

Lesson Three

Making Sense of the Bible's Setting

The Bible tells the specific story of God's redemptive and restorative plan for the world. The general setting of the Bible is the place and time where God was acting to bring about those plans.

In other words, *the setting of Scripture* is the specific time and place where God was working to make a way for His people to approach Him.

The Promised Land of Israel plays a central role in God's purposes, which we discussed in our teaching together this week. Understanding the history and geography of Israel is extremely helpful in understanding the Lord and the story of Scripture, but that won't be the focus of our lesson today. (See the recommended resources for books and atlases that will help further your own study.)

The Bible records events that took place over a period of more than 2000 years, spanning people groups and places that are too vast to be covered in a single lesson. In this lesson, we will consider how to engage the Lord in Bible study as we seek to understand more about the place, peoples, and customs in which the story is set.

SETTING

1. Look back to your listening guide from this lesson's teaching. What is the definition of setting?
2. How does understanding the setting of a story help us to understand the story itself?
3. How do you think understanding the setting of the Bible will help us understand who God is?

THE BOOK OF RUTH

4. Look back to Lesson 2, questions #16-18. During which era of Israel's history did the events of the book of Ruth take place? Who was ruling in Israel?

The events of Ruth begin in Moab but move into Israel during the time of the Judges, while the Old Covenant was in effect. Recall that as part of the Old Covenant, God gave His people instructions for how to live as a nation with a holy God in their midst. Included in that covenant were specific blessings and curses. If the Israelites obeyed God's commands, they would enjoy prosperity in the Land He had promised to them. If they disobeyed, they would face oppression by foreign powers.

5. How does the idea of the blessings and curses of the Old Covenant help you to understand what was happening to the Israelites during the period of the Judges?
6. How does that understanding affect the way you view Elimelech's decision to leave the Promised Land?
7. How do you see God's heart for all nations depicted even in this story that centers around God's chosen people of Israel? (Hint: Consider the nationality of Ruth.)
8. Boaz's field was in Bethlehem, in the southern region of Israel. What else occurred in Bethlehem according to Luke 2:1-6? Why had Mary and Joseph had to travel there (see verse 4)?

Because Joseph traced his lineage through the line of David, he had to return to the town where David was from. That led to Jesus, the promised Messiah, being born in Bethlehem, which the prophet Micah had prophesied approximately 700 years prior (Micah 5:2). Setting is important!

Some of the cultural norms of Ruth's times seem a little obscure to us as modern, western readers of this ancient eastern book.

Part of studying and engaging with the Bible is learning to ask questions of it, even if all the answers aren't readily available. Take some time to consider any questions you have about the setting—the location, customs, and culture—of Ruth.

9. What events in the book of Ruth that are confusing to you? What might make more sense if you understood more about the setting?

You're about to have a chance to investigate one of those questions on your own.

10. Start by asking your question directly to the Lord:

Lord, please help me to understand You better by helping me to understand Your Word. One question I have about the book of Ruth is...

The Lord wants to help us know Him better by revealing His truth to us!

Now, you're going to engage some study tools for better understanding of the setting and culture. While Google is not always a *reliable* source, it can be a good place to start. A study Bible would also be helpful. Blue Letter Bible (blueletterbible.org) has links to commentaries if you click on the verse you are looking for information about and then select the "Commentaries" tab.

11. See what you can find out about the question you asked above by using one or more of the sources listed above. Remember that the goal is not merely to walk away with "the right answer" but to come to the text for a better understanding of who God is and of what He is saying through His Word. Record any notes about what you discover:

You may still not have a completely clear understanding of everything that is happening in Ruth, but by learning to ask the questions, to do some research, and to wait on the Lord to bring further clarity, we're growing in our faith and our understanding of God.

It's not about the *answers*. It's about furthering the relationship through communication. He speaks in His Word. We speak to Him about what we don't

understand. He brings greater clarity. And we grow in our faith—not just because we “found an answer” but because we know that God heard us when we asked!

YOUR SETTING

Acts 17:26-28 says:

“From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’”

12. How has your setting affected your relationship with the Lord?

13. Do you believe that the Lord can use your exact set of circumstances to encourage you to reach out and seek Him? How have you seen Him do that?

14. What part of your story's current setting do you desire to see God use to cause you to know Him more?

15. Spend some time in prayer reaching out for the Lord. Ask Him the questions you have about your current setting. Tell Him the parts you are thankful for. Just as you engage with Him in His Word, you can also engage with Him in *your* setting and story.