



Wherever You Go

Ruth 1:1-18; Matthew 5:21-32; Galatians 1:13-24

Commitments today with their corresponding responsibilities do not seem to be taken as seriously as in days past. Society is wont to borrow without paying back what is owed. Marriages tend toward being seen as temporary arrangements. One's word is no longer accepted without some questioning of the faithfulness of the one pronouncing it. It is expected that commitments will be broken and life is planned accordingly. We act as though a commitment were something bad—a prison from which we feel obliged to escape. In a context such as this, what is the reality of our commitments with God?

In the context of ancient Israel, there were very few possibilities for a woman who was widowed. It would be hoped that her sons would provide for her. If not, she would be expected to marry one of her husband's brothers or return to her father's house. For a woman without such options, there was little hope. It was a very similar situation among the nations surrounding Israel, if not the same. For a woman in such a situation, life would be very difficult, because she would have no one to provide for or protect her against those who would abuse her. This was the situation in which Naomi found herself. Well, Naomi's situation was even more complicated, because she was not living in her own country.

Naomi had left Israel with her husband and two sons to live in a foreign land. In Israel, the land was not giving much harvest and the family decided to seek to better their living in the foreign land of Moab. The results were not so good for Naomi. While living among the Moabites, her husband died. After ten years, her sons both married, they also died in turn. Absent the men in her life, Naomi was left at the head of her house with the two daughters-in-law as her responsibility. She was expected to care for them, as well as for herself. She tried for a while, but after hearing that Israel's crops had improved, she decided to return to her own land. Life in Israel would have offered more possibilities for Naomi, but for her daughters-in-law, that would be another story.

His daughters-in-law depended on her. As a matter of culture and traditional norms, they had a right to expect that somehow Naomi would support them. Meanwhile, the three all found themselves widowed and childless. As one their situation was very critical. In Moab, Naomi had few opportunities. As she was from another nation, she could not count on many legal and social protections. She found herself at the mercy of all those around her. She had no family to support her. She had no land or other assets on which to live.

She called her daughters-in-law to tell them of her plan to return to Israel. It was a logical plan. Her situation was no great secret. Recounting her situation, she encouraged both her daughters-in-law to stay in their homeland, each returning to the homes of their fathers. It should have been the best option for each of them, yet it was expected that they would deny the opportunity for freedom to leave their mother-in-law alone. To begin with, one of the daughters-in-law refused to leave Naomi. It was formality. It was good manners. It was routine to turn down what was offered, even when one wants to accept it. Once the routine was finished, Naomi insisted. She asked them again to return to the homes of their parents. The first daughter-in-law accepted this release from the social ties that bound her to Naomi. She said good-bye with tears and hugs, returning to her house to go her own way. Ruth had all the freedom to do the same. Instead, she refused to leave her mother-in-law alone. She had a commitment to Naomi and resolved to continue that journey, even as life's circumstances militated

against that being a good opportunity. She decided to retain her ties with her mother-in-law, even if the door was open and nobody would think less of her to let Naomi go his way alone.

Their trip would not be peaceful. It was a journey of at least 60 miles, a journey to be undertaken on foot. They would be alone on the road, with no man to give them any protection. They would spend some few days en route, seeking shelter from the sun, cold, wind, and rain. They would enjoy no hotel, home, or tent along the road. They would be good targets for bandits and those who would abuse them. This would not be a good vacation. It was simply the best option left to him to Naomi. There would be many dangers, but only back in Israel would Naomi find opportunities to find family who might support her in her widowhood.

Naomi insisted that Ruth return home to her parents. She had no way to provide for Ruth. She had no other child who could marry Ruth. She had no spouse with whom to have another child, even if Ruth were willing to wait for him to grow to manhood. She had no material means to provide for her own livelihood, much less for Ruth's as well. It made no sense at all that Ruth should follow her. Dangers awaited them on the way to Israel. There was not much reason to expect anything better than a grave awaiting them in Israel. Regardless, Ruth refused to leave her. She was resolute and determined. She had made a commitment to join Naomi's house upon her marriage. She was determined to follow the established course that tied her life to his mother-in-law's.

We can not say how far Naomi went to persuade Ruth to abandon her. She persisted at least until she was sure she that Ruth was not going to change her mind. She explained that she had no fortune or hope there in Israel. She explained that Ruth's options were better in Moab than living as a foreigner in Israel. Ruth did not pay her any heed. Her answer sounds like a declaration of love, being so commonly cited today in wedding celebrations.

“I will not depart from you! Do not ask me to leave you or to abandon you. Wherever you go, I go. Wherever you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people and your God will be my God. Where you are buried, I also will be. May God punish me if I abandon you!”

Hers were not the words of a woman enamored with her fiancée. They were words to a mother-in-law from her daughter-in-law. She had accepted a commitment to join her life to Naomi's son. She joined Naomi's household, regardless of problems that might arise so. Everything had ended in disaster, but her commitment had not changed. There was a way out of her commitment in Naomi's words, but for Ruth, her original commitment was of greater importance than a way out. With the death of her husband, she had moved to dependence on Naomi, and the circumstances made no difference.

Like the Apostle Paul, she had made her decision. For Paul, a decision could not ignore his previous life of persecuting believers in Jesus Christ. Upon accepting the way of Christ Jesus, he opened his life to receive what he had earlier doled out to others—prison, torture, and death for the sake of Christ. Paul knew what was coming on dedicating his life to Jesus Christ. Ruth had no idea. She knew only that she was accepting a path not for her own sake, but for her mother-in-law's benefit. She came to Naomi to reinforce the commitment already made. Whatever came, she was committed to continue in faithfulness. When Paul accepted Christ, he well knew a cross might await him. Are we ready to make the same commitment to walk with Christ wherever?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*