

Leader's Guide

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

A Study in Ruth and Jonah

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By Kathy Smith & Lane Henderson

*Leader's Guide**Preparing to Lead Your Group*

Prepared by Laurel S. Neal

Introduction

Some of you will be leading this study—*Ready or Not: Following God's Call*— in a Presbyterian Women's Circle. Others of you will be leading it in a small group, Sunday School class, or some other setting. Some of you will be leading this study for a group that meets monthly. Others of you will be meeting more frequently—perhaps on a weekly basis for 9-10 weeks. Some of you will be leading all the lessons yourself. Others of you will be leading just one or two of them.

Some of you are experienced Bible study leaders who have your own tried-and-true methods of preparation and leadership. Others of you feel a bit uncertain about how to get ready to lead a group Bible study.

Whatever your situation is, here's *one* way to prepare for leading your group. Getting ready to lead can be done in an hour and a half. You might want to spend more time, but the following game plan *can* be done in 90 minutes. I suggest leaving time in between the steps to let the biblical material percolate in your mind and heart, but you'll find out what works best for you.

Preparing to Lead the Study**Step 1: Sinking into the Text (30 minutes)**

Open your Bible to the passage for the study. Pray for God's guidance. Read the passage through several times, jot down your observations. If you like, use the accompanying *Bible Study Worksheet* as a guide and make notes as you go. You're just going to observe the text.

- Begin with the lists of who, when, where, and what. What **people** are mentioned in the passage? What **time frames** are mentioned? For example, the book of Ruth begins with information about the time frame: *In the days when the judges ruled*. What **places** and **geographical locations** are mentioned in the text? For example, just in Ruth 1:1-5, Bethlehem, Judah and Moab are mentioned. Finally, **what else**

is in the passage? Again, just looking at Ruth 1:1-5, we find famine, relocation, intermarriage, and widowhood playing a role in the story.

- Notice if any words or phrases are repeated. This is usually obvious after several readings, and it's often a clue to something the biblical author is trying to emphasize. When you're studying a whole book of the Bible, as you are with Ruth and Jonah, pay attention to words from earlier chapters or passages that show up again. Sometimes these kinds of repetitions are significant, as well.
- Take a look at the verbs that appear in the passage. Sometimes—though not always—the verbs are interesting. In some passages the verbs themselves are quite vivid. Or the verb tenses convey something important—either in their consistency or because the tenses change in the course of a passage.
- Now that you've read the passage through several times, ask yourself a few questions:
 - What sort of mood (or moods) does the passage seem to have?
 - How is the passage put together or structured?
 - Does the passage remind you of anything – events in your own life, stories you've heard, something from a movie or book, a piece of music, or something in the news, etcetera?

For example, it's hard for me to read Ruth 1 without several things coming to mind: my own experiences of moving to a new a place; what it was like when my brother was widowed several years ago; the beginning of the film version of *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, in which a woman and her three daughters are left with little money and are forced to leave their home after their husband/father dies; the people of Greensburg, Kansas, whose lives were recently up-ended by a fierce tornado. Just let your mind range over your own life and what's going on around you, and jot down what occurs to you. (Some of these will prove helpful to you later as illustrations and examples).

- Now jot down any questions the passage raises for you. Anything goes here, from “Where's Moab?” to “What was the impact of losing all the men in their family?” “What would be the impact in yours?” to “How well did these three women like each other?” If you push yourself a bit here, you'll find yourself really sinking into the passage, caring about the story, curious about what's really going on.

In addition, something that might help you with your observation of Ruth is to read through the book of Judges. Since “the days when the judges ruled” is the setting for the story of Ruth and Naomi, reading the book of Judges will provide you with the larger context.

Step 2: Moving from Observation to Interpretation (30 minutes)

Now you're ready to do a couple of things, and I want to give you some choices about how to proceed.

- You can turn to the study itself and simply work your way through it. The study contains some background information that will help you as you go—information that will answer some of the questions you've asked.
- You can also check out this Leader's Guide and find a bit more information on some of the historical, geographical, and cultural background of the story. **Background Notes** are provided for each lesson.
- You can also consult a Bible dictionary on your own, looking up entries that will help answer some of the questions you've asked. This is actually pretty quick. If you like to do your own research, this study can be very fun and rewarding. You'll find it extremely helpful as a leader to have access to a good Bible dictionary. Here are three excellent dictionaries to look for in your church library or to borrow from your pastor.

Harper's Bible Dictionary, HarperCollins
Eerdmans' Bible Dictionary, Eerdmans
New Bible Dictionary, InterVarsity Press

A Bible dictionary is a very handy tool, and you might like to get one of your own at some point. Meanwhile, the *Background Notes* that accompany this Leader's Guide may be quite helpful to you. Your church library may also have a multi-volume Bible dictionary (such as *The Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*), and this can be a good source for more in-depth background information if you feel you need it.

As you do any or all of these things, what you've noticed, and asked, and learned about the content of the passage will begin to give you a sense of what the passage is about. In other words, you'll be moving naturally from observing the passage to interpreting it. The questions in the study itself lead you through observation to interpretation, often moving back and forth between the two as the study progresses from one set of verses to another.

If you're using the *Bible Study Worksheet*, there's a place to jot down your own ideas concerning what the passage seems to mean. Often your thoughts will dovetail with the study itself, but sometimes you'll see something additional, or even different, in the passage. This happens because you're engaging in the same process of observation and reflection the authors of this study used. You'll see and experience firsthand much of what Kathy and Lane saw and experienced firsthand in their study and preparation. They couldn't include *everything* they thought the passages were about, so they zeroed in on some major interpretive themes.

You're doing the same thing: noticing a lot of themes and sub-themes, a lot of messages and sub-messages, but also trying to hear the main things God is saying through the stories of Ruth and Jonah. This is the Holy Spirit at work, and it's an exciting experience. You'll find yourself being drawn into the story, captivated by something in particular about it, maybe gnawing on a question that won't go away. Be sure to capture these insights someplace—either on the worksheet, or in the Study Guide, or in some other way that works for you. You're beginning to have a clear sense, or at least a clearer sense, of what the passage is about—what God is saying through it.

Step 3: Getting Ready to Lead the Study with Others (30 minutes)

The Relational Side of Bible Study – Using Sharing Questions

Whether you're using this study on a monthly basis or using it more frequently, relationships are part of why people have come together. Some people are hoping new friendships will form; others are hoping existing relationships will deepen. Either way, most people aren't there *just* for Bible study, so you need to make room for relationship-building as part of the group's time together. Besides, Bible study is always better—deeper, more significant, more transforming—when it happens in the midst of growing, caring, trusting relationships.

One good way to build relationships is to create some time at the beginning of each lesson for a sharing question or two. If your group consists of 12 people or less, you may want to stay together to answer these, but it depends on how much time you have available. If your group is larger than 10-12, consider asking people to get into smaller clusters of 3-5. Go to [*Using Sharing Questions in Groups*](#) for further instructions about how to choose and use questions that promote relationship-building.

During the first 3 weeks of your group, people are settling in and finding their place. It's important to spend extra time on relationship-building during these initial lessons. If people begin by getting to know each other better, more of them will participate in the study and discussion, and the group will become a more meaningful experience for all involved.

These group questions have another purpose as well. In addition to helping people get to know each other and find their place (and their voice) in the group, sharing questions can get people “warmed up” for the passage of scripture you're planning to study. Some suggested questions are provided in the Leader's Guide for each lesson. You'll probably be able to see how they might “prime the pump” for the study itself.

The Relational Side of Bible Study – Prayer

Prayer is a great activity to incorporate into your study time as a group. You want to open with prayer, either at the very beginning or at the beginning of the study time itself. But

you might also want to have a group prayer time following the study. As with sharing questions, get into smaller groups if necessary.

Prayer times are important, but they can become overly lengthy if they aren't led well. Consider setting time parameters as well as content parameters. Be explicit about how much time is available. Ask people to share something in particular and model this by going first yourself. (For example: "Please share one thing that's going well in your life and one thing in your life for which you need prayer." Or consider asking people to pray for each other's application insights from the study.) Go around the circle either to your right or left; this eliminates the guesswork and awkwardness of figuring out whose "turn" it is. Give people permission to "pass" with no questions asked. Intervene in overly lengthy answers in a gracious way; this is a person who needs more time, and perhaps they'll be willing to talk more after the meeting is finished. In a situation like this, be sure to follow up with the individual yourself.

By the way, I like to ask people to give prayer requests for themselves, not just for others. Women sometimes find this difficult at first, but most women also long for a place where their own needs are honored. Sharing personal needs also does more to build relationships in the group than does sharing about the needs of others.

If people are comfortable praying out loud, encourage them to do so in a format that works for your group. If some are inexperienced with praying out loud, try leading them in prayer yourself, leading them in silent prayer, or asking people to pray one-sentence prayers that don't intimidate the inexperienced. Again, let people "pass."

Just a reminder: All personal sharing requires a commitment to confidentiality on the part of group members. Make sure people understand this as you're getting started with the study, and keep reminding them of it as you go along. Personal information shared inside the group should not be shared with anyone outside the group without explicit permission. Period.

The Discussion Side of Bible Study

Here are some simple pieces that will make your study work well. You don't have to prepare them in any particular order—it just helps to have them all. Sometimes you'll get your idea about how to begin your study first, but sometimes, the manner in which you will begin your study does not become clear to you until you have worked your way through the entire lesson. Don't worry about it—just go with what works for you. But if you get these components in place, you'll probably have a great discussion and a great time together. Do begin your planning with prayer.

- Choose (or write) a **sharing question** or two.

- Plan an **introduction**. The introduction is something that will orient the group to the study, and most of the time it shouldn't be more than just a couple of minutes in length. As a practical matter, most of the time there will be someone in your group who hasn't completed the lesson in the study guide. A good introduction is one way to get them on board with everyone else.

Kathy and Lane introduce each lesson with some kind of personal experience, or a story, or a reflection question. You can use these, of course, but it's also great to come up with something of your own to kick off the group study time. Remember asking yourself (during Step 1) if the passage reminded you of anything? Maybe something from that reflection will make a good introduction. Maybe you'll bring in a picture of your own mother-in-law to introduce Ruth 1; or a sack of grain to introduce Ruth 2 or 3; or a model boat to introduce Jonah. You get the idea. Be imaginative, but keep it simple. You just want to focus people's attention and begin to draw them into the study together.

The introduction is also a good place to provide some pertinent background information to the passage—or to summarize briefly what has happened in the story up to this point.

- Plan several **discussion questions** to ask the group. How many depends on how much time you have, but 7-10 questions will more than fill a 40-minute discussion time. When you have them, arrange them in a logical order.

By all means choose some of your questions—maybe even all of them—from the study guide itself. But also feel free to write some of your own. (See the [Guide to Discussion Questions](#) for help in writing good discussion questions and leading good discussions.) Not very many people like to go through all the questions in a study guide one by one—especially if they've already answered them on their own. Plus, there often isn't time to do that. So choose questions that are especially relevant in setting the context, or especially helpful in focusing people on the main theme(s) of the passage, or especially good at challenging people to apply the passage to their own lives.

Choose a few **observation questions** to set the stage. These questions will ask you to describe, summarize, retell, explain, and compare. You'll be able to add to the discussion information you've gleaned from the Leader's Guide or a Bible dictionary. But don't get bogged down on observation. You'll want to keep the discussion moving.

Choose a few **interpretation questions** to get people talking at a deeper level about the passage. Good interpretation questions prompt people to use their observations and background information to reflect on things that can't be looked up anywhere. **Interpretation** questions will ask you to use what you know in a real life situation. These questions ask you to apply, demonstrate, and illustrate what you have learned. For example, there's no way to know for sure why Ruth is

so passionately committed to Naomi, while Orpah heads for home; but a careful reading of the passage, combined with good background information about history, culture, and theology, will probably lead to good discussion and some interesting insights.

Finally, choose at least one **application question** and/or application exercise. It's almost always the case that groups run out of time before they get to application. **Application** questions ask you to explain how the pieces fit together. There's a lot of interesting stuff to talk about whenever you do Bible study, but application is the real goal of Bible study, not just knowing more about the Bible or even understanding it better. Kathy and Lane offer excellent application ideas for Ruth and Jonah. Another source of application ideas is the application section on the [Bible Study Worksheet](#). Think about how the passage or story would have challenged its original Jewish audience, and maybe even upset them. Think about how it challenges the culture(s) we live in today, whether it's American culture, or work culture, or church culture. Think about how it challenges your own life—your thoughts and feelings and habits; your relationships; your Christian discipleship. What is God trying to give you or do for you? What about you or your life needs to change? If the passage has had some kind of impact on you, you'll be able to help others apply it, too.

- Review the illustrations that have come to mind during your preparation, and collect the ones you might want to use. Perhaps jot them down alongside the discussion questions to which you think they apply.

Now you're ready to lead the study. Pray for the people in your group and for the time you'll spend together. Ask God to be present in a transforming way at your meeting. And have fun!

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Guide to Discussion Questions

Prepared by Laurel S. Neal

Here are some simple suggestions for choosing or writing good discussion questions to use during your study time—along with some helpful hints about how to lead that discussion time effectively and well.

Evaluating Your Discussion Questions

1. Are they clear? If not, try rewording them.
2. Are they too long or complex? If so, break them down into more than one.
3. Are they open-ended and challenging enough to generate discussion?
4. Do they move the group through the passage in some kind of logical sequence?
5. Do they draw out and apply the main point(s) of the passage?
6. Do you have about the right number of questions for the time you have available? (About 5-7 questions will usually fill a half-hour discussion.)
7. Do you have a good balance of observation, interpretation, and application questions? (See *Preparing to Lead Your Group* for an explanation of these three types of questions.)

Leading the Discussion

1. Don't be afraid to deviate from the study guide or even from your own questions. Stay flexible.
2. Avoid answering your own questions (except when you're asking for personal sharing, and then be prepared to go first and be brief).
3. If people seem not to understand your question, repeat it or rephrase it until they do understand.
4. Allow for silence, but be discerning about what's causing the silence. Sometimes group members are thinking; other times they might be confused or bored by the question.
5. Don't be satisfied with just one response. Encourage others to respond by saying, for example, "What do the rest of you think?" or "Does anyone have anything else?" or "Does anyone have a different 'take' on this?"
6. Affirm people for their responses.
7. Willingly admit that you're not an expert.
8. Periodically summarize what the group has been saying about the passage or a particular topic.
9. If someone says something outlandish or just plain wrong, try saying, "Help me understand where you see that in the text." Be gentle as opposed to confrontational when you do this.
10. When the discussion drifts away from the main point, be willing to refocus the group's attention. Try saying something like, "This has been interesting, but I'm

wondering if I could lead us back to the question we were discussing earlier...”
They’ll let you do this, and most people will appreciate you for it.

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Using Sharing Questions in Groups

Prepared by Laurel S. Neal

Information excerpted and adapted from *Using the Bible in Groups* by Roberta Hestenes.

(Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983.)

I. Purpose of Sharing Questions in Small Groups

A very good tool to help build relationships in a Bible study group is to use a sharing question at each group meeting. These are one or two sentence questions that invite people to tell the group something about themselves. Sharing questions give people permission to talk about them self in a structured context in which everyone gets to share something, and everyone listens to the others. These are not questions which ask for knowledge, information or opinions about issues or ideas. These are questions which encourage people to talk about themselves: their past experiences, present circumstances, hopes and dreams for the future, joys and sorrows, struggles and successes. Sharing questions are used to help members move beyond chit-chat and shallow conversation to talk about something that helps other members of the group get to know them better.

II. When to Use Sharing Questions

Usually the question is asked at the beginning of the meeting time and takes between ten and twenty minutes for all to answer it.

III. Types of Sharing Questions

A. Past Tense Questions

1. These questions ask people to share something about their personal history.
2. These are especially appropriate in the early stages of a new group and when new members join. By inviting people to share their past, you begin to know something about the influences and experiences that are part of each group member's life story.

B. Present Tense Questions

1. These questions invite people to discuss what is happening in their lives very recently and at the present time. The focus is on experiences and feelings that are part of daily life now.
2. Present tense questions help people talk about what is going on in their lives right now. Often group members do not know what fellow members do in their daily lives or how they feel about what is happening to them unless such questions are asked.

C. Future Tense Questions

These questions focus on what is ahead, usually not in the near future but a little further off. They encourage people to talk about their desires for change, their hopes and dreams, expectations and possibilities. Questions of this type are usually asked after a group has been together for a while.

D. Affirmation Questions

1. Affirmation questions invite group members to say positive things about each other and the group experience. People often form friendships that are meaningful to them, but we seldom tell other people just what they mean to us and why we value them. During the last meetings of a group, affirmation becomes particularly appropriate.
2. While group members are often reticent to say positive things about each other, it is a quality that can often be seen in the life of Jesus and the apostles. They could see the qualities in people and affirm those, thus helping people to recognize and value what God was doing within and through them. This type of affirmation can be very important in expressing feelings and in building a sense of belonging and being cherished.

E. Accountability Questions

These questions are asked when group members promise to work actively at living out the implications of their Christian faith. Such questions should only be asked when people have chosen to make themselves accountable to fellow group members.

IV. Guidelines for Using Sharing Questions

A. Modeling a response

Ask the question and model a brief, appropriate response yourself as an example for the others. Then ask a person seated next to you to respond; choose someone you think will be comfortable with the question and will respond appropriately. Continue on around the circle. If the first one or two people talk for too long, suggest that the others answer the question more briefly so that everyone will have a chance to share.

B. Going around a circle (or not)

1. Going around in a circle is one way to answer questions. As a leader, you might ask your group how they want to go about answering questions. Do they want to go around in a circle, or do they want to respond individually? Whichever they decide, allow people to pass if they cannot or do not want to answer the question.
2. If they choose to go around in a circle, after all have shared, go back to any who passed and ask if they would like to share now. Many times they will, and just ignoring them will leave them feeling left out. Never force people to share. Do not embarrass or manipulate people. While

encouraging everyone to participate, allow them to re-shape the question if it makes them feel more comfortable. Move quickly on to the next person or the next activity.

3. If the group decides not to go around in a circle, you as a leader will have to work harder to draw shy people into the conversation.

C. Choosing appropriate questions

1. Levels of intensity

Match the intensity level of the question to the willingness and experience of the group members. Start with relatively safe questions that anyone can answer without much thought or difficulty. As the group continues, risk asking slightly more probing questions which call for more self-disclosure and more thoughtful reflection.

2. Moving around “the bases”

Don’t get into a rut of asking just one kind of question every time. Instead, as people begin to know each other better, mix in present, future, and affirmation questions with past tense questions – and then keep “moving around the bases” by varying the types of questions you ask.

3. Sensitivity to group members

Ask questions that can be answered by every member of the group. Do not ask, for example, “When and how did you become a Christian?” if not everyone has had that experience or uses that kind of language. Do not ask, “Where did you go to college and what was your field of study?” if anyone in the group did not go to college. Be sensitive to the backgrounds of the group members, and do not ask questions that only a few can answer. The purpose of a sharing question is to help each of the group members to talk briefly about their own life.

4. Open-endedness Ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered simply “yes” or “no.”

5. Personal, but not controversial.

Do not ask questions that call for ideas or opinions on controversial issues or problems of the day. You are interested in people’s experiences and their feelings about those experiences. During the Bible study time, you will have plenty of opportunity to discuss ideas. The sharing time is for meeting each other at the personal level.

6. Balance

Do not ask questions that require people to confess their shortcomings or say only negative things about themselves. Try to balance the opportunity to mention positive things as well as difficult things.

7. Flexibility

Phrase your questions in a way that gives people some “wiggle room” – not, “Who was your favorite teacher in school?” but “Who was one of your favorite teachers in school?” Not, “What was your great

success in answered prayer this week?” But, “What has been a high and low in your experience of prayer?” In other words, don’t ask questions that box people in or require them to do a lot of mental “sifting.” Instead, ask questions that allow people some freedom to choose what they want to share with the rest of the group.

D. Sharing questions are such a helpful tool that most groups will want to consider using them at almost all meetings even after they have been together for many months. More simple invitations to share can also be used, such as: “Does anyone have anything they want to share?” or “Let’s take some time and catch up.” or “What’s been happening in your life this week?” If used too frequently, however, such general questions tend to encourage repetitive sharing rather than opening new opportunities to know each other in the different aspects of our lives.

Background Notes for Ruth

All the information in the following Background Notes
can be found in a Bible dictionary.

Anointing – Women rubbed aromatic oils on their bodies for special occasions. There is another word in Hebrew for the kind of anointing that signifies that certain persons and objects are holy and have been set apart by God or for God.

Barley – Wheat and barley were the two main grain crops in the ancient Near East. Bread was the all-important food during the biblical period, and grain prices were an index of overall economic conditions. Wheat was generally more expensive than barley, so barley bread, while not inferior, tended to be more common than wheat bread, especially among lower-income people. The barley harvest began in late April and was followed by the wheat harvest; together the harvests lasted for seven weeks and ended with a celebration known as the Feast of Pentecost. Because of their importance as food, grains in general were regarded as signs of God's goodness.

Best Clothes – The primary difference between everyday clothing and clothing for special occasions was the quality of the fabric and therefore its costliness.

Bethlehem – Literally *house of bread*. A small town located 15 miles south of Jerusalem in Judah. It is the burial place of Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin; the hometown of David and the place where he was anointed king; and, of course, the birthplace of Jesus. Also, as the book of Ruth tells us, it was the home of Naomi and her family.

Boaz – Boaz was a wealthy landowner and farmer in Bethlehem. He belonged to the family of Naomi's deceased husband.

Chaff – The husks and stalks of grains like barley and wheat. The chaff covers the grain while it's growing, but is removed during the winnowing process. It is inedible and therefore worthless.

David – The youngest son of Jesse, from the tribe of Judah. David became the second king of Israel following Saul. He was born in Bethlehem and ruled Israel from about 1010 to 970 B.C. He is one of the key figures in Israel's history. In the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, he is understood as an ancestor, forerunner, and foreshadower of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus is a genealogical descendant of David. David's story is recorded in 1 Samuel 16:13 through 1 Kings 2:12.

Deal kindly – The Hebrew word for *deal kindly* is the important word *hesed*, which refers to God's sovereign love and tender mercy. God's *hesed* is demonstrated over and over again in his covenant faithfulness toward his people, who often sin and break the covenant on their end. The word occurs frequently in the Old Testament, and it appears in Ruth 1:8, 2:20, and 3:10. Naomi seems to have a high view of God's sovereignty: she

sees God being involved in everything that's happened and seems to see God as the author of both good and bad events. She also seems to believe that God is present in Moab, for she indicates that God can bless Ruth and Orpah right there in their own homeland.

Elders – After the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, every city seems to have had a ruling body of elders made up of senior members of the community. Among other duties, these men settled various kinds of disputes and business dealings (Exodus 18:13-17; 24:1-11; Numbers 11:16-30; Judges 21:16-24; 1 Samuel 8:1-9).

Ephah – A dry measure. Compared to an American bushel, an ephah would be somewhere between 3/8 and 2/3 of a bushel.

Ephrathites – Ephrath or Ephrathah was the ancient name of Bethlehem in Judah.

Family and Marriage – The social structures of ancient Israelite culture seem to have been based in kinship. Nuclear families were connected through their ancestors in extended families. In general, extended families remained in close proximity to one another, though occasionally people were motivated to seek more favorable economic opportunities elsewhere. Children in Israelite families remained under the care and control of their fathers until marriage. Following marriage, members of an extended family sometimes lived together or near each other. Customarily, marriages were arranged by the parents when the partners were young, but consent was generally a component. Most people married within their clan or extended family, and marriages between first cousins were permissible. Mothers rather than fathers tended to oversee marriage issues, and normally the wife came to the husband's home and joined his family. Ordinarily, Israelite men chose Israelite wives; although after a war Israelite men might take foreign wives from among the captives (Deuteronomy 20:14-18). In general, though, marrying outside the Israelite community was discouraged on the grounds that inter-marriage tended to weaken Israel's bond with God. **Levirate law** (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) specified that if a husband died without producing a son, the husband's brother was obligated to marry the widow. Obviously, then, security for women in ancient Israelite culture came through men, either their fathers or their husbands.

Famine – Scarcity of food, and accompanying hunger, over a prolonged period of time. In the Old Testament, famine and hunger are understood as one of the judgments of God against human unrighteousness and disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:48). Several periods of famine are recorded in scripture: Genesis 41, Genesis 12 and 26, 1 Kings 7-8, 2 Kings 25, Lamentations 5, and Isaiah 14.

Gate – Most cities were surrounded by walls as a defensive measure, with one or more gates in the walls. Ordinarily these gates were enclosed structures of more than one story and contained several rooms. The gate was where the elders of the city gathered to decide disputes.

Gleaning – Jewish law mandated that the poor, orphans, widows, and strangers should be allowed to glean, or gather, the remains of harvested grain, olives, and grapes (Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-20). In fact, the law instructed farmers to leave a portion of their harvest in the field to be gleaned by the poor, and not to go back and pick up what had been dropped or accidentally left behind. This custom made it possible for some of the most vulnerable to provide for themselves. Grain was harvested either by cutting or by pulling it up by the roots.

Harvesting – Grain sheaves were taken to a threshing floor and laid out there. Using sledges or animals with hooves, the sheaves were beaten, breaking them down into stalk, chaff, and grain. Then the grain and the chaff were separated from each other by winnowing, a process that could take several weeks when the crop was a large one. The chaff, which was unusable, would be burned, while the barley grain would be bagged, stored, and sold.

House, Security – In Ruth 1:8, 1:9, 4:11, and 4:12, a Hebrew word is used that refers to a house in the sense of a physical dwelling place. In Ruth 1:9 a second Hebrew word is used as well, and it reappears in Ruth 3:1. This word is sometimes translated as *security* in English, because its primary meaning isn't a dwelling place per se, but a *settled spot* or *place of rest; a home*.

House of Israel – There isn't a precise Hebrew counterpart to the English word *family*. The closest counterpart Hebrew has is the word *house*, which signifies not a place where people live, but a group or community of people who are related in some way. In this sense, *house of Israel*, refers to the community of persons who make up the nation of Israel.

Inheritance – Property was passed on to blood relatives on the father's side. If a man died without leaving a son, his property passed to his daughter if he had one. In the absence of a daughter, the property passed to the man's brothers. In the absence of brother's, the property passed to his uncles on his father's side. If none of these were alive, the property passed to the nearest other relative in his own family/clan. (See Numbers 27:5-11.) The main goal of such inheritance requirements was the preservation of the territorial integrity of the tribes and clans of Israel. (See **Ownership of Property**.)

Jesse – Grandson of Boaz and father of David.

Judah – A geographical region in Palestine, encompassing most of southern Palestine. Jerusalem and Bethlehem are both located in Judah.

Judges, the days of – The period of the Judges spans the years between Joshua and the Old Testament prophet Samuel—roughly 1200-1000 B.C. Reading the book of Judges will give you a feel for this period, during which Israel was united against its enemies in a loose federation of clan groups. This period was noted for a recurring pattern of sinking into idolatry, receiving punishment from God, and the emergence of a “savior” figure in the form of a judge. Having defeated Israel's enemies, these charismatic leaders then

presided over a period of relative calm and rest. But the integrity of their leadership varied, and the destructive cycle always recurred. It was a chaotic period of Israel's history. The backdrop of the book, and its refrain, is that this was a time when "there was no king in Israel." The book concludes with the ominous words, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." The story of Ruth takes place during this period of Israel's history.

Kinsman – A relative. Boaz was a member of Naomi's deceased husband's family. In the Old Testament, *kinsman-redeemer* or *next-of-kin* (Ruth 2:20, 4:1-6)—in Hebrew *go'el*—is a technical legal term. It refers to the redemption, or buying back, through payment, of someone's inheritance or property; or to the redemption, again through payment, of a family member from some type of servitude or other difficulty. (See Leviticus 25:25, 47-49 and 27:15-20; Psalm 72:4, 14; and Jeremiah 32:1-15.)

Leah – The older sister of Rachel and the first wife of Jacob, son of Isaac (and Rebekah), son of Abraham (and Sarah) (See Genesis 29ff.). As the mother of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun and Dinah, Leah helped establish the house, or nation, of Israel.

Measure – This word appears in 3:15 and 3:17 and is something you might not discover by consulting a Bible dictionary alone. But even if you don't know any Hebrew, you could probably figure it out using a good concordance. At any rate, this is an interesting term. It doesn't denote a unit of measurement per se, like the word *ephah* that's used in 2:17. This word is a word that means *to stretch*. What Boaz probably did in Ruth 3 was give Ruth six ephahs of barley, but six generous ephahs instead of six precisely measured ones.

Moab – The land of Moab is located east of Judah on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. It is a high plateau and well-watered. Its ancient economy centered on the cultivation of wheat and barley, sheep and goats. Moab was one of Lot's sons, so Lot's descendants must have settled in this area before the Exodus. The Moabites were not Israelites and did not worship Israel's God. Although Moab isn't that far away from Judah, its culture is significantly different from Israelite culture. Moses managed to gain permission from the Moabites to camp in their territory before entering the Promised Land; but, later, both King Saul and King David would fight the Moabites and defeat them (I Samuel 14 and II Samuel 8). In the days of the Judges, Eglon king of Moab invaded Israel and oppressed it for some 18 years (Judges 3); he was finally assassinated by Ehud the Benjaminite.

Naomi – The name in Hebrew means *pleasant*. But Naomi herself has become bitter (*mara* in Hebrew) in the course of what she has suffered. Notice the play on words with her name in Ruth 1:19. Names were commonly used by the Israelites (and other ancient Semitic people) to convey meaning.

Obed – The son of Ruth and Boaz and grandfather of David.

Ownership of Property – The ownership—and sale—of property in ancient Israel was tied to the original division of the land among the 12 tribes (or clans) of Israel in the 13th

century B.C. Following the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and took possession of the land of Canaan. If you look at a map from this period—try looking in the back of your Bible for one—you’ll notice that different regions are named for different tribes/clans deriving from Jacob’s progeny: **Reuben**, **Simeon**, **Judah**, **Issachar**, and **Zebulun** (these were Jacob’s sons by Leah; to a sixth son, Levi, the priesthood was bestowed instead of land); **Gad** and **Asher** (Jacob’s sons by Zilpah); **Dan** and **Naphtali** (Jacob’s sons by Bilhah); **Benjamin** and Joseph (Jacob’s sons by Rachel)—except that instead of a region named after Joseph, there are two “half-regions” named after Joseph’s sons **Ephraim** and **Manasseh**. The 12 landed tribes/clans operated under strict biblical laws that prohibited selling land outside one’s family or clan, because the whole socioeconomic structure of ancient Israel depended on the continuity of land ownership. Land belonged to the family in ancient Israel, not to the individual. Ultimately, though, all land was understood to belong to God, and therefore human “ownership” of land was understood as an inheritance from God—rather than as private property to be bought and sold in a speculative, profit-making way. If land needed to be sold, it was generally sold within the family/clan and was first offered to the next-of-kin. See Leviticus 25:23ff, which, among other things, prohibits the permanent transfer of land.

Parched Grain – Grain that is not fully mature. Often used as an ingredient in hot casseroles containing meat or poultry.

Perez, Tamar, Judah – Judah was the fourth son of Jacob by Leah. Judah’s oldest son, Er, was married to Tamar, a Canaanite woman. When Er died, Tamar was still childless. She married Judah’s second son, Onan, who also died. Judah told Tamar to remain a widow until his youngest son, Shelah, was old enough to marry. But Judah reneged on this promise, perhaps because he feared Shelah would die too. Tamar then disguised herself as a prostitute and offered herself to Judah, her father-in-law, becoming pregnant with twins: Perez and Zerah. (See Genesis 38.) Tamar’s marital situation bears similarities to Ruth’s, and Tamar is credited with continuing the line of Judah, the family of Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David and, eventually, Jesus.

Rachel – The second and favorite wife of Jacob, (son of Isaac and Rebekah and grandson of Abraham and Sarah, See Genesis 29ff.). She was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin and therefore helped establish the house, or nation, of Israel.

Reaping – The harvesting of grain.

Removing a Sandal – Taking off a sandal may have been, at this time, the manner in which an agreement was ratified or confirmed. Property lines were set by walking around the perimeter of a parcel of land; the “seller” removing his sandal as part of land negotiations may be connected to this practice of setting property lines.

Spread One’s Cloak – People in Old Testament times wore a wrap-around type garment called a cloak. A cloak was large enough to wear over other clothing—even to serve as something of a disguise—and was roomy enough to enfold or carry grain or other goods.

The poor used their cloaks both as clothing and as a cover for sleeping. Not to own a cloak at all meant that one was extremely poor. To *spread one's cloak* over someone carries connotations of protection, security and marriage.

Ten (10) – In ancient Israel, numbers carried symbolic and theological significance. The number 10 carries connotations of completeness, and a group of ten elders signified a complete company of community leaders. It took a group of ten to conduct the business of the elders.

Threshing Floor – A flat surface used for winnowing grain—possibly a flat outcropping of rock or a hard-packed earthen surface. These were located in close proximity to the village, usually in a spot where winds favorable to the winnowing process could be expected. Sheaves of grain were scattered over the threshing floor about a foot deep. In some cases, specially shod animals were driven over the sheaves until the stalks, husks, and kernels were loosened from each other. Another method involved running a wooden sled with stones or fragments of iron fastened to its underside back and forth over the sheaves. In both methods, the stalks of grain were beaten until they had been broken down into fine pieces of straw that when loosened from the kernel of grain blew away as chaff.

Uncovering Feet - This expression possibly carries a sexual connotation, as the word *feet* is sometimes used in Hebrew as a euphemism for genitals. But read the excellent note on page 30 in the Study Guide for a more complete explanation of the cultural context of this passage.

Widow – Widows in ancient Israelite culture suffered disgrace and a precarious existence. Having no rights of inheritance, widows were often left in great need. They were vulnerable to exploitation and other forms of cruel treatment. Levirate marriage was one of very few protections for the widow, and it was not always available or possible. Widows lacking the protection of family often resorted to prostitution in order to survive or, in the alternative, relied on public charity. God's concern for widows is noted in a number of places in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:14-19, 14:29, 24:17-22 and 27:19; Jeremiah 49:11; Psalm 68:5 and 146:9; Luke 7:11-17; Acts 6:1-6), as is the idea that the neglect or mistreatment of widows provokes God's displeasure (e.g., Psalm 94:1-7; Isaiah 1:16-17, 21-25).

Wine – Wine was a common beverage in Palestine, which has an excellent climate for the cultivation of grapes. In many places in scripture wine is associated with grain, and together, wine and grain is a sign of the sufficiency of God's good gifts to human beings.

Winnowing – Once the stalks and husks—the chaff—and the kernels of grain had been loosened; the grain was winnowed, or sifted. The remains of the stalks, now straw, together with the husks and the grain, were gathered in a pile on a cloth on the ground or in a basket or sieve. Then these were raked or thrown into the air with a shovel or a winnowing fork. A winnowing fork is a hand tool like a pitchfork, but with finely spaced tines. Palestine's prevailing north and west breezes assisted in this process by separating

the chaff, which weighed less, from the kernels of grain—and blowing the chaff away. The remaining grain was now ready for storage, sale, or use.

Witness – Someone who attests to the validity of a contractual agreement.

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

Lesson One – Called Through Circumstances **Ruth 1:1-21**

If you are leading only this lesson, before you begin, you will also want to read: [Preparing to Lead Your Group, Using Sharing Questions in Groups, Guide to Discussion Questions, and the Bible Study Worksheet.](#)

Studying the Passage

Remember: a good approach is to spend at least 30 minutes reading and observing the passage on your own, perhaps using the [Bible Study Worksheet](#) as a guide; then perhaps another 30 minutes working through the lesson in the Study Guide (see the **Background Notes** below); and then another 30 minutes planning how you will lead the study in your group.

When you're working through the lesson in the Study Guide, here's what to do with the study questions. Almost always, everything you need to know to answer a question is right there in the biblical passage or in the **Background Notes**. Sometimes you'll have to put two and two together, but that's the fun part. What you're doing is working from what you *can* see in the passage, and what you *can* look up about setting, history, culture and vocabulary, to what you *can't* look up. But any interpreting you do—any hunches you have or conclusions you draw—should be grounded in the passage. Don't pull stuff out of thin air. Don't make stuff up. Don't manipulate the passage. Stay modest and God will bless you with significant firsthand insights into his Word.

Following the **Background Notes** you'll find a few comments on the questions in the study. But not many, and here's why. If you pray for God's guidance, do your own observation of the passage, read the **Background Notes**, and use your head, you'll be able to answer every study question successfully. Really. And the answer will be your own discovery instead of something you got secondhand. Don't worry, though: if there's anything tricky about a question, you'll find help in the section entitled, **Notes on the Study Questions**.

Relationship Building (10-20 minutes)

This week, choose a history (past tense) sharing question. History questions tend to be easier to answer and less threatening than questions about the present or the future. Easy does it the first week, because you want people to feel at home in the group. Choose one or two of the questions listed below, or write your own. Remember to go first and model an appropriate type and length of response to the question(s) you choose. (See [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#) for more information.)

- Where did you grow up, and what sort of place was it?

- Where was home for you, and where did you go the first time you really “left” home?
- What was something you really wanted when you were a child for which you had to wait quite awhile?
- Who was a memorable adult in your life as a child, and what made that person interesting or compelling to you?
- Tell about an adult (other than your parents) who took a positive special interest in you during your childhood.
- Think about the trips you took during your childhood. Tell about just one—where you went and why, and something that stands out about that trip in your memory.

Bible Study (20-40 minutes)

- Planning your introduction

You want to orient the group to the study and its focus on the relationship between calling and circumstances. Kathy Smith does this in her own introduction to the lesson, as well as in the first question she poses: *Describe a time in your life when your circumstances made it difficult to see God at work.* Perhaps you could use a story from your own life—nothing too heavy, but significant enough to help the group enter into the story of Ruth. If you prefer to use something less personal, how about a story from the news, or a movie, or a book you’re reading?

- Choosing your discussion questions – Here’s a sample list of questions for Ruth 1:1-21. I’ve used mostly questions from the study itself, but I’ve worded them in my own way, and I’m hoping the group discussion will feel like an extension of the work people did individually. If I follow the questions in the Study Guide too closely, it might feel like we’re “checking each other’s answers” instead of having a conversation. But this list is only an example. Please plan and organize your questions around your own experience of Bible study and the needs of your group. Also decide whether you’ll take the passage as a whole, or break it up into shorter sections.
 1. Let’s begin by describing the circumstances in which Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah find themselves as the book of Ruth opens. What are their circumstances both personally and in the larger scheme of things? (Observation)
 2. What impression do you get about the feelings these women have about their circumstances, each other, and God? (Observation)
 3. What choice does each woman make, and what factors does each one have to consider in deciding her future? (Observation)

4. What do you suppose “tips the balance” for each woman as she makes her decision? (Observation + Interpretation)
 5. How would you describe the feelings, attitudes, and situation of Naomi and of Ruth as they “follow God’s call” to settle in Bethlehem? (Observation + Interpretation)
 6. Why do you think Ruth so wants to stay with Naomi, when Naomi is feeling such bitterness? (Interpretation)
 7. I find myself wondering when God has used circumstances in *our* lives to call us into something new and even unexpected, as he did with Ruth and Naomi. (Interpretation + Application) – As the leader, I’d be ready to offer a brief example from my own experience here, and then let others add their own.
 8. The study asks us to consider the relationship between Naomi and Ruth as a mentoring relationship. What are your reflections about this aspect of their relationship? (Interpretation)
 9. What’s your situation right now? Would you say God is calling you to let go of old dreams and embrace something new? Would you say God is calling you to *have* a mentor of your own, or to *be* a mentor to someone else? (Application) – Again, as the leader I’d be ready to share something here from my own life. It’s a chance to model application for others as well as to include them.
- Ending the lesson well – Pay attention to the time. It’s important to pace the discussion so you make it all the way to application. As you get within 10-15 minutes of your time limit, begin to pull the discussion together so you’ll have time for some personal sharing around application issues and still have time for prayer. The goal of Bible study is personal transformation. So one of the most important things you can do as a leader is model authentic attempts to apply the scriptures to your own life—and encourage others to do the same. Often it works well to return to where you began: if, for example, you began the study with an example of a time when the circumstances of your life made it difficult to see where God was at work, consider returning to that example. Perhaps you could briefly share how, from a different vantage point—perhaps through this study of Ruth 1—you can now see some of what God was doing. Use this to draw the study to a close and transition into prayer.

Prayer Time (5-15 minutes)

Think a bit about the prayer time for this week. Since it’s the first lesson, some people might not feel quite ready to pray out loud yet. Consider how to frame the prayer time and conduct it. One thing you could do is pray for the group yourself and tie your prayers

to the study: pray that we might look for God in our circumstances, especially the discouraging circumstances of our lives, and that God will give us significant relationships—and make us significant to others.

Background Notes

All the information in the following Background Notes
can be found in a Bible dictionary.

Bethlehem – Literally *house of bread*. A small town located 15 miles south of Jerusalem in Judah. It is the burial place of Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin; the hometown of David and the place where he was anointed king; and, of course, the birthplace of Jesus. Also, as the book of Ruth tells us, it was the home of Naomi and her family.

Deal kindly – The Hebrew word for *deal kindly* is the important word *hesed*, which refers to God's sovereign love and tender mercy. God's *hesed* is demonstrated over and over again in his covenant faithfulness toward his people, who often sin and break the covenant on their end. The word occurs frequently in the Old Testament, and it appears in Ruth 1:8, 2:20, and 3:10. Naomi seems to have a high view of God's sovereignty: she sees God being involved in everything that's happened and seems to see God as the author of both good and bad events. She also seems to believe that God is present in Moab, for she indicates that God can bless Ruth and Orpah right there in their own homeland.

Ephrathites – Ephrath or Ephrathah was the ancient name of Bethlehem in Judah.

Family and Marriage – The social structures of ancient Israelite culture seem to have been based in kinship. Nuclear families were connected through their ancestors in extended families. In general, extended families remained in close proximity to one another, though occasionally people were motivated to seek more favorable economic opportunities elsewhere. Children in Israelite families remained under the care and control of their fathers until marriage. Following marriage, members of an extended family sometimes lived together or near each other. Customarily, marriages were arranged by the parents when the partners were young, but consent was generally a component. Most people married within their clan or extended family, and marriages between first cousins were permissible. Mothers rather than fathers tended to oversee marriage issues, and normally the wife came to the husband's home and joined his family. Ordinarily, Israelite men chose Israelite wives; although after a war Israelite men might take foreign wives from among the captives (Deuteronomy 20:14-18). In general, though, marrying outside the Israelite community was discouraged on the grounds that inter-marriage tended to weaken Israel's bond with God. **Levirate law** (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) specified that if a husband died without producing a son, the husband's brother was obligated to marry the widow. Obviously, then, security for women in ancient Israelite culture came through men, either their fathers or their husbands.

Famine – Scarcity of food, and accompanying hunger, over a prolonged period of time. In the Old Testament, famine and hunger are understood as one of the judgments of God against human unrighteousness and disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:48). Several periods of famine are recorded in scripture: Genesis 41, Genesis 12 and 26, 1 Kings 7-8, 2 Kings 25, Lamentations 5, and Isaiah 14.

House, Security – In Ruth 1:8, 1:9, 4:11, and 4:12, a Hebrew word is used that refers to a house in the sense of a physical dwelling place. In Ruth 1:9 a second Hebrew word is used as well, and it reappears in Ruth 3:1. This word is sometimes translated as *security* in English, because its primary meaning isn't a dwelling place per se, but a *settled spot* or *place of rest*; a *home*.

Judah – A geographical region in Palestine, encompassing most of southern Palestine. Jerusalem and Bethlehem are both located in Judah.

Judges, the days of – The period of the Judges spans the years between Joshua and the Old Testament prophet Samuel—roughly 1200-1000 B.C. Reading the book of Judges will give you a feel for this period, during which Israel was united against its enemies in a loose federation of clan groups. This period was noted for a recurring pattern of sinking into idolatry, receiving punishment from God, and the emergence of a “savior” figure in the form of a judge. Having defeated Israel’s enemies, these charismatic leaders then presided over a period of relative calm and rest. But the integrity of their leadership varied, and the destructive cycle always recurred. It was a chaotic period of Israel’s history. The backdrop of the book, and its refrain, is that this was a time when “there was no king in Israel.” The book concludes with the ominous words, “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” The story of Ruth takes place during this period of Israel’s history. Consider reading the book of Judges as a backdrop to your study of the book of Ruth.

Moab – The land of Moab is located east of Judah on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. It is a high plateau and well-watered. Its ancient economy centered on the cultivation of wheat and barley, sheep and goats. Moab was one of Lot’s sons, so Lot’s descendants must have settled in this area before the Exodus. The Moabites were not Israelites and did not worship Israel’s God. Although Moab isn’t that far away from Judah, its culture is significantly different from Israelite culture. Moses managed to gain permission from the Moabites to camp in their territory before entering the Promised Land; but, later, both King Saul and King David would fight the Moabites and defeat them (I Samuel 14 and II Samuel 8). In the days of the Judges, Eglon king of Moab invaded Israel and oppressed it for some 18 years (Judges 3); he was finally assassinated by Ehud the Benjaminite.

Naomi – The name in Hebrew means *pleasant*. But Naomi herself has become bitter (*mara* in Hebrew) in the course of what she has suffered. Notice the play on words with her name in Ruth 1:19. Names were commonly used by the Israelites (and other ancient Semitic people) to convey meaning.

Widow – Widows in ancient Israelite culture suffered disgrace and a precarious existence. Having no rights of inheritance, widows were often left in great need. They were vulnerable to exploitation and other forms of cruel treatment. Levirate marriage was one of very few protections for the widow, and it was not always available or possible. Widows lacking the protection of family had limited options; they were often forced to earn money by disreputable means or rely on public charity. God’s concern for widows is noted in a number of places in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:14-19, 14:29, 24:17-22 and 27:19; Jeremiah 49:11; Psalm 68:5 and 146:9; Luke 7:11-17; Acts 6:1-6), as is the idea that the neglect or mistreatment of widows provokes God’s displeasure (e.g., Psalm 94:1-7; Isaiah 1:16-17, 21-25).

Notes on the Questions in the Study Guide

Question 2.a. – In your observation of Ruth 1:1-5 you probably noticed the verbs *lived* and *remained* in verses 1 and 2, as well as the reference to *ten years* in verse 4. As you read about Moab in the **Background Notes**, you probably realized that Naomi’s family were no longer strictly visitors in Moab, but had become part of the culture there.

Question 4 – Did you notice that the narrator doesn’t mention God at all in Ruth 1:1-5? But beginning in 1:6, we see that God is part of Naomi’s vocabulary, life, and worldview.

Question 5 – Notice that the text doesn’t tell us that God told Ruth to leave Moab and go with Naomi. Naomi even says that the hand of the Lord is against her; yet Ruth accompanies her. Consider Ruth’s decision from the standpoint of the risk and cultural change it involves for her.

Questions 5 & 6 – Be careful that your group doesn’t assign motives to Ruth or Orpah that we don’t have any textual evidence for!

Question 7 – Pay attention to the word *empty*; it comes up again later. Imagine how Naomi must feel a shutting down of possibilities and hope in her life. Also pay attention to the play-on-words with Naomi’s name.

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

Lesson Two – Calling and Protection

Ruth 1:22-2:23

If you are leading only this lesson, before you begin, you will also want to read: [Preparing to Lead Your Group, Using Sharing Questions in Groups, Guide to Discussion Questions, and the Bible Study Worksheet.](#)

Studying the Passage

Remember: a good approach is to spend at least 30 minutes reading and observing the passage on your own, perhaps using the [Bible Study Worksheet](#) as a guide; then perhaps another 30 minutes working through the lesson in the Study Guide (see the **Background Notes** below); and then another 30 minutes planning to lead the study in your group.

When you're working through the lesson in the Study Guide, here's what to do with the study questions. Almost always, everything you need to know to answer a question is right there in the biblical passage or in the **Background Notes**. Sometimes you'll have to put two and two together, but that's the fun part. What you're doing is working from what you *can* see in the passage, and what you *can* look up about setting, history, culture and vocabulary, to what you *can't* look up. But any interpreting you do—any hunches you have or conclusions you draw—should be grounded in the passage. Don't pull stuff out of thin air. Don't make stuff up. Don't manipulate the passage. Stay modest and God will bless you with significant firsthand insights into his Word.

Following the **Background Notes** you'll find a few comments on the questions in the study. But not many, and here's why. If you pray for God's guidance, do your own observation of the passage, read the **Background Notes**, and use your head, you'll be able to answer every study question successfully. Really. And the answer will be your own discovery instead of something you got secondhand. Don't worry, though: if there's anything tricky about a question, you'll find help in the section entitled, **Notes on the Study Questions**.

Relationship Building (10-20 minutes)

This week, it's probably a good idea to choose another history (past tense) sharing question. History questions tend to be easier to answer and less threatening than questions about the present or the future. At this second session, people are still finding their place and their voice in the group. Choose one or two of the questions listed below, or write your own. Remember to go first and model an appropriate type and length of response to the question(s) you choose. (See [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#) for more information.)

- Tell about a time when you found yourself in an unfamiliar setting of some kind—perhaps a new place, job, family situation, or church. What’s one thing you remember about that experience?
- Tell about a time when you received unexpected kindness or generosity from someone.
- What was one of the first jobs you ever had?
- Who’s one of the best bosses you’ve ever had, and what made that person a good boss?
- Where did you grow up, and what was one of the big annual events that took place there?
- Describe an event, or day, or season in your childhood that turned out to be a turning point in your life.
- Tell about a time when you were a foreigner—or felt like one.
- Tell about a time when someone looked out for your interests.
- Who were two of the “main characters” in your childhood (or high school years, or early adulthood...)?
- Tell about a person who helped shape your future by believing in you.
- Tell about something in your life that turned out better than you expected.
- Tell about a time when you’ve tried to protect someone from something harmful.

Bible Study (20-40 minutes)

- Planning your introduction

You want to orient the group to the study and its focus on calling and protection. Kathy Smith does this in her introduction and *First Steps* sections by getting us to think about our lives as though they’re a “Movie of the Week.” Perhaps you could use your own handbill as your introduction. But you might have another idea for an introduction, like something from your life or the news, a movie or TV show, or a book you’ve read.

As part of your brief introduction to Lesson Two, don’t forget to do a quick summary of Lesson One and the story of Ruth and Naomi up to this point.

- Choosing your discussion questions – Here’s a sample list of questions for Ruth 1:22-2:23. I’ve used mostly questions from the study itself, but I’ve worded some of them in my own way, and I’m hoping the group discussion will feel like an extension of the work people did individually. If I follow the questions in the study guide too closely, it might feel like we’re “checking each other’s answers” instead of having a conversation. But this list is only an example. Please plan and organize your questions around your own experience of Bible study and the needs of your group. Also decide whether you’ll take the passage as a whole, or break it up into shorter sections, such as Ruth 1:22-2:17 and Ruth 2:18-23.

1. What changes happen in Ruth and Naomi's situation right away in Ruth 2? (Observation)
 2. What character traits do you notice in Ruth and Boaz as the story unfolds in chapter 2? (Observation)
 3. How would you describe the relationship that's forming between Ruth and Boaz at this early point in the story? (Observation + Interpretation)
 4. Where's God in the story? (Observation + Interpretation)
 5. What, if any, differences do you notice in Ruth or Naomi or in their relationship in 2:18-23? (Observation + Interpretation)
 6. In what ways do you identify with Ruth—or have trouble identifying with her? (Application)
 7. How has someone playing a kinsman-redeemer role in your life helped you discover or follow God's calling—or how might such a person help you now? (Application)
- Ending the lesson well – Pay attention to the time. It's important to pace the discussion so you make it all the way to application. As you get within 10-15 minutes of your time limit, begin to pull the discussion together so you'll have time for some personal sharing around application issues and still have time for prayer. The goal of Bible study is personal transformation. So one of the most important things you can do as a leader is model authentic attempts to apply the scriptures to your own life—and encourage others to do the same. Often it works well to return to where you began by referring back to your introduction in some way and/or summarizing the discussion you've had. Use this time to draw the study to a close and transition into prayer.

Prayer Time (5-15 minutes)

Think a bit about the prayer time for this week. Since it's just the second lesson, some people still might not feel comfortable praying out loud. Consider how to frame the prayer time and conduct it. Consider using the prayer activity suggested in the *Traveler's Tool Bag* on page 28 of the Study Guide.

Background Notes

All the information in the following Background Notes can be found in a Bible dictionary.

Barley – Wheat and barley were the two main grain crops in the ancient Near East. Bread was the all-important food during the biblical period, and grain prices were an index of

overall economic conditions. Wheat was generally more expensive than barley, so barley bread, while not inferior, tended to be more common than wheat bread, especially among lower-income people. The barley harvest began in late April and was followed by the wheat harvest; together the harvests lasted for seven weeks and ended with a celebration known as the Feast of Pentecost. Because of their importance as food, grains in general were regarded as signs of God's goodness.

Boaz – Boaz was a wealthy landowner and farmer in Bethlehem. He belonged to the family of Naomi's deceased husband.

Deal kindly – The Hebrew word for *deal kindly* is the important word *hesed*, which refers to God's sovereign love and tender mercy. God's *hesed* is demonstrated over and over again in his covenant faithfulness toward his people, who often sin and break the covenant on their end. The word occurs frequently in the Old Testament, and it appears in Ruth 1:8, 2:20, and 3:10. Naomi seems to have a high view of God's sovereignty: she sees God being involved in everything that's happened and seems to see God as the author of both good and bad events. She also seems to believe that God is present in Moab, for she indicates that God can bless Ruth and Orpah right there in their own homeland.

Ephah – A dry measure. Compared to an American bushel, an ephah would be somewhere between 3/8 and 2/3 of a bushel.

Family and Marriage – The social structures of ancient Israelite culture seem to have been based in kinship. Nuclear families were connected through their ancestors in extended families. In general, extended families remained in close proximity to one another, though occasionally people were motivated to seek more favorable economic opportunities elsewhere. Children in Israelite families remained under the care and control of their fathers until marriage. Following marriage, members of an extended family sometimes lived together or near each other. Customarily, marriages were arranged by the parents when the partners were young, but consent was generally a component. Most people married within their clan or extended family, and marriages between first cousins were permissible. Mothers rather than fathers tended to oversee marriage issues, and normally the wife came to the husband's home and joined his family. Ordinarily, Israelite men chose Israelite wives; although after a war Israelite men might take foreign wives from among the captives (Deuteronomy 20:14-18). In general, though, marrying outside the Israelite community was discouraged on the grounds that inter-marriage tended to weaken Israel's bond with God. **Levirate law** (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) specified that if a husband died without producing a son, the husband's brother was obligated to marry the widow. Obviously, then, security for women in ancient Israelite culture came through men, either their fathers or their husbands.

Gleaning – Jewish law mandated that the poor, orphans, widows, and strangers should be allowed to glean, or gather, the remains of harvested grain, olives, and grapes (Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-20). In fact, the law instructed farmers to leave a portion of their harvest in the field to be gleaned by the poor, and not to go back and pick

up what had been dropped or accidentally left behind. This custom made it possible for some of the most vulnerable to provide for themselves. Grain was harvested either by cutting or by pulling it up by the roots.

Kinsman – A relative. Boaz was a member of Naomi’s deceased husband’s family. In the Old Testament, *kinsman-redeemer* or *next-of-kin* (Ruth 2:20, 4:1-6)—in Hebrew *go’el*—is a technical legal term. It refers to the redemption, or buying back, through payment, of someone’s inheritance or property; or to the redemption, again through payment, of a family member from some type of servitude or other difficulty. (See Leviticus 25:25, 47-49 and 27:15-20; Psalm 72:4, 14; and Jeremiah 32:1-15.)

Parched Grain – Grain that is not fully mature. Often used as an ingredient in hot casseroles containing meat or poultry.

Reaping – The harvesting of grain.

Widow – Widows in ancient Israelite culture suffered disgrace and a precarious existence. Having no rights of inheritance, widows were often left in great need. They were vulnerable to exploitation and other forms of cruel treatment. Levirate marriage was one of very few protections for the widow, and it was not always available or possible. Widows lacking the protection of family had limited options; they were often forced to earn money by disreputable means or rely on public charity. God’s concern for widows is noted in a number of places in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:14-19, 14:29, 24:17-22 and 27:19; Jeremiah 49:11; Psalm 68:5 and 146:9; Luke 7:11-17; Acts 6:1-6), as is the idea that the neglect or mistreatment of widows provokes God’s displeasure (e.g., Psalm 94:1-7; Isaiah 1:16-17, 21-25).

Notes on the Questions in the Study Guide

Question 2 – As you observed the presence of Boaz in the story and read the **Background Notes** on families and Levirate law, you might have realized that Ruth 2 begins on a hopeful note. You begin to suspect how the story might end. In fact, it’s likely that the original audience knew the ending of the story already, since genealogy was such a major part of their culture.

Question 3 – As a widow in this culture, you know that Ruth has few reputable options for earning a living.

Question 6 – Pay attention to the theme of protection and provision in the story and consider how it operates on two planes at once. At one level, this is a wonderful small town romance in which two vulnerable women receive protection and provision from God through Boaz. The story is very much about God protecting and delivering Ruth and Naomi from a crisis in their own lives and time. But surely the author also had another, larger story in mind as well: the story of God’s faithful protection and care for Israel and, ultimately, for all God’s people. God made sure that Israel would continue on beyond the time of the Judges. Just as God had a larger calling for Ruth,

God had a larger calling for Israel than what it was during the time of the Judges. This calling will become clearer by the end of the story, but it's a calling that benefits and involves us.

Question 7 – Make sure you help your group identify the theme of protection here. Consider what the story teaches about the interplay of risk and protection.

Question 11 – Group members might need some help identifying examples from their own lives. Thinking of your own answers first is part of being a good leader. Be prepared to offer a couple of reflections from your life to this question.

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

Lesson Three – Initiative and Response

Ruth 3:1-18

If you are leading only this lesson, before you begin, you will also want to read: [Preparing to Lead Your Group](#), [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#), [Guide to Discussion Questions](#), and the [Bible Study Worksheet](#).

Studying the Passage

Remember: a good approach is to spend at least 30 minutes reading and observing the passage on your own, perhaps using the [Bible Study Worksheet](#) as a guide; then perhaps another 30 minutes working through the lesson in the Study Guide (see the **Background Notes** below); and then another 30 minutes planning to lead the study in your group.

When you're working through the lesson in the Study Guide, here's what to do with the study questions. Almost always, everything you need to know to answer a question is right there in the biblical passage or in the **Background Notes**. Sometimes you'll have to put two and two together, but that's the fun part. What you're doing is working from what you *can* see in the passage, and what you *can* look up about setting, history, culture and vocabulary, to what you *can't* look up. But any interpreting you do—any hunches you have or conclusions you draw—should be grounded in the passage. Don't pull stuff out of thin air. Don't make stuff up. Don't manipulate the passage. Stay modest and God will bless you with significant firsthand insights into his Word.

Following the **Background Notes** you'll find a few comments on the questions in the study. But not many, and here's why. If you pray for God's guidance, do your own observation of the passage, read the **Background Notes**, and use your head, you'll be able to answer every study question successfully. Really. And the answer will be your own discovery instead of something you got secondhand. Don't worry, though: if there's anything tricky about a question, you'll find help in the section entitled, **Notes on the Study Questions**.

Relationship Building (10-15 minutes)

This week, you might want to do another history question, but maybe your group is ready to share on a different level. By the 3rd and 4th sessions, people are finding their place in the group and are feeling more at home. Choose one or two of the questions listed below, or write your own. Remember to go first and model an appropriate type and length of response to the question(s) you choose. (See [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#) for more information.)

- What's a "dream of grandeur" you had for yourself as a child, and what happened to it?

- What was your first date with your husband? Or, for those of you who aren't married, what's a memorable first date you've had with someone along the way?
- Tell about a time when someone pushed you to do something that was outside your comfort zone. How did that experience turn out?
- Tell about a time in your life when you were just a little bit "forward" with someone.
- What's a childhood memory that's as clear today as the day it happened?
- Tell about a time when you had to wait to see how something would turn out.
- Tell about a time when you did just what someone told you to do. How did things turn out?
- Tell about a time when you "took matters into your own hands." How did things turn out?
- For a special occasion, what constitutes "dressing up" for you?
- What clothes do you wear when you want to look your best? How about when you don't care how you look?
- Tell about a recent or current situation in your life where you've had to wait to see how things will turn out.
- Who's someone you'd like to receive attention or affirmation from right now?

Bible Study (20-45 minutes)

- Planning your introduction

You want to orient the group to the study and its focus on initiative and response. Kathy Smith does this in the Study Guide by telling a pertinent joke and then relating the situation of the man in the joke to the situation of Ruth and Naomi. She observes that it can be quite a struggle to discern what God is doing, and what God is calling us to do, in the midst of real life. Then she asks a great question to launch Lesson Three: *Describe a time in your life when you were unsure whether to wait for God to reveal his will or to move ahead on your own. How did you manage this tension? What was the outcome?* There's a lot of material here for creating your introduction, including relating such a time in your own life. Of course, feel free to create an introduction that works for you, whether you use Kathy's suggestions or come up with something on your own—whether it's something from the news, a movie or TV show, a book you've read, or your own life.

As part of your brief introduction to Lesson Three, don't forget to do a quick summary of Lesson Two and the story of Ruth and Naomi up to this point.

- Choosing your discussion questions – Here's a sample list of questions for Ruth 3:1-18. I've used mostly questions from the study itself, but I've worded some of them in my own way, and I'm hoping the group discussion will feel like an extension of the work people did individually. If I follow the questions in the study guide too closely, it might feel like we're "checking each other's answers"

instead of having a conversation. But this list is only an example. Please plan and organize your questions around your own experience of Bible study and the needs of your group. Also decide whether you'll take the passage as a whole, or break it up into shorter sections, as Kathy does in the Study Guide.

1. What instructions does Naomi give Ruth in 3:1-4, and how does this show initiative on Naomi's part? (Observation)
 2. What do you think Naomi has in mind, and how do you think she came up with this idea? (Interpretation) – This is a good place to have the group reflect on the kinsman-redeemer and levirate marriage traditions that continue to play a crucial role in the story.
 3. What does this plan involve for Ruth, and how does she respond to Naomi's plan? (Observation)
 4. What do you think Ruth's internal responses might be? (Observation + Interpretation)
 5. Now Ruth becomes the initiator in the story. How do events unfold, and how does Boaz respond? (Observation)
 6. What does Boaz's response tell you about him, about his character? (Interpretation)
 7. Since this is also a story about God's relationship to Israel and to humanity in general, what do you think the author wants us to learn about God? (Interpretation)
 8. Ruth 3 gets us thinking about taking initiative in certain situations and the fact that this can be a godly thing. Let's look at the continuum on page 34 in the Study Guide. Where would you place Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz on that continuum? (Interpretation)... Where would you place yourself? (Application)
 9. Where in your life could you take more initiative or take a risk? Where do you need to wait for God (or someone else) to respond? (Application)
- Ending the lesson well – Pay attention to the time. It's important to pace the discussion so you make it all the way to application. As you get within 10-15 minutes of your time limit, begin to pull the discussion together so you'll have time for some personal sharing around application issues and still have time for prayer. The goal of Bible study is personal transformation. So one of the most important things you can do as a leader is model authentic attempts to apply the

scriptures to your own life—and encourage others to do the same. Often it works well to return to where you began: if, for example, you began the study with an example of a time when you were uncertain whether to wait on God or move ahead on your own, consider returning to that example. Perhaps you could share an insight about that situation that you’ve gained from studying Ruth 3. Use this to draw the study to a close and transition into prayer.

Prayer Time (5-15 minutes)

Think a bit about the prayer time for this week. Since it’s the third lesson, people are probably feeling more comfortable. Consider how to frame the prayer time and conduct it. But perhaps this week you can do a “popcorn prayer”: starting with you, just go around the circle; each person prays a one-sentence prayer or says, “I pass”; when it gets back to you, bring the prayer to a conclusion.

Background Notes

All the information in the following Background Notes can be found in a Bible dictionary.

Anointing – Women rubbed aromatic oils on their bodies for special occasions. There is another word in Hebrew for the kind of anointing that signifies that certain persons and objects are holy and have been set apart by God or for God.

Barley – Wheat and barley were the two main grain crops in the ancient Near East. Bread was the all-important food during the biblical period, and grain prices were an index of overall economic conditions. Wheat was generally more expensive than barley, so barley bread, while not inferior, tended to be more common than wheat bread, especially among lower-income people. The barley harvest began in late April and was followed by the wheat harvest; together the harvests lasted for seven weeks and ended with a celebration known as the Feast of Pentecost. Because of their importance as food, grains in general were regarded as signs of God’s goodness.

Best Clothes – The primary difference between everyday clothing and clothing for special occasions was the quality of the fabric and therefore its costliness.

Boaz – Boaz was a wealthy landowner and farmer in Bethlehem. He belonged to the family of Naomi’s deceased husband.

Chaff – The husks and stalks of grains like barley and wheat. The chaff covers the grain while it’s growing, but is removed during the winnowing process. It is inedible and therefore worthless.

Deal kindly – The Hebrew word for *deal kindly* is the important word *hesed*, which refers to God’s sovereign love and tender mercy. God’s *hesed* is demonstrated over and over again in his covenant faithfulness toward his people, who often sin and break the

covenant on their end. The word occurs frequently in the Old Testament, and it appears in Ruth 1:8, 2:20, and 3:10. Naomi seems to have a high view of God's sovereignty: she sees God being involved in everything that's happened and seems to see God as the author of both good and bad events. She also seems to believe that God is present in Moab, for she indicates that God can bless Ruth and Orpah right there in their own homeland.

Ephah – A dry measure. Compared to an American bushel, an ephah would be somewhere between 3/8 and 2/3 of a bushel.

Family and Marriage – The social structures of ancient Israelite culture seem to have been based in kinship. Nuclear families were connected through their ancestors in extended families. In general, extended families remained in close proximity to one another, though occasionally people were motivated to seek more favorable economic opportunities elsewhere. Children in Israelite families remained under the care and control of their fathers until marriage. Following marriage, members of an extended family sometimes lived together or near each other. Customarily, marriages were arranged by the parents when the partners were young, but consent was generally a component. Most people married within their clan or extended family, and marriages between first cousins were permissible. Mothers rather than fathers tended to oversee marriage issues, and normally the wife came to the husband's home and joined his family. Ordinarily, Israelite men chose Israelite wives; although after a war Israelite men might take foreign wives from among the captives (Deuteronomy 20:14-18). In general, though, marrying outside the Israelite community was discouraged on the grounds that inter-marriage tended to weaken Israel's bond with God. **Levirate law** (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) specified that if a husband died without producing a son, the husband's brother was obligated to marry the widow. Obviously, then, security for women in ancient Israelite culture came through men, either their fathers or their husbands.

Harvesting – Grain sheaves were taken to a threshing floor and laid out there. Using sledges or animals with hooves, the sheaves were beaten, breaking them down into stalk, chaff, and grain. Then the grain and the chaff were separated from each other by winnowing, a process that could take several weeks when the crop was a large one. The chaff, which was unusable, would be burned, while the barley grain would be bagged, stored, and sold.

House, Security – In Ruth 1:8, 1:9, 4:11, and 4:12, a Hebrew word is used that refers to a house in the sense of a physical dwelling place. In Ruth 1:9 a second Hebrew word is used as well, and it reappears in Ruth 3:1. This word is sometimes translated as *security* in English, because its primary meaning isn't a dwelling place per se, but a *settled spot* or *place of rest*; a *home*.

Kinsman – A relative. Boaz was a member of Naomi's deceased husband's family. In the Old Testament, *kinsman-redeemer* or *next-of-kin* (Ruth 2:20, 4:1-6)—in Hebrew *go'el*—is a technical legal term. It refers to the redemption, or buying back, through payment, of someone's inheritance or property; or to the redemption, again through

payment, of a family member from some type of servitude or other difficulty. (See Leviticus 25:25, 47-49 and 27:15-20; Psalm 72:4, 14; and Jeremiah 32:1-15.)

Measure – This word appears in 3:15 and 3:17 and, this is something you might not find out by consulting a Bible dictionary. But even if you don't know any Hebrew, you could probably figure it out using a good concordance. At any rate, this is an interesting term. It doesn't denote a unit of measurement per se, like the word *ephah* that's used in 2:17. This word is a word that means *to stretch*. What Boaz probably did in Ruth 3 was give Ruth six ephahs of barley, but six generous ephahs instead of six precisely measured ones.

Spread One's Cloak – People in Old Testament times wore a wrap-around type garment called a cloak. A cloak was large enough to wear over other clothing—even to serve as something of a disguise—and was roomy enough to enfold or carry grain or other goods. The poor used their cloaks both as clothing and as a cover for sleeping. Not to own a cloak at all meant that one was extremely poor. To *spread one's cloak* over someone carries connotations of protection, security and marriage.

Threshing Floor – A flat surface used for winnowing grain—possibly a flat outcropping of rock or a hard-packed earthen surface. These were located in close proximity to the village, usually in a spot where winds favorable to the winnowing process could be expected. Sheaves of grain were scattered over the threshing floor about a foot deep. In some cases, specially shod animals were driven over the sheaves until the stalks, husks, and kernels were loosened from each other. Another method involved running a wooden sled with stones or fragments of iron fastened to its underside back and forth over the sheaves. In both methods, the stalks of grain were beaten until they had been broken down into fine pieces of straw.

Uncovering Feet - This expression possibly carries a sexual connotation, as the word *feet* is sometimes used in Hebrew as a euphemism for genitals. But read the excellent note on page 30 in the Study Guide for a more complete explanation of the cultural context of this passage.

Wine – Wine was a common beverage in Palestine, which has an excellent climate for the cultivation of grapes. In many places in scripture wine is associated with grain, and together wine and grain is a sign of the sufficiency of God's good gifts to human beings.

Winnowing – Once the stalks and husks—the chaff—and the kernels of grain had been loosened; the grain was winnowed, or sifted. The remains of the stalks, now straw, together with the husks and the grain, were gathered in a pile on a cloth on the ground or in a basket or sieve. Then these were raked or thrown into the air with a shovel or a winnowing fork. A winnowing fork is a hand tool like a pitchfork, but with finely spaced tines. Palestine's prevailing north and west breezes assisted in this process by separating the chaff, which weighed less, from the kernels of grain—and blowing the chaff away. The remaining grain was now ready for storage, sale, or use.

Notes on the Study Questions

Ruth 3 can be difficult to study, given Naomi's instructions and Ruth's actions, which seem very foreign to us. We need to be careful not to transpose our own cultural views and norms on this text. For this reason, Kathy chose to focus the study more on the risks that Ruth and Naomi take in trying to secure a future, and less (or not at all) on what the author might be saying about romance and marriage. Nevertheless, the kinsman-redeemer and levirate marriage traditions are important to understand and keep in mind as the story continues to unfold.

Question 2 – Note that the theme of *security* recurs in this chapter.

Question 3 – Ruth doesn't merely follow Naomi's instructions. She either knows a lot about the culture or takes Naomi's word for it that Boaz will understand what her actions mean. But Ruth goes beyond Naomi's instructions when she asks Boaz to throw his garment over her—for what this amounts to is a proposal of marriage. What basis would Ruth have for such boldness?

Question 4 – Boaz says yes! This is unexpected and unheard of in that culture—and not all that common even in ours. (Some of us might use some unkind words to describe a woman who's as pushy as Ruth is!)

Question 5 – Naomi and Ruth run the risk of ruining their reputations, especially if Ruth gets caught on the threshing floor. But Ruth may be at risk in another way as well. Venturing onto the threshing floor, alone and at night, among men who've been drinking and might be looking for "loose" female company—all this poses a risk to Ruth's physical safety as well as her reputation.

Question 8 – To some extent we are being treated to the love story of King David's great-grandparents. Be sure to notice the details—like Boaz's concern for Ruth's virtue and reputation, the solicitous way he escorts her from the threshing floor unseen, the gifts he gives. Also notice the delay that's introduced into the story. What is the reason for this?

Question 10 – Ruth and Naomi took some big risks here, even to some extent stepping outside of their cultural norms. They were also living in a culture where marriage was the only "career" open to Ruth, and the only moral way for these women to provide for themselves. Like them, we need to look for ways God might want us to risk, step outside our cultural norms, and take initiative. But we also need to look for ways in which God calls us to wait and to live within the norms of our own society and culture. For a New Testament example of these issues, see the story of the woman with the flow of blood who touches Jesus in hopes of being healed (Mark 5:25-34).

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

Lesson Four – *Calling and Legacy*

Ruth 4:1-22

If you are leading only this lesson, before you begin, you will also want to read: [Preparing to Lead Your Group, Using Sharing Questions in Groups, Guide to Discussion Questions, and the Bible Study Worksheet.](#)

Studying the Passage

Remember: a good approach is to spend at least 30 minutes reading and observing the passage on your own, perhaps using the [Bible Study Worksheet](#) as a guide; then perhaps another 30 minutes working through the lesson in the Study Guide (see the **Background Notes** below); and then another 30 minutes planning to lead the study in your group.

When you're working through the lesson in the Study Guide, here's what to do with the study questions. Almost always, everything you need to know to answer a question is right there in the biblical passage or in the **Background Notes**. Sometimes you'll have to put two and two together, but that's the fun part. What you're doing is working from what you *can* see in the passage, and what you *can* look up about setting, history, culture and vocabulary, to what you *can't* look up. But any interpreting you do—any hunches you have or conclusions you draw—should be grounded in the passage. Don't pull stuff out of thin air. Don't make stuff up. Don't manipulate the passage. Stay modest and God will bless you with significant firsthand insights into his Word.

Following the **Background Notes** you'll find a few comments on the questions in the study. But not many, and here's why. If you pray for God's guidance, do your own observation of the passage, read the **Background Notes**, and use your head, you'll be able to answer every study question successfully. Really. And the answer will be your own discovery instead of something you got secondhand. Don't worry, though: if there's anything tricky about a question, you'll find help in the section entitled, **Notes on the Study Questions**.

Relationship Building (10-15 minutes)

This week, you might want to do another history question, but hopefully your group is ready to share on a different level. By the 3rd and 4th lessons, people are finding their place in the group and are feeling more at home. Choose one or two of the questions listed below, or write your own. Remember to go first and model an appropriate type and length of response to the question(s) you choose. (See [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#) for more information.)

- How did the family you grew up in make big decisions that affected everyone?

- Tell about a time when you took on a responsibility that really belonged to someone else. Tell about a time when you handed off one of your responsibilities to someone else.
- Tell about a time when you had to negotiate with someone about something.
- Tell about a memorable or long-anticipated birth in your immediate or extended family.
- Tell about an important promise you've made during your life, or an important promise someone else has made to you.
- What's one quality, habit, or characteristic you "inherited" from your family that you like, and one you don't like so well?
- Tell about a time, event, or circumstance in your life that wasn't very positive, but out of which something good happened or in which you can now see God's providential care.
- What was one way your parents sacrificed for you? How did you feel about it then, and how do you feel about it now?
- What do you do when you have a big decision to make that affects or involves other people?
- Tell about a situation in your life that needs to be clarified and sorted out.
- What's one hope or dream you have for the future?
- What's something you hope to pass on to your children (or grandchildren)?
- What's at the top of your "want list"? How long have you wanted it, and how do you think having it will change your life?

Bible Study (20-45 minutes)

- Planning your introduction

You want to orient the group to the study and its focus on calling and legacy. Kathy Smith does this in her introduction to Lesson Four in the Study Guide, and then follows it up with a terrific question: *As you look back on your life, can you highlight one event—although there may be many—that in retrospect turned out to be pivotal? That is, if you had made another choice, your life would have turned out much differently. In what way do you see God's hand in this pivotal moment?* You could, of course, use this question during your relationship-building time instead. Either way, it's a great way to enter the study together. As usual, though, feel free to create an introduction that works for you, whether you use Kathy's suggestions or come up with something on your own—whether it's something from the news, a movie or TV show, a book you've read, or your own life.

As part of your brief introduction to Lesson Four, don't forget to do a quick summary of Lesson Three and the story of Ruth and Naomi up to this point.

- Choosing your discussion questions – Here's a sample list of questions for Ruth 4:1-22. I've used mostly questions from the study itself, but I've worded some of

them in my own way, and I'm hoping the group discussion will feel like an extension of the work people did individually. If I follow the questions in the study guide too closely, it might feel like we're "checking each other's answers" instead of having a conversation. But this list is only an example. Please plan and organize your questions around your own experience of Bible study and the needs of your group. Also decide whether you'll take the passage as a whole, or break it up into shorter sections, as Kathy does in the Study Guide.

10. In Ruth 4, Boaz is now the center of attention. What strategy has he come up with, and how does he implement it? (Observation)
 11. We can't understand what's going on here without referring to the kinsman-redeemer and levirate marriage traditions, as well as the land ownership traditions, in ancient Israel. Using those as reference points, how do you understand what all is going on in the "negotiations" between Boaz and the next-of-kin? (Observation + Interpretation)
 12. What's the significance of their agreement for Ruth & Naomi? (Observation + Interpretation) What about for Israel as a whole? (Interpretation)
 13. Who are the people mentioned at the end of the chapter? (Observation) Why do you think they're mentioned here? (Interpretation)
 14. How does this entire story help you understand what God has done/is doing for human beings—for you and me—in Jesus Christ? (Interpretation)
 15. What new perspectives do you have on some of those pivotal events in your own life? What will be different for you as you face such events now and in the future? (Application) – If you like, you can incorporate the Spiritual Timeline in the *Traveler's Tool Bag* section (page 42) into this discussion.
- Ending the lesson well – Pay attention to the time. It's important to pace the discussion so you make it all the way to application. As you get within 10-15 minutes of your time limit, begin to pull the discussion together so you'll have time for some personal sharing around application issues and still have time for prayer. The goal of Bible study is personal transformation. So one of the most important things you can do as a leader is model authentic attempts to apply the scriptures to your own life—and encourage others to do the same. Often it works well to return to where you began: if, for example, you began the study by talking about pivotal events, consider coming back to those for further reflection. Perhaps you could focus in on what the legacy of your own event was, and encourage others to share in a similar way. Use this to draw the study to a close and transition into prayer.

Prayer Time (5-15 minutes)

Think a bit about the prayer time for this week. Since it's the fourth lesson, people are probably feeling pretty comfortable. Consider how to frame the prayer time and conduct it. For instance, this week's prayer time could focus on prayers of thanksgiving and intercession for the pivotal events people have shared. Some people will be able to see a positive legacy and will be feeling grateful; but others may still be struggling to see God at work in their pivotal moment, or to see a positive legacy flowing out of it. Both circumstances can lead to conversation with God. Perhaps this week you can do another "popcorn prayer": starting with you, just go around the circle; each person prays a 1-sentence prayer or says, "I pass"; when it gets back to you, bring the prayer to a conclusion. Or simply have a time of conversational prayer, with you opening and closing that time.

Background Notes

All the information in the following Background Notes can be found in a Bible dictionary.

Bethlehem – Literally *house of bread*. A small town located 15 miles south of Jerusalem in Judah. It is the burial place of Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin; the hometown of David and the place where he was anointed king; and, of course, the birthplace of Jesus. Also, as the book of Ruth tells us, it was the home of Naomi and her family.

Boaz – Boaz was a wealthy landowner and farmer in Bethlehem. He belonged to the family of Naomi's deceased husband.

David – The youngest son of Jesse, of the tribe of Judah, who became the second king of Israel following Saul. He was born in Bethlehem and ruled Israel from about 1010 to 970 B.C. He is one of the key figures in Israel's history and the Old Testament, and in the New Testament he is understood as an ancestor, forerunner, and foreshadower of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus is a genealogical descendant of David. David's story is recorded in 1 Samuel 16:13 through 1 Kings 2:12.

Deal kindly – The Hebrew word for *deal kindly* is the important word *hesed*, which refers to God's sovereign love and tender mercy. God's *hesed* is demonstrated over and over again in his covenant faithfulness toward his people, who often sin and break the covenant on their end. The word occurs frequently in the Old Testament, and it appears in Ruth 1:8, 2:20, and 3:10. Naomi seems to have a high view of God's sovereignty: she sees God being involved in everything that's happened and seems to see God as the author of both good and bad events. She also seems to believe that God is present in

Moab, for she indicates that God can bless Ruth and Orpah right there in their own homeland.

Elders – After the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, every city seems to have had a ruling body of elders made up of senior members of the community. Among other duties, these men settled various kinds of disputes and business dealings (Exodus 18:13-17; 24:1-11; Numbers 11:16-30; Judges 21:16-24; 1 Samuel 8:1-9).

Ephrathites – Ephrath or Ephrathah was the ancient name of Bethlehem in Judah.

Family and Marriage – The social structures of ancient Israelite culture seem to have been based in kinship. Nuclear families were connected through their ancestors in extended families. In general, extended families remained in close proximity to one another, though occasionally people were motivated to seek more favorable economic opportunities elsewhere. Children in Israelite families remained under the care and control of their fathers until marriage. Following marriage, members of an extended family sometimes lived together or near each other. Customarily, marriages were arranged by the parents when the partners were young, but consent was generally a component. Most people married within their clan or extended family, and marriages between first cousins were permissible. Mothers rather than fathers tended to oversee marriage issues, and normally the wife came to the husband's home and joined his family. Ordinarily, Israelite men chose Israelite wives; although after a war Israelite men might take foreign wives from among the captives (Deuteronomy 20:14-18). In general, though, marrying outside the Israelite community was discouraged on the ground that inter-marriage tended to weaken Israel's bond with God. **Levirate law** (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) specified that if a husband died without producing a son, the husband's brother was obligated to marry the widow. Obviously, then, security for women in ancient Israelite culture came through men, either their fathers or their husbands.

Gate – Most cities were surrounded by walls as a defensive measure, with one or more gates in the walls. Ordinarily these gates were enclosed structures of more than one story and contained several rooms. The gate was where the elders of the city gathered to decide disputes.

House, Security – In Ruth 1:8, 1:9, 4:11, and 4:12, a Hebrew word is used that refers to a house in the sense of a physical dwelling place. In Ruth 1:9 a second Hebrew word is used as well, and it reappears in Ruth 3:1. This word is sometimes translated as *security* in English, because its primary meaning isn't a dwelling place per se, but a *settled spot* or *place of rest*; a *home*.

House of Israel – There isn't a precise Hebrew counterpart to the English word *family*. The closest counterpart Hebrew has is the word *house*, which signifies not a place where people live, but a group or community of people who are related in some way. In this sense, *house of Israel*, refers to the community of persons who make up the nation of Israel.

Inheritance – Property was passed on to blood relatives on the father’s side. If a man died without leaving a son, his property passed to his daughter if he had one. In the absence of a daughter, the property passed to the man’s brothers. In the absence of brother’s, the property passed to his uncles on his father’s side. If none of these were alive, the property passed to the nearest other relative in his own family/clan. (See Numbers 27:5-11.) The main goal of such inheritance requirements was the preservation of the territorial integrity of the tribes and clans of Israel. (See **Ownership of Property**.)

Jesse – Grandson of Boaz and father of David.

Kinsman – A relative. Boaz was a member of Naomi’s deceased husband’s family. In the Old Testament, *kinsman-redeemer* or *next-of-kin* (Ruth 2:20, 4:1-6)—in Hebrew *go’el*—is a technical legal term. It refers to the redemption, or buying back, through payment, of someone’s inheritance or property; or to the redemption, again through payment, of a family member from some type of servitude or other difficulty. (See Leviticus 25:25, 47-49 and 27:15-20; Psalm 72:4, 14; and Jeremiah 32:1-15.)

Leah – The older sister of Rachel and the first wife of Jacob, son of Isaac (and Rebekah), son of Abraham (and Sarah). (See Genesis 29ff.) As the mother of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun and Dinah, Leah helped establish the house, or nation, of Israel.

Moab – The land of Moab is located east of Judah on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. It is a high plateau and well-watered. Its ancient economy centered on the cultivation of wheat and barley, sheep and goats. Moab was one of Lot’s sons, so Lot’s descendants must have settled in this area before the Exodus. The Moabites were not Israelites and did not worship Israel’s God. Although Moab isn’t that far away from Judah, its culture is significantly different from Israelite culture. Moses managed to gain permission from the Moabites to camp in their territory before entering the Promised Land; but, later, both King Saul and King David would fight the Moabites and defeat them (I Samuel 14 and II Samuel 8). In the days of the Judges, Eglon king of Moab invaded Israel and oppressed it for some 18 years (Judges 3); he was finally assassinated by Ehud the Benjaminite.

Obed – The son of Ruth and Boaz and grandfather of David.

Ownership of Property – The ownership—and sale—of property in ancient Israel was tied to the original division of the land among the 12 tribes (or clans) of Israel in the 13th century B.C. Following the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and took possession of the land of Canaan. If you look at a map from this period—try looking in the back of your Bible for one—you’ll notice that different regions are named for different tribes/clans deriving from Jacob’s progeny: **Reuben**, **Simeon**, **Judah**, **Issachar**, and **Zebulun** (these were Jacob’s sons by Leah; to a sixth son, Levi, the priesthood was bestowed instead of land); **Gad** and **Asher** (Jacob’s sons by Zilpah); **Dan** and **Naphtali** (Jacob’s sons by Bilhah); **Benjamin** and Joseph (Jacob’s sons by Rachel)—except that instead of a region named after Joseph, there are two “half-regions” named after Joseph’s sons **Ephraim** and **Manasseh**. The 12 landed tribes/clans operated under strict biblical laws that prohibited selling land outside one’s family or

clan, because the whole socioeconomic structure of ancient Israel depended on the continuity of land ownership. Land belonged to the family in ancient Israel, not to the individual. Ultimately, though, all land was understood to belong to God, and therefore human “ownership” of land was understood as an inheritance from God—rather than as private property to be bought and sold in a speculative, profit-making way. If land needed to be sold, it was generally sold within the family/clan and was first offered to the next-of-kin. See Leviticus 25:23ff, which, among other things, prohibits the permanent transfer of land.

Perez, Tamar, Judah – Judah was the fourth son of Jacob by Leah. Judah’s oldest son, Er, was married to Tamar, a Canaanite woman. When Er died, Tamar was still childless. She married Judah’s second son, Onan, who also died. Judah told Tamar to remain a widow until his youngest son, Shelah, was old enough to marry. But Judah reneged on this promise, perhaps because he feared Shelah would die too. Tamar then disguised herself as a prostitute and offered herself to Judah, her father-in-law, becoming pregnant with twins: Perez and Zerah. (See Genesis 38.) Tamar’s marital situation bears similarities to Ruth’s, and Tamar is credited with continuing the line of Judah, the family of Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David and, eventually, Jesus.

Rachel – The second and favorite wife of Jacob, the son of Isaac (and Rebekah), the son of Abraham (and Sarah). (See Genesis 29ff.) She was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin and therefore helped establish the house, or nation, of Israel.

Removing a Sandal – Taking off a sandal may have been, at this time, the manner in which an agreement was ratified or confirmed. Property lines were set by walking around the perimeter of a parcel of land; the “seller” removing his sandal as part of land negotiations may be connected to this practice of setting property lines.

Ten (10) – In ancient Israel, numbers carried symbolic and theological significance. The number 10 carries connotations of completeness, and a group of ten elders signified a complete company of community leaders. It took a group of ten to conduct the business of elders.

Widow – Widows in ancient Israelite culture suffered disgrace and a precarious existence. Having no rights of inheritance, widows were often left in great need. They were vulnerable to exploitation and other forms of cruel treatment. Levirate marriage was one of very few protections for the widow, and it was not always available or possible. Widows lacking the protection of family often resorted to prostitution in order to survive or, in the alternative, relied on public charity. God’s concern for widows is noted in a number of places in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:14-19, 14:29, 24:17-22 and 27:19; Jeremiah 49:11; Psalm 68:5 and 146:9; Luke 7:11-17; Acts 6:1-6), as is the idea that the neglect or mistreatment of widows provokes God’s displeasure (e.g., Psalm 94:1-7; Isaiah 1:16-17, 21-25).

Witness – Someone who attests to the validity of a contractual agreement.

Notes on the Study Questions

Question 1 – It’s hard to get around the feeling that this is a “set up,” since Boaz mentions just the land at first. When Boaz adds, “maintain the dead man’s name,” the next-of-kin would understand that a levirate marriage is expected as well. This turns a profitable “deal” into a costly one for the next-of-kin.

Question 2 – “Take my right of redemption for yourself, for I cannot redeem it.” The next-of-kin is interested in the land, but is either not interested in marrying Ruth or is not able to marry her.

Question 3 – The role of the *go’el* was often costly, since it usually involved the purchase of property. The unnamed next-of-kin seems prepared to pay the price involved in redeeming the land to keep it in the family. But there is more to this deal than redeeming land.

Question 5 – In addition to noticing that Perez is an ancestor of Boaz, notice that Tamar is a foreigner like Ruth.

Question 6 – In Israelite culture, children were regarded as the primary blessing in life.

Question 7 – Isaiah is an example of someone whose calling was not confirmed through blessing. God told Isaiah to preach until the land was “utterly desolate” and no one was listening to him (Isaiah 6).

Question 9 – Remember that a call can come through circumstances (as it did for Naomi) or through requests or suggestions from other people (as it did for Boaz), as well as directly from the Lord. For many of us, our call is as simple as this: to live faithfully in the given circumstances of our daily lives. Of course, we still have to figure out exactly what that faithfulness looks like. For some of us, God may have been stirring up something new in us—a new way to step out in faith. Group members in both of these categories will need encouragement.

Questions 11 & 12 – In general, all Christians have received salvation, freedom from sin, the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and so on. But encourage group members to share more specifically. For example: In what ways has God lavished you with riches? From what have you been set free?

Background Notes for Jonah

All the information in the following Background Notes
can be found in a Bible dictionary.

Anger of God – Used in Jonah 3:9 and 4:2, the Hebrew word translated here as anger refers to God’s passionate opposition to evil and sin and to their results in human life and in the created world as a whole. Anger is not an arbitrary or fitful passion on God’s part (as it often is in human beings), nor does God regard human beings with animosity. Rather, God is slow to anger and full of mercy and grace. God, in Jesus Christ, is redeeming the world out of all its troubles. This is a work in progress. God is bearing all evil and sin in himself. But without anger at evil and sin, God would not be fully righteous, and God’s love would sink to the level of mere sentimentality.

Angry – The word that refers to Jonah’s anger in Jonah 4:1-9 is a different Hebrew word than the word referring to God’s anger in 3:9 and 4:2. Jonah’s anger is the anger of fierce displeasure.

Booth – A hut or temporary shelter, perhaps made with boughs woven together.

Bush – The meaning of this word is uncertain. The plant in Jonah 4:6 may have been the castor-oil plant, a shrub which grows rapidly, but is known to wither after only minimal handling. Another suggestion is this was the bottle-gourd plant, which is a vine rather than a shrub.

Cast Lots – In ancient Israel (as well as in the New Testament), “lots” were sometimes cast or drawn in an effort to discern God’s will in various circumstances, such as the allocation of land or territory, the detection of a guilty person (Joshua 7:14 and Jonah 1:7), or the allocation of Temple duties. See, for example, 1 Samuel 10:16-26; Numbers 26:55; Joshua 14:2; Matthew 27:35; Acts 1:26. While often talked about, the Bible contains no description of the procedure itself.

Evil Ways – The biblical perspective is that all forms of evil, brokenness, and sin have their source in rebellion against, or disobedience toward God, God’s will, and God’s good purposes for human beings and the world. Evil is, of course, complex and varied. The Bible does not define or explain evil, but it does consistently acknowledge the reality of evil, tell many stories about it, and give many examples of it.

Fasting – In the Bible, fasts usually involve abstaining from all food (and often all drink as well) for a specified period of time. Fasts are of two types: public and private. Public fasts were associated with annual events such as the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31 and 23:27-32), and also with periods of national catastrophe or crisis (2 Chronicles 20:3; Ezra 8:21-23; Nehemiah 1:4-11; Joel 1-2; Zechariah 7-8). Such public fasts usually lasted for a day and were ordinarily accompanied by penitence, prayer, humility, the wearing of sackcloth, and various kinds of offerings. Individuals engaged in private fasts

as a sign of grief, humility, or repentance, or with the purpose of seeking God's guidance and help.

Fear of the Lord – Fear of the Lord is the attitude of awe that people ought to have before a holy God. It is given by God to human beings to enable them to regard God with reverence and awe. It prompts human beings to revere God's authority, obey God's commandments, and shun all forms of wickedness.

Flood – Water is frequently used in a variety of similes and metaphors in scripture. In its own right, water is essential to human life, and water was a critical factor in the life of ancient Palestine. Metaphorically speaking, the Bible uses the image of flood waters to refer to what people experience when they are in terrible trouble or deep distress. Baptism, of course, relies on the metaphor that our salvation is like being drawn up from the waters of death. See also **Sea**.

Forty (40) – The Israelites understood and used numbers in symbolic ways. The number 40, for example, is often used to indicate a large number or a long period of time. A reference to forty years, for instance, often encompassed one or two entire generations of people; so, to say that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years following their exodus from Egypt is to say that all the adults who'd rebelled against God had died before gaining access to the Promised Land. In general, the number forty is associated with almost every new development in the history of God saving humanity: the flood in Genesis 7-8 (40 days and nights of rain); the release from slavery and wilderness wanderings in Exodus (40 years); Moses' fasts on the mountain in Exodus 24 and 34 and in Deuteronomy 9 (40 days); spying out the land of Canaan in Numbers 13 (40 days); Moses' prayer for Israel in Deuteronomy 9 (40 days); the recurring pattern of servitude and deliverance in the book of Judges (40 years); Goliath's defiance of the Israelites in 1 Samuel 17 (40 days); the temptation of Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry (40 days); the period of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (40 days); and others.

Joppa – A natural harbor and major seaport in ancient Israel, near modern-day Tel Aviv. Though it fell within the territory of Dan, it was seldom under Israel's control.

Nineveh – The capital of ancient Assyria (modern-day Iraq) and a major city, located on the east side of the Tigris River. At its height, as many as 175,000 people may have lived there; in Jonah the population is cited as 120,000. The reference to Nineveh may actually be to a cluster of four cities in close proximity to one another, of which Nineveh was the largest (as we might group a number of towns under the heading, "greater Chicago" or "the Houston area." The probable purpose of this numerical reference, however, is to affirm Nineveh's "greatness," not to give the precise size of its population. The Assyrians worshiped the god Ashur, who was represented on earth in the person of the king of Assyria. Ishtar, the goddess of war and love, was worshipped at Nineveh; and Nabu, the god of wisdom, also had a temple in Nineveh.

Pit – Metaphorically, the idea of a deep hole is used in the Old Testament to describe the underworld, the place of the dead and departed spirits.

Prayer – Prayer is a form of worship that involves turning toward God, who is a personal being who cares for us and hears us. Prayer includes the activities of praise, confession, thanksgiving, lament, petitioning, intercession and more. God enables prayer and calls people to prayer. Various prayers are recorded in the Old and New Testaments, but the book of Psalms is a collection of songs and prayers that Jews learned and used in both corporate and personal worship. Jonah makes use of the Psalms in his prayer in 2:2-9 (See Psalms 18, 42, 88, 120, and 139).

Presence of the Lord – The Israelites understood God to be a spiritual being, but God was also personal and dwelt in their midst. No building could contain God, but the tabernacle during the wilderness wanderings, and later the Temple in Jerusalem, signified the reality of God being with them and being involved in their lives and history.

Sackcloth – A coarse material usually made of camel or goat hair, and usually black, or at least dark, in color. Camel and goat hair were customarily used to make the bags in which grain was stored. Because of their discomfort, people wore garments made of sackcloth as a sign of mourning and/or penitence in the face of personal and national calamities. (See, for example, Genesis 37:4; 2 Samuel 3:31; 1 Kings 21:27; Job 16:15; Esther 4:1-3; Lamentations 2:10; Nehemiah 9:1; Jonah 3:5; and Matthew 11:21.)

Sea – The Israelites were people of the land, not the sea. In fact, they tended to fear the sea. God was the creator of the seas and they were under God’s command. And yet, the seas were also a symbol of chaos and disorder. They represented powers that opposed God, and were the home of Leviathan, the great sea monster.

Sheol – In Hebrew thinking, Sheol is the place of the dead.

Sit in Ashes – Symbolically speaking, ashes signify ruin and destruction. Putting ashes on one’s head, or sitting in ashes, signified grief and repentance. Doing either was often included in rituals of mourning in ancient Israel (see, for example, 2 Samuel 13:19; Isaiah 58:5; Jeremiah 6:26).

Sleep – Sleep is used in both a literal and figurative sense in both the Old and New Testaments. It can refer to mental or spiritual dullness, to physical laziness, and even to death.

Tarshish - Most likely a location in the Mediterranean Sea—perhaps as far west as the coast of Spain, beyond Gibraltar. Its fleet of ships was impressive, and these represented power and wealth. The *ships of Tarshish* are mentioned, for example, in Isaiah 2:16, and Tarshish seems to have become, in the popular imagination of the day, a faraway exotic paradise whose luxury goods were exported to Israel, Phoenicia, and other locations around the Mediterranean.

Temple – See **Presence of the Lord**.

Three (3) – The Israelites understood and used numbers symbolically, and the whole Bible reflects this. The number 3 has natural associations with the Trinity, of course—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, one God. But it is also associated with some of the mighty acts of God and, in general, with a sense of completeness (Exodus 19:11; Hosea 6:2; Jonah 1:17; Luke 13:32; Matthew 12:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4).

Turn From – The Hebrew word used in Jonah 3:8-9 means to turn back, or turn away, or make a retreat.

Wickedness – Ungodliness. The term refers to active wrongdoing or participation in that which is evil or perverse. The Bible depicts wickedness as residing in the human heart and being both progressive and contagious.

Word of the Lord – This term is used almost 400 times in the Old Testament, always in reference to God's revelation of his will or purpose for human beings. God speaks. The *word of the Lord* comes in a variety of forms, including commandments, prophecy, warnings, and comfort or encouragement. The New Testament tells us that Jesus himself is God's Word—not spoken or written, but living.

Worm – Usually mentioned in scripture in reference to death and decay.

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

Lesson Five – Disobeying a Call

Jonah 1:1-17

If you are leading only this lesson, before you begin, you will also want to read: [Preparing to Lead Your Group, Using Sharing Questions in Groups, Guide to Discussion Questions, and the Bible Study Worksheet.](#)

Studying the Passage

Remember: a good approach is to spend at least 30 minutes reading and observing the passage on your own, perhaps using the [Bible Study Worksheet](#) as a guide; then perhaps another 30 minutes working through the lesson in the Study Guide (see the **Background Notes** below); and then another 30 minutes planning to lead the study in your group.

When you're working through the lesson in the Study Guide, here's what to do with the study questions. Almost always, everything you need to know to answer a question is right there in the biblical passage or in the **Background Notes**. Sometimes you'll have to put two and two together, but that's the fun part. What you're doing is working from what you *can* see in the passage, and what you *can* look up about setting, history, culture and vocabulary, to what you *can't* look up. But any interpreting you do—any hunches you have or conclusions you draw—should be grounded in the passage. Don't pull stuff out of thin air. Don't make stuff up. Don't manipulate the passage. Stay modest and God will bless you with significant firsthand insights into his Word.

Following the **Background Notes** you'll find a few comments on the questions in the study. But not many, and here's why. For one thing, when Lane Henderson wrote the Study Guide for Jonah, she included some important commentary material in the flow of the study itself. Repeating these comments in the **Notes on the Study Questions** section of the Leader's Guide would be redundant; as a result, there are fewer entries in that section with Jonah than with Ruth. But also remember that if you pray for God's guidance, do your own observation of the passage, read the **Background Notes**, and use your head, you'll be able to answer every study question successfully. Really. And the answer will be your own discovery instead of something you got secondhand. Don't worry, though: if there's anything tricky about a question, you'll still find help in the section entitled, **Notes on the Study Questions**.

Relationship Building (10-15 minutes)

This week, choose a history (past tense) sharing question; don't feel restricted to past tense questions. Choose one or two of the questions listed below, or write your own. Remember to go first and model an appropriate type and length of response to the question(s) you choose. (See [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#) for more information.)

- Tell about a time in your childhood when you did the opposite of what you were told to do.
- What's one of the fiercest storms you've been in?
- Tell about a time in your life when you felt like "the odd man out."
- Tell about a job you've had, or a responsibility you've been given, that you didn't like.
- Tell about a time when you think God might have been telling you what to do.
- Tell about a time when you tried to run away from God or God's will for you.
- Tell about a time when a decision you made ended up affecting others adversely.
- Describe a memorable trip you've taken sometime in your life.
- Who was a real troublemaker in your family, neighborhood, or school?
- Tell about a time when your parents let you "learn something the hard way."
- Tell about a time when you've let one of your children "learn something the hard way."
- Tell about a task – in the past or present – that you think God has called you to do; a responsibility God has placed in your hands; a place where God might need you or be depending on you and your availability and obedience.
- What's a trip you'd like to take sometime in the future, or a place you'd like to visit, and why? What's a place you have no interest in visiting—or visiting again—and why?
- When you don't want to listen to someone, what do you do?

Bible Study (20-45 minutes)

- Planning your introduction

You want to orient the group to the study and its focus on disobeying a call from God. Lane Henderson does this in her own introduction to the book and the lesson, as well as in the first question she poses: *Can you remember a time when you felt God was asking you to do or say something that was uncomfortable or surprising, or perhaps to do something you didn't want to do?* Perhaps you could use an example from your own life to orient people to the study. If you prefer to use something less personal, how about a story from the news, or a movie, or a book you're reading?

- Choosing your discussion questions – Here's a sample list of questions for Jonah 1:1-17. I've used mostly questions from the study itself, but I've worded them in my own way, and I'm hoping the group discussion will feel like an extension of the work people did individually. If I follow the questions in the study guide too closely, it might feel like we're "checking each other's answers" instead of having a conversation. But this list is only an example. Please plan and organize your questions around your own experience of Bible study and the needs of your group. Also decide whether you'll take the passage as a whole, or break it up into shorter sections.

1. The story opens with the Lord issuing a call to Jonah. What does God call Jonah to do and why—and how does Jonah respond? (Observation)
 2. What reasons can you think of for why Jonah might want to disobey God's call? (Observation + Interpretation)
 3. What are the initial results of Jonah's disobedience? (Observation)
 4. Jonah goes into the hold and falls asleep. What do you think is going on with him? (Interpretation)
 5. How do the sailors size up the situation, and what do they seem to make of Jonah? How do they respond to him and what seems to be happening? (Observation + Interpretation)
 6. What do you make of Jonah as this episode unfolds? (Observation + Interpretation)
 7. What do you make of God? (Observation + Interpretation)
 8. Where have you recently "dragged your feet" about something God might be calling you to do? And how might your resistance or disobedience be affecting others? (Application)
- Ending the lesson well – Pay attention to the time. It's important to pace the discussion so you make it all the way to application. As you get within 10-15 minutes of your time limit, begin to pull the discussion together so you'll have time for some personal sharing around application issues and still have time for prayer. The goal of Bible study is personal transformation. So one of the most important things you can do as a leader is model authentic attempts to apply the scriptures to your own life—and encourage others to do the same. Often it works well to return to where you began: if, for example, you began the study with an example of a time when you were put off by God's call, consider returning to that example. Perhaps you could briefly share how you now see some of what God was intending for you. Use this to draw the study to a close and transition into prayer.

Prayer Time (5-15 minutes)

Think a bit about the prayer time for this week. Consider how to frame the prayer time and conduct it. For instance, this week's prayer time could include some periods of silence for people to reflect on the areas listed in *My Travel Log* on page 50. Listening to God is a form of prayer, and perhaps God wants to speak a word to you and the members of your study group.

Background Notes

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can be found in a Bible dictionary.

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Sleep – Sleep is used in both a literal and figurative sense in both the Old and New Testaments. It can refer to mental or spiritual dullness, to physical laziness, and even to death.

Tarshish - Most likely a location in the Mediterranean Sea—perhaps as far west as the coast of Spain, beyond Gibraltar. Its fleet of ships was impressive, and these represented power and wealth. The *ships of Tarshish* are mentioned, for example, in Isaiah 2:16 and Tarshish seems to have become, in the popular imagination of the day, a faraway exotic paradise whose luxury goods were exported to Israel, Phoenicia, and other locations around the Mediterranean.

Three (3) – The Israelites understood and used numbers symbolically, and the whole Bible reflects this. The number 3 has natural associations with the Trinity, of course—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, one God. But it is also associated with some of the mighty acts of God and, in general, with a sense of completeness (Exodus 19:11; Hosea 6:2; Jonah 1:17; Luke 13:32; Matthew 12:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4).

Wickedness – Ungodliness. The term refers to active wrongdoing or participation in that which is evil or perverse. The Bible depicts wickedness as residing in the human heart and being both progressive and contagious.

Word of the Lord – This term is used almost 400 times in the Old Testament, always in reference to God’s revelation of his will or purpose to human beings. God speaks. The *word of the Lord* comes in a variety of forms, including commandments, prophecy, warnings, and comfort or encouragement. The New Testament tells us that Jesus himself is God’s Word—not spoken or written, but living.

Notes on the Questions in the Study Guide

Question 3 – Notice that Jonah’s rejection and avoidance of his prophetic commission is both immediate and deliberate. However, as we shall see, he cannot escape from God. Compare with Psalm 139:7-10.

Question 4 – The sailors would have been of several different races and religions.

Question 8 – Notice that these pagan sailors have a strong sense of religious duty, and how shocked they seem to be in the face of Jonah’s reckless disobedience toward his God.

Question 11 – Jonah has professed his belief in God as the Lord of the whole universe. Consider how Jonah’s aversion to going to Nineveh on behalf of this God contradicts his beliefs about God.

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

Lesson Six – God Still Provides

Jonah 2:1-10

If you are leading only this lesson, before you begin, you will also want to read: [Preparing to Lead Your Group, Using Sharing Questions in Groups, Guide to Discussion Questions, and the Bible Study Worksheet.](#)

Studying the Passage

Remember: a good approach is to spend at least 30 minutes reading and observing the passage on your own, perhaps using the [Bible Study Worksheet](#) as a guide; then perhaps another 30 minutes working through the lesson in the Study Guide (see the **Background Notes** below); and then another 30 minutes planning to lead the study in your group.

When you're working through the lesson in the Study Guide, here's what to do with the study questions. Almost always, everything you need to know to answer a question is right there in the biblical passage or in the **Background Notes**. Sometimes you'll have to put two and two together, but that's the fun part. What you're doing is working from what you *can* see in the passage, and what you *can* look up about setting, history, culture and vocabulary, to what you *can't* look up. But any interpreting you do—any hunches you have or conclusions you draw—should be grounded in the passage. Don't pull stuff out of thin air. Don't make stuff up. Don't manipulate the passage. Stay modest, and God will bless you with significant firsthand insights into his Word.

Following the **Background Notes** you'll find a few comments on the questions in the study. But not many, and here's why. For one thing, when Lane Henderson wrote the Study Guide for Jonah, she included some important commentary material in the flow of the study itself. Repeating these comments in the **Notes on the Study Questions** section of the Leader's Guide would be redundant; as a result, there are fewer entries in that section with Jonah than with Ruth. But also remember that if you pray for God's guidance, do your own observation of the passage, read the **Background Notes**, and use your head, you'll be able to answer every study question successfully. Really. And the answer will be your own discovery instead of something you got secondhand. Don't worry, though: if there's anything tricky about a question, you'll still find help in the section entitled, **Notes on the Study Questions**.

Relationship Building (10-15 minutes)

Choose one or two of the questions listed below, or write your own. Remember to go first and model an appropriate type and length of response to the question(s) you choose. (See [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#) for more information.)

- Tell about an event or experience for which you were either well prepared or poorly prepared.
- When you were a child, what's something you feared?
- What's something your parents did for you that you took for granted or even rejected?
- What "destiny" did your parents have planned for you? How did you feel about that destiny or the lack thereof?
- Tell about a time when you were in trouble and cried out to God.
- What do you like to do when you have a day or two all to yourself?
- Tell about one thing in your life that didn't (or hasn't) worked out the way you planned.
- What's something you're thankful for?
- If you left home without anything, what's one thing you'd ask to have sent to you right away and why?
- When and how do you pray?

Bible Study (20-45 minutes)

- Planning your introduction

You want to orient the group to the study and its focus on God's provision. Lane Henderson does this by referring to the belly of the fish and asking the following question: *Although you've probably never cried out to God from the belly of a great fish, can you remember a time when you cried out to God from an unexpected place, or from within a desperate circumstance?* Perhaps you could use an example from your own life to orient people to the study. Think about what it's like to be *in the belly* of an adverse or unwelcome situation. Give an example of a time when you've been *in the belly*, or choose something from the news, a movie, a book you've read, or a TV show you watch. Recently on *Grey's Anatomy*, for example, Meredith Grey drowned and became hypothermic; she was "dead" for several hours—she was *in the belly of a great fish*—and struggling with whether to stay dead or return to life. It was a time of soul-searching and decision-making.

Remember to give your group a brief summary of Lesson Five and of Jonah's story up to this point.

- Choosing your discussion questions – Here's a sample list of questions for Jonah 2:1-10. I've used mostly questions from the study itself, but I've worded them in my own way, and I'm hoping the group discussion will feel like an extension of the work people did individually. If I follow the questions in the study guide too closely, it might feel like we're "checking each other's answers" instead of having a conversation. But this list is only an example. Please plan and organize

your questions around your own experience of Bible study and the needs of your group. You might want to have the group treat this chapter as one unit.

1. Let's analyze Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish. What imagery does Jonah use in his prayer, and what does this imagery tell us about the state of Jonah's mind and heart? (Observation)
 2. Jonah got a lot of his imagery and language from the Psalms. Why do you think he relied so much on the Psalms in this conversation with God? How do you think the Psalms may have helped him? (Interpretation)
 3. If Jonah 2:9 is the midpoint of the story and is therefore emphasized by the author, what do you think is going on in that verse? What is Jonah saying about himself and the situation? What is he not saying? Why does God think it's time to get Jonah out of that fish and back onto dry land? (Observation + Interpretation)
 4. How does Jonah's prayer during a time of distress compare with the prayers you pray during times of distress? (Application) What ideas does Jonah's example give you for your own prayer life, especially during tough times? (Application)
 5. What connections do you notice between Jonah and Jesus? (Observation + Interpretation)
 6. Even though we're Christians, as the Study Guide points out on page 57, we can fall into worshiping idols instead of God. Worshiping the wrong things can lead to struggle and distress in our lives. Which of the idolatries on page 57 are showing up in your own life? (Application) – Be ready to go first on this question to break the ice for others and to give them some time to think.
 7. How do you see Jonah's example of thankfulness and thanksgiving fitting into your life—especially when you're in distress or struggling with one of these idolatries? (Application)
- Ending the lesson well – Pay attention to the time. It's important to pace the discussion so you make it all the way to application. As you get within 10-15 minutes of your time limit, begin to pull the discussion together so you'll have time for some personal sharing around application issues and still have time for prayer. The goal of Bible study is personal transformation. So one of the most important things you can do as a leader is model authentic attempts to apply the scriptures to your own life—and encourage others to do the same. Often it works well to return to where you began: if, for example, you began the study with an example of a time when you or someone else cried out to God from a desperate

set of circumstances, consider returning to that example and reflecting on it in terms of a psalm that captures what that experience was like for you. Use this to draw the study to a close and transition into prayer.

Prayer Time (5-15 minutes)

Think a bit about the prayer time for this week. Consider how to frame the prayer time and conduct it. For instance, this week's prayer time could focus on thanksgivings. What's one thing that's going well in each person's life right now—or in a challenging situation they currently face? Or, what's one way they've experienced God's presence or provision recently in the midst of a challenging situation? Share these responses and then do a "popcorn prayer" in which group members thank God specifically. Close the prayer time yourself.

Background Notes

All the information in the following Background Notes can be found in a Bible dictionary.

Fear of the Lord – Fear of the Lord is the attitude of awe that people ought to have before a holy God. It is given by God to human beings to enable them to regard God with reverence and awe. It prompts human beings to revere God's authority, obey God's commandments, and shun all forms of wickedness.

Flood – Water is frequently used in a variety of similes and metaphors in scripture. In its own right, water is essential to human life, and water was a critical factor in the life of ancient Palestine. Metaphorically speaking, the Bible uses the image of flood waters to refer to what people experience when they are in terrible trouble or deep distress. Baptism, of course, relies on the metaphor that our salvation is like being drawn up from the waters of death. See also **Sea**.

Pit – Metaphorically, the idea of a deep hole is used in the Old Testament to describe the underworld, the place of the dead and departed spirits.

Prayer – Prayer is a form of worship that involves turning toward God, who is a personal being who cares for us and hears us. Prayer includes the activities of praise, confession, thanksgiving, lament, petitioning, intercession and more. God enables prayer and calls people to prayer. Various prayers are recorded in the Old and New Testaments, but the book of Psalms is a collection of songs and prayers that Jews learned and used in both corporate and personal worship. Jonah makes use of the Psalms in his prayer in 2:2-9 (See Psalms 18, 42, 88, 120, and 139).

Presence of the Lord – The Israelites understood God to be a spiritual being, but God was also personal and dwelt in their midst. No building could contain God, but the

tabernacle during the wilderness wanderings, and later the Temple in Jerusalem, signified the reality of God being with them and being involved in their lives and history.

Sea – The Israelites were people of the land, not the sea. In fact, they tended to fear the sea. God was the creator of the seas and they were under God's command. And yet, the seas were also a symbol of chaos and disorder. They represented powers that opposed God, and were the home of Leviathan, the great sea monster.

Sheol – In Hebrew thinking, Sheol is the place of the dead.

Temple – See **Presence of the Lord**.

Word of the Lord – This term is used almost 400 times in the Old Testament, always in reference to God's revelation of his will or purpose to human beings. God speaks. The *word of the Lord* comes in a variety of forms, including commandments, prophecy, warnings, and comfort or encouragement. The New Testament tells us that Jesus himself is God's Word—not spoken or written, but living.

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

Lesson Seven – Second Chances

Jonah 3:1-10

If you are leading only this lesson, before you begin, you will also want to read: [Preparing to Lead Your Group](#), [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#), [Guide to Discussion Questions](#), and the [Bible Study Worksheet](#).

Studying the Passage

Remember: a good approach is to spend at least 30 minutes reading and observing the passage on your own, perhaps using the [Bible Study Worksheet](#) as a guide; then perhaps another 30 minutes working through the lesson in the Study Guide (see the **Background Notes** below); and then another 30 minutes planning to lead the study in your group.

When you're working through the lesson in the Study Guide, here's what to do with the study questions. Almost always, everything you need to know to answer a question is right there in the biblical passage or in the **Background Notes**. Sometimes you'll have to put two and two together, but that's the fun part. What you're doing is working from what you *can* see in the passage, and what you *can* look up about setting, history, culture and vocabulary, to what you *can't* look up. But any interpreting you do—any hunches you have or conclusions you draw—should be grounded in the passage. Don't pull stuff out of thin air. Don't make stuff up. Don't manipulate the passage. Stay modest and God will bless you with significant firsthand insights into his Word.

Following the **Background Notes** you'll find a few comments on the questions in the study. But not many, and here's why. For one thing, when Lane Henderson wrote the Study Guide for Jonah, she included some important commentary material in the flow of the study itself. Repeating these comments in the **Notes on the Study Questions** section of the Leader's Guide would be redundant; as a result, there are fewer entries in that section with Jonah than with Ruth. But also remember that if you pray for God's guidance, do your own observation of the passage, read the **Background Notes**, and use your head, you'll be able to answer every study question successfully. Really. And the answer will be your own discovery instead of something you got secondhand. Don't worry, though: if there's anything tricky about a question, you'll still find help in the section entitled, **Notes on the Study Questions**.

Relationship Building (10-15 minutes)

Choose one or two of the questions listed below, or write your own. Remember to go first and model an appropriate type and length of response to the question(s) you choose. (See [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#) for more information.)

- What's a memorable hike, walking tour, or long walk you've taken?

- Tell about a time when you changed your mind about something.
- Tell about a time when you received a second chance at something.
- Tell about a time when you needed or deserved a second chance and didn't get it.
- Tell about a time when someone gave you some kind of warning. What was your response?
- Tell about a time when you resented someone for getting "special treatment" you thought they didn't deserve.
- Who "laid down the law" in your family growing up, and how did you feel about that?
- When did Jesus and the gospel begin to make sense to you?
- Tell about a time when someone went out of their way to look out for your interests.
- When have you given or received "tough love"?
- To whom do you have the power to grant a second chance?
- How do you usually feel, and what do you usually do, when great news reaches you? How about when it's sobering news?

Bible Study (20-45 minutes)

- Planning your introduction

You want to orient the group to the study and its focus on second chances. Lane Henderson does this in her own introduction to Lesson Seven, as well as in the first question she poses: *Describe a time in your life when you were given a second chance to "do the right thing." How did you respond, and what were the results?* Perhaps you could use an example from your own life to orient people to the study. If you prefer to use something less personal, how about a story from the news, or a movie, or a book you're reading?

Remember to give your group a brief summary of Lesson Six and of Jonah's story up to this point. Also, do make use of the background information Lane provides at the beginning of the *Read the Map* section.

- Choosing your discussion questions – Here's a sample list of questions for Jonah 3:1-10. I've used mostly questions from the study itself, but I've worded them in my own way, and I'm hoping the group discussion will feel like an extension of the work people did individually. If I follow the questions in the study guide too closely, it might feel like we're "checking each other's answers" instead of having a conversation. But this list is only an example. Please plan and organize your questions around your own experience of Bible study and the needs of your group. Also decide whether you'll take the passage as a whole, or break it up into shorter sections.

1. Let's look at those three passages from the Study Guide together: Genesis 12:1-3, Acts 3:25-26, and Galatians 3:8. God made a covenant with

Abraham that had a long-range goal. How would you describe God's goal, and how does Jonah's call fit into that goal? (Observation)

2. What message is Jonah supposed to take to the Ninevites? (Observation)
 3. What reasons can you come up with for why Jonah might have tried to avoid this assignment from God? (Observation + Interpretation) – Encourage the group to generate as many possibilities as they can. Some will be more verifiable and solid than others, but it is okay to look at this from a variety of angles.
 4. Describe the content and extent of the Ninevites' response to Jonah's proclamation. (Observation)
 5. What do you suppose accounts for this response? (Interpretation). As with the reasons for Jonah avoiding his call, there are probably a number of possible factors here.
 6. What's your reaction to God's role and God's goals in this story? (Interpretation)
 7. If this is what God is like, how does that challenge us as a congregation? How does it challenge you personally? (Application) – As the leader, it would be good to have a brief example ready for each of these questions. Perhaps you could identify a relationship in your own life that could use a "change of heart" on your part or a "second chance."
- Ending the lesson well – Pay attention to the time. It's important to pace the discussion so you make it all the way to application. As you get within 10-15 minutes of your time limit, begin to pull the discussion together so you'll have time for some personal sharing around application issues and still have time for prayer. The goal of Bible study is personal transformation. So one of the most important things you can do as a leader is model authentic attempts to apply the scriptures to your own life—and encourage others to do the same. Often it works well to return to where you began: if, for example, you began the study with an example of a time when you were given a second chance, you might end the study by reflection on your intention to *give* a second chance to someone else. Use this to draw the study to a close and transition into prayer.

Prayer Time (5-15 minutes)

Think a bit about the prayer time for this week. Consider how to frame the prayer time and conduct it. For instance, this week's prayer time could focus on giving second chances to others. You could ask people to identify one relationship that's going really well, and one relationship that needs a second chance or some other kind of help. Or you

could ask people to identify an area of life that's going really well for them and something else about which they're feeling ineffective. Model a brief response of your own and, remember, this isn't a therapy session. For the prayer time itself, consider going around the circle to the right, with each person praying briefly for the person seated to their left. You go first.

Background Notes

All the information in the following Background Notes
can be found in a Bible dictionary.

Anger of God – Used in Jonah 3:9 and 4:2, the Hebrew word translated here as anger refers to God's passionate opposition to evil and sin and to their results in human life and in the created world as a whole. Anger is not an arbitrary or fitful passion on God's part (as it often is in human beings), nor does God regard human beings with animosity. Rather, God is slow to anger and full of mercy and grace. God, in Jesus Christ, is redeeming the world out of all its troubles. This is a work in progress. God is bearing all evil and sin in himself. But without anger at evil and sin, God would not be fully righteous, and God's love would sink to the level of mere sentimentality.

Evil Ways – The biblical perspective is that all forms of evil, brokenness, and sin have their source in rebellion against, or disobedience toward God, God's will, and God's good purposes for human beings and the world. Evil is, of course, complex and varied. The Bible does not define or explain evil, but it does consistently acknowledge the reality of evil, tell many stories about it, and give many examples of it.

Fasting – In the Bible, fasts usually involve abstaining from all food (and often all drink as well) for a specified period of time. Fasts are of two types: public and private. Public fasts were associated with annual events such as the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31 and 23:27-32), and also with periods of national catastrophe or crisis (2 Chronicles 20:3; Ezra 8:21-23; Nehemiah 1:4-11; Joel 1-2; Zechariah 7-8). Such public fasts usually lasted for a day and were ordinarily accompanied by penitence, prayer, humility, the wearing of sackcloth, and various kinds of offerings. Individuals engaged in private fasts as a sign of grief, humility, or repentance, or with the purpose of seeking God's guidance and help.

Fear of the Lord – Fear of the Lord is the attitude of awe that people ought to have before a holy God. It is given by God to human beings to enable them to regard God with reverence and awe. It prompts human beings to revere God's authority, obey God's commandments, and shun all forms of wickedness.

Forty (40) – The Israelites understood and used numbers in symbolic ways. The number 40, for example, is often used to indicate a large number or a long period of time. A reference to forty years, for instance, often encompassed one or two entire generations of people; so, to say that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years following their exodus from Egypt is to say that all the adults who'd rebelled against God had died

before gaining access to the Promised Land. In general, the number forty is associated with almost every new development in the history of God saving humanity: the flood in Genesis 7-8 (40 days and nights of rain); the release from slavery and wilderness wanderings in Exodus (40 years); Moses' fasts on the mountain in Exodus 24 and 34 and in Deuteronomy 9 (40 days); spying out the land of Canaan in Numbers 13 (40 days); Moses' prayer for Israel in Deuteronomy 9 (40 days); the recurring pattern of servitude and deliverance in the book of Judges (40 years); Goliath's defiance of the Israelites in 1 Samuel 17 (40 days); the temptation of Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry (40 days); the period of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (40 days); and others.

Nineveh – The capital of ancient Assyria (modern-day Iraq), and a major city, located on the east side of the Tigris River. At its height, as many as 175,000 people may have lived there; in Jonah the population is cited as 120,000. The reference to Nineveh may actually be to a cluster of four cities in close proximity to one another, of which Nineveh was the largest (as we might group a number of towns under the heading, “greater Chicago” or “the Houston area.” The probable purpose of this numerical reference, however, is to affirm Nineveh's “greatness,” not to give the precise size of its population. The Assyrians worshiped the god Ashur, who was represented on earth in the person of the king of Assyria. Ishtar, the goddess of war and love, was worshipped at Nineveh; and Nabu, the god of wisdom, also had a temple in Nineveh.

Sackcloth – A coarse material usually made of camel or goat hair, and usually black, or at least dark, in color. Camel and goat hair were customarily used to make the bags in which grain was stored. Because of their discomfort, people wore garments made of sackcloth as a sign of mourning and/or penitence in the face of personal and national calamities. (See, for example, Genesis 37:4; 2 Samuel 3:31; 1 Kings 21:27; Job 16:15; Esther 4:1-3; Lamentations 2:10; Nehemiah 9:1; Jonah 3:5; and Matthew 11:21.)

Sit in Ashes – Symbolically speaking, ashes signify ruin and destruction. Putting ashes on one's head, or sitting in ashes, signified grief and repentance. Doing either was often included in rituals of mourning in ancient Israel (see, for example, 2 Samuel 13:19; Isaiah 58:5; Jeremiah 6:26).

Three (3) – The Israelites understood and used numbers symbolically, and the whole Bible reflects this. The number 3 has natural associations with the Trinity, of course—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, one God. But it is also associated with some of the mighty acts of God and, in general, with a sense of completeness (Exodus 19:11; Hosea 6:2; Jonah 1:17; Luke 13:32; Matthew 12:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4).

Turn From – The Hebrew word used in Jonah 3:8-9 means to turn back, or turn away, or make a retreat.

Wickedness – Ungodliness. The term refers to active wrongdoing or participation in that which is evil or perverse. The Bible depicts wickedness as residing in the human heart and being both progressive and contagious.

Word of the Lord – This term is used almost 400 times in the Old Testament, always in reference to God’s revelation of his will or purpose to human beings. God speaks. The *word of the Lord* comes in a variety of forms, including commandments, prophecy, warnings, and comfort or encouragement. The New Testament tells us that Jesus himself is God’s Word—not spoken or written, but living.

Notes on the Questions in the Study Guide

Question 8 - The Hebrew word that gets translated into English as “changed his mind” involves an alteration in attitudes or plans that arises out of compassion or pity.

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

Lesson Eight – Choosing Our Response

Jonah 4:1-11

If you are leading only this lesson, before you begin, you will also want to read: [Preparing to Lead Your Group](#), [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#), [Guide to Discussion Questions](#), and the [Bible Study Worksheet](#).

Studying the Passage

Remember: a good approach is to spend at least 30 minutes reading and observing the passage on your own, perhaps using the [Bible Study Worksheet](#) as a guide; then perhaps another 30 minutes working through the lesson in the Study Guide (see the **Background Notes** below); and then another 30 minutes planning to lead the study in your group.

When you're working through the lesson in the Study Guide, here's what to do with the study questions. Almost always, everything you need to know to answer a question is right there in the biblical passage or in the **Background Notes**. Sometimes you'll have to put two and two together, but that's the fun part. What you're doing is working from what you *can* see in the passage, and what you *can* look up about setting, history, culture and vocabulary, to what you *can't* look up. But any interpreting you do—any hunches you have or conclusions you draw—should be grounded in the passage. Don't pull stuff out of thin air. Don't make stuff up. Don't manipulate the passage. Stay modest and God will bless you with significant firsthand insights into his Word.

Following the **Background Notes** you'll find a few comments on the questions in the study. But not many, and here's why. For one thing, when Lane Henderson wrote the Study Guide for Jonah, she included some important commentary material in the flow of the study itself. Repeating these comments in the **Notes on the Study Questions** section of the Leader's Guide would be redundant; as a result, there are fewer entries in that section with Jonah than with Ruth. But also remember that if you pray for God's guidance, do your own observation of the passage, read the **Background Notes**, and use your head, you'll be able to answer every study question successfully. Really. And the answer will be your own discovery instead of something you got secondhand. Don't worry, though: if there's anything tricky about a question, you'll still find help in the section entitled, **Notes on the Study Questions**.

Relationship Building (10-15 minutes)

Choose one or two of the questions listed below, or write your own. Remember to go first and model an appropriate type and length of response to the question(s) you choose. (See [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#) for more information.)

- Tell about a time when you were angry, or brought a complaint against God.

- Tell about a time in your life when someone “taught you a lesson.”
- What happens to you when you’ve had a “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day?”
- What do you do to recover when you’ve had a really bad day?
- Tell about a time you “got even” with someone, or someone “got even” with you.
- What’s one of your pet peeves? (Once this gets going it can be kind of fun, people may have several pet peeves. You can go around the circle two or three times if you like.)
- How do you process anger and frustration?
- What’s something you really like to have your own way about?
- What’s something you really want God (or someone else) to do for you?

Bible Study (20-40 minutes)

- Planning your introduction

You want to orient the group to the study and its focus on choosing our responses. Lane Henderson does this in her own introduction to Lesson Eight, as well as in the first question she poses: *Describe an experience you had in the last week that angered you. Are you still mad?* Perhaps you could use an example from your own life to orient people to the study. If you prefer to use something less personal, how about a story from the news, or a movie, or a book you’re reading? For instance, the family I grew up in had a “No Sulking” rule. If we wanted to sulk, we had to go to our own room. Now I understand why: sulkers are miserable to be around, and Jonah is a good example of that.

Remember to give your group a brief summary of Lesson Seven and of Jonah’s story up to this point.

- Choosing your discussion questions – Here’s a sample list of questions for Jonah 4:1-11. I’ve used mostly questions from the study itself, but I’ve worded them in my own way, and I’m hoping the group discussion will feel like an extension of the work people did individually. If I follow the questions in the study guide too closely, it might feel like we’re “checking each other’s answers” instead of having a conversation. But this list is only an example. Please plan and organize your questions around your own experience of Bible study and the needs of your group. Also decide whether you’ll take the passage as a whole, or break it up into shorter sections.
 1. Let’s take a close look at Jonah’s angry response and his sulking. What does he feel, think, say and do? (Observation)
 2. Why do you think Jonah is so angry with God? (Observation + Interpretation)

3. How do you interpret Jonah's response to God's question in verse 4 and verse 9 about having a right to be angry? (Observation + Interpretation)
 4. How does the vine fit into all this? What point do you think God is trying to make with Jonah? (Observation + Interpretation)
 5. What conclusions are you drawing about God's character from this story? What conclusions might you draw about human nature based on Jonah's response? (Observation + Interpretation)
 6. We don't know, of course, but what do you think happened to Jonah after this? What do you think it would take for Jonah to respond differently the next time God calls on him? (Interpretation)
 7. Where does this story challenge you in terms of your own emotions, motives, and desires? (Application)
- Ending the lesson well – Pay attention to the time. It's important to pace the discussion so you make it all the way to application. As you get within 10-15 minutes of your time limit, begin to pull the discussion together so you'll have time for some personal sharing around application issues and still have time for prayer. The goal of Bible study is personal transformation. So one of the most important things you can do as a leader is model authentic attempts to apply the scriptures to your own life—and encourage others to do the same. Often it works well to return to where you began: if, for example, you began the study with an example of something that angered you recently, consider returning to that and sharing how you processed that instead of getting permanently stuck in the anger. Use this to draw the study to a close and transition into prayer.

Prayer Time (5-15 minutes)

Think a bit about the prayer time for this week. Consider how to frame the prayer time and conduct it. For instance, this week's prayer time could focus on people's struggles with anger, or on situations in which they need to get to a godly response. Choose one of the many methods of praying together that have been mentioned in this study, or pray together in a different way that works well for your group.

Background Notes

All the information in the following Background Notes can be found in a Bible dictionary.

Anger of God – Used in Jonah 3:9 and 4:2, the Hebrew word translated here as anger refers to God's passionate opposition to evil and sin and to their results in human life and in the created world as a whole. Anger is not an arbitrary or fitful passion on God's part (as it often is in human beings), nor does God regard human beings with animosity.

Rather, God is slow to anger and full of mercy and grace. God, In Jesus Christ, is redeeming the world out of all its troubles. This is a work in progress. God is bearing all evil and sin in himself. But without anger at evil and sin, God would not be fully righteous, and God's love would sink to the level of mere sentimentality.

Angry – The word that refers to Jonah's anger in Jonah 4:1-9 is different Hebrew word than the word referring to God's anger in 3:9 and 4:2. Jonah's anger is the anger of fierce displeasure.

Booth – A hut or temporary shelter perhaps made with boughs woven together.

Bush – The meaning of this word is uncertain. The plant in Jonah 4:6 may have been the castor-oil plant, a shrub which grows rapidly, but is known to wither after only minimal handling. Another suggestion is this was the bottle-gourd plant, which is a vine rather than a shrub.

Nineveh – The capital of ancient Assyria (modern-day Iraq), and a major city, located on the east side of the Tigris River. At its height, as many as 175,000 people may have lived there; in Jonah the population is cited as 120,000. The reference to Nineveh may actually be to a cluster of four cities in close proximity to one another, of which Nineveh was the largest (as we might group a number of towns under the heading, "greater Chicago" or "the Houston area." The probable purpose of this numerical reference, however, is to affirm Nineveh's "greatness," not to give the precise size of its population. The Assyrians worshiped the god Ashur, who was represented on earth in the person of the king of Assyria. Ishtar, the goddess of war and love, was worshipped at Nineveh; and Nabu, the god of wisdom, also had a temple in Nineveh.

Tarshish - Most likely a location in the Mediterranean Sea—perhaps as far west as the coast of Spain, beyond Gibraltar. Its fleet of ships was impressive, and these represented power and wealth. The *ships of Tarshish* are mentioned, for example, in Isaiah 2:16, and Tarshish seems to have become, in the popular imagination of the day, a faraway exotic paradise whose luxury goods were exported to Israel, Phoenicia, and other locations around the Mediterranean.

Word of the Lord – This term is used almost 400 times in the Old Testament, always in reference to God's revelation of his will or purpose to human beings. God speaks. The *word of the Lord* comes in a variety of forms, including commandments, prophecy, warnings, and comfort or encouragement. The New Testament tells us that Jesus himself is God's Word—not spoken or written, but living.

Worm – Usually mentioned in scripture in reference to death and decay.

Notes on the Questions in the Study Guide

Question 2 – Jonah seems to have preferred divine judgment to divine mercy—at least where the Ninevites are concerned.

Ready or Not: Following God's Call

Lesson Nine – *Reviewing Our Study* Ruth & Jonah

If you are leading only this lesson, before you begin, you will also want to read: [Preparing to Lead Your Group](#), [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#), [Guide to Discussion Questions](#), and the [Bible Study Worksheet](#).

Reviewing the Books

To prepare for this lesson, I suggest you reread Ruth and Jonah. Just read them again, all the way through, as you would a short story.

Relationship Building (15-25 minutes)

This week, consider choosing a question that will help wrap up the group experience you've had together. Choose one or two of the questions listed below, or write your own. Remember to go first and model an appropriate type and length of response to the question(s) you choose. (See [Using Sharing Questions in Groups](#) for more information.)

- What has been meaningful to you about this group?
- How has this group been important or helpful to you?
- What have you especially valued about this group?
- What's one thing you've experienced or learned here that will stick with you?
- What's one thing that's changed in your relationship with God or your view of God over the course of this study?

Bible Study (20-30 minutes)

- Planning your introduction

You want to orient the group to the study and its focus on reviewing the study as a whole. The Study Guide includes a chart on page 75 that you can use as an introduction. You don't need to spend a lot of time on this. Even if people haven't taken time to complete it on their own, just work your way through it in a thorough but fairly quick manner. You're just helping them collect their thoughts so you can get on to the discussion questions.

- Choosing your discussion questions – Here's a sample list of questions for reviewing Ruth and Jonah. I've used mostly questions from the study itself, but I've worded them in my own way, and I'm hoping the group discussion will feel like an extension of the work people did individually. If I follow the questions in the study guide too closely, it might feel like we're "checking each other's

answers” instead of having a conversation. But this list is only an example. Please plan and organize your questions around your own experience and the needs of your group.

1. Which of these characters did you relate to the most and when?
 2. How has this study of Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, and Jonah changed your sense of how God “calls” us and what a “call” is?
 3. Based on these stories, what would you say are some of the principles or components involved in discerning God’s call?
 4. Using the prayer on page 79 as a reference point, where are you on discerning and following God’s call in your own life right now? Are you ready, or not?
- Ending the lesson well – As you get within 10-15 minutes of your time limit, begin to pull the discussion together. The goal of Bible study is personal transformation, so try to summarize the personal transformation you’re hearing about and observing in the course of this discussion. This is a form of affirmation. Invite the group to respond to your observations. Use this to draw the study to a close and transition into prayer.

Prayer Time (5-15 minutes)

Think a bit about the prayer time for this week. Consider how to frame the prayer time and conduct it. Since this is your final lesson, you could simply focus your prayers on thanksgiving for the experience you’ve had together. Or you could focus the prayer time on each person’s sense of God’s call to them, paying special attention to those who are struggling to hear God’s call; or who feel uncertain about it; or who, like Jonah, aren’t sure they like what they’re hearing. This is a good week to allow extra time for prayer. Be prepared, as the leader, to close this final prayer time in a fitting way.