

Drawn in
BIBLE STUDY

Ruth

Discovering Your Place in God's Story

EUGENE H. PETERSON



FEATURING
THE MESSAGE

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THE MESSAGE®

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Ruth: Discovering Your Place in God's Story

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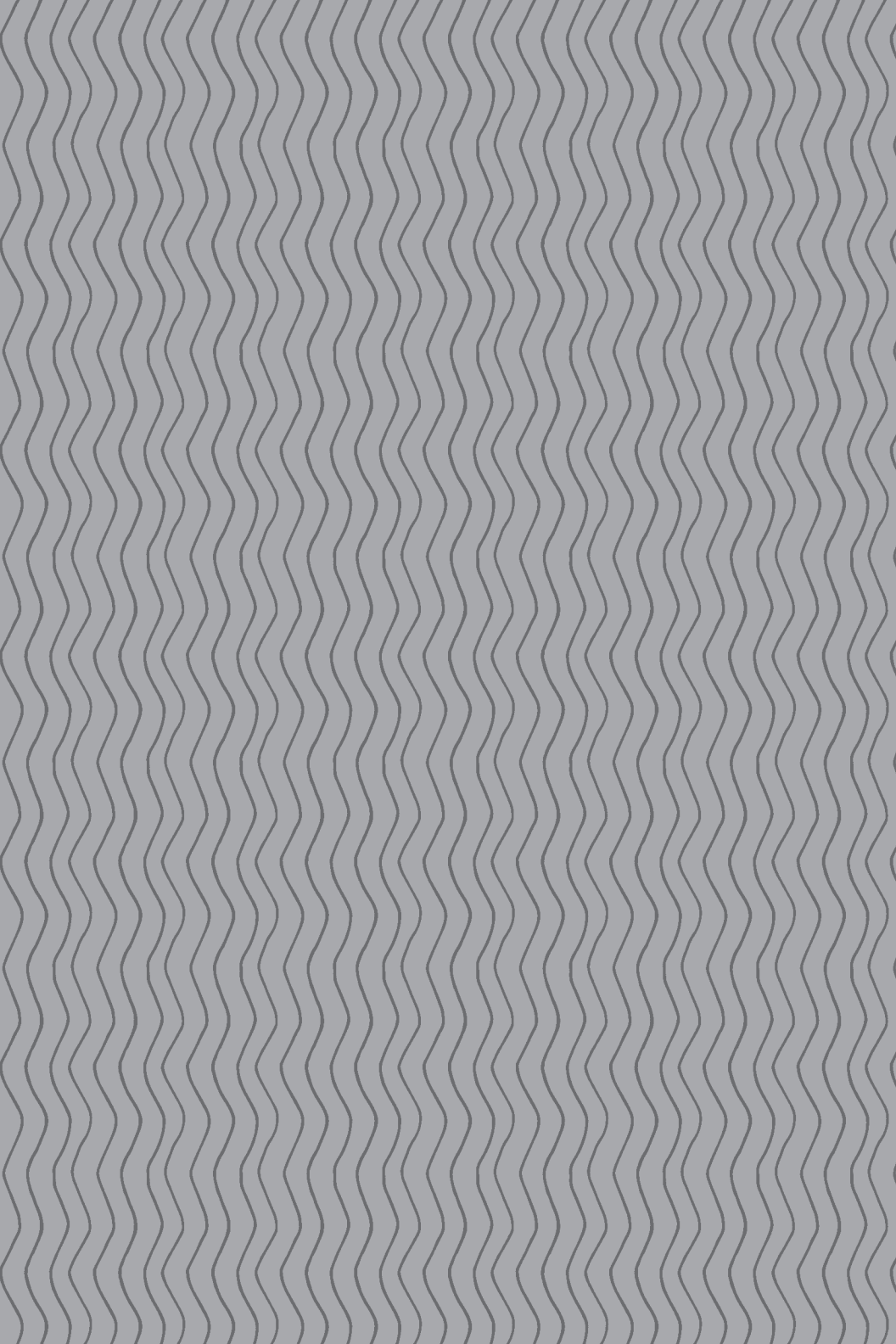
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introduction

Eugene H. Peterson



READING IS THE FIRST THING, just reading the Bible. As we read, we enter a new world of words and find ourselves in on a conversation in which God has the first and last words. God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us.

I didn't start out as a pastor. I began my vocational life as a teacher and for several years taught the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek in a theological seminary. I expected to live the rest of my life as a professor and scholar, teaching and writing and studying. But then my life took a sudden vocational turn to pastoring a congregation.

I was now plunged into quite a different world. The first noticeable difference was that nobody seemed to care much about the Bible, which so recently people had been

paying me to teach them. Many of the people I worked with now knew virtually nothing about it, had never read it, and weren't interested in learning. Many others had spent years reading it, but for them it had gone flat through familiarity, reduced to clichés. Bored, they dropped it. And there weren't many people in between. Very few were interested in what I considered my primary work, getting the words of the Bible into their heads and hearts, getting the message lived. They found newspapers and magazines, videos and pulp fiction more to their taste.

Meanwhile I had taken on as my life work the responsibility for getting these very people to listen—really listen—to the message in this book. I knew I had my work cut out for me.

I lived in two language worlds, the world of the Bible and the world of today. I had always assumed they were the same world. But these people didn't see it that way. So out of necessity I became a “translator” (although I wouldn't have called it that then), daily standing on the border between two worlds, getting the language of the Bible that God uses to create and save us, heal and bless us, judge and rule over us, into the language of today that we use to gossip and tell stories, give directions and do business, sing songs and talk to our children.

My intent is simply to get people reading the Bible who don't know that the Bible is readable at all, at least by

them, and to get people who long ago lost interest in the Bible to read it again. Read in order to live, praying as you read, “God, let it be with me just as you say.”

INTRODUCTION TO RUTH

As we read the broad, comprehensive biblical story of God at work in the world, most of us are entirely impressed: God speaking creation into being, God laying the foundations of the life of faith through great and definitive fathers and mothers, God saving a people out of a brutal slave existence and then forming them into lives of free and obedient love, God raising up leaders who direct and guide through the tangle of difficulties always involved in living joyfully and responsively before God.

Very impressive. So impressive, in fact, that many of us, while remaining impressed, feel left out. Our unimpressive, very ordinary lives make us feel like outsiders to such a star-studded cast. We disqualify ourselves. Guilt or willfulness or accident makes a loophole, and we assume that what is true for everyone else is not true for us. We conclude that we are, somehow, “just not religious” and thus unfit to participate in the big story.

And then we turn a page and come on this small story of two widows and a farmer in their out-of-the-way village.

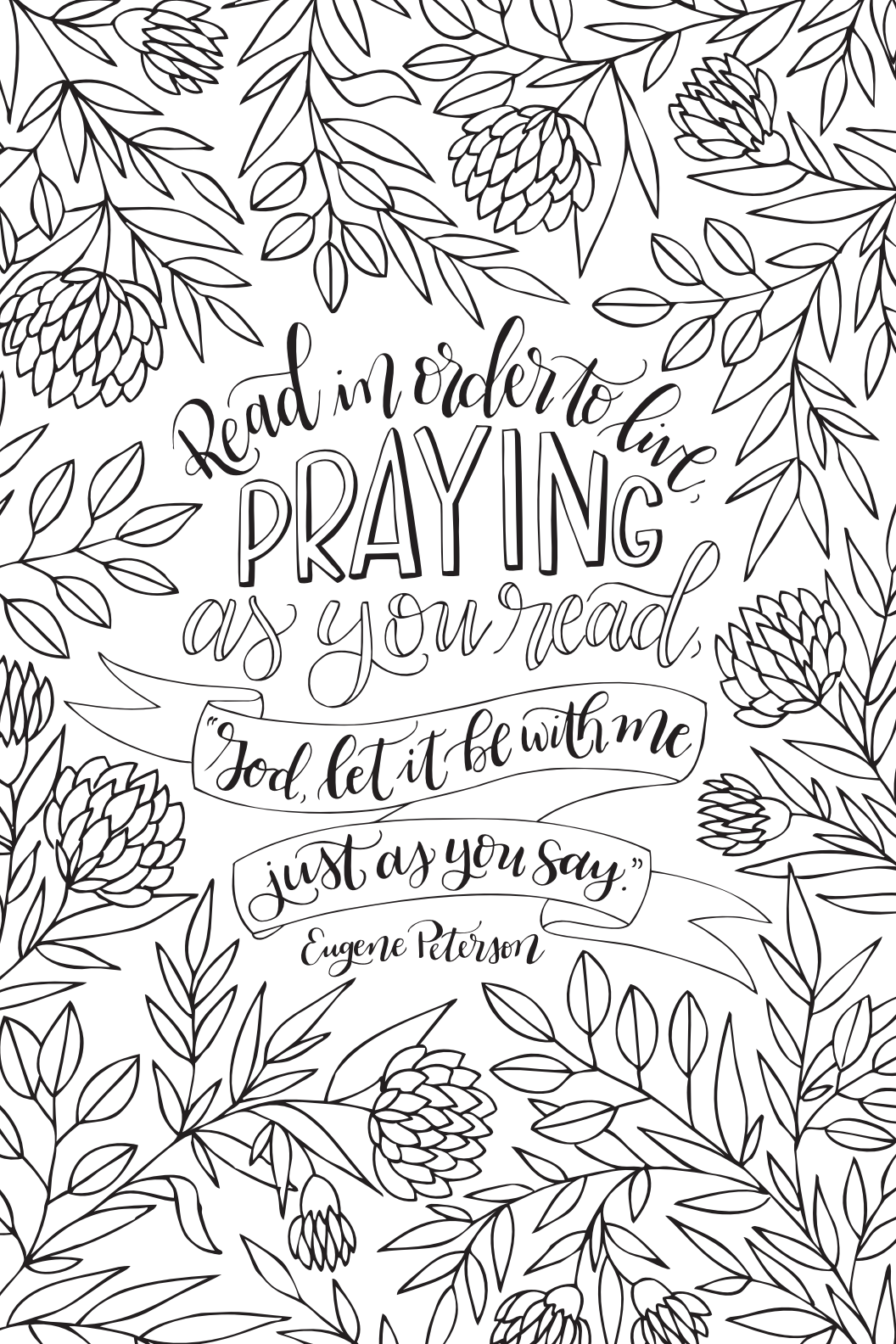
The unknown author, a master of the short story, wrote sometime after the reign of David, Ruth’s great-grandson.

Ancient literature focused on men, especially powerful men, so it's extraordinary to get a tale from the point of view of two lower-class women. The outsider Ruth was not born into the faith and felt no natural part of it—like many of us. But she came to find herself gathered into the story and given a quiet and obscure part that proved critical to the way everything turned out.

Scripture is a vast tapestry of God's creating, saving, and blessing ways in this world. The great names in the plot that climaxes at Sinai (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses) and the great names in the sequel (Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon) can be intimidating to ordinary, random individuals: "Surely there is no way that I can have any significant part on such a stage." But the story of the widowed, impoverished alien Ruth is proof to the contrary. She is the inconsequential outsider whose life turns out to be essential for telling the complete story of God's ways among us. The unassuming ending carries the punch line: Boaz married Ruth, she had a son, Obed; Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

David! In its artful telling of this "outsider" widow, uprooted and obscure, who turns out to be the great-grandmother of David and the ancestor of Jesus, the book of Ruth makes it possible for each of us to understand ourselves, however ordinary or "out of it," as irreplaceable in the full telling of God's story. We count—every last one of us—and what we do counts.





Read in order to live
PRAYING
as you read.

"God, let it be with me

just as you say."

Eugene Peterson



HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF

Ruth

*It takes more than bread
to stay alive. It takes a steady stream
of words from God's mouth.*

MATTHEW 4:4

MANY PEOPLE APPROACH READING the Bible as a religious duty or a way to get in good with God. Worse still, some believe God will send a horrible punishment if they don't dedicate at least a half hour each day to dutiful study of his Word. Coming to the Bible with so much religious baggage takes all the fun out of reading it.

Reading the Bible isn't simply a fact-finding mission. You don't come just to collect bits of trivia about God. From the moment you read the first line of the Bible, you will discover that this book isn't about you. It's about God. God gave his Word as the place where you meet him face-to-face.

In order to read the Scriptures adequately and

accurately, it's necessary at the same time to live them—to live them *as* we read them. This kind of reading has been named by our ancestors as *lectio divina*, often translated “spiritual reading.” It means not only reading the text but also meditating on the text, praying the text, and living the text. It is reading that enters our souls the way food enters our stomachs, spreads through our blood, and transforms us. Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we feed on it. Words spoken and listened to, written and read are intended to do something in us, to give us health and wholeness, vitality and holiness, wisdom and hope.

The Scriptures not only reveal everything of who God is but also everything of who we are. And this revelation is done in such a way as to invite participation on both sides, of author and reader.

This may be the single most important thing to know as we come to read and study and believe these Holy Scriptures: this rich, alive, personally revealing God as experienced in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, personally addressing us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, at whatever age we are, in whatever state we are. Christian reading is participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love. We submit our lives to this text so that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

One of the characteristic marks of the biblical storytellers is a certain reticence. They don't tell us too much. They leave a lot of blanks in the narration, an implicit invitation to enter the story ourselves, just as we are, and to discover for ourselves how to fit in. There are, of course, always moral, theological, and historical elements in these stories that need to be studied, but never in dismissal of the story that is being told.

When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we're being led not to see God in our stories but to see our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.

The Bible is God's Word. He spoke it into existence and he continues to speak through it as you read. He doesn't just share words on a page. He shares himself. As you meet God in this conversation, you won't just learn *about* him; you will *experience* him more deeply and more personally than you ever thought possible.

DRAWN IN BIBLE STUDIES

We all lead busy lives, and even when we step away from our activities for spiritual rest and renewal, our activities don't necessarily step away from us. *Drawn in* Bible Studies are designed to temporarily relieve you of distractions so you can enjoy the story of God more fully. This happens in a variety of ways:

The Coloring

For people of all ages, coloring offers a structured activity that fosters creative thinking. Tricia McCary Rhodes, author of *The Wired Soul*, is not surprised by the appeal of coloring among adults today:

Brain scans of people involved in activities like coloring reveal that as we focus, our heart rate slows and our brain waves enter a more relaxed state. Over time, by engaging in Scripture or prayer art-journaling, it may become easier for us to focus and pay attention in other areas of our lives as well. It is no wonder we are so drawn to this activity.

As you work through a study, read the appropriate Bible passage and question, and mull over your response as you color. Some art has been provided for you, but feel free to draw in the open space as well. The act of coloring will help your “orienting response,” the brain function that allows you to filter out background distractions and attend to the matter at hand. That’s one reason so many people doodle as they read or study. Ironically, by coloring as you engage in this Bible study, you’ll be more attentive to what the Scriptures have to teach you.

The Message

For many people, the Bible has become so familiar that it loses some of its resonance. They've memorized so many Scriptures, or heard so many sermons, that they think they've figured a passage out. For others, the Bible has never not been intimidating—its names and contexts separated from us by millennia, its story shrouded by memories of bad church experiences or negative impressions of people who claim it as their authority. While you can read any Bible translation you like alongside the *Drawn in* Bible Studies, included in the studies themselves are passages from *The Message*, a rendering of the Bible in contemporary language that matches the tone and informality of the original, ancient language. You will often be surprised by the way *The Message* translates something you may have read or heard many times before. And in that surprise, you'll be more receptive for what God might have for you today.

The Questions

When we sit down just to read the Bible, we can feel a bit disoriented. The questions in the *Drawn in* Bible Studies are designed to help you stay connected to your own lived experience even as you enter into the lived experience of the people and places the Scriptures introduce us to. You'll grow in your understanding of the Bible, but

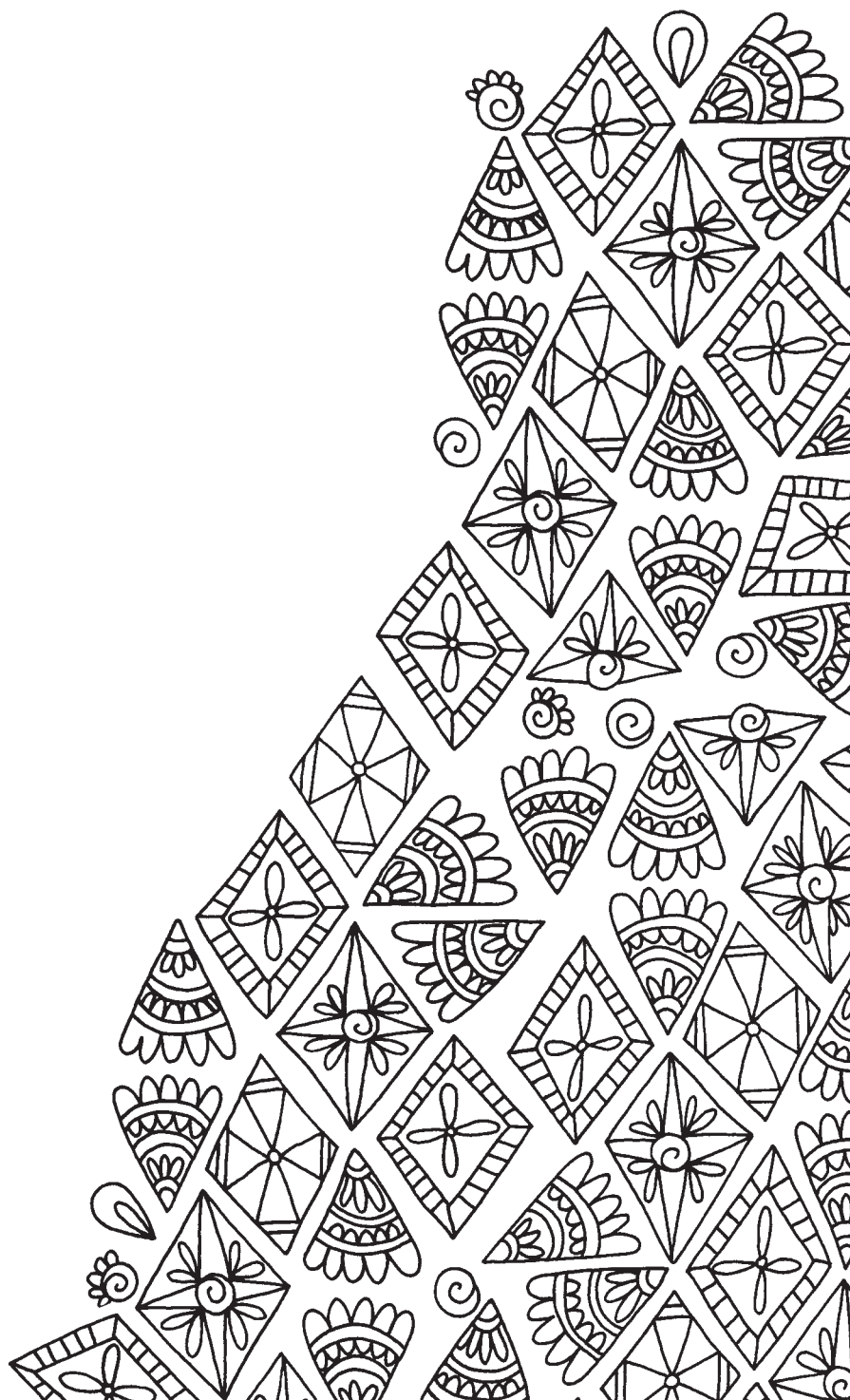
you'll also grow in your understanding of yourself. These questions are also good for discussion—get together with a group of friends, and enjoy coloring and talking together.

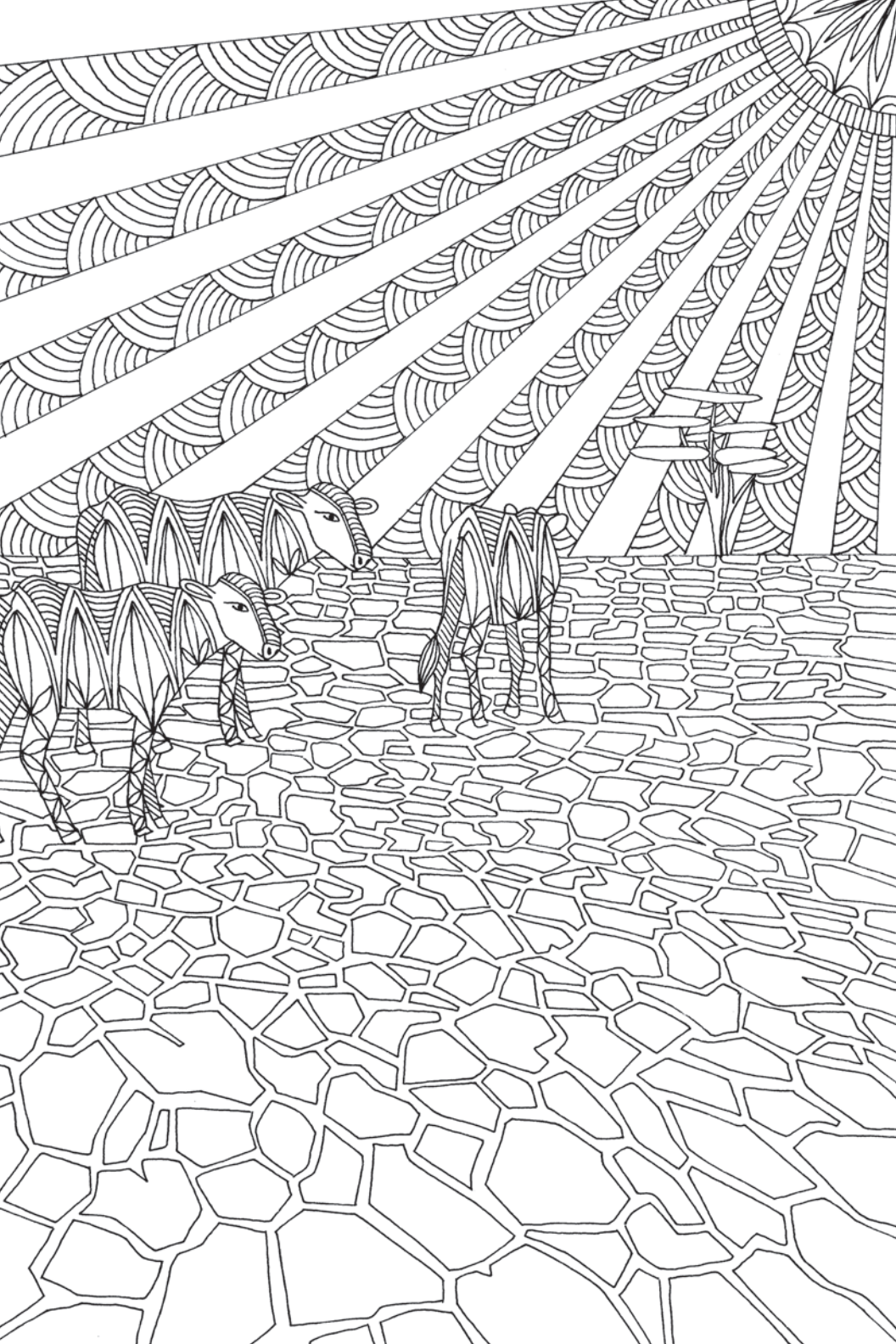
The Commentary

Included in this *Drawn in* Bible Study are occasional comments from renowned Bible teacher Eugene Peterson. You'll see his name following his comments. He helps clarify more confusing passages and offers insight into what's behind what you're reading. He'll help keep you from getting stuck.

Leader's Notes

In the section "How to Lead a *Drawn in* Bible Study" you'll find general guidelines for leading people through this study, along with notes specific to each session. These can inform and enhance your experience, so even if you are going through this study on your own, or if you are not the leader of a group discussion of this study, read through the notes as preparation for each session. Nevertheless, don't feel pressure to be an expert; the main purpose of this study is to provide an opportunity for fun and fellowship as people encounter God's Word and consider how it touches their lives.





Ruth

—SESSION ONE—

God Has Dealt Me a Hard Blow

RUTH 1



THE BOOK OF Ruth is only a sample of what's possible when we take the stories of other people seriously. It offers evidence that it can be done and provides the stimulus for others to do it. Every one of us, though, has to find his or her own way into the story.

—EUGENE

1. *Think about the story of your life. What have been your turning points, plot twists, cliff-hanging moments?*
2. *How have you changed over the course of the story?*
3. *Reflect on specific people you have met along the way. How have those people affected your story?*

How have you affected theirs?





ONCE UPON A time—it was back in the days when judges led Israel—there was a famine in the land. A man from Bethlehem in Judah left home to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The man’s name was Elimelech; his wife’s name was Naomi; his sons were named Mahlon and Kilion—all Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They all went to the country of Moab and settled there.

Elimelech died and Naomi was left, she and her two sons. The sons took Moabite wives; the name of the first was Orpah, the second Ruth. They lived there in Moab for the next ten years. But then the two brothers, Mahlon and Kilion, died. Now the woman was left without either her young men or her husband.

One day she got herself together, she and her two daughters-in-law, to leave the country of Moab and set out for home; she had heard that GOD had been pleased to visit his people and give them food. And so she started out from the place she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law with her, on the road back to the land of Judah.

RUTH 1:1-7



4. *Elimelech took his family out of Judah because of a famine. Recall a time you were tempted to leave a hard situation. Did you leave or stay? Why?*

Do you think Elimelech made the right decision to leave Bethlehem? Why or why not?

5. *Life didn't get easier for Elimelech or his family. A lot of pain is condensed into three verses (verses 3-5). Sometimes it seems like a lot of pain has been condensed into our lives as well. What have you been taught or told about how to deal with pain and loss?*



How do you relate to God when you're dealing with pain or loss?

6. *Why does Naomi decide to return to Judah? How does this compare to her family's decision to leave Judah in the first place?*

7. *Think of a "Naomi moment" you've had—a moment when you were forced by circumstance to make a hard choice. What choices did you have to make? What did you feel as you went through the process?*

What helped to guide your decision?



AFTER A SHORT while on the road, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law, “Go back. Go home and live with your mothers. And may GOD treat you as graciously as you treated your deceased husbands and me. May GOD give each of you a new home and a new husband!” She kissed them and they cried openly.

They said, “No, we’re going on with you to your people.”

But Naomi was firm: “Go back, my dear daughters. Why would you come with me? Do you suppose I still have sons in my womb who can become your future husbands? Go back, dear daughters—on your way, please! I’m too old to get a husband. Why, even if I said, ‘There’s still hope!’ and this very night got a man and had sons, can you imagine being satisfied to wait until they were grown? Would you wait that long to get married again? No, dear daughters; this is a bitter pill for me to swallow—more bitter for me than for you. God has dealt me a hard blow.”

Again they cried openly. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye; but Ruth embraced her and held on.

Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law is going back home to live with her own people and gods; go with her.”

But Ruth said, “Don’t force me to leave you; don’t make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I’ll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I’ll die, and that’s where I’ll be buried, so help me GOD—not even death itself is going to come between us!”



"GOD
HAS DEALT
ME A
HARD BLOW."

FROM RUTH 1, MSG


When Naomi saw that Ruth had her heart set on going with her, she gave in. And so the two of them traveled on together to Bethlehem.

RUTH 1:8-19 _____

8. *At first Naomi brings her daughters-in-law along with her, but then she tells them to “go back.” Explain her rationale for parting with Ruth and Orpah. What would you have done?*
9. *In what ways do you identify with Ruth?*
10. *Who in your life would you stick with, no matter what? Why?*
11. *In what ways do you identify with Orpah?*



12. *Reflect on a relationship or friendship in your life that ended. What was hard about that ending? How has your life changed since?*

_____  _____

WHEN THEY ARRIVED in Bethlehem the whole town was soon buzzing: “Is this really our Naomi? And after all this time!”

But she said, “Don’t call me Naomi; call me Bitter. The Strong One has dealt me a bitter blow. I left here full of life, and GOD has brought me back with nothing but the clothes on my back. Why would you call me Naomi? God certainly doesn’t. The Strong One ruined me.”

And so Naomi was back, and Ruth the foreigner with her, back from the country of Moab. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

RUTH 1:19-22 _____

13. *Naomi had to leave her family and her home, and then in a strange land she lost her husband and her sons. One hard thing after another. In what ways do you identify with Naomi?*





"Your people
are
my people,
Your God is my god."

From Ruth 1,

MSG





A NOTE
FROM
EUGENE

NAOMI GOT INTO the story by complaining. She experienced loss, complained bitterly about it, and had her unhappiness taken seriously by a storyteller who formed it into a complaint against God.

14. *Does it surprise you to read Naomi's complaint "The Strong One ruined me"? Why?*

When we see that God's Word includes complaints against him, what do we learn about him?

15. *Are you tempted to defend God against Naomi? Why or why not?*







A NOTE
FROM
EUGENE

FORMALIZED COMPLAINTS ARE common in Scripture. As people looking to help others find their way in their story, we don't always have to be on God's side, defending him. There are in fact times when the biblical position is at the plaintiff's side.

16. *Reflect on a time you or a loved one complained about God. What feelings were underneath the complaint? Did your understanding of God change in that situation? How?*

How do you think God responds to our complaints?

Until we meet again

CONTINUE TO REFLECT *on your life story. In what situations do you now see God's role differently than you did at first? Take some time to acknowledge God's part in your story, and ask God to help you play a strong supporting role in the stories of your loved ones.*

KEEP AN EYE out for people who need help telling their stories. Consider when you are called to play the role of God's defender, or when you might be called to help give voice to a complaint against God.

Consider scheduling a time to “swap stories” with someone. Give the other person a chance to share his or her Naomi moments, including difficult feelings about God, and be prepared to share your own.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the providential way you have guided my life,

though at times it's been hard to see the providence
for all the plot twists.

Help me to be brave and good and true,
regardless of where the story takes me.

Help me to be a good listener to other people's stories,
being attentive to what you're doing
in them and around them.



