:
How To Read the Bible Book by Book (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002).

Study 1: RUTH 1

Naomi

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Ruth 1:1-7	Ruth 1:8-13	Ruth 1:14-18	Ruth 1:19-22	Judges 21:25

Explore the Basics

1. When does all this happen? What are the problems in Israel?

Chapter 1 v1 places this story in the time of the Judges. A quick look back at the last verse of Judges (which is immediately before Ruth in our order of the Old Testament books) speaks of a time when everyone 'did as he saw fit'. This is characterised in Nehemiah 9:26 as *"But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies."*

The immediate problem for our characters in the story is that there is a famine in the land. They are starving.

2. Where do Elimelech and Naomi go?

They flee as economic refugees into Moab (one of Israel's traditional enemies and certainly a gentile nation). Note that their place of origin is Bethlehem.

3. What happens there?

Elimelech dies, the two sons marry Moabite women and then both sons die.

Naomi is left as one of three widows.

4. What does Naomi decide to do next? Why?

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Having heard that the 'drought had broken' in Israel, Naomi decides to return 'home'.

She commences the journey with one daughter in law and ends it with one.

5. Who is Ruth and what does she do in this chapter?

Ruth is a Moabite woman who marries one of Naomi's sons (it is not clear which one – in a sense that marriage is not important – it did not produce a son).

Ruth then goes to Israel with Naomi despite Naomi's advice that she would be better staying in Moab.

Deeper and Wider

1. Why Moab? What is the problem here?

Moab is reasonably close (to the east of Judah), the famine does not seem to have had the same effect there.

The problem is that this is a gentile nation and one that has persecuted Israel in the past.

Baldwin (NBC): "*Though near geographically it was not friendly territory. The Moabites were descended from Lot (Gn. 19:27) and so were distant relations of Israel, but they had been hostile when the Israelites had approached from Egypt after the exodus (Nu. 21:29). Early in the period of the judges Eglon King of Moab had invaded and dominated the Israelites for eighteen years (Jdg. 3:14).*"

2. What is the significance of v16?

Ruth in this somewhat surprising assertion declares her allegiance to Naomi, to Naomi's people and to Naomi's God.

Baldwin (NBC): "*Naomi's protest called forth the most sublime response. Ruth's mind was made up, Where you go I will go. Naomi's well-being was her first*

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concern, though that involved emigration from her homeland, leaving her parents who were still living (2:11), and settling among strangers. From this point on Naomi's people would be her people, though Ruth had no certainty that she would find acceptance. Most significant of all Ruth declared Naomi's God to be her God. Her resolve was total, extending even to death, and confirmed on oath in the name of her new-found Lord. Ruth's declaration forms the climax of this chapter. The author no doubt hoped that readers would follow her example."

3. How does Naomi sum up her situation in v20?

Baldwin (NBC): *"Naomi quickly cut short any celebration by revealing the depth of her despair. Overcome by memories of past happiness in Bethlehem she could not bear to be called Naomi (which means 'pleasant' or 'lovely'). Far more appropriate in her view was Mara (meaning 'bitter'), and she blamed the Almighty (Shaddai) for her bitter experiences."*

4. "As the barley harvest was beginning"(v22). Why are these words significant?

This is first of all a sign that the famine has broken. There is a harvest to be taken in. Second it provides and context and a primary location for the action of the rest of the book.

Finally it reflects the words in v6 that 'The Lord had come to the aid of his people'.

Apply

1. Kindness is one of the themes of this book. How is kindness shown, by whom, and to whom?

Baldwin (NBC) on 'kindness': **"8** *There is more to the word kindness than the reader might suspect. It translates the Hebrew word *hesed*, here and in 2:20*

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and 3:10. Supremely it is the characteristic of God himself in his dealings with those who are his people. Sometimes (e.g. Ex. 15:13) it is translated 'unfailing love' and the word conveys the Lord's faithfulness to his covenant promises (Dt. 7:9). People who have experienced the Lord's hesed are intended to reflect the same loving care in their relationships with others. Ruth the Moabitess is said to have done so (3:10), because of her selfless loyalty to Naomi and because, by declaring Naomi's God to be her God, she entered into the sphere of his blessing. By the same route, other non-Israelites were able to know for themselves the Lord's hesed, for he is 'rich in love... he has compassion on all he has made' (Ps. 145:8-9). Supremely that steadfast love was revealed in Christ and is a secure basis for Christians' trust in the God of Naomi and Ruth today."

Naomi demonstrates kindness when suggesting her daughters in law go back to Moab.

The Bethlehemite women attempt to show kindness to Naomi.

Ruth of course is the shining light of kindness in her attitude to and support of Naomi.

2. Are the people in this chapter worthwhile examples to follow? Why or why not?

Ruth of course is the shining light.

Her conversion and her steps in 'discipleship' are here for us all to see and emulate.

The negative examples are also worth noting.

Elimelech takes his family out of the 'land' into the land of foreigners when it could be argued that the correct response for one of God's people is repentance and pleading to the LORD. (Ref XXX)

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Naomi is embittered by her experience but does v6 imply that at least she sees God at work in the relief of the famine.

For Next Week: Ruth 2.

Study 2: RUTH 2

Ruth

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Ruth 2:1-7	Ruth 2:8-16	Ruth 2:17-23	Deuteronomy 24:17-22	Deuteronomy 25:5-10

Explore the Basics

1. What is Naomi's and Ruth's most basic need at the start of this chapter? What is the possible solution?

Naomi and Ruth are returned refugees, Ruth is a 'stranger' in the land. They both lack husbands or sons and so lack a means of support.

They are indeed vulnerable and need a means of getting food.

The possible solution is to go 'gleaning'.

Notice to the hint at a solution and a segue to the rest of the story in v1. Naomi could have asked him for support but determines not to.

2. What does Ruth find herself doing?

She finds herself following along behind the men harvesting the barley, picking up the 'bits' they have left behind or are at the edge of the field.

She just 'happens' to choose the field belonging to this close relative of Naomi's.

3. How does the owner of the field treat Ruth?

First he notices her when he arrives at the field, then he enquires who she is, and is told of her relationship to Naomi.

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He speaks to Ruth and offers her special treatment and protection. Remember she is a vulnerable single woman.

Then he instructs his workers to actually leave extra grain for Ruth to glean.

4. What is Naomi's reaction to all of this?

I would put it as surprised and pleased and encouraging to Ruth to continue to do this work. She probably also appreciated the food.

Deeper and Wider

1. What purpose does the task of gleaning serve?

Look at Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19.

Baldwin (NBC): *"The immediate need was food. It was humiliating to be reduced to such poverty, but because it was harvest time there was a means of self-help. God's law stipulated that farmers were not to harvest the corners of their fields, but leave grain for the poor to collect (Lv. 19:9; 23:22). Special blessing would follow from this generous action (Dt. 24:19)."*

2. "As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz" (v3). What do these words hint at?

Baldwin (NBC): *"Ruth decided to take advantage of this provision (gleaning), but guessed that not all farmers would welcome people foraging on their land, especially a foreigner. She wanted to go where she would find favour. Though she knew nothing about any near relatives of her father-in-law, she 'happened' to choose to glean in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech. The repetition of these words which occur in v 1 underlines their importance. Her choice of field was no accident; God had been her unseen guide as subsequent events were to prove."*

3. Why is Boaz so kind to Ruth? Note v10-12.

Baldwin (NBC): *"The answer was that her reputation had gone ahead of her. The people of Bethlehem recognized goodness in action and approved of Ruth's courage in accompanying Naomi. With May the LORD repay you Boaz was expressing more than a pious wish. Aware of Ruth's self-sacrifice Boaz wanted her to be richly rewarded so that her faith would be strengthened by seeing all her needs met. Such was the promise to those who took God at his word (Dt. 5:10). God's people loved to liken God's protecting care to that of a bird spreading its wings over its chicks (cf. Pss. 17:8; 36:7). Jesus' use of the same metaphor has reinforced its message (Mt. 23:37)."*

4. Verse 20 speaks of a kinsman-redeemer. What is such a person supposed to do? Worth looking at Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

Baldwin (NBC): *"20 Kinsman-redeemer. Strong family ties in Israel meant that the verb 'redeem' was in common use; it belonged to the realm of family law. Each member of a family or clan had an obligation to defend and provide for any other who was destitute or a victim of injustice. The redeemer of property was to buy back land a relative had sold in time of need (Lv. 25:25), thus keeping it within the family. If someone sold himself into slavery, his nearest relative was to buy his freedom (Lv. 25:47-55). A redeemer also had the duty of avenging a murder (Nu. 35:19; Dt. 19:6). The book of Ruth extends his duties to providing an heir for a male relative who has died childless. Usually this duty fell to a brother (Dt. 25:5-10), but in the case of Ruth who had no brothers-in-law, a more distant relative was expected to marry her, as Naomi revealed (ch. 3).*

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When the OT asserted that Yahweh was Israel's redeemer, the events of the exodus were to the fore: 'I will redeem you with an outstretched arm' (Ex. 6:6); 'In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed' (Ex. 15:13). Yahweh declared himself to be Israel's divine Kinsman, ready to deliver and help them (Is. 41:14). The special contribution of the book of Ruth is the insight that the near kinsman alone possessed the right to redeem, and yet was under no obligation to do so. The willingness of Boaz to undertake a costly duty foreshadowed that of the greater Redeemer, who was to descend from him."

Apply

1. What kindnesses can you see in this chapter?

For discussion.

2. In what way is the owner of the field an example to follow?

Note v4 (Baldwin (NBC): "The LORD be with you!, words familiar to many Christians, are used only here in this exact form."), v8,v9,v12.

And more to come!

For Next Week: Ruth 3.

Study 3: RUTH 3

Boaz

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Ruth 3:1-6	Ruth 3:7-13	Ruth 3:14-18	Proverbs 31:10-31	Judges 21:25

Explore the Basics

1. Who is the instigator of the events in this chapter?

The plot thickens (If you can call divine guidance a 'plot').

However in human terms it is now Naomi that drives the narrative forward.

She recognises that Boaz may make a good husband for Ruth and that in some ways he is obligated to her. Baldwin (NBC): "*n OT times marriage was arranged by parents, so it was fitting that Naomi should take steps to find a home and security for Ruth. Some weeks had passed, because harvesting was over and threshing was in progress. Naomi had been giving careful thought to the best approach to Boaz in his capacity as a near relative. Her hope was that he would accept responsibility as their kinsman–redeemer by marrying Ruth. But, kind as he had been, Boaz had not made any move towards marriage, hence Naomi's decision to put on the pressure. Her plans were to involve considerable courage on Ruth's part.*"

2. What does Naomi instruct Ruth to do?

The detail is in v3-4.

She is to make fairly discreet 'advances' to Boaz.

3. What is Boaz's first reaction?

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Surprise I would imagine, then wants to know who is there..

Baldwin (NBC): *"Once he had fallen asleep Ruth took up her position at his feet, the place of submission, and waited. In the middle of the night Boaz awoke and at this point the story becomes intensely gripping. How will these two worthy people conduct themselves in so compromising a situation? Boaz became aware of a woman's presence but could not identify her. His stark question was, therefore, to be expected. Ruth's reply, though respectful, was not deferential as it had been in 2:10, 13. She spoke in her own right, and took the courage to request Boaz to act as kinsman-redeemer and marry her. That is the significance of the words, Spread the corner of your garment over me. The word for corner is the same as that for 'wing' in 2:12. Ruth reminded Boaz of his own words, and requested him to become the fulfiller of his own prayer. 'Spreading the cloak over' was a vivid expression for providing protection, warmth and fellowship. The phrase spoke eloquently of marriage."*

4. What does Boaz resolve to do?

He resolves to deal with any obstacle to his being able to marry Ruth.

The 'plot' has gone perfectly.

Deeper and Wider

1. What do you think Ruth's actions imply?

There is really no real need for conjecture. Ruth is, with Naomi's firm encouragement, seeking a husband.

2. How does Boaz describe Ruth in v11? Note Proverbs 31:10. What does this imply? (In the

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Hebrew arrangement of the Old Testament, Proverbs is followed immediately by Ruth).

Boaz describes her as a 'woman of noble character' – it seems that he has found one.

Worth discussing what in their relationship would make Boaz think that.

3. What is the possible obstacle to Boaz's proposed course of action?

There is a closer relative who thus has a prior claim. Baldwin (NBC): *"He could do all she asked without incurring blame because the whole community had come to appreciate Ruth's integrity. But first he had to confront a relative who had a prior claim to the role of kinsman–redeemer. Why had this man not been mentioned before? The answer can only be surmised, but it seems likely that Naomi, if she knew of the man, had already decided that he was unlikely to take on any extra responsibilities. Boaz would put the matter to the test."*

4. Ruth is a Moabitess. What complications does this imply in regard to the Torah? Why then does Boaz persist?

The law forbade the Israelites from marrying 'foreign women' and they often were rebuked by the prophets and God for doing so. Ruth is by background a foreign woman.

But remember she has been married to an Israelite before and she had committed herself to Yahweh, Naomi's God.

In the text there is no hint of reproach for what Boaz proposes (at this stage) to do.

Apply

1. In many ways this is an account of a set of fairly normal events. Where is God in all this? How can

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this inform how we go about our lives as disciples of Jesus?

In many ways we want to confine God to the big things of life, the career, mission work etc. But God is also God of the small and regular and routine things of life. God cares for and directs it all. He has a will for us all things.

2. Consider here the example of both Ruth and Boaz. What is there to emulate here?

For discussion

Again kindness (hesed) is on view.

For Next Week: Ruth 4.

Study 4: RUTH 4

The Redeemer

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Ruth 4:1-8	Ruth 4:9-12	Ruth 4:13-22	Matthew 1	XXX

Explore the Basics

1. Where does Boaz go first thing the next morning?

To do what?

Boaz goes to the meeting place of Bethlehem, the town gate.

Baldwin (NBC): *"The main gate of the town served as the local law court. Planned with an open space around which benches provided places to sit in the shade of the high walls, the gate was a natural meeting place. It had the advantage of being open to the public, who could observe that justice was done. Boaz knew that his relative would be sure to go through the gate to work and the relative, who remains unnamed, would be prepared for some serious business when he was invited to sit down. The ten elders of the town, chosen at random, roughly correspond to the jury in English law. Responsible adults were presumed to be competent to discern what was just. In Bethlehem these elders represented the community in which the legal decision had to be carried out. Their approval was essential and the seated group of twelve constituted the court of law."*

2. How is the possible obstacle to Boaz's intentions overcome?

Boaz proceeds carefully.

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The first matter discussed is Elimelech's (Naomi's husband's) land. The alternate kinsman is willing to take this one.

But then, with some wisdom, Boaz introduces the problem of the 'little woman' – and the alternate kinsman backs away with some speed.

Baldwin (NBC): *"Elimelech had a right to an heir. Ruth the Moabitess, his daughter-in-law, was still living, and the man who bought the field had the duty of raising an heir for the dead man through her. If a son were born, the land would revert to him and Elimelech's property would remain in his family. The kinsman would then lose what he had bought and would have another family to keep, hence his reply, I cannot do it. The cost was too high. The generosity of Boaz in accepting these financial losses becomes the more apparent."*

3. What is the significance of the sandal (v7)?

Baldwin (NBC): *"Another custom, however, had dropped out of use and therefore had to be explained (7). Both parts of the redemption agreement were completed by the symbolic handing over of a sandal, which represented possession (cf. Jos. 1:3). The elders were formal witnesses that Boaz was legally entitled to the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon, and that Mahlon's widow was to become his wife."*

4. What is the outcome of the marriage?

To put it succinctly – A Son.

Baldwin (NBC): *"The Lord enabled her to conceive may be a reference to the absence of children by her first marriage, but Scripture never takes for granted the conception of a child and regards each individual as the Lord's special work of creation (e.g. Ps. 139:13). The birth of a son was the culmination of joy for the women*

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present, who exclaimed, Praise be to the LORD! and addressed their delight to Naomi rather than to Ruth. Honour was due to the older generation, and those who had known Naomi before she went to Moab would be overjoyed to see how the Lord was providing for her future."

Deeper and Wider

- 1. Consider Naomi's role in this whole story. Compare 1:20-21 and 4:14-17.**

From Mara – 'bitterness' to blessedness is Naomi's story.

In many ways she is a self-willed and manipulating woman but in the end she is a doting Grandmother – blessed by her LORD.

- 2. Read v17-22. What is the significance of this?**
Here is the bloodline of Israel's kings, the bloodline of the Messiah, the line of fulfilment of God's promises.
- 3. Note Matthew 1:5 and Luke 3:31? Who is Ruth's 'greater son'?**

The answer is JESUS

- 4. Look back over the 4 chapters. How have the characters shown kindness to one another?**

Apply

- 1. Mark Deaver maintains that one of the issues in this story is whether God's kindness is greater than the kindness of people. List the ways God's kindness is shown throughout the four chapters? Discuss how God has been kind to you and yours.**

Discuss

Baldwin (NBC) reflecting on the whole book:

"Whereas its opening words recorded famine, migration and deaths, the end of the book looks forward in hope.

The list of names, covering the period from the

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patriarchs to David, reminds the reader that what happened to Naomi and Ruth was part of the ongoing saving work of God through the centuries. Life had meaning because the Lord, who had made clear promises to Abraham, was active in each generation, revealing his character, keeping his promises and achieving his purposes. This was the unseen factor that created a historical perspective in Israel, unique in the ancient world. But Israel's history is not concerned only with the great ones in the land. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz illustrate that true greatness reflects the character of the living God, whose steadfast love called forth a responding love in those who put their trust in him."

2. **'There is a redeemer.'** What has the book of Ruth taught you about God and what he has done for us?

For Discussion

XXX

For Next Week: Esther 1,2 and 3

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Some Background : **Esther**

Excerpts from Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart:
How To Read the Bible Book by Book (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002).

Study 5: ESTHER 1:1-3:15

"Plot"

These studies, as you will have noticed, each cover considerable ground. It is worthwhile reading the full 'story' together and then answer this reduced number of questions?

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Esther 1:1-9	Esther 1:10-22	Esther 2:1-18	Esther 2:19-23	Esther 3:1-15

Explore the Basics

1. What happens at Xerxes 'little' banquet?

Presumably lots – given that the whole event lasted 180 days and the banquet itself 7 days

Here is Xerxes showing off his wealth and power.

He demands Vashti the queen's presence and she refuses – she is deposed.

And the search 'pageant' begins for a new Queen.

Baldwin (NBC): *"There is irony in the contrast between the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces (1), and the banality of his proclamation that every man should be ruler over his own household. Despite all the great show of wealth and power, King Xerxes had decided limitations in his own home. There is irony also in the reference to the laws of Persia and Media, which could not be repealed, and yet which could be passed at a whim by a monarch in high spirits from wine."*

2. How does Esther become Queen?

Basically she enters and wins the 'beauty contest'.

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Baldwin (NBC): *"The fact that she was lovely in form and features was a key factor in the outworking of God's purpose, and is seen as his good gift."*

3. What does Mordecai do for Xerxes?

On overhearing a plot he informs the King thought Xerxes and the plotters are condemned.

4. What does Haman plot?

Haman is another 'foreigner' in Xerxes court and is promoted to high office.

When he demands certain gestures in honour of his position – Mordecai refuses consistently.

Haman is not one to overlook a slight and so he plots the downfall not only of Mordecai but also of his whole people – the Jews.

He manages to get the Kings compliance and 'by chance' a date is set for the destruction of the Jews.

Deeper and Wider

1. What, do you think, motivates Mordecai's provoking of Haman?

We are really given no clue.

Though Haman's background may suggest a possibility:

Baldwin (NBC): *"a certain Haman, an Agagite. The name Agag recalls the reign of Saul the son of Kish (1 Sa. 9:1-2), who failed to fight this Amalekite king to the death, so incurring condemnation by the prophet Samuel (1 Sa. 15). Jewish readers would see a recapitulation of this battle in the confrontation between Mordecai (also a 'son of Kish') and Haman the Agagite. It was a battle Mordecai determined to win."*

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There is also the fact that Xerxes has honoured Haman and not the man who had saved his life, Mordecai.

2. What sort of people do Mordecai and Esther appear to be?

To quote the Bible Project, they are morally ambiguous. They recognise their Jewishness but seem to be thoroughly immersed in the culture of Susa.

However there are hints of the positive:

Baldwin (NBC): *"The author now introduces Mordecai, a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin. (Though the word Jew derived from 'Judah', it became a generalized term for any Israelite during the post-exilic period.) Mordecai had distinguished names among his ancestors: Kish was the father of King Saul (1 Sa. 9:1), and Shimei, his relative, had fiercely supported him (2 Sa. 16:5). The fact that the family had been deported to Babylon with King Jehoiachin in 597 BC is another indication of its importance (2 Ki. 24:14-16). The name Mordecai was connected [p. 446] with Marduk, the state god of Babylon. ... Mordecai was evidently a man to be reckoned with. He had adopted his orphaned cousin, Hadassah, 'myrtle', also known as Esther.*

Of the many girls who arrived in Susa, only one, Esther, is mentioned by name. Even before the king had set eyes on her, Esther had won the favour of Hegai. Hegai gave Esther preferential treatment, promoting her to first place by selecting for her the best attendants and the most attractive quarters. Esther did not permit such favours to go to her head, but kept her own counsel with regard to her nationality. Unlike Xerxes, Mordecai was able to rule his household. The fact that he cared enough about Esther to check daily

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on her well-being provides a clue to his secret. Esther obeyed because she loved and respected Mordecai."
Mordecai is also loyal to his King as shown in his reporting of the plot.

3. What impression does this account give of the Persian royal court?

Oppulent, luxurious, self conscious even OTT (over the top).

Also seeming filled with intrigues and rivalry and jealousies.

4. What is your impression of Xerxes when he is at 'home'?

Xerxes is King of the Persian Empire. The empire that challenged the Greeks and ruled great swathes of the Near and Middle East.

Baldwin (NBC): *"The narrator first introduces King Xerxes, his empire and his capital. His difficult Persian name Khshayarsha was transliterated Ahasuerus in Hebrew (so AV, RV, RSV), whereas the NIV has adopted the Greek transliteration Xerxes, better known in secular history. His empire, extending from the Indus River in Pakistan to the Upper Nile in northern Sudan, comprised an impressive 127 provinces. Susa, the ancient capital of Elam, had been rebuilt by Darius, father of Xerxes, as one of his capital cities. The citadel was the central acropolis, elevated above the remainder of the city, and fortified to protect the king. The third year of his reign (483 BC) marked the end of opposition to the new reign, and was an appropriate time to consolidate the empire by assembling its leading figures in the capital."*

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However, he does seem a little fond of his wine, his Queen seems content to defy his orders in regard to a state occasion, and he is willing to make legislation while heavily influenced with alcohol. Further his court seems to be a place of some discord, and infected with jealousies, rivalries and plots. He also seems willing to make rash legislation (which in this jurisdiction cannot be changed) with out properly understanding background and consequences. And some of his choices of officials seem unwise, while others who have been a great help are forgotten.

Apply

- 1. The question right through this book is where is God and what about his promises to the Jews?**

For discussion and in fact should be the main point of discussion as the story unfolds.

- 2. So what can we take from the characters in the story so far?**

From Haman - Pride can be a consuming problem – or don't believe your won publicity.

From Mordecai XXX

From Esther XXX

From Xerxes XXX

For Next Week: Read Esther 4,5,6 and 7.

Study 6: ESTHER 4:1-7:10

"Pivot"

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Esther 4:1-17	Esther 5:1-8	Esther 5:9-14	Esther 6:1-14	Esther 7:1-10

Explore the Basics

1. How does Mordecai persuade Esther to help? (Note 4:13-14)

I think the first thing to note is that he has to persist. Baldwin (NBC): *"Mordecai had every reason to grieve at the edict of Haman because his refusal to acknowledge Haman's promotion had jeopardized the whole Jewish race. By wearing a mourning garb and making loud wailing the Jews made known their plight, identified themselves and drew attention to the inexplicable edict. Mordecai, however, could no longer make contact with Esther because sackcloth was not permitted within the citadel. When Esther heard he was in mourning she sent him suitable clothing to replace his sackcloth, but to no avail. Esther's great distress indicates genuine love and concern. Her trusted attendant Hathach went to find out the facts."*

Baldwin (NBC): *"Mordecai undoubtedly implied that God would protect his people and that he had purposed to use Esther by causing her to be chosen as queen. This is a theological high point in the book. Mordecai believed that God guides in political events and in individual lives, even though those in power do not acknowledge him."*

2. What is the nature of, and result of, Esther's first approach to the king?

Need to note the danger implied in 4:11.

Esther dresses up, goes humbly and tentatively approaches the throne room. The King accepts her approach and indeed makes an extravagant offer. But Esther simply requests that Xerxes and Haman join her for dinner. 'She' will 'cook' – or at least her servants will.

This they do and Esther suggests a second banquet the next evening.

3. What happens in the Mordecai/Haman relationship?

Haman is overjoyed at this turn of events – he is in favour with the King and the Queen.

But again he notices Mordecai's lack of submission and he is outraged.

Encouraged by his wife he prepares to have Mordecai 'dispatched'.

4. Then what happens after the king's sleepless night?

Then it so happens (?) that the King can't sleep. (too much rich food at Esther's banquet). So he has the account of his reign read to him and he notes he has neglected to reward Mordecai's whistle blowing.

So the next morning, just as Haman is arriving, he decides to reward Mordecai and ironically Haman, misunderstanding, gets to dictate the nature of that recognition.

All too soon after this it is off to the second banquet.

5. What is the result of the second banquet?

Esther, asked a third time, finally makes her request. She wants here people to be saved.

And Haman is named.

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The king in a rage leaves to 'think'. When he returns he finds Haman, who is actually pleading for his life, in a compromising position with the Queen.

To cut a long story short Haman ends up 'hoist on his own petard'.

Deeper and Wider

- 1. The Bible Project suggests that Chapter 6 is the pivot around which the story turns? What is the fundamental change that happens in this chapter?**

If you haven't done so already now would be a good time to have a look at this.

XXX

The big reversal here is between Mordecai the Jew and Haman the Agagite. At the beginning of the chapter Haman is the big man and Mordecai is headed for the 'gallows' at the end Haman is on the gallows and Mordecai the Jew is exalted.

- 2. Note 4:15-16. What is Esther's attitude here? Is this faith or fatalism?**

This is Esther's big statement of faith.

Baldwin (NBC): "*Esther's call for a three-day fast revealed that she shared the faith of Mordecai in the God who answers prayer, though she did not mention his name. Her need was for courage to fulfil her destiny by interceding for the life of her people, though it could cost her her own life.*"

We are left a bit in the dark as to what Esther is thinking. But surely she knows of Yahweh's care for his people.

- 3. Consider the reversal of fortunes in this story so far. Are they just happy accidents?**

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There is more to these than just the Mordecai/Haman swap.

There is Esther / Vashti

Xerxes to some extent.

The point is that, despite the name of Yahweh not being mentioned, the coincidences or serendipitous happenings or luck are all for the good, eventually of God's people.

4. **What is the problem that still needs to be resolved?**

The law of the Persians cannot be changed so how are the Jews to be saved from the edict that Xerxes has already issued.

Baldwin (NBC): *"One major problem remained to be solved: Haman's edict remained on the statute book and needed to be negated. It had gone out in the name of the king, who alone could authorize any alteration, and it had been published in every province of the empire."*

Apply

1. **How do we, or should we, view the violence in these chapters?**

A good question XXX

2. **So again, where is God in these chapters? How is that an encouragement to us?**

For discussion.

XXX

For Next Week: Read Esther 8,9 and 10.

Study 7: ESTHER 8:1-10:3

"Purim"

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Esther 8:1-10	Esther 8:11-17	Esther 9:1-17	Esther 9:18-32	Esther 10:1-3

Explore the Basics

1. What is Xerxes response to Esther's request to protect her people?

Note that this is something of a process and in the end it is Mordecai who writes the decree just as Haman had written the original one.

Baldwin (NBC): *"The edict had gone out in the king's name, but Esther contended that the wording had been devised by Haman, and therefore she argued in favour of an order... overruling the despatches of Haman. First, King Xerxes justified himself by his drastic punishment of Haman, and went on to sanction another decree in the king's name, though the wording was left once again to his second-in-command. The words that Esther had so carefully avoided about the impossibility of revoking decrees of the king he now repeated. Once again the writer has a little dig at royal inconsistencies.*

8:9-14 *The wording echoes 3:12-14, where Haman's edict is recorded, only the content of the edict is entirely reversed. So much for laws that cannot be changed, and for the great men who frame the laws. Haman's edict of the first month was overturned in the third month by order of his enemy, Mordecai, who added Hebrew to the list of languages in which the new edict*

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was published. Fast horses from the royal stud ensured speedy delivery.

It is important to note the NIV translation of v 11, which captures the sense, as opposed to the NEB, JB and GNB. There is no question about the first clause, permitting Jews to organize themselves; question arises over the object of the verbs destroy, kill and annihilate, quoted from 3:13, Haman's decree. There the object was 'all the Jews—young and old, women and little children', whereas Mordecai's decree made any armed force... that might attack them the object. Permission was given to plunder property but even that was limited to the one specified day, which Haman had regarded as propitious. The Jews would be ready to retaliate if they were attacked, whereas Haman had intended that they should be slaughtered in cold blood."

2. What happens on the thirteenth day of the 12th month, the month of Adar?

See

Baldwin (NBC): "When the fateful day came, the thirteenth of Adar, the Jews got the upper hand over their enemies. The writer summarizes the outcome of the day's events so that the reader is in no doubt: the victims had become the victors. In fact, he gives the impression that much of the opposition melted away because of the support for Mordecai at both popular and leadership levels."

3. What festival is established to celebrate the Jews deliverance? 9:23-28

The festival of Purim.

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Baldwin (NBC): *"What the author has not yet explained is the name Purim, therefore he gives a summary of Haman's plot. It involved his casting the pîur or 'lot', a word not found in Hebrew, hence the bracketed translation in the text. The finding of a die bearing the word pîuru (see Introduction) has now confirmed the meaning of the word, so vindicating the accuracy of the [p. 451] author of the book. The casting of lots for fixing dates was a long-established practice in the ancient Near East, but on this occasion it did not work out as the would-be winner had intended. The adoption of the word Purim (pur with the Hebrew plural ending,—im), 'lots', was therefore a defiant repudiation of fate, because fate had not delivered the right answer to the one who believed in fate. The Jews had proved again that they knew a better way of life. For this reason it was imperative that the festival should be celebrated by every family in every generation, and never be allowed to die out."*

Jobes (NIVAC): *" Although the fateful day of the battle in Persia was Adar 13, Purim was to be celebrated not on Adar 13, but on Adar 14 and 15. As F. Bush points out, "the festival does not celebrate victory in battle, and the joy prescribed is not malicious glee over the slaughter of their enemies. The festival commemorates, rather, the fact that they "gained relief from their enemies" and that life was "transformed for them from sadness to joy and from mourning to a holiday.""*

4. What does chapter 10 tell us of Mordecai's final triumph?

Possibly gets the biggest promotion of all time.

Note 10v3

Deeper and Wider

1. Again, where is God in all of this?

Baldwin (NBC): *"Paul's assurance that 'God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled' (2 Thes. 1:6-7) could have been prompted by a reading of Esther. In both books the 'trouble' is persecution of God's people, who are in no position to defend themselves. Powerful opposition has continued over the centuries, and 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood' (Eph. 6:12). God sometimes intervenes with spectacular providences, as he did in the time of Esther, but whether he publicly vindicates the believer or not, the church's task is to stand firm. Paul found his vindication in the growth of the church.*

In the centuries before Christ the survival of the Jewish people was essential if there were ever to be a church. The book Esther, which relates a story about that survival, is therefore an integral part of the Bible for Christians as well as for Jews."

2. How does this book treat human authority and hierarchies ???

I am inclined to think that here the fickleness and self-centredness of human authority, at least of the sort that Xerxes represents, is subtly poked fun at. Much of the treatment seems ironic.

The lavish party and Vashti's defiance.

The Law of the Medes and Persians which cannot be changed – but is pretty much.

The rapid rise and fall of the self important Haman.

Apply

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1. Proverbs 31:10-31 speaks of the 'Good Woman'. From these studies how does Esther exemplify this? Or does she?

I think this is up for grabs.

Is she an example or not.

The Old Testament presents us with lots of heroes of the faith – David, Abraham, Joshua, Gideon, Sampson to name a few – but most have very substantial 'feet of clay' – with the possible exception of Daniel and, perhaps, Joseph.

XXX

2. God keeps his promises to his people. How does the book of Esther encourage you to trust this?

I suspect this is the whole point of the story. We must trust God. In the obvious circumstances where his name is invoked, where we are told he is acting, but also in the less obvious, the day to day doings of our world where God is also active even though he is not named.

Phillips (EBC): *"The text closes with (lit.) "speaking peace [šālôm; NIV "welfare"] for all his descendants"—a poignant reminder of the necessity for Jews throughout the succeeding centuries to have someone able to intercede for their well-being. While Mordecai had expressed the confidence that help would arise from "another place," the grim reality is that persecution also continues to arise from "other places" (Beal, 106). That great need for shalom for Mordecai's descendants ("his seed") lies in the shadow of the greater One of those descendants who both spoke and made shalom. The events of Esther mean that God's people, through whom blessing will come to all nations (Ge 12:3), are preserved for the coming Intercessor."*

For Next Week: Read Ruth and Esther again.

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And read Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke 1 and 2

Baldwin (NBC): ""

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Some Background : **Mary**

Excerpts from Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart:
How To Read the Bible Book by Book (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002).

Study 8: MARY 1

Pregnancy

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Matthew 1:18-20	Luke 1:26-38	Luke 1:39-45	Luke 1:46-55	Isaiah 7:13-15

Explore the Basics

1. What is your impression of Mary, the mother of Jesus from what you know of the Bible?
2. Read Matthew 1:16. Who is Mary?
3. Note also Matthew 1:18-20. What are we told about Mary here?
4. Read Luke 1:26-38. What is announced here? What is Mary's response?
5. Read Luke 1:39-45. How does Elizabeth's reaction add to our understanding of what is happening to Mary?

Deeper and Wider

1. Read Luke 1:46-55. What is the focus of Mary's song? How does she describe herself?
2. Read Matthew 1:21-23. How does this add to the story.
3. Read Isaiah 7:13-15? What does this tell us about what is happening to Mary?

Apply

1. Read XXX
2. Note Luke 1:38. How should we emulate Mary's attitude?

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**For Next Week: Read Matthew 1:24-2:23 and Luke
2:1-40.**

Study 9: MARY 2

Birth

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Luke 2:1-40	Matthew 1:24-2:12	Matthew 2:13-23	John 1:1-14	Philippians 2:5-11

Explore the Basics

1. Read Luke 2:1-7 and Matthew 1:24-25. How, when and where is Mary's child born?
2. Note Luke 2:19. What things do you think Mary was 'treasuring'? Why does Luke include this comment?
3. What is the result of the visit of the Magi for Mary and her family?

Deeper and Wider

1. Note Luke 2:22-24 and 39. What does this tell you about Mary and Joseph?
2. Note Luke 2:33-35. What does Simeon's 'blessing' have to say to Mary? How might this have impacted her?
3. From the Gospel material we have read what prompts us to think that this is part of a much greater story?

Apply

1. How does Mary continue to be an example for us over this stressful part of her life?
2. Note that in these passages we have studied Ruth says, "Your people will be my people and your God my God," Esther says, "And if I perish, I perish," and Mary says: ""I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." How should these attitudes inform our discipleship?

For Next Week: Read John 19:19-30.

Study 10: MARY 3

Motherhood

A Reading Guide:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Luke 2:21-40	John 2:1-11	John 19:16-30	Acts 1:1-14	Revelation 12:1-17

Explore the Basics

1. Read Luke 2:41-52. Trace what Mary's reaction to each stage of this story must have been? What more does she have to 'treasure' in her heart (v51)?
2. Read John 2:1-11. What is Mary's role in this?
3. Read Mark 15:40, John 19:25-27. At the cross what would Mary's thoughts be?
4. Note Matthew 27:57-61; 28:1-10; Mark 16:1. What was Mary's 'role' around the resurrection?
5. Read Acts 1:12-14. This is the last reference in the Scriptures to Mary. What do we find here doing?

Deeper and Wider

1. Of course there is a cosmic element to what is happening to Mary in the Gospels. Read again Isaiah 7:13-15 and look at Revelation 12. What part does the 'woman' (the "virgin") play in God's plan of salvation?

Apply

1. Discuss or consider your impressions of Mary from the passages we have looked at. What example can we take from her?
2. So how should we regard Mary?
3. Proverbs 31:10-31 speaks of the 'Good Woman'. From these studies how does Mary exemplify this?

Study XX: XXX

"XXX"

Day	Reading	My Thoughts	Prayer Points
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

Generally each of these reading sets will break the weeks passage into manageable bites and then have one or two others from the rest of Scripture which relate to the themes of the passage.

- 1. From the passages we have looked at who is this Child who has been born (note Philippians 2:5-11)? How must that make Mary (and Joseph) feel?**