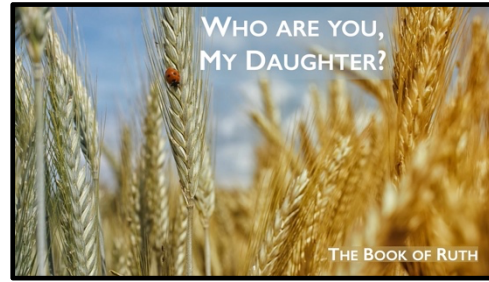


Will You Go Where I go?

Ruth 1:1-22



Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, *your kingdom come*, your will be done, **on earth** as it is in **heaven**” (Matt 6.9-10 TNIV). For the last several weeks Bernard Bell has given us the broad sweep of God’s kingdom in heaven through Daniel’s apocalyptic visions of ravenous beasts and destructive empires that rise and fall under God’s sovereign hand. God’s timing was impeccable, as Bernard’s masterful teaching gave us a heavenly perspective to process the demonic destruction and horror Vladimir Putin has inflicted on the people of Ukraine. Each week I found myself coming to church grieving and disoriented from the week’s events but, through the Scriptures, I was strangely comforted and anchored in the Lord who is sovereign, just and good. Thank-you, Bernard!

For the next four weeks we will turn our attention to the book of Ruth, examining how God’s kingdom comes to **earth** in an age of moral deterioration, political disaster and civil war that characterized the book of Judges. Judges spells out in gruesome details the evil that is unleashed when “every man does what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 17:6; 21:25). The book closes with a double epilogue that spotlights the corrupt priests of the tribe of Levi as the source of Israel’s descent in the darkest depravity possible. Sexual assault of a priest’s concubine from **Bethlehem** sparks a civil war, wholesale killing and mass kidnapping of women to provide wives for the tribe of Benjamin for fear it would be “be cut off” without progeny.

During that 400 year period, one wonders, “Where was the kingdom of heaven made manifest on earth?” The answer comes in the book of Ruth. From the world of violence, sensuality and depraved demigods, we turn to an idyllic story set in the pastoral landscape of Bethlehem. In this story all the characters are good; there is mutual respect between worker and employer; people recognize where God is at work and bless one another in response. In Ruth, every prayer is answered and every blessing secured. And through the most unlikely instruments, a family, community and nation are remarkably transformed and given a future hope that will outlast time. Reflecting on our times, Ellen Davis observes,

Like the Israelites in the time of the Judges, we are worn down and worn out by ‘great events’ on a national and international scale...and so, perhaps the Torah [“teaching”] of this book of Ruth is especially apt now¹...According to rabbinic tradition, the book of Ruth was written for **one purpose only**: to teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of *hesed* (unfailing kindness to the helpless). It demonstrates how human relationships characterized by mutual faithfulness to sow seeds of hope in the midst of desperate situations—the exact opposite of the trajectory of Judges.²

What is *hesed* – Unfailing love to the helpless

- It is based on a covenant relationship, expressive of the deep and abiding loyalty and commitment between parties and that which binds a community together.
- Motivated by compassion for the helpless, who lives are in dire straits and are not able to help themselves.
- It is a voluntary act of extraordinary mercy or generosity, a “going beyond the call of duty.” No sanction can really force it.
- It demonstrates the incalculable risk and joy of covenanted relationship.
- It is our foundational responsibility before God and mankind—“And what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, love *hesed* and walk in humility with your God” (Mic 6:8).

While the Torah and prophets command *hesed*, the book of Ruth demonstrates it in living color. My prayer is that *hesed* will captivate you, thrill you and possess you to experience a love that brings heaven to earth in the most desperate and life-threatening situations.

Chapter One Summary

The chapter has three main parts:

- I. The narrator recounts the family’s migration to Moab (vv. 1-5)
- II. On the road back to Bethlehem we have three passionate exchanges of dialogue that forge the meaning of covenantal love and family bonds. (vv. 6-18)
- III. The arrival and reception in Bethlehem (vv. 19-21)



I. Setting the Stage: Famine and Death (1:1-5)

A. Famine: No grain seed (vv. 1-2)

1 In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. (Ruth 2:1-2 ESV)

The book opens “During the bloody and dark days when warlords ruled, the Lord of Hosts disciplined his people by sending oppressors who plundered their grain (Judg 2:14; 6:1) and by drought that withered their grain (Ruth 1:6, 21; Deut 28:23).”³ Ruth opens with a famine in Bethlehem (“the house of bread”) and a man migrates with his family across the Jordan to the high plains of Moab, which seems more promising than the promised land. Elimelech means “my God is king,” which is ironic, for “my God is king” is seeking “bread” outside the land of promise and, in Moab of all places. The names of their sons, Mahlon and Chilion (meaning “Sterile and Spent”), hint at an ominous reversal in their fortunes. Ellen Davis observes,

Living as sojourners in Moab, a place that from an Israelite perspective was definitely on the wrong side of the tracks – that is, the wrong side of the Jordan. The Israelites told an unflattering story that the Moabites were descended from the incestuous union of Lot and his daughter (Gen 19:37), which followed the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In more recent memory, on the very verge of entering the promised land, the Israelites “whored after” Moabite women and made sacrifices to their god, Baal Peor with disastrous consequences. In short, to the ancient Israelite mind, Moab represented the quintessence of perversion and godlessness.⁴

In verse one, we are told Elimelech had intended for his family to “sojourn” temporarily as refugees, but in verse two discover that “**they were there,**” indeed settled, having left behind all their ancestral ties as Ephrathites.

B. Death: No human seed (vv. 3-5)

3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 And they took for themselves wives, Moabites; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, 5 and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

In Elimelech’s search for life, Moab became a graveyard of death. In five short verses death wipes all the men off the stage. Naomi’s husband dies leaving her alone on foreign soil with her two boys. When the boys grow up, they take Moabite wives, an act expressly forbidden in the Torah (Exod 34:16; Deut 7:3), and after ten years of childless marriages, they died like their father, leaving Naomi desperately alone.

This is a family history under a curse. “The deaths of Mahlon and Chilion bereaved Naomi of her beloved children, wiped out her life’s work as a woman, and brought the curtain down with a merciless thud on the future. When they buried Naomi’s sons, there were essentially burying Naomi too.”⁵ “The three surviving widows — especially Naomi — are left in desperate need of *hesed* (unfailing kindness to the helpless). The young widows can remarry and have sons, but Naomi represents herself as too old to have a son to care for her in old age. Moreover, without an heir, Elimelech’s household will lose its inheritance and social immortality in Israel.”⁶

Somehow the word reaches Naomi that God had “come to the aid” (*paqad* “to be concerned for, care for, attend to, help”) of his people and given them food. The famine in Bethlehem was over by God’s providential hand.

II. On the Road Back to Bethlehem (1:6-18)

A. First exchange as they set out on the road (vv. 6-10)

6 Then she arose, she and her daughters-in-law, and returned from the fields of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them bread. 7 So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

Until now, Naomi has been portrayed passively: she “was left” (vv. 3, 5). But now, ignited by the news of God’s *hesed*, she becomes the subject of a series of active verbs that have a similar impact on her daughters-in-law: “She arose...she **turned back**...she went out...**they** walked.” **Return** is found twelve times as the theme word of the chapter, along with “go” or “walk” which occur ten times. “Although Naomi may be despairing (see v. 20), she nonetheless boldly undertakes the journey that will ultimately restore her joy. But as soon they set out on the road, she seems to have second thoughts about all three returning.”

**8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law,
“Go, **return** each of you to her mother’s house.
May the LORD deal kindly (*hesed*) with you,
as you have dealt with the dead and with me.
9a The LORD grant that you may find rest,
each of you in the house of her husband!”**

This is the first spoken dialogue in the book and its affectionate tone, rhetorical beauty, and spiritual force give evidence to the power of *hesed* love to renew forsaken hope. Naomi’s request that her daughters-in-law return to their “mother’s house” is unusual, but it may reflect that, in her impoverished and vulnerable condition, she is no longer feels adequate to fulfill a mother’s role for them, a role she enjoyed for ten years. In the absence of her motherly care she commends Ruth and Orpah to God’s *hesed* love to care for them. In so doing, Naomi is graciously freeing her daughters-in-law of any ongoing commitment to her (another dimension of *hesed*).

Even more striking is that “their kindness is not so much the reason why God should act as it is a standard of behavior that Naomi calls upon God to emulate.”⁷ That’s quite compliment for these foreign women. If you find that shocking, Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan, rings the same bell. That is, those who are outside our circle of faith, even our enemies, may be better examples of *hesed* love than those within. Have you ever made that discovery? We are not told what these acts of kindness were, but if we consider what *hesed* means—unfailing love for the the helpless, who are in dire straits—I suspect Ruth welcomed Naomi into her home after she became a widow and cared for her needs for ten years. Their bond was further strengthened when Ruth suffered the same fate as her mother-in-law and became a widow.

After commending them to the Lord's *hesed* love, Naomi petitions God that her daughters-in-law would find rest and security in the context of a new marriage. "Rest conveys a sense of deep belonging and security [and is] the unshakable assurance that a person or a people feels in the presence of God, even when enemies threaten (Ps 23:2; Isa 32:18)."⁸ Then she kissed them and they lifted up their voices and wept, united in their pain.

**9b Then she kissed them,
and they lifted up their voices and wept.**

**10 And they said to her,
"No, we will **return** with you to your people."**

Naomi sealed her prayer with what she thought would be a parting kiss, but I suspect that she was not prepared for the depth of tears that flowed and the young widows' insistence on **returning** to Bethlehem with their mother-in-law, rather than **returning** to their own mothers in Moab.

B. Second exchange: Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to "return" (vv. 11-13)

11 But Naomi said, "Turn back**, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 **Turn back**, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, 13a would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying?**

One can see from the dialogue that, as the stakes become higher and the emotions become more intense, the women are drawing closer. Three times Naomi names them "my daughters," which makes the thought of separation even more painful. Naomi counters her daughters-in-law suggestion with a powerful reminder that she is no position to provide the husbands that she believes are essential for the well-being of her daughters. Under Israelite law, when a married man died childless, his brother or close relative was expected to marry the widow and use their seed to preserve the deceased relative's name and inheritance. At her age, that possibility is out of the question, impossible!

To put an end to this discussion, Naomi gives voice to how she really feels, blaming God in shocking terms for all that has transpired against her.

No, my daughters, for it is **exceedingly more bitter for me than you**
because the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” (13b)

Katharine Sakenfeld notes that this is the third reference to the LORD in the story. “First, Naomi heard that the LORD had provided bread (v. 6); then she asked that the LORD bless Ruth and Orpah (vv. 8-9); now she says that the LORD’s hand has gone out against her. God can provide for peoples and for individual persons; but in Naomi’s view God has not cared for her.”⁹ This is not the narrator’s view, but it is her perception.

Carolyn James calls this her **Job moment** (Job 27:2), “when she can no longer stifle what her sufferings imply about God. The dam that for so long has been holding back a tidal wave of anger and despair bursts open in a flood of bitter hopelessness... “Unlike Job, she is not portrayed as being interested in why calamity has struck.... Her spirit has been crushed even beyond the point of prayer. Yet as events unfold by the end of the story, the prayer is not uttered because it could not even be imagined will nonetheless receive its answer.”¹⁰ (such is God’s loyal-love)

C. Ruth “clings” and refuses to “return” (vv. 14-18)

14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has turned back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

After the third exchange, Orpah follows Naomi’s advice, kisses her goodbye and goes back to her family. Like Naomi’s sons, Orpah’s name (“back of the neck”) bears witness to her destiny, as she turns her back to her mother-in-law and returns to her community. By contrast, Ruth “cleaves” (Hebrew, *davaq*) to Naomi. The primary context of the word is marriage and signals that Ruth is committed to **leaving** father and mother to follow Naomi. “**Ruth clung to her.**” It was probably one of those lengthy embraces that makes the recipient feel uncomfortable.

Naomi avoids addressing its significance by turning Ruth’s attention to her sister-in-law Orpah and, with a touch of peer pressure, exhorts her to follow her example. Realizing that the issue of family and marriage made no impact on Ruth, she addresses the issue of religion and community. Orpah returned to **her people** (Moabites) and **her gods** (where worship of the vile Chemosh, the patron deity, involved child sacrifice!).

Those words were the match that set a fire ablaze in “Ruth’s soul, bringing the issues into razor sharp-focus...this choice is not about geography, marriage or family loyalty. This decision is about **God**.¹¹ Despite Naomi’s persistent and unremitting resolve to go it alone, she is no match for Ruth and the extraordinary oath that will bind her to Naomi with God as her witness and judge.

16 But Ruth said,

“Stop afflicting (*paga’*) me to **leave you
or to **return** from following you.**

**For where you go I will go,
and where you lodge I will lodge.**

**Your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.**

**17 Where you die I will die,
and there will I be buried.**

May the **LORD do so to me and more also
if anything but death parts me from you.”**

Her spirit feels Naomi’s persistent urging as sharp barbs, “Stop afflicting me!” commitment to **leave** like Abraham

temporary **lodging** on the way

crossing border / embraces covenant **people**

comes to the **sanctuary** – converts spiritually

commitment exceeds Naomi’s **lifetime**

until Ruth’s **death**

Her oath before the LORD

“Facing the same realities as Orpah, Ruth by faith throws herself through the veil of sight and clings (*davaq*; see Gen. 2:24) by faith to Naomi and the living God.”¹² What would you have done at such a crossroads?

Robert Alter has demonstrated that in biblical narrative the first piece of dialogue assigned to a character often defines their distinctive character and, in Ruth’s case, it suggests that she is a remarkable women of outstanding character. By making this decision to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem, Ruth becomes in her own person not only a widow but also an orphan (having no father or adult male protector) and a sojourner. Thus she embodies and embraces the three classic biblical categories of vulnerability.

It is also speaks volumes about Naomi, for her life was Ruth’s only exposure to the God of the Hebrews. Living in a patriarchal world, Naomi did not have a choice about going to Moab, she just had to submit. Nor could she prevent her sons from marrying Moabite women. But once they did, she made the choice to love her Moabite daughters-in-law. We get her at her worst when the book opens, but for ten years in Moab she must have been a stellar model of faith, so much so that Ruth chooses her God as she stands at the fork in the road. With Naomi her only Bible, Ruth discovered “the pearl of great price” and leaves everything behind for it.

**18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her,
she said no more.**

The Hebrew is a bit more graphic: “she stop talking” or “lapses into silence”...what was going on in her heart?

- was she moved beyond words by Ruth’s affection?
- was she perplexed by her tenacity?
- Or was she frustrated and frightened, feeling the burden of this young life, now inextricably bound to her own?

III. Arrival and Reception in Bethlehem (1:19-22)

19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, “Is this Naomi?”

Upon their arrival at Bethlehem, Naomi has so aged from her years of bitter distress that the sight of her throws the women of the village into a state of shock and confusion, “Is this Naomi.” After all she has been through, the very sound of her name, “pleasantness,” is repulsive to her. In another Job moment, Naomi throws the gauntlet down and redefines who she has become and who is to blame for her transformation.

**20 She said to them,
“Do not call me Naomi [pleasantness]; call me Mara [bitterness],
for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.**

**21 I went away full,
and the LORD **has brought me back** empty.**

**Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”**

Naomi’s complaint is harsh but it is based on a high view of God’s sovereignty (Almighty – *sadday*) and his covenantal responsibility (LORD = I AM). Furthermore, it is not unprecedented. Both Moses and Elijah ask God why he has brought evil “to this people” (Exod 5:22) and “upon this widow” (1 Kgs 17:20). Sakenfeld notes, “It is significant, however that both Moses and Elijah are directly addressing God in these passages and trying to reverse the circumstances, while Naomi neither addresses God nor expects any chance for reversal. This may be due to the fact that Naomi—unlike

Moses and Elijah, the paradigmatic prophets of the LORD—has never been addressed by God nor been called by God to some great task. Rather, like Ruth [who follows in the footsteps of Abraham without the promise of a glorious future], Naomi must endure hardship and uncertainty without the benefit of God underwriting and endorsing her affairs.”¹³

Naomi’s words “the Lord brought me back **empty**” must have been heart breaking for the women of Bethlehem to hear. But imagine how painful they must have been for Ruth, having just sacrificed everything to accompany her mother-in-law home. She stands next to her unrecognized, naked and alone, crumpled in the waste basket marked “empty.” In defense of Naomi, inconsolable grief and despair can swallow us in self-pity and blind us to God’s grace. But *hesed* love doesn’t depend on repayment or acknowledgement. Naomi may not recognize Ruth, but God does. She carried out a successful rescue mission and will become a catalyst for new levels of godliness and justice in the community as the psalmist says,

LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent?...
she who swears to his own hurt and does not change.
she who does these things will never be shaken. (Ps 15:1, 4b)

22 So Naomi returned,
and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her,
who returned from the country of Moab.
And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

The beginning of the barley harvest confirms the word Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord remembered his people to give them bread and foreshadows Ruth’s destined fertility.

Where is the kingdom of God to be found on **earth** in an age of moral deterioration, political disaster and violent war? For Israel it came from the most unlikely place—Moab, through the lives of two widows caught up in God’s *hesed* love. As Ellen Davis affirms, “the real test of covenant relationship is how one vulnerable person treats another who is likewise vulnerable...Ruth’s practice of *hesed* moves others into the incalculable risk of covenant relationship.”¹⁴

Postscript:

Where is the kingdom of God on earth today, as Putin ravages an entire nation to enrich his own? The answer is found in women and children fleeing as refugees and being enveloped in *hesed* love as they cross borders into neighboring countries. I have been so proud of our missionaries, Jim and Nelly Foster in Romania, who have shown hospitality to a number of families from Ukraine. In God's perfect timing, they had just completed renovating their garage into an apartment and had moved into it, leaving their expansive four bedroom home free to house many guests.

Liviu and Camilla living in Cluj have also jumped in to help. This week Camilla sent the following update from their travels to the border:



Two evenings ago, we arrived back from our trip along the Romanian border, from Isaccea in the South to Siret in the North. When we arrived in Siret to deliver our final pieces of equipment to our friends there, they were already getting ready to drive a convoy of trucks across the border to Cernauti (Chernivtsi). After helping them load their trucks, Liviu suggested that, if they needed a driver, we could help—indeed, they needed a reliable driver, and before we knew it, we were driving a small truck in a humanitarian convoy into Ukraine.

The border at Siret was by far the most emotional sight of them all. The stream of refugees walking in the cold, carrying pets, suitcases and children in their arms, was seemingly endless. Cernauti (Chernivtsi) is a town just about 38 km (24 miles) from the border. The road was terrible, so it took us about 50 minutes to drive. We arrived first at a large hospital, and after waiting there for some time, we were redirected to a large sports hall on the other side of town

It took us a few hours to unload the four trucks in our convoy, which were filled with wheelchairs, beds, crutches, walking chairs, and other medical essentials, some of which was brought all the way from Sweden.

When we were finally done unloading the goods, we hurried back into our trucks to make it out of the city before curfew. We hardly managed to keep up with the other truck drivers, who were apparently accustomed to driving big trucks on broken roads at high speed and saw no good reason to wait around for us. With hazard lights on, we drove out of the city and towards the border, but before making it that far, we made another stop at a pastor's house.

The lady of the house had prepared a feast for us, which we accepted with gratitude, and which lasted for exactly seven minutes before we again had to rush back into our trucks. The lady, speaking Romanian, never stopped crying, as she talked about her country, Ukraine, and what nightmarish news she had received from friends and family in other cities. Even if I spoke perfect Romanian, I wouldn't know what to say, so we just stood there and looked at each other, tears in our eyes, unspoken understanding resting between us.

We rushed back to our trucks, and drove in the convoy, hazard lights on, back to the border with Romania. Another round of waiting and watching the Ukrainian refugees, who were still waiting outside in the cold, and still waiting in their cars to cross the border. There was no place to sleep in Suceava—every single hotel or pension completely full—but we managed to get the last room available in the next town. It was close to 3 am before we got in bed, thankful for a warm place and clean sheets, and our hearts and minds filled with everything we had experienced that day.

The next morning we started another full day of driving back to Cluj. The closer we got to home, the more our exhaustion and emotion was coming to the surface. We took turns praying, crying, talking and being silent, and, before we knew it, we were back home. Yesterday we worked, rested, and took one of our new Ukrainian friends out for dinner—the lady who came with her three dogs. Her father and husband are still in Ukraine—her father refusing to leave and her husband unable to. Her hometown, where her father still lives, is being bombed daily by Russian missiles. Knowing there is nothing for her to go back to, we're now looking for a more permanent place for her, her mother, and her three dogs.

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father,
 inherit the kingdom prepared for you
 from the foundation of the world.
 For I was hungry and you gave me food,
 I was thirsty and you gave me drink,
 I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
 I was naked and you clothed me,
 I was sick and you visited me,
 I was in prison and you came to me.”
 Matthew 25:34-36

¹ Ellen F. Davis, “All That You Say, I Will Do,” *Preaching the Luminous Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 59.

² Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 165.

³ Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Wu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 853.

⁴ Ellen F. Davis and Margaret Adams Parker, *Who are You My Daughter? Reading Ruth Through Text and Image* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003), 6.

⁵ Carolyn Custis James, *The Gospel of Ruth, Loving God Enough to Break the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 42.

⁶ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 853.

⁷ Katharine Sakenfeld, *Ruth (Int)* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 25.

⁸ Davis, *Who Are You My Daughter*, 19.

⁹ Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 29.

¹⁰ Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 29

¹¹ James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 48.

¹² Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 854-85.

¹³ Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *Ruth and Esther, Berit Olam, Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 20.

¹⁴ Davis, *Preaching the Luminous World*, 61.