

THE COMPASS

Desperate Housewives of the Bible, Part 3 **Committed to the Commitment**

Doug Brendel

If you were to open your Bible, turn to the Old Testament, and read the book of Ruth aloud, start to finish, it would take less than 20 minutes.

I suggest to take your Bible and read it for yourself sometime this week; I think it will be a pleasing experience for you.

Ruth is the eighth book of the Bible, right after Judges, right before 1 Samuel. In my Bible, it takes up less than four pages.

Let me tell you the story.

We go back in time 3,300 years, to ancient Israel, to the town of Bethlehem. This is 13 centuries before the birth of Christ.

The weather changes; the crops fail. There's terrible famine.

In those days, you lived off the land. If the crops failed, you couldn't just make do by stocking up from the local grocery store.

You had to go where the crops were good.

So a resident of Bethlehem, named Elimelech, decides to move.

He packs up his wife Naomi — her name means *pleasant*, isn't that pleasant? — and their two boys, whose names were Mahlon and Kilion.

If you head east from Bethlehem, you can scoot around the northern tip of the Dead Sea, which back then was known as the Salt Sea.

And if you follow the shoreline south — because the Dead Sea is tall and skinny, stretching almost 50 miles north to south — you come to the land of Moab.

This is where Elimelech and Naomi relocated. There was food there.

I'm guessing that Elimelech had no choice; there was no food anywhere else — because Moab was not the place a Jewish father would choose for his boys to grow up.

Moab wasn't really an enemy of Israel — they didn't have a strong army or an aggressive temperament, where they were always trying to conquer Israel like a number of other countries did.

But Moab represented a different kind of risk: a risk of the heart.

The country had been founded, about six centuries earlier, in a most unseemly way.

You remember Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities that God destroyed by fire because the people were so totally perverted?

A guy named Lot escaped, but Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt.

(You can read about this in **Genesis 19**.)

Well, after Lot was widowed, both of his daughters got him drunk, seduced him, and got pregnant.

Each one had a son by her own father.

And one of those baby boys was Moab, and as he grew up, his land was known as

Moab too, and his people were the Moabites.

It's interesting, after such a beginning, what kind of reputation the people of Moab developed — because through history, they were known for their very attractive women, and the Moabite women tended to attract the Israelite men.

They would lure them away from their worship of Israel's one true God and into the whole pagan social system of the Moabites.

Moab was known for its intense commitment to worship of a false god known as Chemosh.

Their religious rituals were brutal; at times, they even involved child sacrifices.

So Moab, lying on the eastern banks of the Dead Sea, was as different a place from Israel, on the western banks of the Dead Sea, as you could possibly imagine.

But that's where the food was, and Elimelech has to feed his family. So Moab is where they head.

But maybe Elimelech was sickly. Maybe he was old. Maybe he just came down with something in this strange new country.

In any event, he died in Moab, leaving Naomi with her boys.

Her situation is now radically different. As a widow in those days, you were at tremendous risk. You didn't have the social safety net that we take for granted today.

She's dependent on her sons, Mahlon and Kilion.

And the boys have grown up. They're getting interested in girls.

Sure enough, they both fall in love with local women.

Kilion falls for a girl named Orpah. Mahlon marries a girl named Ruth.

But something's wrong. Don't know what — but before long, both of Naomi's sons have died.

Naomi's heartbreak is complete.

Her husband is dead, both her sons are dead.

Three funerals. Three burials.

And now all three women — Naomi and her daughters-in-law — are not only grief-stricken; they're also in a terrible position financially.

If there's any glimmer of good news, it's that things have turned around back home, in Israel.

The famine is over, there's food again.

So Naomi can go back to Bethlehem.

At least she'll be among her old friends.

It must have been a sad day, those three women packing up their belongings to leave Moab.

Naomi is looking at stuff she brought from Bethlehem years before, when she had a husband and two little boys.

You have to wonder what she kept, what she gave away, what she just tossed because it was too painful a reminder.

Meanwhile, Orpah and Ruth have their own griefs to bear.

They've lost their husbands, and now they're looking at kissing their moms good-bye, bidding farewell to all their friends and relatives, and going to a place they'd never been, on the other side of the sea.

I wonder what kind of a knot they had in their stomachs as they packed up, as they said their good-byes, as they headed up the road on the first leg of their journey.

There must have been a terrible sense of mourning, a deep, deep bereavement, hanging over the three of them that day.

But before they even got out of Moabite territory, Naomi stopped.

This didn't feel right to her.

She was sad enough, going home without her husband and sons; but she didn't have to make these two young women go through what she had gone through.

Naomi knew that when they got to Bethlehem, she wasn't going to have much if anything to offer them.

They were going to be extremely poor, life was going to be really hard.

If the girls stayed behind, they could be cared for. They would close to their own mothers, they would be among friends.

So Naomi said to them (**Ruth 1:8,9**), **"...Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."**

Then she gave both of them a good-bye kiss, and both girls cried hard.

But over those years, these women had grown close to each other. These girls loved their mother-in-law.

She was a strong person, she was an interesting character, she was articulate.

So Orpah and Ruth said no. They wanted to go with her to Israel. They wanted to stay together.

But Naomi was serious.

She gave them orders.

"Return home," she said (**Ruth 1:11**). You don't have any good reason to come with me.

I'm not going to make any more babies that can grow up to be husbands for you, she said.

I'm so old, I'm not even going to get married again myself.

In fact, she said, **"...Even if I thought there was still hope for me — even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons — would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No...."**

You at least have some hope here, she told them. I don't. Don't throw in with me.

"...It is more bitter for me than for you," she said, **"because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!"** (**Ruth 1:12,13**).

Orpah is devastated. She kisses her mother-in-law good-bye, and heads back down the road toward her Moabite home.

But Ruth is hugging Naomi, and she won't let go.

Naomi won't cave in, though.

15 “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”

She’s saying, you’ve got your own family, your own country, your own faith, your own way of doing things.

Don’t add to your troubles by trying to fit in with a new group.
Make it easy on yourself.

16 But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.

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

Nothing but death, she went on to say, will ever separate us.

And finally...

18 When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So the journey continued, with one old woman and one young.

They got to Bethlehem, and there was chatter all over town.

People had heard about Elimelech and the boys dying, and they must have figured there was no way they were going to see Naomi again. The idea of a old widow moving all over the world was far-fetched in that culture.

But here she was — people were delighted to see Naomi — and even more amazed to see that she had brought her daughter-in-law, a Moabite woman, with her.

A woman of Moab — in Bethlehem! Shocking!

But Naomi was just weary. She had fought and fled a famine. She had spent years living as a stranger in a strange land. She had buried her husband and both her sons. She had said good-bye forever to one daughter-in-law. And she had made the long, long trip home.

Don’t even call me Naomi anymore, she told her friends. The term *pleasant* doesn’t apply to me.

20 “Don’t call me Naomi, ” she told them. “Call me Mara [which means *bitter*], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.

21 I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

She is a beaten woman.

But Naomi doesn’t even realize — she has an ace.

She has an advantage. A secret weapon. She has Ruth.

Ruth may look like baggage. If Naomi is looking for someone to help her, Ruth — in that culture — is the wrong ethnic group, the wrong gender, the wrong religion, the wrong marital status.

But Ruth is right in the single most important way.

Ruth is committed to the commitment.

Being committed to the commitment is a lost art today.

It sounds ridiculous. It sounds foolish.

You can be committed to a person, you can be committed to a cause, you can be committed to a nation or a group or the company that employs you. Being committed to a commitment seems pointless.

But Ruth has a kind of strength, a kind of spiritual power. She has a strength that comes from being committed to the commitment.

In the days ahead, we're going to see that Ruth is the one who comes up with a survival strategy.

Ruth is the one who sells the strategy to her mother-in-law.

Ruth is the one who executes the strategy.

Ruth is the one who takes the risks.

Ruth is the one who sets both women on the surprising path to a new life, a good life.

Ruth's strength isn't coming from Naomi.

Naomi has as much as said, I'm a loser. It's over for me. Don't commit to me. That would be a losing proposition.

She's made it clear she doesn't have any hope.

Her hope is tied up in her marital status, in her age, in her ability to bear children.

In fact, she transfers her hopelessness onto Ruth — she thinks Ruth *also* has to get a husband, or *Ruth* is hopeless too.

Naomi sees God as her enemy; she doesn't see him doing her any good. She figures Ruth would do better with her own gods.

Ruth is not getting a thing from Naomi. No encouragement. No energy. Just a steady stream of negativity.

But Ruth's commitment goes beyond Naomi's hopelessness.

She isn't committed because of Naomi's situation.

Ruth isn't committed because of Naomi's age, or her status, or her future prospects.

She has made a commitment, and she is sticking with that commitment *regardless*.

Regardless of hopelessness, old age, infertility, poverty, bad attitude, religious conflict, gender bias, doesn't matter to Ruth.

She is in. She is in for the long haul.

She is committed to the commitment.

You and I live our lives surrounded by Naomis.

There are people in our lives who go from pleasant to bitter.

There are situations in our lives that go from hopeful to hopeless.

There are seasons of life where our position goes from strong to weak.

I remember the first time I heard the phrase *committed to the commitment*, and it wasn't a happy time in my life.

I was in my early 20's, my first marriage was in trouble.

I was working in an office next to another young guy, whose first marriage was also in trouble.

He was pushing ahead with a divorce, I was dragging my feet.

I was hung up about it from a religious standpoint; I also felt that I was the guilty party in my marriage.

He and I would talk for hours about the whole question of marriage and divorce, and

finally one day he kind of snickered at me and said, “You don’t really love her. You’re just committed to the commitment.”

Those words stung me! His philosophy seemed so wise — being committed to the commitment sounded like the thinnest, most meaningless kind of loyalty you could possibly engage in. I felt so foolish!

To my embarrassment, I have to admit that I didn’t come to understand the truth about being committed to the commitment until many years later, long after I had gone ahead with that divorce.

The surprising truth is this: being committed to the commitment is the strongest kind of loyalty in the world.

It produces the greatest strength. The highest energy level. The most consistent power.

Why? Because at some point after I commit to a person, that person is going to disappoint me.

The person I committed to isn’t really there anymore. They’re someone else now. Someone ... disappointing.

At some point after I commit to a company, it’s going to be sold to a Japanese conglomerate.

The company I signed a contract with doesn’t really exist anymore. It’s a different organism now.

I will experience the same sense of betrayal over and over again throughout my life. I commit to a project. I commit to a schedule. I commit to a diet. A political party, a candidate. I commit to an auto loan. A relocation. A child. Another child. Another child!

If my commitment is really only to that project, that schedule, that diet, or whatever, I will be disappointed — and I will be terribly, terribly tempted to bail out — because the situation shifts under my feet after I’ve begun my commitment.

Only if I am *committed to the commitment* can I survive the bitterness of the betrayal.

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You know, some days, frankly, I don’t like what I find in the pages of Scripture. Sometimes I don’t appreciate how it works like a mirror, reflecting back to me the ugly reality of what I’m doing or saying or (most often) thinking.

Sometimes I go to the Scriptures for encouragement, and I get stung. God wants to do something different in me, and he speaks to me through the Scriptures and nails me!

I feel betrayed. I feel like he changed up on me.

But I keep going back there for direction — because I’m committed to that commitment.

Some days I don’t understand what God is going in my life. I’m angry with him. I’m disappointed in him. I feel like he is dropping the ball on something I really, really care about.

I think some part of my life could be pleasant, but he’s letting it be bitter. And I hate that. In a way, you could say, if I were only committed to the God I imagine — the God I expected — the God I thought I had figured out — then I would be sorely

tempted to bail out on my commitment to him.
But I made a commitment one day, long ago, to walk with him. To trust him to be telling the truth. To trust him to love me and take care of me. To give me his best.
And I am committed to that commitment.
So I keep coming back for more. Keep coming back to him. Keep giving him another shot at me.

When I commit to the commitment, I am actually catching up to something God has already done.

He has already made a commitment to me, and he is committed to the commitment.

James 1:17 says he **does not change like shifting shadows**.

So that when I disappoint him, when I betray him, when I hurt him, when I become something different from the dream he dreamed when he first dreamed me up ...
he is still committed to me.

He still loves me.