

HEROES OF THE FAITH  
RUTH: THE PROBLEM OF GRIEF  
Ruth 1:1-8, 16-18

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It's a love story that would make Danielle Steele blush. It's full of sex and seduction. It has dead ends and new beginnings. It deals with grief and explores commitment. It's the story of Ruth. It takes place during the period of Judges. You can read it in about 15 minutes. But before you dig in let me glean a lesson or two about life that is worth taking with you. The Book of Ruth teaches us that:

**LIFE IS FILLED WITH DETOURS**

DETOUR AHEAD—don't you hate that sign when you are traveling somewhere?

They've been working on Briley Parkway ever since I moved to Nashville. I'm not optimistic they will finish it before I retire. Detours are CONFUSING. I was coming home from Opry Mills the other day when the sign said "Get in the west lane if you want to go east on I-40." I thought that didn't make sense. So, I held my own, followed logic. When I wound up at the Hermitage Exit I finally had to admit that roads under construction never follow logic.

Detours cause ANXIETY. Sandy and I headed up to Louisville late last Sunday afternoon to get some rest and visit our grandchildren. Not that those two are synonymous activities, if you know what I mean. Anyway, Sandy was driving and somewhere south of Elizabethtown the Interstate came to a stand still. We moved 5 miles in one hour. When a trucker told us there was an accident another 10 miles ahead, it was time for a detour. Sandy wanted to buy a map. I just wanted the driver's seat. "What number road are you trying to find?" she asked. "I have no idea," I replied. She had this anxious look on her face that this detour was going to be another dead end and she had been on those with me before. Detours do that for you, do they not? They leave you full of anxiety; they leave you full of confusion.

Back in the days of the Judges, when chaos ruled the world, a famine in the land of Bethlehem caused a man named Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, along with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to migrate to Moab in hopes of finding food. Somebody told them to cheer up, things could be worse. So, they cheered up and sure enough things got worse for them when they got to the new land. Elimelech died. Then the two sons married two Moabite women against their religious heritage, one named Orpah and another named Ruth. Ten years later both Mahlon and Chilion died. Life is full of detours.

Never morning wears to evening but some heart breaks, a heart just as sensitive as yours or mine. What does one do with detours ahead? It's not a question of

whether or not you have detours, it's what do you do with the detours of your life?

Maybe a country song by Carrie Underwood gives us a clue. She was on her way to Cincinnati to see her mom and daddy on a cold, dark, winter night. She was driving too fast when the wheels started slidin' with the baby in the back. That's when this traveler began to pray:

Jesus take the wheel,  
Take it from my hands.  
'Cause I can't do this on my own,  
I'm letting go.  
So give me one more chance,  
To save me from this road I'm on,  
Jesus take the wheel.

I submit to you, that's a pretty good prayer. I know it's secular country music, but it's a pretty good prayer, Jesus, take the wheel. When life is confusing, when it's full of anxiety, when you are traveling a road that you have no idea where it's going to end, Jesus, take the wheel.

### **LIFE CONFRONTS US WITH DECISIONS.**

Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem. Things are better there. The rains have come, the famine has ended. So she bids her daughters-in-law goodbye. Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye and returns to her family. But Ruth will have nothing to do with it. In Verse 17 we get the verse everybody knows from the Book of Ruth.

*Entreat me not to leave thee or to return from following thee, for whither thou goest I will go. Whither thou lodgest, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God and where you are buried there I will be buried as well.*

Now let me set the record straight. That was spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. I know we don't usually make such radical commitments to our mother-in-law, we just tell jokes about them.

Two men were talking at a bar. "My mother-in-law is an angel," says one guy. "You're lucky," replies the other. "My mother-in-law is still alive."

Do you know why mothers-in-law are buried 18 feet under when 6 feet is enough for everyone else? Because deep down mothers-in-law are really nice persons.

There is no joke here. It's a radical statement of loyalty and commitment. Ruth commits herself to Naomi, to a new religion, to a new life, to a radical, different way of living.

You are most likely to hear these words sung at a wedding. While the context has

nothing to do with marriage, it has everything to do with commitment. We like that stuff of commitment even though it frightens us. Commitment is a island of certainty in a sea of change. Commitment is a promise of presence in a world that is unpredictable. Commitment is a chance we take, a vow we make, because humans are not made to be butterflies fluttering here and there in search of the sweetest nectar.

Or, as is said of a horse and a jockey in that tender movie, Sea Biscuit, “You don’t throw a whole life away just because it’s banged up a bit.” The world only functions on commitment. *Whither thou goest I will go*. We could use that kind of promise in families, in churches, among friends, and even among countries. Life is full of decisions. Caring people don’t throw relationships away just because they struggle from time to time. We need to hang in there.

### **LIFE OFFERS NEW DIMENSIONS**

The word “redemption” appears 23 times in this short story. It’s not a word we use much anymore. My mother used to redeem S&H Green Stamps for prizes.

I was at a convenient store up in Maine when I made the mistake of throwing a Coke bottle in the trash. The lady almost jumped over the counter to grab it out of the trash and said, “You don’t understand, that’s worth something up here; we have a bottle bill in this state.” Bottles and cans are redeemable in Maine. Some of you redeem your frequent flyer miles for more trips. To redeem something is to buy it back, cash it in, set it free.

Now I need to tell something about this story because what makes this story really neat is that there is something else going on underneath the surface. Isn’t that what makes stories intriguing?

So, Ruth goes to glean grain in the fields of Boaz. Such practice was an ancient form of welfare. Boaz likes what he sees. There’s a night on the threshing floor. There are some property rights to be dealt with. But eventually Boaz takes Ruth to be his wife. Together they have a son whom they name Obed. Obed is the grandfather of King David, from whose lineage Christ Himself is born. Woven in to this story of sexual innuendoes, strange customs, and men’s rights, there is a principle of a kinsman-redeemer who gives us a forward glimpse of Christ our Redeemer.

No matter what’s happened in your life, no matter the circumstances, no matter the grief, no matter the change, there is One who comes to buy it back, to redeem, to set us free. We believe he is Jesus, the Christ.

S.D. Gordon was a dynamic preacher up in Boston in the early part of last century. One Sunday Dr. Gordon carried an old, beat-up, rusty bird cage into the pulpit with him. “I guess you are wondering where I got this bird cage,” said Brother Gordon. “Well, I bought it from a boy on the street. He had birds in it. I

asked him what he was going to do with those birds.” The kid said, “I’m going to play with them, tease them, irritate them—then take them home and feed them to my cats.” “How much do you want for those birds?” asked Brother Gordon. “You don’t want these birds,” replied the boy. “They are worthless—they don’t sing or anything.” Nevertheless I hung in there until I bought the birds. Then I took them to the park and set them free.

Then S.D. Gordon leaned over the pulpit and said this: God saw Satan playing around with the people God had made in His own image. God said to Satan—What are you going to do with my people? Satan replied, “I’m going to tease them a while, make them marry and divorce, fight and kill each other, throw bombs and shoot missiles. Then I’m going to condemn them to hell for they are worthless anyway.” “How much do you want for them?” asked God. “It’ll take the life of your son,” said Satan. That day, God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to set us free.

New Life is costly—you are worth it.

Detours can be deadly—so let Jesus take the wheel.

Our responsibility is commitment.

Are you willing to go with Him all the way?

Amen.