



## She Had No Control

**Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-22, Matthew 5:33-37, Galatians 2:1-10**

A great many of the conflicts between individuals, groups, peoples, and nations has to do with the singular issue of control. The reasons why control is important to us are varied. We could spend hours listing them. Perhaps at its root in our yearning for control is a matter of a lack of trust. We think others will take something from us, prevent the realization of our goals and objectives, or that in some other way life will not yield us the benefits we so highly prize. In large part it is a matter of not trusting others. We seek control for our own protection. Even so, the idea that we can exercise control over our lives at times appears to be a mere illusion. Is it possible to live a full life without the need to be seeking control from one or another source over the variable winds of life?

Ruth did not know where or how her life would develop in consequence of her decision to follow Naomi in faithfulness. She had joined her life with her mother-in-law, but had no idea what her future would be. Upon insisting on keeping that commitment, she lay aside control over her life, her future, her options, and her possibilities. She allowed Naomi to make the important decisions. It would be her responsibility to serve, help, and follow Naomi directions. She was about to embark on a journey to a new land—to a new life among people with customs she did not know. Determined, she threw aside the freedom to conduct her own life. She placed everything in her mother-in-law's the hands.

Such a decision may be somewhat difficult and fill us with fear, can't it? We don't know if for Ruth this decision brought sleepless nights. We don't know how to define the level of her concern on this side of her statement to tie herself to Naomi. Many times we think, reflect, and reconsider the decisions we've already made, especially the most important ones. It may well be that we question them more after the fact than before we've made them. We question the decisions taken, evaluating once and again whether or not we made the best decision. It is easy to get caught in such past concerns. They are a great trap for our lives, stealing the blessing of living in the present, resting and rejoicing in God's blessings. As a wise friend once said to me, "You've made that decision. Now get on with the next one."

Ruth's decision was that of a beginning which would set her life apart. It made a difference between her former life and what was to come. It was not simply the issue of a determination not to return to her parents' home. It was also the question of placing herself at the mercy of the people of a nation that was not hers. It was the question of depending on someone with a minimum of resources in a land where Ruth would have no way of claiming rights and protections for herself. She was casting off into the unknown—to a context of life in which the very little control she had in her own land would disappear. She would become even more dependent than she already was.

If the loss of her husband and father-in-law were sufficient to cause concern, plunging into her mother-in-law's care should have been worse. She placed herself in a precarious situation—a situation in which she would have to rely even more on another and give up even greater control over her life.

In some ways, it was natural for a woman of her day cede control. She was viewed as property of her father, brother, or husband. On coming to rely on a son, she would also be a sense his property, as well. In one aspect, this socio-cultural context made the decision simpler—it was closer to the daily reality of a woman. On the other hand, it was not comforting to give up what little control one had.

They began traveling to Israel and toward a new life. Arriving there, her lack of control became more acute. As any other who travels to a distant country depends on the surrounding people, Ruth was isolated in their new land, but for her connection to Naomi. The language was similar, at least. The customs were similar to some extent, but the religious practices marked a great distinction, applicable even to foods and their preparation.

It was a hard life for Ruth. She followed after the reapers to collect the gleanings they left behind. This was the practice of those with no jobs or land, so they could survive on the little that was left in the field. It was the life of beggars, widows, and the others left on the margin of society. While it was harvest season, things went well enough. She did not starve, at least. At the same time, she did not earn any more than the crumbs that might be found in the fields.

Ruth spent the day under the sun with other workers in the field. The difference was that she could not count on the water provided to the hired workers, or the midday meals. Neither did she have the protection of being a servant of the landowner. She was at the mercy of those around her. She had the right to be behind the workers at harvest, but that did not mean she would be left in peace. It was all too common for someone to bother those following the paid workers. A woman alone was easy prey for abuse, even more so a foreigner.

In Ruth's case, everything changed while she was gleaning in Boaz's fields. He was related to her late father-in-law and knew of her treatment of Naomi. It was not something to be expected, but Ruth received recognition which came by meet her own needs, too. Not everything good always comes to those who are faithful. It is that God works to meet our needs while calling us to grant him control of our lives. The hard part is trusting amid the uncertainties of the unknown that God can and will be faithful to us.

Paul found conflict in the church regarding the question of control over others. In his case it was about circumcision and Jewish ritual laws. Many felt comfortable in their cultural and traditional way of exercising faith, seeking to impose their ways on others. The gospel, meanwhile, does not follow such patterns of force. It is no message of preserving a series of rituals. It is a message of freedom to enter into a relationship of dependency and trust in God. In this relationship, we have no control of our lives, but we give that control to God's direction and guidance.

Jesus spoke of our lives having limits beyond our control. Oaths make no sense, because we have no control over so many aspects of life. There is no need for such control, either. We are called only to live in dependence upon God and in honesty before our limitations. We get into trouble when we assert a control that is not ours. The decision to make Jesus Christ our Lord is a decision to relax our desire for control, giving it to God. That is what Ruth did, not knowing where her acceptance would lead. She knew only that she was handing over control of their life to another. It is a difficult decision for us who so desperately want control. Could it be that we might not live in a fuller peace if we gave up control of our lives to God? Regardless, we lack any real control over our lives. Recognizing our dependency is a much healthier way of living.

*—Christopher B. Harbin*