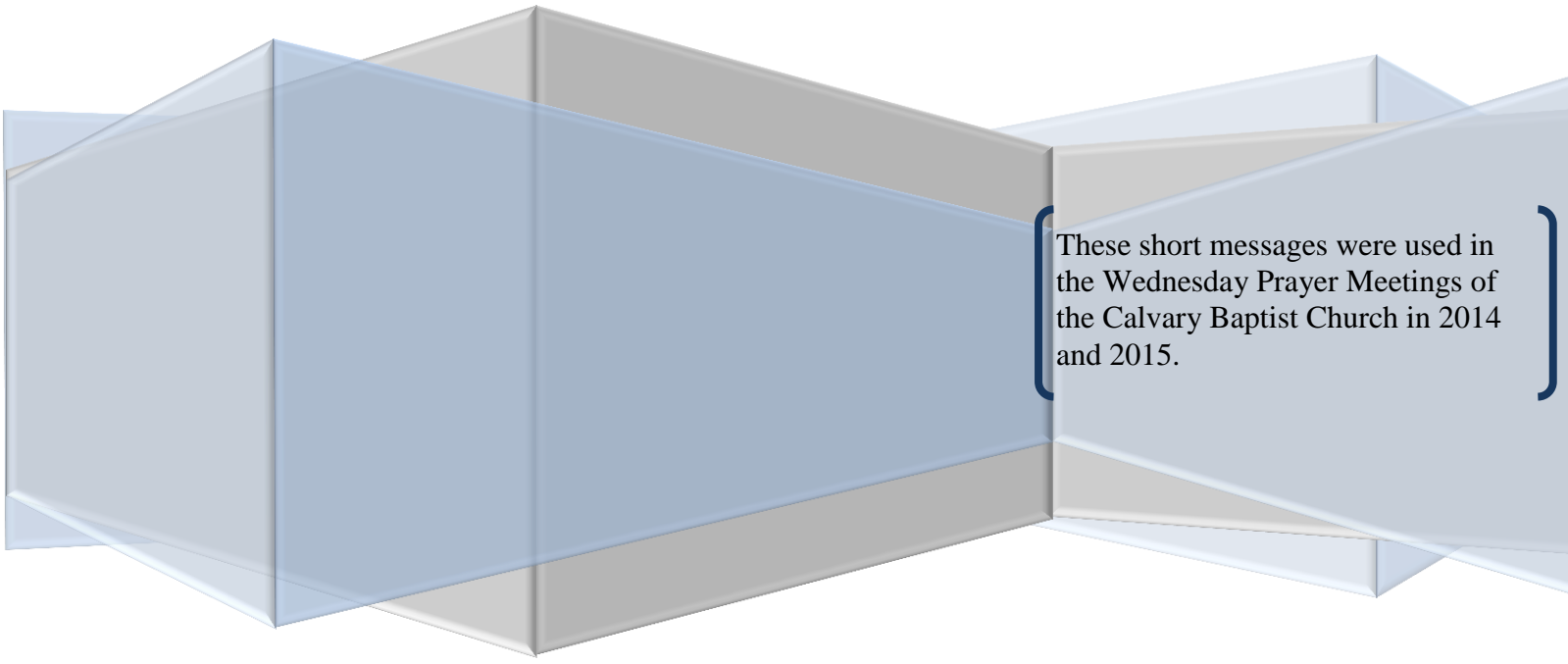


Calvary Baptist Church of Lamar

Hesed Love (Ruth)

Jeffrey Alexander



These short messages were used in the Wednesday Prayer Meetings of the Calvary Baptist Church in 2014 and 2015.

Discussions on Hesed Love (Ruth)

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

These short messages were used in the Wednesday Prayer Meetings of the Calvary Baptist Church 2014 and 2015. Below is a list of titles and references.

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1.

Hesed: Covenant Love

Our studies are tracing the kingdom of God in its development in Old Testament history. After the fall, recorded in Genesis 3, God began the project of redeeming and restoring the creation to its pre-Adamic condition. This work involves cleansing the world from the corruption and pollution of sin.

In Romans 8 Paul discusses the glory of the future state that all God's children desire, one we can barely imagine. Our present state involves considerable suffering, which often overrides one's joy of hope and expectation. Suffering is hard to deal with, for without proper understanding the sufferer can fall into unbelief, questioning and doubting God's goodness. For this reason, Paul addresses the fact that creation itself must wait for the revelation of the sons of God. The devastating effects of sin on the created order have subjected it to futility until it can also be free from the bondage of corruption (vv. 20, 21). Until then this period of suffering is necessary.

Humans suffer because they are sinful, corrupt, and filled with natural hatred for God, His Word, and His ways. Nevertheless, the Lord is pursuing a perfect plan to bring His own from this condition into the freedom of glory. This work of redemption involves suffering, which is not easy. However, it is necessary. Suffering is, in light of God's intended purpose, a process of discipline through which we are transformed into the image of the Last Adam, Jesus Christ. He also suffered in the flesh, leaving us an example to follow as we forge patiently onward. In the meantime, the unseen God works His purpose in us. When we realize this and understand how it works, we are better equipped to endure suffering patiently.

The purpose of God also includes the establishment of a relationship to Him defined in covenantal terms. We recognize this relational structure, but we also tend to project unrealistic expectations on it. We often mistakenly want God to give us a life filled with wonder and magic—the kind of fairytale existence that Hollywood is famous for putting on the silver screen. Suffering with that kind of expectation can be devastating. We doubt His love and question His motives. We lose our footing and our assurance. Worse than that, we hide from God. There is a shame in suffering that we attribute to the guilt of sin. We think that God must be punishing us for failing Him. Our natural hatred for God revives, and enmity sets in with its despair and misery. Where is God in that!?

The answer is quite unexpected, for while we do not see Him and doubt that He is there, He is there. Not only that, He, merciful and kind, unchangeable and consistent, is faithfully pursuing us in covenant love. What He has promised for us, He will produce in us (Philippians 1:6). If God is for us, who can be against us? Not even ourselves (Romans 8:31-39).

2.

The Setting for *Hesed-Love*

Three stories end the book of Judges. Two are found in chapters 18-21, very disturbing tales that reveal the great need for a king. God's kingdom requires a king. Thus, we are about to move into that aspect of kingdom development. This new phase of kingdom development will demonstrate that sinful humans can never be a kingdom of righteousness on earth, even with a king.

The third story occupies its own short book, the story of Ruth, which introduces us to Israel's first real human king. With surgical precision the author brings the reader into the narrative with a few deft strokes. There was a famine in those days. Famines were the divine means of getting the attention of His sinful people (Deut. 11:11-17; 2 Chron. 7:13, 14; 1 Kings 17:1-7; James 5:17, 18). However, the narrative is not about sin, repentance, and restoration. Instead, we follow a man named Elimelech from Bethlehem of Judah whose response was to flee the famine with his family to a foreign and unfriendly neighbor, Moab.

Elimelech means *God is king*. In a sense, Elimelech represents Israel and her covenant relationship to her God-king. The big question, was God really this man's king? His actions say no. He did not trust the Lord or wait for His instruction. Moab means "*who is father?*" because they were the descendants of Lot's eldest daughter by incest (Gen. 19:35-38). Neither Lot nor his daughters submitted to Yahweh as Lord or waited for His instruction. Like attracts like.

Moab was located on the Southeast corner of the Dead Sea. When Israel was freed from Egyptian bondage, the Moabites denied them direct access through Moab to the Promised Land. Then Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse the children of Israel (Num. 22-24). When that failed, Balaam taught Balak how to seduce the Israelites to worship Baal (Rev. 2:14). The judgment on these evils was that both the Ammonites and the Moabites were permanently excluded from the assembly of the Lord (Deut. 23:3-6).

Later, Eglon, another king of Moab, invaded Israel early in the judges (3:14) and subjugated them for 18 years until God raised up Ehud to deliver them. There was no love lost between these cousins. So it seems strange to us to read that this family from Bethlehem would seek refuge in Moab.

When trouble comes to us, we can try to "endure it," but then the trial becomes our master, making us hard and bitter. If we try to escape it, we miss God's purpose in it for us. The best option is to enlist it so that we can profit from it as we wait upon God (James 1:2; Psa. 25:3). Elimelech chose escape, thus; we read a description of personal tragedy.

What should have been a temporary sojourn turned into ten years of heartache. Paul Miller¹ writes, "Can you hear the irony? A famine in the *'House of Bread'*? *God Is King* is dead? *Pleasant's* husband and sons have died? Reality is mocking God. In other words, because Naomi hopes in God, her grief intensifies." It is enough to make us turn away from God, but couched undetected in the tragedy is a marvelous demonstration of how God's kindness works.

¹A *Loving Life*, Crossway, 2014, p. 22

3.

The Journey of Hope

The worldly and pagan view of life is cyclical. What comes around goes around (Ecclesiastes 1:5, 8*). The seed sprouts, grows to maturity, reproduces, fades, and dies, dropping its seeds only to start the cycle again. This cycle just keeps repeating itself to infinity.

Hebrew Scriptures introduced a new perspective—*hope*. The cycles lead somewhere. It is not an endless loop because there is an ultimate purpose for all things. God began the creation with the plan that it should move toward a glorious end. That end is stated in Genesis 1:28. Man, created in God's image, was to *fill* (fulfill and complete) the earth, *subdue* it (order it), and have *dominion* over all in it (to rule it wisely). In other words, as God's agents, mankind was to extend His kingdom throughout the earth to the glory of the Creator. Adam's disobedience destroyed that purpose. The judgment on Adam threw mankind into the hopeless cycle described in Ecclesiastes.

Genesis 3:15, however, introduces a glorious hope. There was to be a second Adam (Romans 5:1-4; 18-21) to fix the failure of the first Adam and to restore the original design of the creation (Revelation 21:1), with a new earth (v. 1, 5-8), a new Jerusalem (vv. 2, 9-20), and a new temple (vv. 3, 4, 22-27). In the meantime, what hope is there for us as we wait the consummation of all things?

Here is where Ruth teaches us about the journey of hope. Her story breaks the despair of the pagan cycles. Nevertheless, as we have observed, the journey is not without suffering. God's grace began its work in Ruth's heart to love Naomi with *hesed*-love. That love must be characterized by perseverance, or it isn't *hesed*. Suffering is God's means to cultivate perseverance. The way suffering works to accomplish this goal is through death. It is only when something dies that it can be resurrected to new life. That is the story of Ruth.

Paul expressed it like this: "*That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead*" (Philippians 3:10). Knowing Christ and resurrection power requires (1) sharing in His sufferings in order to (2) be like Him in His death so that (3) one may attain the resurrection of new life. Paul recognized what the journey involved—"I press on" (vv. 11-14), a very clear note of perseverance. That is the teaching of the book of Revelation: "*Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints*" (13:10). Oh, that God may grant us *hesed*-grace!

*Ecclesiastes is the pagan's view of life: "*all is vanity and vexation of the spirit.*" Written by Solomon in his old age, it reflects a very dim view of life, one seen from the perspective of God's judgment on Adam (12:7). Nevertheless, the book concludes that life is better for the one who fears God and keeps His commandments (12:13, 14). This is not a gospel message of hope and salvation. It is simply all you can do under the present circumstances.

4.

A Glimmer of Hope

In the first five short verses of Ruth, the author describes the tragic free-fall of a poor Jewish woman into ruin and despair. Removed from her native home into a land of strangers, this poor woman had her life devastated beyond imagination. Without mercy and in seeming cruelty, her God threw her into the pit of suffering. Natural human optimism leaves no room for the pit, and so, it seemingly must be avoided at all costs. Life has to be good or it's not life. The good life, to be happy, healthy, and wealthy is the birthright of every one, or so we are led to believe. Reality, however, destroys optimism, leaving many people cynical and bitter.

Verse six also informs us that Naomi abruptly decided to leave Moab, her widowed daughters-in-law joining her. Custom dictated that a young woman in these circumstances was better off returning to her father's house. Daughters-in-law were not obligated to remain with the mother-in-law, especially if there were no children involved. However, if they chose not to return home, the daughters-in-law would become servants to the mother-in-law, an arrangement that often ended badly. So this bit of information is quite puzzling.

What the text is doing, however, is to move the reader quickly forward to learn of the glimmer of hope softening the gloom. First, we learn that Yahweh visited His people with bread, ending the famine. It was not weather patterns or climate change that brought this happy change to the land. It was God's divine purposes that brought it about.

Second, Naomi is evidencing the one thing needful for suffering people. She is enduring. She is keeping on, facing the changing circumstances with the determination to stay the course.

Third, as they are all about to depart from the place of their current residence, Naomi attempts to discourage Orpah and Ruth from accompanying her to Bethlehem. She is concerned with what is best for these young women. This tells us a great deal about her character. She is not being selfish but showing real love. Also, the fact that they were willing to accompany Naomi from their native home to a foreign land evidences what they thought of Naomi.

It is at this point that the story moves to focus in on *hesed*-love, which is what the foundation of any relationship must have in order to reflect God's covenant love for His people. This is the heart of Ruth as expressed by Naomi in her blessing on Orpah and Ruth: "*May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me*" (v. 8). The term translated *kindly* is the Hebrew term, *hesed*. Naomi is asking that Yahweh deal with the young women in covenant love. She is asking that Yahweh bind Himself to them for good, no matter what their response to Him will be. In other words, *hesed*-love is stubborn love. It does not require a positive response or for that matter, any response. This kind of love seeks the welfare of the one loved and will allow no hindrance.

5.

Tough Love

Jesus informed His disciples that the end of the age would be characterized by the absence of love: “*And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold*” (Matt. 24:12). The term, *lawlessness* or *iniquity* (*anomia*, no law or without law) is a condition that disregards law through rejection of authority because self is elevated as the final court of appeal. Thus, the characteristic of the end of the age will be the elevation of self. When self becomes king, one thinks no one else matters except as they benefit that one. In other words, love dies because self is reigning. Paul echoed this truth (2 Tim. 3:1-5). People will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient (without regard for law), ungrateful, heartless (without true affection), unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, puffed up with conceit, and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

These characteristics, as we have noted, also characterized the times of the judges, when everyone did that which was right in his own eyes. How refreshing, then, when we come to the story of Ruth and find real love displayed in dire and difficult circumstances.

Naomi heard that Yahweh graciously ended the famine plaguing Ephrata of Judah (v. 6). Her daughters-in-law decided to return with her to Bethlehem. Together, they began the long trek back to Israel up the Jordan valley. Just what caused Naomi suddenly to stop them is not recorded. Perhaps she realized the sacrifice they were making was too great. She would not be responsible for the certain hardship they faced. Their best hope for a better future was for each one to return to her mother’s house.

This concern is the first glimpse into what *love* looks like. That these Moabite girls wanted to stay with Naomi indicates their love for her. Now we understand why. Naomi expressed motherly concern for their welfare as she understood it. She wanted them to go home, blessing them: “*May the LORD deal kindly with you*” (v. 8). The word, *kindly*, is the Hebrew term, *hesed*, a characteristic belonging Yahweh (Ex. 15:13). It is used of humans only as they reflect Yahweh in life by virtue of their relationship to Him.

The *hesed* that Naomi desired for them was that they would find *rest* (v. 9). This is the ultimate object of *hesed*—*rest* (Deut. 12:9; 1 Kings 8:56; Psa. 95:11; Isa. 32:18; Heb. 4:8-11). This is the theological meaning of the Sabbath. Naomi wanted Yahweh to embrace these girls in His *hesed* in order that they would find His rest for them. What she did not understand, however, was *how* Yahweh worked *hesed*. What she wanted them to do in returning to their families would not ultimately bring them the blessing that she was asking for them. *Hesed* is tough love. Naomi wanted easy love for them. Convincing them that remaining with her would lead only to hardship, she argued convincingly but wrongly for what she thought to be best for them. Ruth only would enjoy that blessing because she embraced the suffering necessary to receive it.

6.

Ruth's Pledge

Realizing the potential problems in returning to Bethlehem, Naomi sought to persuade her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' homes in Moab. They were young, and returning was their best hope for the security of remarriage. Nevertheless, they insisted on returning with Naomi to her people (Ruth 1:10). Her love for these young women prodded her to bless them with *hesed*, the covenant love of Yahweh for His people. This raises the question: how could she do this, especially considering the curse that the Lord pronounced against Moab in Deuteronomy 23:3-6? Also, her sons' marrying Moabite women was disobedience as well (Deut. 7:3). The solution to this problem is the very heart of the argument of book justifying David's qualification to be king in Israel. God promised to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham (Gen. 12:3). It was God's intention to show all nations favor (Zech. 8:22), saving some from every nation, kindred, and people.

When the girls refused to return, Naomi proceeded to argue the obvious. If they came to Israel, Levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10) was their only option for marriage, one that was out of the question. She had no husband and her advanced age made the prospect for remarriage for her unlikely. Even if she did remarry and have sons, the practical reality of the situation was ruled out (Ruth 1:13).

Logic prevailed and Orpah returned. Ruth would not. She clung to her mother-in-law. That term, to cling or to cleave, is used of the bond of marriage (Gen. 2:24). She was determined to put Naomi's interests above her own. That is real love. Joining herself to Naomi in this way indicated a far deeper understanding of grace than we are willing to credit the OT saint. God was redeeming Ruth physically and spiritually. It wasn't Ruth's selfless decision to go with Naomi; it was grace working God's plan in her life.

The Scripture does not fault Orpah for choosing to return. However, her choice also indicates that she was not accorded the gracious privilege belonging to Ruth. She returned to her pagan roots and her worship of the gods of the Moabites (v. 15).

Ruth's response to Naomi reflects her abrupt command (v. 8). Then she pledged her loyalty to her. It is a poetic masterpiece (vv. 16, 17), "an incandescent reply that has set thirty centuries trembling."¹ The Hebrew parallelism in the three stanzas of the poem radiates *hesed*-love. It demonstrated a radical shift to a new life corresponding to NT conversion. Ruth did the unthinkable in changing her identity so completely when the culture had no mechanism for that. Ruth's commitment was also permanent. She cut off any thought of returning, even after Naomi's death. Yahweh was now her God. Naomi's blessing her with Yahweh's *hesed* had greater implications than she knew. Ruth was now committed to Yahweh as much as anyone in Israel. Ruth was wholly committed ("determined," v. 18), without which there is no salvation.

¹ Ozick, Cynthia, *Metaphor and Memory*, cited by Paul Miller, *A Loving Life*, p. 36

7.

Naomi's Lament

Bethlehem was stirred by the arrival of Naomi, who was returning without family, saving for the strange foreign girl with her who was also attired in widow's garb. They asked, "Is this Naomi?" (1:19). Her response to them is a lament (vv. 20, 21), which is blunt and accuses God of her present condition. This bluntness disturbs Western readers who find her words rude, bordering on blasphemy. After all, was it not her husband that deserted Israel to find solace in Moab, a nation rejected by God? Perhaps she was getting only what she deserved for her family's disobedience at a time when everyone was doing what they thought was right in their own eyes.

The Western church knows little or nothing of the art of lament practiced in both ancient and modern Eastern cultures. Lament occupies a prominent place in the Word of God, with many examples scattered throughout Scripture. Of the 150 psalms in Scripture, 58 are psalms of lament. It is time that Christians in the Western world be introduced to the great value that they afford the means to respond correctly to the suffering that will inevitably come to everyone who follows Jesus (Phil. 1:29).

A lament is an expression of mourning or sorrow usually crafted in poetic language and set to music. Notice that Naomi's lament is divided into two stanzas, both beginning with a reference to calling: "*Do not call me Naomi*" and "*Why call me Naomi.*" Both stanzas address Naomi's situation as "bitterness" and "calamity." Both clearly charge God with her dire straits: "*The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me;*" "*Yahweh has brought me back empty;*" and "*Yahweh has testified against me;*" "*the Almighty has brought calamity upon me.*" Notice the references to God and also the order of those references.

A lament captures the tension between reality and hope. Using the covenant name for God, Naomi expresses the confidence of hope contained in the proclamation of His Name on Sinai (Ex. 34:6, 7). Also, if the Almighty brought her back empty, He can fill her again. This assumed confidence is borne out in the story that follows. This lament lays the foundation of Naomi's *hope*.

Laments have several characteristics that free them from the sin of complaining (Phil. 2:14, 15). While laments contain a complaint about a dire situation over which God has total control, they will be accompanied by a word expressing hope for lasting deliverance. They are to be seen as petitions for God to intervene, either expressed or assumed. Often these petitions are followed up with an assurance of being heard by God and a vow of praise in which the supplicant promises to give public glory to God. The vital element that every the lament must contain, however, is submission to, trust in, and unconditional loyalty and devotion to His God. The one lamenting is not fleeing from God but running to Him.

Life is hard, and Jesus commanded us to take our cross to follow Him. Suffering needs lamenting—an acceptable means to voice the pain and anguish that accompanies all life's calamities.

8.

Some Practical Thoughts on Lament and *Hesed*

Brokenness is something that few people properly understand. A blog article expressed the frustration of a pastor's wife who suffered the recent passing of a son who had taken his own life. Her mourning was compounded by the frustration of having to deal with church members, relatives, and friends who did not understand how to approach her especially at the holiday season. Christmas cards were especially difficult to receive. Most of the cards conveyed only stock imprinted messages inviting her to enter the glib joy and gaiety of the season. These cards were met with anger. How could she be merry with this huge black hole in her life? Some did write comments in a feeble effort to express something of awareness and sympathy but in a rather embarrassed and awkward way. Worse, there were many who simply ignored their personal tragedy because the territory was too uncomfortable and difficult for them to face. That blog was a sad commentary on our love—the fundamental requirement of Christianity.

Like this pastor's wife, Naomi lamented her own grief and personal tragedy (Ruth 1:20, 21) among her people. Unlike Naomi's time and place, lament is something unknown to our culture, particularly our Christian culture. Her experiences were overwhelming, but she turned to her God in it, if only to beat upon His chest with her fists. As the Psalms teach us, that is okay. She measured God with a broken ruler, so her conclusions were incorrect. But Yahweh graciously met her with kindness. He loves the open, honest heart even when it misinterprets the circumstances.

God's kindness came to Naomi unrecognized and unexpected in the person of Ruth. Ruth heard Naomi's lament and entered it. That is the key. We tend to shut others out in order to grieve in false modesty and privacy and then complain that those around us do no care. We desperately need to learn how to lament biblically and, in turn, how to listen to the lament of others. That is what it means to love one another. It requires us to tune in to each other and to allow others into our experiences. That is how Ruth responded to Naomi. She entered Naomi's life and shared her brokenness unobserved and with no desire to be recognized for it. Her own grief enabled her to understand better, but experience or not, she quietly bore Naomi's brokenness as her own. At the same time, Naomi did not see Ruth due to her own dazed and fog-dimmed existence. Nevertheless, Ruth endured by dying to herself.

There are two dangers in our suffering. One is not lamenting in our grief, which can lead to unbelief. True lamenting demands that God be included in the complaint. The heathen world is good at godless lamenting that leads only to hopelessness. Don't go there. The other extreme is over lamenting, which can lead to bitterness. That is what Naomi did. Her lament led her to accuse God, and that's how we alienate ourselves from him. We need His grace in our grief!

9.

Hesed: Dangerous Love

One sad aspect of the church in this day in its emphasis on love is that it fails by embracing something that is not really love at all. Much of what passes for love is no more than an expression of emotionally sympathetic interest. Real love is a selfless sacrificial choice that puts the good of another first, even if that choice is expensive and dangerous.

The Old Testament view of God is often regarded as austere and hard while the New Testament version is seen as kinder and gentler. This is a wrong perspective because it is based on a wrong understanding of both love and the person and purpose of God. Scripture reveals the unrelenting persistence of *hesed* to accomplish the divine objective of peace and rest (*shalom*) through the redemption and restoration of the universe ruined by sin's invasion. The study of Ruth reveals this incredible and powerful principle in the preparation of Israel's great king, David. And it goes far beyond that because David is just a piece of the greater overall structure of God's kingdom established in David's greater Son, Jesus Christ.

All that Naomi could see was that God had destroyed her life by taking her husband and two sons, leaving her ruined and hopeless in a foreign land (Ruth 1:13). Her only comfort was the loyalty of her two daughters-in-law, a loyalty which was born out of Naomi's love for these girls who shared her grief. Her only prospect was the urge to return to Bethlehem driven by the news that God had visited His people with food (v. 6).

The text of the story makes no attempt to explain the mystery of their divinely ordered tragedy (vv. 1-5). Perhaps the lack of explanation is that there is no obvious explanation. The mystery of *hesed* is at work, taking these wretched sufferers to glorious places that they could never imagine in their present circumstances.

The mystery deepens in observing Ruth's *hesed* loyalty to Naomi, which could not be budged by Naomi's logic with all its sound reasoning (vv. 11-15). Ruth's adamant refusal to be persuaded to return and her solemn vow to abandon her own life for Naomi's (vv. 16-18) can only be attributed to sovereign grace working quietly at the core of Ruth's being, even beyond her own comprehension.

Hesed love is dangerous because it risks everything for no obvious benefit. Ruth's concern for Naomi took her into unfamiliar and unpredictable circumstances with no promise of reward for her sacrifices. All that mattered to Ruth was Naomi. She burned her bridges and cast her all on Naomi's God—a God who had testified against them and afflicted them to the point of their returning empty and destitute (v. 21). What could Ruth possibly find in that arrangement to encourage her choice? Blind faith is no answer because it could not survive here.

Ah, but there is the mystery of *providence*—the work of sovereign redemption fulfilling promised ends (Gen. 3:15). This explanation is hinted at in the opening of chapter two: “*Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech.*”

10.

The Hope of *Hesed*

Paul Miller's insightful study of *hesed* in *A Loving Life** has helped my own understanding of this wonderful biblical concept that should be driving our relationships. We live in a broken world that is incredibly damaged by sin. We survive by adjusting to life as it comes to us, but, sadly, we interpret the narrative from a faulty perspective due to our own depravity. In the first place, we believe that life is all about "me." It is my happiness that counts. Self is everything and, thus, how we *feel* is the principle gauge of how we live.

The present era is one of one's need to "be in tune with his feelings." In order to be genuine, one must act on how he *feels* about his situation. Things don't get done because I don't feel like doing them and I must be true to myself. *Hesed* demands just the opposite. Naomi felt totally dislocated by the tragedy of her loss. She blamed her God whom she rightly understood to be sovereign over all things. Yet, she also believed her God to be kind and gracious. This led to confusion. How could she reconcile her circumstances with God's goodness?

There is no indication that Naomi felt any personal guilt for sinning against Yahweh. Elimelech may have disobeyed God, but Naomi had no choice. However, she did repent, which was to return to Bethlehem. Although she felt dislocated, she moved in order to correct her situation irrespective of her feelings. Naomi obeyed God because *hesed* leads to *hope*.

Ruth's dislocation was only amplified by her move. Whatever her feelings were, she committed her life to *hesed* and followed through with that commitment. *Hesed* is *doing* what is right even when it does not feel right. Ruth obeyed by following through. *Hesed* leads to hope through *obedience*, which requires *endurance*. Endurance is the NT mark of authentic Christianity (Matt. 24:13; see also Rev. 13:10).

The *circle* is the symbol of paganism. In this thinking life is a cycle. The beginning is the end; the end is the beginning. Peace is followed by war which is followed by peace; thus, the cycle repeats. Poverty leads to prosperity, which returns to poverty. Happiness cycles to suffering. This is the pagan's principle insight into human existence. (See Eccl. 1:5, 8.)

The *hesed* symbol of hope is a line that curves upward—a *J*-curve. History is moving toward a glorious climax with the invasion of salvation. Although at first the journey may seem like a downward move to death and despair, it doesn't end there. The curve turns and shoots upward in resurrection hope. *Hesed* does not lock us into a cycle of despair but takes us on a journey of hope, even when it does not at first appear so. Our God is a God who acts for those who wait for Him (Isa. 64:4). As *hesed*-duty brought Ruth to glean in the fields, providence directed her to Boaz and Ruth's journey of *hesed* began its upward curve in resurrection to glorious hope.

11.

The Invisible Work of *Hesed*

Entering the second chapter of Ruth, one sees two remarkable evidences of *hesed*-love at work. In the first verse, we are given a bit of information that we will need in order to comprehend the first evidence of *hesed* at work. Naomi had a near kinsman (something we will discuss as we come to chapter 3) named Boaz (*strength*), a *gibbor chayil*—a mighty man, probably due to his wealth. What we need to understand about this information is that God’s unseen providence is orchestrating every detail of the story. Naomi does not see this yet, but God has not brought her home empty (1:21). He was about to bless her beyond her imagination.

The second evidence of *hesed* at work is in Ruth’s commitment to Naomi’s welfare. She had devoted herself to Naomi in a way that is hard for us to grasp. She was both courageous and vulnerable, yet her strength was not obvious. In fact, at this point she was almost invisible. Naomi does not acknowledge her to the women in Bethlehem. All she spoke about was her own woeful situation at the hand of Yahweh (1:20, 21). “*So Naomi returned,*” writes the narrator, and “*Oh, by the way, Ruth, her daughter-in-law with her*” (v. 22).

Ruth was, in a sense, invisible at this point because of her decision of follow her mother-in-law. She had no more status than a female servant in the community. On top of that, she was a foreigner and not accorded the same privileges as Jewish servants. She was also susceptible to abuse and worse. All this she did for Naomi in order to care and provide for her and to be her companion. What could she hope to gain in return? Nothing. She had no hope for marriage or family. Naomi was old, and when she died, she had no hope for any inheritance. Ruth would be stuck in a foreign land with nothing. Why would she choose to do this? Would you choose to do it?

If these women could only have understood the consequences of their pact, but they did not. We do, and when we fully comprehend the story with its implications, shame on us if we fail to profit from it. The example of Ruth’s selfless commitment ought to push us out of our own comfort zones, trusting His *hesed* and risking all for His kingdom (Matt. 6:44).

Unlike modern girls, Ruth did not depend on Naomi to take care of her. She took the initiative to glean in the harvest (Lev. 19:9, 10; Deut. 24:19-22). However, apparently this right was not necessarily always accorded to the poor at this dark period of Israel’s history. Ruth hoped to find a field where she would be allowed to glean (v. 2). She planned to ask permission to do so, a very humiliating thing in itself.

It is interesting to see the human side in the story’s progress. Ruth “happened” to come to a field belonging to Boaz. The term suggests an accident or chance occurrence. However, there are no accidental circumstances with God (Phil. 2:12, 13).

12.

A Worthy Champion

Observe the introduction to Boaz in verse one of chapter 2. This introduction is the narrator's way of introducing the glorious hope that awaits Naomi. Her return to Bethlehem was in utter despair although contritely repentant and obedient. She was bitter, even falsely accusing God of testifying against her and bringing calamity upon her (1:20, 21). She could not have understood the mysterious ways that her covenant Lord was working to bring blessing into her life. All that she could see was her immediate pain and the suffering she endured because of it. That is a principle all believers must learn (Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 1:21). Naomi had yet to realize that God's ways are not our ways, but His ways are designed to the greater good of His own children (Isa. 55:8, 9).

Thus the second chapter introduces us to Boaz of the family of Elimelech. He was a *gibbor hayil*, a worthy champion. His name means "in him is strength." He is a picture of the Savior. He is introduced when death has robbed Naomi of all hope humanly possible. Boaz is introduced to the reader, but not Naomi at this point in order to demonstrate that God works behind the scenes to accomplish His plan. All the pieces are in now in place.

Ruth set out to work, gleaning in the harvest even though Naomi does not. *Hesed* love does not consider the circumstances or judge the fairness of the situation. Humanly speaking, Ruth should begrudge Naomi's lack of appreciation for her determination to remain with her nor her failure to acknowledge her when she returned to Bethlehem. Ruth's love even ignores Naomi's seeming lack of interest in working with her. She takes no notice because her commitment to Naomi has nothing to do with how she is treated in return. Miller refers to Ruth's love as "one-way" love. It is true love because it ignores every wrong motive to love. This kind of love destroys the ego, a necessity if genuine saving grace is to work true deliverance.

Real servants of God must reflect the Father's unfailing love for His own through Jesus Christ. True saints are "*to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (Eph. 4:2, 3). That is how Ruth behaved.

Ruth's selfless determination to pursue Naomi's welfare provided the setting for God's providential work behind the scenes to bring about Naomi's redemption. The unseen hand guided Ruth to fields of Boaz. However, it must be noted that the tragedy of Naomi's circumstances coupled with the steadfast *hesed* commitment of Ruth were elements providence required to do its work. Suffering restricted Ruth's options. Necessity determined her course. Love limited her, but this was God's means to deepen her life in a way that she could not have imagined. Her only option for survival was to glean, a menial and degrading work that took away all her carnal pride and dignity. Yet, at the same time, *hesed* replaced these human crutches with real spiritual dignity, a dignity that caught the eye of a worthy champion.

13.

The Vulnerability of Love

In our day, the protection of the rights of all, especially of the weakest and most vulnerable, is considered a high priority. This priority is a heritage of our founding upon Christian principles. The unique aspect of our nation that sets us apart from all other nations is our Bill of Rights. It was drafted to satisfy the concern of the Anti-Federalists like Patrick Henry, who opposed the Constitution, fearing that a strong federal government would endanger the rights of individual citizens. The Bill of Rights was drafted to allay those fears. On the other hand, it seems that what was designed for protection has been used to promote privileges, not rights. It is a good thing to guard the vulnerable; it is another thing to force others to defend aberrant and sinful behavior under the guise of *rights*.

Ruth gave no thought to being safeguarded in the culture of her day. There was no bill of rights in that nation to which she could turn and demand protection. Indeed, it that day, she was very exposed on several fronts. She was woman and widowed with no male to establish her identity as a person or to defend her against abuses. She was a Moabite and, thus, a foreigner in a country built wholly upon a covenant structure established with Abraham and for his descendants. She had no covenant status in that culture; yet, she chose to place herself right in the center of it. Remember, this was the period of the judges, and one need only reflect upon the horrible abuse suffered by the Levite's concubine in Judges 19. Surely, Ruth understood her times and the great danger she faced by her choices. The discerning reader will discover that the foundation of her choices was her great faith in the care of Israel's God. Yahweh was her protector, and faithful He was!

Ruth knew what the people of Israel should have understood—that they were to seek their protection, not in a document of human government but in the promises of Yahweh. The psalmist declared, “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*” (Psa. 46:1). The Lord pronounced in Isaiah, “*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*” (Isa. 41:10).

Boaz discovered this about Ruth's courage—she acted because she loved and trusted “*The LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings [she] had come to take refuge!*” (Ruth 2:12). Her love and trust were not misplaced for Providence assigned Boaz as her human protector. He picked up the task with diligence, having first acquired a full dossier of her character and activities. This investigation of Ruth led to a purpose in Boaz born of *hesed* for Ruth. He brought assurance to her through seven staccato commands (Ruth 2:8, 9). He quickly and powerfully established Ruth's place and status among them, of which she had no doubt. God secured her welfare better than any bill of rights.

14.

Hesed's Power

God's response to Naomi's bitter lament (Ruth 1:20, 21) is found in 2:18 and 19, not by rebuke, but by overwhelming generosity. The Lord demonstrated His own glorious *hesed* for His children as evidenced in Ruth's gleanings for that single day (a 16-hour day at that), an amount which was equal to two weeks' wages. The amount shocked Naomi. One thing was certain, no widow could have been that successful without a male protector, a fact Naomi immediately noted. She said, "*Blessed be the man who took notice of you.*" But the blessing was not so much in the generosity itself, as in the identity of the man who took it upon himself to be Ruth's protector.

Hesed's power began in Ruth's love for Naomi. Her love was a selfless display of good to her mother-in-law. She died to herself in order to live unto Naomi. Her selfless thoughtfulness was even demonstrated in her saving the left-overs from her lunch for Naomi. That kind of love moves hearts, and Naomi was moved. With the suddenness of a lightning strike, a plan for Ruth's welfare blazed into reality as Ruth revealed the protector was Boaz.

This revelation brought life to Naomi, who to this point had been no help to Ruth. In fact, she seems to have all but ignored her. She offered Ruth no help when she offered to glean in the barley harvest. She did not go with her. She did not offer advice nor direct her to where she might have the best success. She did not tell her of Boaz or his relationship to them. She just let her go, but now things turned around in a glorious way. Hope awakened in her heart, and the joy of it flooded her soul. She cried out in worship, "*May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness [hesed] has not forsaken the living or the dead!*" God's plan was clear before her; Boaz was a near kinsman.

When Naomi used the phrase, "*the living or the dead,*" she was speaking of her life as it stood. The loss of her husband and sons ended her family line. Now, the realization of hope raised her expectation that her family had not died out, as she believed. A marriage of Ruth to Boaz would produce the children to keep her tribal perpetuity alive. Yahweh's *hesed* was shown to both Naomi, the living, and to Elimelech, the dead. The hopelessness of her condition was instantly altered and her own heart was given life again. *Hesed* power raises the dead.

What Naomi could not possibly understand at this time was how her new hope was connected to Judah, her ancestor, with the prophecy of Jacob: "*The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples*" (Gen. 49:10). Yahweh's *hesed*-kindness would extend to "*all whom the Lord our God would call*" (Acts 2:39) from every people, kindred, tribe, and nation through Jesus Christ, who would spring from Ruth's son.

15.

The Kinsman-Redeemer

In ancient Israel the culture functioned around the clans, not the state. The territory was divided according to tribal units, and each portion was divided into family inheritances. The Lord gave very specific instruction in Leviticus 25 to govern land use in order to assure that this structure would continue in Israel. For example, in the case of hardship a man could sell his property, but, in consideration of clan rights, the land could not be sold permanently (Lev. 25:23). The individual benefit in such a sale was not as important as the ancestral claims that might be affected by that transaction. Thus, if the man's dire straits did not allow him to redeem his property; a near relative could do so (v. 25). If there was no "near kinsman," a *goel*, the land automatically returned to the clan on the year of Jubilee (v. 28). Even when the property was redeemed, the price was calculated from the year of Jubilee (v. 27).

In Naomi's case, the deaths of Elimelech and his sons ended the possibility of personal redemption. Surprisingly, the author of Ruth does not explain why Naomi did not consider the possibility of a kinsman-redeemer when she returned to Bethlehem. Perhaps her own grief and bitterness of soul prevented her from clear thinking. Nevertheless, Ruth's success at gleaning in the field of Boaz awakened Naomi to that possibility. She knew that Boaz was able to perform this duty. Favorable conditions were presenting themselves in that direction. Had he not already taken it upon himself to be Ruth's protector? He was interested in Ruth, no doubt.

Covenant mercy led Naomi to conceive a brilliant plan, not only to redeem all that was Elimelech's but to provide the *shalom* (the blessing of *rest*, the security of husband and family) for Ruth. Since Ruth had no male relative to intervene for her, Ruth would have to present her proposal to Boaz herself. A very risky but well-conceived plan was formed. Ruth would come to Boaz in the same way that a prostitute would. Her discovery might not end well. Thus, Naomi's plan seeks to reduce the risks. Waiting until the end of the harvest, the cover of night, approaching the man after he has fallen asleep, curling up at his feet all increase the chances of success in the venture. Ruth's virtuous reputation and Boaz's godly character ensured that the tactic would not end in sinful or abusive conduct. Nevertheless, Boaz might refuse the offer. In that case, the cover of darkness would allow the meeting to end discreetly. Naomi, however, was confident that that would not happen, "He will tell you what to do" (Ruth 3:4). Ruth submitted in her simple reply, "All that you say I will do."

Hesed-love saturated every detail of this plot. *Hesed*-love assured the success of the venture since nothing was motivated by selfish desire or ends. Ruth's love for Naomi returned to her in Naomi's desire for her *rest* (home). Boaz is also driven by love to care for Ruth's welfare. That love will also pave the way for her redemption and security in Yahweh's covenant *shalom*.

16.

Hesed Rewarded

Greek Neoplatonism, which holds that the material and physical aspects of creation are inherently evil, has largely influenced Western culture. This philosophy infected the early church so that sex has been regarded as dirty. This mindset also tends to fixate inordinately on sex. Thus, attitudes become prudish. The Jews, on the other hand, understood that a good God created all things perfect, so that nothing is innately evil. That means that sex is good and should be celebrated as a gift from God, within its permitted parameters, of course.

For this reason, Naomi's instructions to Ruth were saturated with sexual overtones. Nearly everything in her directions to Ruth was euphemistic for sex—uncovering feet, lying down, knowing, etc. The threshing floor was notorious for forbidden sexual encounters. Thus, the very act of Ruth's going to Boaz in the way prescribed could be seen as a solicitation. The sole saving feature of this scheme was Ruth's virtue guarded by the godly character of Boaz (Ruth 3).

Hesed-love was the principle that drove and motivated this whole encounter. Ruth obeyed her mother-in-law's instruction to the letter. She prepared herself, went to the threshing floor, uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight he awakened with a start (vv. 6-8). A woman lay at his feet! "Who are you?" he demanded. Ruth gently replied, "*I am Ruth, your amah (slave).*" She then does something audacious and non-slave like. She ordered her master; "*Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer*" (v. 9). Boaz had blessed Ruth at their first meeting, observing that she sought cover under Yahweh's *wings*. Now, Ruth orders Boaz to extend his *wings* (the hem of his cloak) to cover her. It was a marriage proposal, and she spoke up first to avoid any misunderstanding of her intentions.

Far from offended, Boaz was filled with joy. "*May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter*" (v. 10). Note that Boaz respects her, not as a slave, but as family. The use of "*bath*" (daughter) also indicated that he probably was old enough to be her father. In that instant of her request, a whole world of understanding opened in his mind. "*You have made this last kindness [hesed] greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich*" (v. 10).

Ruth's love for Naomi shaped her life. She did not look for a husband to suit her ideals as young women dream—a strong, handsome, and potentially well-positioned husband. Her pursuit demonstrated that Naomi's interests, not hers, were paramount. Boaz saw that and commended her for it. Boaz returned her love. Everything he said was designed to comfort, encourage, and settle her. With her emotional welfare at heart, he said, "*And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen [literally, people of the gate] know that you are a worthy woman*" (v. 11). Ruth's selfless sacrifice for Naomi won her high praises from everyone. *Hesed*-love removed every obstacle and won for her what no selfish pursuit could possibly obtain.

17.

Obstacles, the Revealer of Idols

It is quite beyond coincidence that the story of Ruth parallels in many respects the redemption story of the Bible. Ruth represents mankind, lost in sin and alienated from God. As a Moabite widow, Ruth was in a hopeless condition and unable to escape her situation by her own means. Boaz represents the Savior, both willing and able to redeem Ruth. Naomi represents the people of God, flawed and stumbling, but present to point the way to salvation when needed. However, the unsung hero in this story is *hesed*—covenant love that motivates, seeks, and secures the redemption of God’s people. *Hesed* brought Naomi home from wandering in a foreign land. *Hesed* bound Ruth to Naomi to seek the God of Israel and trust Him fully in all things. *Hesed* brought Ruth to Boaz, and *hesed* drove Boaz to secure redemption for Ruth.

After her audacious move to declare her marriage proposal (Ruth 3:9), Boaz immediately assured her, “*Do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask*” (v. 11). But here it might be argued that Ruth’s character was the thing that prompted Boaz to seek a solution because Boaz stated, “*All my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman*” (v. 11). However, it would be better argued that Ruth’s conduct was a consequence of her faith-driven life—the fruit of sanctifying *hesed*. He knew that her behavior was motivated by love. The apostle Paul stated that the three great virtues of the gospel were faith, hope, and love, the greatest of these being love (I Cor. 13:13). Love sanctifies the soul. What we love shapes our behavior. Love for God motivates us to turn away from selfish and sinful pursuits.

The story unfolds very romantically, and we tend to treat it as a fantasy. However, as in real life, there are always problems and obstacles to overcome. In this case Boaz has a near kinsman who is closer than himself. If Hollywood were writing this episode, it progress very differently. The obstacle would make the story either a tragedy or a one of rebellion and defiance. That is how the world deals with difficulties. Boaz, on the other hand, trusts God. He knows that God is in control and that His will is best. Therefore, he places the matter into His loving care and trusts Him for the right outcome.

Idolatry is placing anything before love to God. If Boaz’s marriage to Ruth was his heart’s first desire, then he was guilty of idolatry. However, his love for God was first. If the marriage was in the will the will of God, then he would take it is a gift from God and bless Him for it. If it were not His will, then whatever God brought about would be better for all.

When someone says, “My hands are bloodied from pounding on heaven’s door.” We detect the self-will of one seeking to make his will God’s. Such a one needs to die and join “*the fellowship of His sufferings*” (Phil. 3:10). He needs to replace his idol with God. How do your obstacles reveal your first love?

18.

Obedience, the Key to Knowing God

Ruth's commitment to Naomi (Ruth 1:16, 17) was in reality a commitment to God. Boaz made that clear when he told her, "*All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me*" (Ruth 2:11). Notice, however, that it was not her "goodness" but her obedience to Yahweh that was in view: "*The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*" (v. 12). *Hesed*-love involves knowing someone through the obedience of commitment regardless of the circumstances. Ruth's actions were the fruit of her desire to know and follow God. Obedience is the God-ordained means for us to know Him experientially (John 15:7-14).

The reward promised began to come to pass beginning with the events in chapter 3, her *hesed*-love returning to her full circle. Accepting her proposal (vv. 9-11), Boaz now committed to Ruth; "I will do for you all that you ask" (v. 11). His demonstration of *hesed*-love for her was also the fruit of his commitment to Yahweh. Obedience to Yahweh is often directed to one for whom Yahweh wants to work. As He works in us to will and to do His will (Phil. 2:12, 13), He often works in us to will and to do for another His will for them. This is clear from Boaz's care to protect Ruth in this potentially dangerous situation. She was vulnerable and Boaz's response could have been very different. He could have taken advantage of her and abused her or rejected and denounced her. Discovery would have ruined her reputation.

Boaz asked for Ruth to *remain* at his feet until early morning. The term that the narrator chose had a twofold purpose: (1) It assured Ruth that he did not expect her to engage with him sexually, and (2) it informed the reader that her commitment to Naomi was now to be rewarded. The Hebrew term, *loon*, means to stay or to rest. It purposefully suggests that no change of purpose or activity was expected. Interestingly, it is the same word that Ruth used in her commitment to Naomi: "*Where you lodge I will lodge*" (1:16).

Boaz was ready to act immediately. In the morning, he would pursue her request by approaching the kinsman that was nearer to Naomi. He took an oath ("*As Yahweh Lives*") and made a promise ("*I will redeem you,*" v. 13). Then, in the dim of the early twilight, he filled her shawl with six measures of barley and sent her home. The gift of the barley held a threefold significance. First, it provided Ruth with cover should she be spotted. Second, it was a down payment on his pledge to her. Third, it was a symbol of the redemption itself. Seed is essential to the continuation of life. The suggestion was that Ruth's redemption would involve her bearing a seed-son so necessary to the realization of that redemption (see Gen. 21:12; Gal. 3:16).

19.

The Rest of Redemption

The last verse of Ruth 3 points to the redemptive principle revealed in the book. In the early morning Ruth returned from the threshing floor where she presented her case to Boaz. She had requested that Boaz redeem the inheritance of Elimelech's lost to him when he fled to Moab to escape the famine in Judea. Coming in, Naomi inquired about the success of her plan. Ruth related all that Boaz did, to which she replied, "*Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today*" (v. 18). Quite literally, Naomi instructed Ruth to rest because Boaz would not rest until the redemption was fulfilled.

Rest (Sabbath-rest) is a very important theme in Scripture. The Old Testament Sabbath was based on God's creation rest (Ex. 20:11; Gen. 2:1, 2). Creation established God's earthly Kingdom in all its primitive perfection. God was present with the first man in the Garden to teach and guide him in fulfilling His will, which was to expand that Kingdom into all the earth (Gen. 1:29). Adam sinned, losing the presence of God and getting thrown out of the Garden. God, also, quit resting, as Jesus explained at the Jews' criticism of His supposed Sabbath-breaking (John 5:17).

Jesus' response is very important to our understanding of God's purpose in redemption. Jesus, the second Adam, did perfectly what the first Adam failed to do. "*My Father is working until now, and I am working.*" The purpose of this "working" was to provide rest—salvation-rest. In other words, Jesus was not violating the Sabbath because He was the One working to provide the real rest pictured in the observance of Sabbath. Sabbath symbolized the faith-rest of those looking to God for the promised salvation and restoration of the Kingdom.

When Israel sinned in the golden-calf incident, Yahweh promised after Moses successfully interceded for the nation, "*My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest*" (Ex. 33:14). The Promised Land was also a pre-fulfillment of the future Kingdom. In Deuteronomy 12, Moses instructed the people concerning their occupying the land (vv. 8-11). He informed them that it was a *rest* that Yahweh was giving them (see, also, Josh. 1:13-15).

Hebrews 3 and 4 expounds on that theme and Israel's failure and applies the principle to the church. Israel, like Adam, failed by sinning and, thus, forfeited the Kingdom (Heb. 4:3-5). We must never imagine that these failures frustrated the plan and purpose of God (vv. 6-10). It remains for the church to be tested (vv. 11-13). However, unlike Adam or Israel, we have a Great High Priest to intercede for us (vv. 14-16). The church will realize the promised Kingdom in full measure, but individual professors may not prove adequate and will fall away, as Hebrews 5 and 6 warns. The failure does not lie with Jesus but in the false profession of those like the children of Israel who do whatever is right in their own eyes (Deut. 12:8; Heb. 3:18). Thus, we, like Ruth, are to rest in Him who will not rest until He settles the matter.

20.

Covenant Disobedience

Many interpret Ruth as representative or typical. Although there are features of the story that fit typical scenarios, few agree as to what constitutes the elements or to their typical nature. It is usually one's theological persuasion that determines how he reads the text. For example, dispensational teachers regard the unnamed nearer kinsman (3:12) as representing law and emphasize the enmity between law and grace as represented by Boaz. There is a general disdain in modern Christianity for the law. However, we must ask, "How does the nearer kinsman typify the law?" The response is his admission that he *cannot* redeem the property (Ruth 4:6). The law cannot redeem. "*By works of the law no one will be justified*" (Gal. 2:16). This type fails, though, because he first assented eagerly—"I will redeem it" (Ruth 4:4).

Instead of seeing this unnamed relative as representing the law of God (unable to redeem because it cannot redeem, Rom. 8:2-4), would it not be better to see him as a typical unregenerate sinner? He approached the issue from the viewpoint of his carnal and selfish nature, which Boaz wisely worked to his advantage.

The unnamed relative at first regarded the offer to redeem Naomi's inheritance as a deal too good pass up (v. 4). Naomi was old and although she would be cared for in the transaction, her death would leave the inheritance unencumbered to him, increasing his wealth and the size of the inheritance that he would leave to his heirs. However, when he was informed that the redemption also required taking Ruth to wife in order to raise her son in the name of the deceased husband, he just as quickly refused. No specific details are given as reason for the refusal save that taking Ruth would impair his inheritance. The man showed no *hesed* disposition for Naomi or Ruth as a near kinsman should. All he cared about was preserving his own estate. He had no love for the law or any desire to obey the law, which included Levirate marriage. That law was a gracious means to preserve and perpetuate the name of a brother in Israel (Deut. 25:5-10). This man cared for no one but himself.

Boaz, on the other hand, reflects the nature of a regenerate heart, being unselfish and caring from the beginning. The force of the law is that one must love God first and his neighbor before himself (Matt. 22:38-40). Love for God requires obedience to God's law and will. Thus, Boaz looked after Naomi and Ruth with care and great generosity, exceeding the requirements of the law. Ruth was not only allowed to glean in his fields, but Boaz ordered his reapers to leave handfuls on purpose. He provided for her protection by ordering his young men to leave her alone and for her welfare by having her drink from his workers' supplies. Finally, he joyfully accepted the request to redeem and earnestly pursued its fulfillment, even if it meant giving up Ruth to another man. Boaz is truly typical of Jesus Christ in his godliness and obedience to his covenant Lord.

21.

Redemption Witnessed

Boaz took upon himself the redemption request of Naomi through Ruth. He did so out of love for Ruth, whom he admired greatly, even though she was a stranger to Israel. After Ruth's request (3:9) Boaz blessed Ruth's courage and promised his aid. He kept her under his protection until early morning, generously provided for her needs with six measures of barley (a token of his promise to redeem), and guarded her reputation, sending her back to Naomi before she could be recognized.

The situation of redemption combined two separate issues. As a *goel*, Boaz would buy the field of Elimelech to insure that the land remained in the clan. There are questions about just what the redemption involved. It might be that Elimelech sold his field to provide for his family during the famine. It is more likely that the property remained in the possession of Naomi, but she needed to sell the land in order to provide for her remaining years, since she had no living heirs to inherit it (4:3).

The second issue was the widow of Mahlon, the rightful heir of Elimelech's possessions. The law provided that a brother, cousin, or other close relative should marry the widow to provide an heir. The firstborn of the union would inherit the property in the deceased husband's name, thus perpetuating the dead man's place in the clan (4:5).

Redemption is the theme here, and it pertains to buying back something that was lost. There are no less than 18 references to redemption in this fourth chapter. The spiritual implications of this chapter are multitude. Two main issues are set forth in the text with *vav* disjunctives (translated, *now*, vv. 1 and 9).

First, we see the pursuit of the redeemer, Boaz. He was the only hope of Naomi and Ruth. Without him, all was lost. Yet, his pursuit was not without issue. A nearer kinsman was involved, one whose interest was complicated by his own inheritance problems (4:6). He could and would redeem the land but not the widow. Boaz's wisdom in his approach to the problem reveals his greater interest in securing the obligation for himself.

Second, we see the cost of the redemption. This section (vv. 9-12) is introduced by the explanation of a custom lost to the generation Ruth was written to—taking off one's sandal and giving it another to confirm an exchange. The closer kinsman released his right to redeem to Boaz. It would seem that Boaz purchased the inheritance *through* this nearer kinsman (see 4:9). Boaz bought both the land and the bride. Ten elders of Bethlehem (ten is number of testimony) witnessed and confirmed the transaction. (Note that everyone voiced his blessing on this redemption, vv. 11, 12.) Perez is mentioned in the blessing because he was also the product of a levirate marriage (Judah and Tamar, the widow of his sons, Er and Onan [Genesis 38]).

Ruth was likely barren, suggested when one considers that she and Mahlon lived 10 years without offspring and confirmed in the blessing of the people of the gate—“*the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman*” (4:12).

22.

A Closing Lesson on Ruth

The study of Ruth is truly challenging to one's spiritual life. The book has been called a diamond of spiritual brilliance as set against the black background of Israel's apostasy and disobedience. The period of the Judges sets the stage for Israel's kings, demonstrating the awful rebellion of man's fallen nature. Instead of pursuing their covenant God in love and obedience, *"Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"* (Judges 21:25).

Unsubmissive and disobedient hearts are generally given over to their own wicked desires. *"Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone"* (Hosea 4:17; see Rom. 1:21-32). However, God is merciful and often relents of His wrath on the basis of covenant love (Psa. 106:45). Ruth is a glorious illustration of this truth.

Although the book carries the name of her daughter-in-law, the book is really about Naomi. The closing verses prove this assertion: *"Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer'"* (Ruth 4:14). Of course, when the book opens, Naomi has no desire to bless the Lord in that she gets clobbered with a heap of bad luck. Her home in Judah is struck by a terrible famine. Living in a strange land, she is bereft of husband and sons, leaving her destitute and hopeless. Although she never abandoned her spiritual roots, after ten years in Moab she returned home, utterly devastated and bitter with her God. *"Do not call me Naomi [pleasant]; call me Mara [bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me."* (Ruth 1:20).

The problem with Naomi, as with all of us, is that she is a daughter of Adam, a sinner by nature and by choice. Sinners see life as all about them, and they relate to God on how they perceive He treats them. They have the philosophy of Job and his friends that bad stuff happens to evil people; so good people should not suffer the bad stuff. When they suffer bad stuff, they get angry and bitter with God. Naomi thought that God was mistreating her. She needed to understand that life is not about us. It is about God—His majestic Person, His sovereign purpose, and His glorious plan. *"To Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen"* (Rev. 1:6).

The great lesson of Ruth is the way God works the salvation of His people. He was preparing Israel for a king. To do so, He chose Naomi as a human instrument to bring that plan to reality. To do so, He needed to empty her and to break her of selfish disobedience in fleeing Israel, living among the idolatrous Moabites, intermarrying with them, and then blaming God for her calamity. Nevertheless, Yahweh sought her in His covenant *hesed* love and loyalty, in spite of her bitterness. He awakened her hope through Ruth's loyalty, filled her with wonderful expectation, and finally exalted her through a miracle son, Obed, the grandfather of David. Naomi experienced the truth of God's gracious principle: He humbles those whom He chooses to exalt (James 4:10).