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Ruth 1

Making A Commitment in An Uncommitted World

I remember sitting down some years ago with a young man who was considering making a marriage proposal. He had made up his mind to ask his girlfriend to marry him, but every time he got close, his throat would close up. He would break into a sweat, he felt slightly woozy, and he would have the kind of feeling some of you have when you're standing on the roof of a tall building looking down – especially if you have an extreme fear of heights. He told me that the thought of marriage made him feel like he was going into a jail cell, and he could just hear the metal doors clanging in back of him.

The idea of a life-long commitment made him feel like he was trapped on an elevator that was heating up – a feeling of claustrophobia, of being trapped, strangled. Every time he got close, he felt like, "I gotta get outta here, I gotta break free." I remember talking with this guy about his girlfriend's qualities. He was a Christian and so was she – a deeply devoted Christian. Both of them were. He was very positive about the girl. They got along great, he thought she was very attractive, he enjoyed her company, and they came from similar social backgrounds. People around them thought they made a great match. They shared a lot of common interests together. They were intellectually compatible. She seemed to love him. They had a lot of the same goals, and even as we talked, he could rationally try to

talk himself into asking her. At an emotional level he absolutely froze up every time he got really close to going for it, and he nearly blew up the relationship. He came just a hair's breadth away from losing what for him would have been a great gift of God. It was an offer of a really good life with a good woman, but he was afraid of making a commitment.

Now, how many of you know men and women have dated 5, 6, 7 or more people? I don't mean just casual dating – recreational dating – but 5, 6, or 7 long-term relationships, some of these lasting for years. For one reason or another, the relationship broke down because one person could not bring himself or herself to walk that last 50 feet to the altar. They may have discussed marriage with their boyfriend or girlfriend on numerous occasions. They may have talked about it at length. They may have thought about it, prayed about it, even gone into counseling concerning it, but there's always something that came up in each of the relationships which kept them from taking that final plunge.

With one of the relationships, it was the job situation. It was a really bad time to get married because they were in school or graduate school or transitioning out of school. Or there was a time when they really needed to focus on that first job – give lots and lots of time to the firm or the company. Another time it was financial problems. Their finances were just in an upheaval and uproar. They're just climbing out of debt or coming through bankruptcy. Another time it's her parents. Another time it's his parents. Then there's a former boyfriend or girlfriend that they haven't quite resolved their feelings over even though it's been years since they broke up with them. But they're still struggling with the past feelings and they need to work

through all that and see whether they need to get back with their old boyfriend or girlfriend. Or it's her kids by a former marriage or his kids or the ministry commitment to something God is saying or the miraculous intervention by God – they got a sign or a circumstance – that says, “Don't do this.” It's always something to keep the person from saying YES to a marriage commitment and sticking with their Yes.

Am I speaking about anyone that any of you have ever known? Am I getting personal enough yet or do I need to describe a little more the pattern of life that I've been discussing? The feat of making a commitment is not just a marriage issue or a romance issue. It's a career and job issue. Over the years I've been in the position of hiring for lots of different staff positions here at Vineyard, and even at my former job as an OSU Professor. I can remember serving on several faculty search committees and reviewing some people's resumes that you get if you're in the position of hiring, and some of you who are managers or employers, you've seen this. Some people's resumes simply scream at you the message that even if you make the mistake of hiring this particular person, it won't be a long term mistake, it won't be a devastating mistake, because they'll probably be gone, quit, or get fired from this position in less than a year. I can remember getting a resume for an open staff position where the person had served in seven different churches over a 10-year period. These seven churches were in several different states. The person had attended five different colleges at various points in his life, but still hadn't received a degree. There were also a number of other employers listed between the ministry positions held. I handed the resume back to one of the pastors and said, “Tell me, as

you look at this resume, if you can spot a pattern in this person's life. It's going to take a lot of intuition, a lot of discernment, maybe a prophetic revelation, but just look at this resume." He looked at the resume and in just about 20 seconds said, "It seems to me this person is having a problem making a commitment."

Now we've all left jobs and moved, maybe quit school and went back. But when there's a general pattern in a person's life – starting one thing and then leaving that, starting one group and losing interest in it after 3 or 4 months and then jumping into a new ministry or a new career or a new relationship – then one begins to wonder whether there isn't a larger problem. You're having a major problem with making a commitment. It may cover all of life or it may cover just a section of your life.

The fear of making a commitment is what one writer calls, "The Yes Anxiety." It goes beyond a healthy caution in making an important decision. Don't hear me during this message to say, "Hey, throw all caution to the wind. Before you make a major decision like marriage, or world missions or career changes, just unscrew your head and go for it – take the plunge." I'm not going to be communicating anything of the kind today. I'm talking about the problem that goes beyond healthy caution. It involves unhealthy, almost phobic fear of saying yes, or a pattern of life where a person is bouncing from one thing to another. It can happen, like I said, in marriage, in family life, where people survive the dating (even the engagement stage) but they panic right before the wedding date or they panic after marriage and they want to get out. Once they get married they feel claustrophobic, as I said, like the elevator door has closed on them. They seek to flee once commitment really

gets serious – like when you have a child or during some other crisis later on at mid-life. I've got to get out!

It can happen, like I said, regarding career – where a person bounces from one job to another or settles for employment well below their potential. You know, the guy that's still making sandals down at the beach because he can't handle the 9-5 world of work. Fear of commitment can occur with church and ministry, too. Many Christians display really strong avoidance patterns when it comes to making a commitment to a church, whether it's in joining a church, giving to a church, being involved in service to a church, or joining a group. They want to grow, they want to become more intimate with God, they want to have a really strong personal relationship with God and personal relationship with others, but they never stick around long enough or take the plunge hard enough to reap the benefits. They may join a group and then quit when it's no longer really fresh and exciting. They like the honeymoon phase of everything. The idea of starting a group of a certain kind or launching a new idea is far more attractive than actually caring for a group. We see people bouncing in and out of leadership, people changing churches, students who hop from Christian group to Christian group, folks going from conference to conference looking for what can only be gotten by commitment.

The problem of making a commitment gets very personal. A person has difficulty sticking with personal disciplines – whether it's devotional time or exercise or diet or moral pledges or promises to save money or a decision regarding school. What are the issues? Why is it so hard for many of us to make a commitment and stick with it? Again, it could be a generalized pattern where all of

life has sort of a laid back, totally uncommitted pattern, or it could just be a certain area of life where a person is afraid to put roots down. Let me suggest a few reasons why people have problems making commitments.

One of the problems that people have is this idea that life will go better if we keep our options open. I just don't want to be trapped in a relationship or even a commitment to things. I just want to be available to God so I can leave at a moment's notice. But almost always that person who must keep all options open has something deeply rooted that is unspiritual – an unwillingness to be relied upon and be reliable. So they break commitments to roommates or they can't buy a home because they have to keep their options open, so they rent everything. They can't be pinned down on a dating relationship because, you know, someone better might come along.

Keeping options open is appropriate for one stage of life – when you're young, when you're just beginning, when you're starting to explore. But when a person is no longer young or just starting out or just beginning or just investigating, and they still have to keep options open mentality, something is flawed in the person's thinking. The fact is, we're going to find today, that true happiness comes when you start closing the door on certain options, when you narrow the range of choices, when you put roots down, when you deliberately say NO to certain things so you can fully say YES to one good thing. Keeping options open comes down to saying NO to everything except this illusion of freedom, this fantasy that you will be happier in continuing to search rather than in finding. The purpose of a search is

not to continue searching. The purpose of a search is so that you will find and embrace.

Second, some people have a problem making a commitment because they have a deep need to make a perfect decision. Perfectionists, or people with perfectionistic tendencies, often really struggle in making a commitment – a romantic commitment, marriage commitment, job commitment, or church commitment because they are always seeing the flaw. How this particular person, who has 40 good qualities, falls short of their ideal (whatever that is). The perfectionist is always afraid of settling, of compromising. So instead of having a realistic view of finding a really good partner in life or a really good job or a really good church, they're always looking for the perfect partner, the perfect job, the perfect church, the perfect ministry, the perfect match, the perfect fit. And in the end, sadly, they may end up with nothing – no marriage, no kids, no good church, no good job. The perfectionist is not willing to see that life in a fallen world involves some trade-offs. The person who wants to keep their options open has to understand that as well. In order to find lasting happiness, I must be willing to trade-off my freedom to do anything. I've got to get narrow in order to be happy.

Well, there are going to be some trade-offs in relationships. No one is perfect in all areas. I certainly see this in people's commitment to a church. They go to a church for a while and there's this honeymoon period where the church is the greatest thing; I mean, this is the perfect church. Then there's one thing they disagree with. They don't like one of the worship leader's choices of songs, or someone offends the person at a small group, or the pastor preached a message that

they don't totally agree with, or the church talks about money, or one of the Children's Ministry workers wasn't perfectly sensitive to their child. There's some flaw in the church they discover after the honeymoon period, and they need to take their kids and head out the door to find The Perfect Church. The perfectionist has a real problem in making a commitment. So how can you know whether you're a perfectionist? Let me describe a few things that will show perfectionistic tendencies.

Some people who have an extreme need for supernatural guidance are really just spiritualizing perfectionism. They can't make a decision unless it is written in the sky 14 times, unless they get five prophetic words and three dreams because they have this idea that there is just one perfect place and one perfect person instead of "Has God providentially brought us together? Do our friends and families support us? Do I feel like God's blessing would rest on our relationship? Do I respect this other person? Are we compatible? I can't make this kind of decision unless I have just a comet flashing across the sky at 9:00 P.M. tonight."

The third reason why people can't make a commitment is this: because they may have failed to resolve past hurts, they can't make a current commitment. The story of the cat that sits down on a hot stove and gets burned, the cat will not only not sit on a hot stove again, it won't sit on a cold stove either! A person who has been burned relationally will often fear entering a new relationship and making a commitment and giving their heart to a new person. Even if the new person is unlike the old one. A person who's been burned in a church commitment will often just stand on the side lines or sit on the fringes of a church for years because they

were hurt and that hurt is unresolved. Frequently, wounding from the past keeps the person from presently being able to say YES to God's new things – to blessings that God has for us today.

The fear of commitment is actually a growing societal and cultural problem as we enter the 21st century. There was a recent survey done of employees – a cross section of over 1500 American adults. Thirty percent of American adults said they feel much less loyal to their employees than they did just a few years ago. Half of the people said they feel about the same, but when 30% said they feel a lot less loyal than just a few years ago, there's a real problem with commitment. Over one-half of employees, the majority of employees, say that their employers are a lot less loyal to them and a lot less committed to them than they were just a few years ago. In poll after poll, many Americans have been affected by corporate downsizing and by the money saving measures that corporations are taking. The price of downsizing in companies seems to be declining employee confidence and diminished loyalty on the part of employees.

For society, there are a number of signs of reduced commitments. The divorce rate is still at an all time high. Companies complain that brand loyalty is just completely ended – people just pick up the cheapest product available now. Car companies have to invest more and more money into advertising to keep their own customers. Book clubs and record clubs are unable to attract new members when there's any kind of commitment required. The percentage of adults who say it's their duty to fight for their country has dropped to an all-time low. The percentage

of people who commit to attending a function – a church function, a wedding, a play, even a sports event – and then fail to show up is at an all-time high.

What I want to talk about today is making a commitment in an uncommitted world. Let's pray.

In Ruth 1:1 we read, "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for awhile in the country of Moab." This book of Ruth takes place in the days when the judges ruled. It was a time of cultural and religious anarchy, and if you look at the verse right before Ruth 1:1 (Judges 1:25), we see sort of a summary of the days in which the judges rules. We read in Judges 21:25, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit [or everyone did what was right in his own eyes.]" – a time of cultural and religious anarchy. There was no king – a vacuum of leadership – a vacuum, especially, or moral leadership. Very much like today, there was also a sense in which everyone was just doing his or her own thing. There was no overall societal commitment to certain values – no sense that certain things were absolutely wrong or absolutely right. Everyone just had his or her own perspective. Values and morals were just a matter of personal preference. You like chocolate; I like vanilla. That's the way it was in the days of the book of Judges – in the area of sexuality, in areas of religious commitment, in areas of the treatment of women, regarding the sanctity of life. The period in which the book of Ruth takes place is a time very much like today where there were thousands and thousands of fracture lines – cracks – dividing one person from another. There were all kinds of tears in the social fabric.

What is interesting about this lovely little book of four chapters is that at a time of great political and economic and social upheaval, a time of famines and wars and invasions, we read this lovely little story of God's care and God's provision for two women in one particular family – a woman named Naomi and a woman named Ruth – in a patriarchal culture where the only folks that really mattered were men!

So often we look around us, especially in this ever more complicated world – a world in which information is traveling at a faster pace and multiplying at geometric rates, a world that has globalized problems. We live in a time of a global economy where what happens in Thailand and Indonesia quickly affects employment here in Columbus, Ohio and the interest rates we're going to pay on homes. We live in a time of global ecological problems where we now have to make global treaties about Green House Gases and rain forests and fishing rights; a time now where many nations have weapons of mass destruction. We have global problems, national problems, huge problems, impeachment, hearings of the President and so on.

It is very easy for the individual – the single mother with a child, the young man who's contemplating getting married, the woman who is starting her own business, a couple who is facing an empty nest, someone who loses a parent to death – it is very easy to feel that my little world and my little problems could not possibly catch the notice of God. When we're talking about huge issues and global issues, it is very easy for a person to feel so overwhelmed by a sense of insignificance. They say, "God, you couldn't possibly take notice of little old me with my tiny little problems at

work or with my health or with my desire to lose weight, you have too much on your mind.”

The book of Ruth is the wonderful shout of protest to the lie that anybody is too insignificant – a woman or part of any group that is marginal like a senior citizen, a widow, a divorcee, a single adult – anyone who has a feeling of not being. In the days of the Judges, God puts a microscope upon one particular family and two women and brings them under His fatherly care. If you want to know, I consider this to be the theme of the book of Ruth, and this is a much-debated issue. Scholars build their careers on discerning themes that no one else has ever seen. In my humble opinion, the theme of the book of Ruth is God’s providential care for His people and for all that turn to Him in faith. If you wanted a theme verse of the book of Ruth, I don’t know that we can do any better than Ruth 2:12 where we read, “May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” The God who spreads His wings as a mother bird would – who spreads His wings of care and provision and protection over His children.

Now the Christian doctrine that speaks about God’s rule and God’s care and God’s provision and God’s protection over His people is called the Doctrine of Providence. Providence means that God didn’t just create the world, but that He also sustains the world and rules the world. He not only sustains and rules the world, but He steers the world or guides it the way a driver would steer a car. There’s someone at the steering wheel of the world, guiding it toward an appointed goal and that someone is steering the events of your life. Providence means

someone is at the wheel in all circumstances, guiding to a good appointed end. Now listen friends, it is the rare Christian that I have met that lives with a consistent sense of Providence. Most people either live their lives as though most of what happens is chance – blind fate instead of provision to us by a living, personal, rational, thinking, loving, caring, ruling Lord of history and Lord of our lives – or people live with a focus upon all secondary causes – this is the result of what the President has done, or the economy, or my boss, or my parents, or economic laws, or national problems, or my body, or my genes. It is the rare person that can see behind these secondary causes, that God cares, that God rules, that God provides. It is faith in God's providence that runs through every chapter in the Book of Ruth and is the binding chord that ties the whole book together – life under the wings of God; life under the loving care and provision of the Lord.

So the whole book is the story of God's providential care. Instead of God being reduced to irrelevance in some areas of our lives, or living with a sort of schizophrenic worldview, or God shows up in blips – He beams down and beams back up - there's an overriding sense of God's active involvement and God's control that pervades the book of Ruth and needs to pervade our thoughts and our lives. Be aware of God's provision and His rule; we can make a thoughtful, totally intelligent response of commitment. In the text we have a story of three different approaches to commitment.

The first is that of Elemilech. It says, "In the days when the Judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for awhile in the country of Moab. The man's

name was Elemilech, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there." Now it's quite apparent that the author intends for us to understand that the names of these various people has significance for we read at the end of the chapter in verse 20, "'Don't call me Naomi,' she told them. 'Call me Mara [Naomi means pleasant one, Mara means bitter.] because the Almighty has made my life bitter.'" Names were a big deal to the ancient Hebrews.

People were not just given a name because their parents liked the sound of it. In the Jewish way of thinking, to know a person's name is to know the person, to know their character, to know something about them. The name is the person. Do you want to come to a deep understanding of a person and their destiny? Know the name. So Abram in the book of Genesis is given a new destiny by virtue of his call from God, his name is changed from Abram to Abraham. He's given a new name because he's become a new person with a new future and a new destiny. Likewise, when Jacob has his character changed by an encounter with the Lord, Jacob is renamed Israel by the Lord. A new person; a new name. If you want to know about God, who He is, know His name.

There are many names that God reveals Himself by in the Bible. El Shaddai – God Almighty, El Roi – the God who sees, El Elyonj – God most high, Yaweh – the God who is active on behalf of His people. God reveals Himself by a name. Names are important. When we call God Jesus, that name is important; that means Savior.

Here in this text we read several names. We read the name Elemilech, which means God is my king. We read of his wife Naomi, which means pleasant one. We

read of Mahlon and Kilion. Mahlon means sickly and Kilion means weakling and failing. Imagine a destiny for two sons, sickly and weakling. Why does the author mention the name Elemilech who name means God is my king? I think he mentions it because this a man who failed to live up to his name. He had the name but he didn't have the game. He had the right label on the bottle, but the bottle was empty. He had the right talk, but he didn't have the right walk. He's going around in life saying God is my king – that's what my name announces. It says of Elemilech that there was a famine in the land and he took his wife and two sons and went for a while in Moab. It's clear in the light of the death of his two sons later on that the author wants us to understand that his decision to go to Moab was an unwise one. God is my king but I run to Moab. Where's Moab? What's Moab about?

Moab was to the East of the Dead Sea. The Moabites were the descendents of Lot and they were worshippers of the god Chemosh – a god to whom human sacrifices were made. The Moabites were sometimes referred to by the Jews as people of Chemosh, people who made child sacrifices. This was a despicable practice to the Jews. The Moabites had attacked Israel during the period of Judges. It's an odd choice, for a man who says "God is my king," to look to the generosity of immoral people so that perhaps they will provide for him because God obviously won't. Elemilech had the name but doesn't have the game.

Let me make a couple of applications before we move on. Those of us who have trusted in Jesus, those of us who have called upon the name of the Lord and asked Jesus to save us, we've asked Him to come into our lives and live in our hearts. We have some names attached to us by the Bible. The question is: do we live up to

our name? We have the name Christian, followers of Christ, people who are attached to Jesus Christ and who are claiming to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

Imagine, you who have asked Christ to save you, and you trusted in Him – imagine you have one of those blinking billboards on your forehead; it's just blinking all day long to God and to everyone else around – Christian * Christian * Christian. Imagine that while this blinking billboard on your forehead is blinking Christian, you are gossiping about a co-worker. You've got the right label on the bottle, but what's coming out of the bottle? Is it the real thing? You've got this label blinking "Christian," but you're refusing to forgive someone who has hurt you. You say you're attached to Jesus, the Master Forgiver, but you won't forgive. You say you're attached to Jesus, but you won't be reconciled or take the time to reconcile with someone who has wounded you, even though Jesus' whole ministry was a ministry of reconciliation, of making peace. You, who are attached to Christ, are called many things by the New Testament. You have a label "Saint" blinking on your forehead. Did you know that? Every Christian, according to the New Testament is a Saint. The word saint has been used and abused in various parts of the church attached only to very special few, an elite, who are particularly extraordinary Christians, through whose hands God has worked miracles. Every Christian has the word saint.

Do you know what "saint" tells us? The word saint means holy one. You're attached to a holy God if you're a Christian. So God expects you, Christian, to live a holy life. How saintly am I? How saintly are you? Do we speak in a saintly way?

What you're doing with your body at a particular time, is it saintly? Do you have a goal for your day, of your week, of your life? Is one of your supreme goals to be a holy man, a holy woman, to have a clear conscious, to live right with God and right with men and women? Or do you have the name but not the game?

We Christians are called brothers and sisters, because we are to live in a family relationship with one another. You know you can't be a true brother or sister without being really involved with other people here in the church. How do you work out your family relationship with other Christians? How do you carry the name brother when you see a fellow member of the church in need? How do you act as a true sister when you learn of someone's need in this church? Well, Elemilech ran from his name and ran from commitment and look at the result. It says, "Now Elemilech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they have lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died." Look at what the author of Ruth is telling us. Elemilech ran away from his exclusive commitment to the Lord, believing he would prosper by going to a foreign land, that outside of God's will would be happiness and provision. He ran away because of the famine in Israel, and he thought that would cause him to escape his problems. Look what occurred. The very thing he feared – if they stayed, they would starve to death – the very thing he feared ended up happening anyway. He and his two sons died in the land of Moab. People break their commitments and run when the pressure is turned up, when they encounter trials or difficulty. They think by running they're going to leave their problems behind. Running away never works. There's always a huge price tag

attached to running away. The problem just meets us in another form later on, and at some point we're going to have to deal with our past. At some point we're going to have to face up to difficulty. Instead of escaping, we're going to have to deal with problems.

In fact, I would give you a rule of personal growth. Personal growth only happens when a person stops running and starts facing their problems. I think of problems between men and women that cause couples to break up. Both of them flee to other relationships where those other relationships have problems and then they have to flee again to still other relationships. Personal growth only occurs when we face certain challenges and deal with them instead of running away. When we're having a problem in a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend, with a fiancée, with a roommate, with a co-worker, with a fellow member of the church, with a spouse, instead of constantly running away from conflict and avoiding it at all costs – withdrawing, giving the other person the silent treatment or denying we're hurt or angry, just loudly sighing but not saying anything, refusing to call or answer mail or go to lunch – instead of running from conflict, we grow by learning to confront it. By learning to discuss our differences with someone; to reconcile with him or her.

Sometimes we have to take the humble step of admitting we were wrong and asking forgiveness. By doing the hard work, the heavy lifting, of relational reconciliation, we grow. We get bigger. Relationships that are just teetering on the brink or collapse are often saved when people are willing to do the heavy lifting of confronting their problems instead of running away from them.

Friends, I say this to you with all affection. Some of your marriages that are teetering on the brink of collapse can be saved if you just wouldn't run away, if you make a commitment to dig in, stay put and deal with your stuff here. I guarantee you're going to have to deal with it somewhere else, and the bill will likely be a lot higher. The same thing applies to some of your relationships with current employers and co-workers, other church members and pastors.

Naomi had a very different approach to commitment than Elemilech. She didn't escape or run from her commitment, she endured them. She endured the pain of tragic circumstances and difficult situations. Naomi remained committed. The book of Ruth could really be called the book of Naomi. She's the main star. Elemilech, in verse 3, is called Naomi's husband. Ruth is Naomi's daughter-in-law. It's Naomi's council that Ruth follows. At the end of the book, Ruth's baby is put in Naomi's lap in Chapter 4:16 where it says, "Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, 'Naomi has a son.'" Here's a woman whose life has been pretty rough. She lost her husband and her two sons. But she didn't lose her commitment to God and her commitment to righteousness. It says, "When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah."

How does a woman who seemingly has lost everything, who has endured tragedy after tragedy - she's widowed, then one son dies and then the other son dies, she's gone through a famine, she's lost everything - how does a woman like that stay

committed – not just throw it all away and run, get into some escape like drugs or alcohol or sex. I think Naomi, first of all, has a good memory. She remembers the land of Judah where she came from. She remembers the road back to Judah. She calls to mind the resource that God has provided her with. She's not completely bereft of resource. She has two daughters-in-law. She has family back in Judah. She has her faith. She has the capacity to work. Yes, she's a widow and vulnerable and life had treated her roughly, but she still has some resource.

Friends, one of the things so important to do when you are being man-handled by life, when you've been hit by the steamroller at your job or in a relationship, is to stop and think on what you do have. What resource do you still have? Especially your resource of a relationship with God!

I've used this illustration before, but some years ago Marlene and I were camping on a beach in North Carolina. We didn't know you needed special tent pegs to hold the tent down – long, plastic sand pegs. We used these little metal pegs and the wind kept blowing the tent over. Finally I said to Marlene, "Let's just jump in and our weight will hold the tent down." She said, "I'm not getting in there! I'm not going to be blown around all night." I discovered, by looking at some of the other campers that there was another kind of tent peg that could hold my tent in place. Even then, one of the sides kept flapping up, but it was OK because the three corners were pinned down and we weren't blown away.

Life is a lot like the tent on the beach. Sometimes the wind blows so hard you feel your life's going to be blown away. We need to nail down some of the corners that we can nail down. Say, ok, I just got devastated by this lay off at work, this

financial set-back or relational breakdown, but not every corner of my tent is pulled up. I still have three tent pegs to hold me fast. Okay one corner of my life is blowing around, but I've still got three pegs in the ground. Naomi had her daughters-in-law and she had her family back in Judah as well as her relationship with her God. Remembering what we have enables us to endure.

And interpreting events correctly, it says in verse 6, "When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of His people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home." Literally she heard that the Lord had visited His people. Naomi was a woman who understood the providence of God. In every one of her speeches throughout the book, Naomi sees that the circumstances of life have been doled out to her and to the people around her by the hand of the Lord. She doesn't just see herself as a victim of circumstances, nor does she see prosperity as simply the product of chance or accident or secondary causes. She doesn't say, "You know, the famine has ended because the rains have come. The famine has ended because the invasion has stopped. The famine has ended because the economy is now on the up swing, the stock market has picked up, and the Japanese have finally opened their markets." She sees behind all of the secondary causes that the Lord has come to the aid of His people.

You know how you keep a commitment? Start seeing Jesus everywhere – in good circumstances and in bad circumstances. Start fixing your eyes on Jesus. Naomi focused on the Lord and not just the circumstances. Look at verse 13 where she says, "Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more

bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!" She sees the Lord's hand in the death of her sons and the death of her husband. In verse 20 she says, "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life bitter." 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.

What an awesome understanding of providence. It's not just circumstances or chance or the economy or a disease or bad genes or a bad parent or the president or my boss. Behind it all stands the Lord. That doesn't mean we understand what God is up to or know why this or that happened. But when your eyes are fixed on Jesus you realize there's only one person that we have to get right with. Only one who acts favorably towards us. God. It doesn't matter what anybody else does or says, or what happens all around. Just one person has to be satisfied. Just one has to be favorable. Just one person has to be pleased. Just one has to act and we will do okay. The Lord. Naomi endures a painful commitment because she's so attached to the Lord. We endure painful circumstances without running, without escaping into our little escapes by praying. In verses 8 and 9, Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Prayer is the human side of the doctrine of Providence. Prayer is what we do in response to believing that God cares, that God rules, that God controls, that God provides. Prayer is not just a psychological thing. You will find relief if you pray, but only because someone hears at the other end of the phone line. By prayer, we

acknowledge that we are not the lord and master of the universe, and that there is someone who we believe to be the lord and master of the universe. Providence tells us that everything is not absurd, and meaningless and happenstance. Prayer is the way for us to say amen to providence, amen to your rule, to Your control. If You intervene, it's going to go well. Providence says there isn't just an irresistible fate on the other side crushing us in an impersonal law.

In prayer, God brings us into fellowship and into union with His government of the world. We get to be instruments for His ruling in this world and instruments for His goodness – His care. God uses everything and everyone. Whether you like it or not, whether you resist or not, you have a choice in how you're going to be used. You can be used like some dumb stick that's picked up and beaten or thrown into the fire and makes some warmth. Or you can be used by having a warm, family relationship with your Father in heaven so you can become a vessel for the expression of His kindness, of His faithfulness, and of His sacrifice. Prayer is the human side of believing in providence where we say, "God You're in control, break in here. Use me, change me, work through me, work around me."

There's a final thing Naomi does that we sometimes forget when we're going through great difficulty. Instead of running away or escaping into TV or drink or sex or another relationship, Naomi does what all people of faith do when life deals hard blows to them. She complains. In verse 11 she says, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters. I am too old to have another husband. 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, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has gone out against me.” With relentless logic, with tears, she kissed them and they wept aloud. With tears she complains about what God has done.

Again in verses 19 and 20 it says, “The two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, ‘Can this be Naomi?’” Is this the pleasant one, the cheerful one, the happy one? Naomi, hearing her own name and how inappropriate her name is because of her destiny, when she sees her destiny and how life has treated her, she says, “Don’t call me Naomi.” I’m no longer the pleasant one, the happy one, the bubbly one, and the optimistic one. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi [the pleasant one]? The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”

Do you know, it’s only people of enduring faith who refuse to run away and complain to the Lord? Complaining, far from being a faithless act, complaining to the Lord is one of the most faith-building things a person in trouble and trial can do. Just like the complaints found in the Psalms. Where are You? Has the Lord forgotten to be good? Has the Lord failed to remember His promises? I just want to quickly distinguish between two different kinds of complaints.

Many complainers are not complaining to God with faith-filled complaints. They’re complaining at God because of self-inflicted wounds. We sow weeds and

reap a crop of weeds instead of fruit, and then we complain to God. Where did these weeds come from? We make terrible choices regarding the treatment of our kids. We scream at them, we reject them, we hurt them, we neglect them and then they grow up and reject us or make bad choices. Then we say, “God, where did You go wrong?” We quit school, we run from our commitments, we pursue escape routes which God says we should not take and then we blame God. This has nothing to do with the kind of complaint that Naomi had.

Her complaints were not the result of self-inflicted wounds. The complaints of the Psalmist or particularly the complaints of Jesus when he hung on the cross and died for us and he cried out to God, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?” The complaints of the godly are one of the signs that faith is still alive in the midst of suffering. Because they’re godly complaints, the faith-filled complaints, the result of a person who takes God seriously. He or she believes with all his or her heart that God is good, that God rules, that God is in control, that God wants good. When the godly one, the one who takes God seriously, doesn’t see God acting, it creates great frustration and anguish. It’s easy to have no complaints when you don’t take God seriously, when you don’t expect anything from God and treat God as a level-one person who’s only going to deliver level-one responses to you. When you take God seriously, as a level-10 person who’s going to deliver level-10, perfect responses and He doesn’t, then we’re faced with two choices.

The choice of Elemilech – you run away. You blow off Christianity and say, “You know, I don’t want to have anything to do with God.” You do what Job’s wife wanted; curse God and die. Or you act like Naomi, King David in the Psalms, Jesus

on the cross, and Job who looked up at heaven and said, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.” I am committed, the righteous complainer says, to the goodness and the love and the sovereignty and the providence of God, despite everything. I’m going to die to this thing. You can throw God your hardest pitch. Get alone with Him; get on your face; cry your eyes out. You can throw your hardest pitch and He’ll catch it.

Finally, we come to Ruth who embraces commitment. We read in verse 14 that they wept again, that Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her. That word clung is the same word used in Genesis 2:24 where it says, “Therefore a man will leave his father and mother and cling to [or cleave to] his wife.” It means in the Hebrew to be glued to, stuck to, to adhere to. Ruth is the prototype of commitment. She’s stuck to her mother-in-law. She’s glued to her. It says in verse 15, “‘Look,’ said Naomi, ‘your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.’” Naomi is pushing her away. Family is calling her back. Her culture is calling her back. Then she has this famous declaration, a covenant declaration. “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. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.’”

I always have a tender place in my heart when I read Ruth 1:16-18. This was the wedding vow that Marlene made to me on our wedding day nearly 24 years ago. Where you go I will go. Where you will stay, I will stay. Your people will be my

people. Your God, will be my God. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. Ruth's commitment involves the whole of life. It involved going and staying; the two opposite extremes of one's traveling. You're either going or staying. It involves all relationships – horizontally: your people will be my people. And, vertically: your God my God. It involves not only life until the end, it involves the end, where you die I will die. This is stated in covenant language. She calls a curse down on herself not only 'til death do us part,' but may God Himself come against me if anything but death separates you and me.

How do you make this kind of commitment in an uncommitted world? How? I think Ruth was a woman who was able to see that the best things in life are obtained NOT by keeping your options open, by keeping all possibilities available. The best things in life are obtained when you leap in and put all the chips on the table when you commit; when you risk. When you slam the door on all the other choices. No one other than the committed know the peace and security that come from being able to trust your whole life to another person.

No one who hasn't given and received a commitment knows what real security feels like; that no one's leaving or threatening to leave. Your goal is to hang in there for the long haul. No one who hasn't made a long term life commitment knows what it feels like to go through the joys, the pains of the ups and downs, the friendships, the fights, the child raising, the vacations, the memories, the grandchildren – the best wine is always the wine that has aged the longest. Ruth was a woman who knew that keeping your options open was a flat out dead end in terms of achieving happiness. She was a woman who knew that there would have to

be trade-offs if she was going to have ultimate fulfillment. She was going to have to leave some things behind. She couldn't join herself to Naomi and Naomi's people without leaving her people. She couldn't join herself to Naomi's God unless she left her god. She couldn't go to the Promise land unless she left her land of Moab.

The committed person understands that some things need to be let go of in order to embrace the better good. The person who embraces commitment ultimately is a person who trusts in the providence of God, who sees the circumstances of their life are lining up towards the embrace of a fresh commitment. They know ultimately they can't trust in themselves or trust in another or trust in a church or trust in the job. They can make a commitment trusting in the Lord that this thing has come to them by the hand of God. That God is good and that God intends to work good in their lives.

It was confidence in the providence of God that enabled me to choose marriage 24 years ago. I thought, here I am, a kid. How can I make a life long commitment to another kid? How do I know where life is going to take me, where life is going to take Marlene? How do I know in 50 years, or 20 years, or 10 years that we wouldn't get tired of each other and regret making this decision? Then I realized, she has the Lord, I have the Lord, and all the other things were checking out. Ultimately in making the step of marriage, I believed God was going to be in my future and her future. That's why Ruth was able to leave everything behind, because she knew God was on the road ahead of her. It's only by trusting the Lord and His providential call for you, that God loves you and will watch out for you, that you can make a commitment in an uncommitted world.

