

Living in God's Will



STONECROFT



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Stonecroft Bible Studies

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-5266-8 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-5267-5 (eBook)

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Printed in the United States of America

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 / VP-KBD / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Acknowledgments

Stonecroft wishes to acknowledge and thank Janice Mayo Mathers for her dedication in serving the Lord through Stonecroft. Speaker, author, and member of the Board of Directors, Jan is the primary author of revised Stonecroft Bible Studies. We appreciate her love for God's Word and her love for people who need Him. Stonecroft also thanks the team who prayed for Jan, and those who edited, designed, and offered their creative input to make these studies accessible to all.

Welcome to Stonecroft Bible Studies!

At Stonecroft, we connect you with God, each other, and your communities.

It doesn't matter where you've been or what you've done—God wants to be in relationship with you. And one place He tells you about Himself is in His Word—the Bible. Whether the Bible is familiar or new to you, its contents will transform your life and bring answers to your biggest questions.

Gather with people in your communities—women, men, couples, young and old alike—and find out together what the Bible's book of Ruth has to say about discovering God's will for you. Follow Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, through the hard times of their lives and see how they respond to God in their choices—and what He brings about for their future. You will discover how their lives point the way for you as you learn to trust God for your own decisions in life.

Each chapter of *Living in God's Will* includes discussion questions to stir up meaningful conversation, specific Scripture verses to investigate, and time for prayer to connect with God and each other.

Discover more of God and His ways through this small-group exploration of the Bible.

Tips for Using This Study

This book has several features that make it easy to use and helpful for your life:

- The page number or numbers given after every Bible reference are keyed to the page numbers in the *Abundant Life Bible*. This handy paperback Bible uses the New Living Translation, a recent version in straightforward, up-to-date language. We encourage you to obtain a copy through your group leader or at stonecroft.org.
- Each chapter ends with a section called “Thoughts, Notes, and Prayer Requests.” Use this space for notes or for thoughts that come to you during your group time or study, as well as prayer requests.
- In the back of the book you will find “Journal Pages”—a space available for writing down how the study is changing your life or any other personal thoughts, reactions, and reflections.
- Please make this book and study your own. We encourage you to use it and mark it in any way that helps you grow in your relationship with God!

If you find this study helpful, you may want to investigate other resources from Stonecroft Ministries. Please take a look at “Stonecroft Resources” in the back of the book or online at [**stonecroft.org/store**](http://stonecroft.org/store).

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Can We Know God's Will?

Ruth 1:1-2

I decided it was time to move! Since I was young and single, my decision didn't rock anyone's world. My family just shook their heads, wondering if I'd ever settle down. With my car loaded up, I headed toward my new city of choice. On the way, I decided to take a quick side trip to visit a friend. She and her fiancé arranged an evening out for us, and the fiancé brought along his roommate to even up the number.

And just like that, my wandering days came to an end. Two days later I'd found a job and unpacked my belongings in my friend's spare room. Thirty-eight years later I'm still married to the roommate. Who knew that last-minute decision would lead to a life-altering journey?



Prayer

Lord, thank you that anytime I need wisdom, I just have to ask you, and you will give it to me. You will not correct me for asking. Thank you too for promising to guide me along the best path for my life. I know that you will advise me and watch over me (James 1:5, page 930, and Psalm 32:8, page 427).

Can We Know God's Will?

If only our foresight were as good as our hindsight! Life would be much easier, wouldn't it? We wouldn't have to worry about whether or not we're making the right decision. We can spend days, weeks, even months, agonizing over major decisions, and then a small, insignificant choice we make—such as a side trip to visit a friend—will significantly alter our lives.

One thing is certain. Every decision we make, big or small, does impact our life. Some decisions enhance our lives, some detract, but they all combine to make our lives what they are today.

What are some significant choices you have made that have impacted your life, both positively and negatively?

What are some *insignificant* choices you have made that have impacted your life?

A common mistake we make is thinking that our decisions only affect us. This couldn't be further from the truth. Every choice—good or bad, big or little—can have ripple effects in the lives of those around us.

Sometimes the decision we are facing is clear. We instinctively know what is best. Sometimes, though, it is not so clear. Details and possible outcomes complicate it, making objectivity impossible. Our

personal desire gets in the way...or what seems reasonable does not line up with what seems wise.

Here is the truth: Choices guided by our human way of thinking will result in human decisions. That's not a big deal when we're deciding between apple pie or chocolate cake. But when lives are involved, it becomes a much bigger deal.

What does Proverbs 14:12 (page 490) say?

Have you ever been so sure you were making the right decision, only to have it blow up in your face? What did you learn from that experience?

It is so important to make God a part of our decision-making process. We don't have the advantage of foresight, *but He does*, and He has offered us access to His unlimited wisdom. He is omniscient, which means He has complete and unlimited knowledge, awareness, and understanding. Can you see why accessing His omniscience would be a huge advantage in the decision-making process?

How are God's thoughts different from our thoughts, according to Isaiah 55:8-9 (page 560)?

God will bring things to our mind that we would never consider. He will expand our thinking and broaden our insight to equip us to make the right decision. The wonderful thing to know is that as long as your heart continues to beat, you can make better choices. While some doors may be forever closed because of past decisions, you can still make decisions now that will result in a satisfying, purposeful life that brings glory to God.

But how do we access God's wisdom so we can know what the best decision is? You have already taken the first step by choosing to participate in this study. You are in for a treat as, over these seven chapters, we learn the key principles in discerning God's will for our lives.

A good book for this purpose is the book of Ruth in the Old Testament, and I promise you are going to *love* this book. It is riveting from start to finish.

The Background of the Book of Ruth

Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible named after women. The other book, Esther, is about a young Jewish woman who became queen of the Persian Empire and was used by God to save her people from extinction. Ruth is about a young Moabite woman who also followed God's lead—right smack into the earthly lineage of Jesus Christ! Both of these women are outstanding examples of what happens when you involve God in the decision-making process.

The book of Ruth has only 4 chapters (85 verses total), but it is jam-packed with profound life lessons that are applicable to us today. It is a true story woven around the choices of at least eight people. And it takes place during a very dark period of Israel's history, known as the Time of the Judges. This period came after the Israelites had settled in the land of Canaan—the “Promised Land”—and before the reign of the kings began.

To briefly recap the history leading up to this time, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. He was God's appointed leader over them, both politically and spiritually, through the 40 years they

wandered in the desert after refusing to believe God and obey His direction to enter the land He had promised would be theirs.

After Moses' death and the death of the unbelieving generation of Israelites, God appointed Joshua to be their leader, and under his guidance Israel at last went into the Promised Land. In time, the land was divided up among their 12 tribes, and each tribe lived on their own land. Joshua was dead by then, and they no longer had a human spiritual leader—instead, God was their spiritual leader.

What follows is a sad but familiar story. Similar ones continue to take place even today. The Israelites chose not to follow God's lead. They settled among the Canaanites and adopted many of their heathen ways. Read Judges 2:1-2 (page 189).

God eventually appointed judges for Israel, but the nation as a whole continued to be apathetic toward God. They failed to teach their children about Him, so a whole generation grew up in spiritual ignorance. A line that appears a couple times in the book of Judges describes their philosophy at the time. Read Judges 17:6 (page 203). Who dictated what the people did?

This philosophy cropped up many times in both the Old and New Testament. It is actually the mindset of today's culture. What is the danger of practicing this philosophy?

This was a period of tremendous unrest for the Israelites that resulted in crime, tribal jealousy, wars, immorality, violence, and oppression by foreign nations. They not only turned their backs on the true God, but they went so far as to embrace other gods and worship idols made of wood, metal, or stone. They had no moral strength to make wise choices and life became miserable for them. Things would get into such an unbearable state that they would finally cry out to God for help.

As He always does, God would answer them. He would choose a judge to lead them. This enabled them to fight back against the enemy nations that were oppressing them. Back in alignment with God, their situation improved as He blessed them.

Then, in their prosperity, they would begin to ignore Him again, spiraling back down to *“doing whatever seemed right in their own eyes.”* It was a depressing, completely avoidable cycle. During approximately 400 years of judges, the Israelites spent more than 90 years in captivity!

It is during this period of time (12 centuries before the birth of Christ) that the events in the book of Ruth unfold. Although it takes place during the time of the judges, the book was probably not written until after David became king of Israel. The biggest indication of this is that the last two verses of the book give a brief genealogy. Read Ruth 4:21-22 (page 210).

Since the genealogy does not mention Solomon, David's son who became king after him, we can assume that it was written before Solomon's reign. The most wonderful aspect of the book of Ruth is that it clearly shows the sovereignty of God. Even in the midst of cold spiritual hearts and lousy decisions, He continued to work behind the scenes to bring about His perfect will.

Okay, enough background! Let's get started.

The Choices of Elimelech and Naomi

Read Ruth 1:1-2 (page 208).

Why did Elimelech leave Bethlehem?

Where did Elimelech move his family to?

Most likely, we have all seen images of famine-stricken countries. What images does the phrase *severe famine* bring to your mind? It's a gut-wrenching sight, but it is with those images that the story begins.

We do not know why there was a famine. Different degrees of famine happen all over the world. But the famine referred to in Ruth was an instance where the land wasn't producing enough food to feed its people, probably due to insufficient rainfall.

God communicates to us in times of blessing and in times of heartache—always seeking to draw us into relationship with Him. One of His most wonderful tools of communication is the Bible—His inspired Word to us. It shows us His love and teaches us about His trustworthy character, no matter what circumstances we find ourselves facing in this life. Read the following verses and note what they say.

Job 1:21 (page 390)

Psalm 37:25 (page 430)

What is your reaction to these verses?

Naomi and Elimelech would have known of the repeated intervention and protection God gave to their ancestors while wandering through the desert—40 years of food they never had to grow for themselves, 40 years of clothes and shoes that never wore out, water gushing from a rock to quench their thirst. They had plenty of evidence of God’s ability to protect His followers. You can read the story yourself in Exodus 15–17 (pages 55–58).

We don’t know how long the famine had been going on, so we do not know how bad the circumstances were—whether this was a preemptive move on the family’s part or a last-resort move. We just know their level of concern was such they were willing to leave their homeland, their means of income, their family and friends—everything near and dear—to move to a foreign land.

Depending on the route they took, it would have been a seven-to-ten-day journey on foot through steep and rugged country. It’s not likely they made the decision to move on the spur of the moment. More likely, Elimelech and Naomi labored long and hard over this decision, because this wasn’t just any country they were moving to—this was Moab.

But they were two people just like you and me, who were trying to take care of their family. When the famine took hold they probably

began to get nervous. They were focusing on the circumstances facing them instead of God, and their decision-making ability became impaired. They decided to do “*what was right in their own eyes*”. They would have been better off staying in the Promised Land than immigrating to Moab.

Read Deuteronomy 23:3-6 (page 156).

Why shouldn't Elimelech's and Naomi's family have moved to Moab?

Where they moved is telling—it shows their desperation as well as their broken communication with God, because the family left the land that God had given them (Exodus 6:4, page 47).

The Moabites were long-time enemies of the Israelites. Chapters 22 through 25 of the book of Numbers (pages 124-127) tell how the Moabites tried to keep the Israelites from entering the land God had promised them by hiring someone to put a curse on them. Instead of reading all those chapters, let's read the summary of this event in Joshua 24:9-10 (page 186).

The Moabites had devised their own religion based on a made-up god they called Chemosh. This religion was a despicable one, requiring atrocities from the people—including the sacrifice of their own children.

Considering Our Own Decisions

From the warmth and comfort of our homes, centuries later, it is easy to pass judgment. Their family was exactly where they were supposed to be—living in the land God had promised them. *How could Elimelech and Naomi turn away from God and move their children to a culture like that?* Place yourself in their shoes for a moment. You are

in the midst of a terrible famine and you have two growing boys to feed. It is easy to misinterpret what our most pressing needs are when we are in the middle of a devastating storm and we fail to remember what God has promised us.

Think of an example where you or someone you know made a decision rooted in emotions rather than in the promises of God. What was the result?

We have all made “in the moment” decisions. Our first instinct is emotional, but what we need to keep in mind is that our knowledge is limited to past experiences and present circumstances. God’s knowledge includes all of the past, present, and future. Learning to discern His guidance will always lead us in the right direction.

Before we finish this chapter, if you want to know what God’s will is in regard to an aspect of your life or a decision you are facing, write what the situation is in the space below.

What are the possible options or solutions?

We'll come back to these notes at the end of the study and see if you have gained any insight or knowledge that will help in your decision.

Personal Reflection and Application

From this chapter,

I see...

I believe...

I will...

Prayer

Lord, how grateful I am that you help me to hear you. From right behind me I hear your voice saying, "This is the way you should go," whether to the right or to the left. You have promised to guide me along the best pathway for my life. You have promised to advise me and watch over me (Isaiah 30:21, pages 539-540, and Psalm 32:8, page 427).

Thoughts, Notes, and Prayer Requests

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