

Heaven's Hound

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I want to begin this morning by reading a few lines from a modern adaptation of Francis Thompson's classic poem: "The Hound of Heaven." The poem is a story about human waywardness—about how we run from God, about how we reject him and attempt to go our own way. These lines express just that.

He was coming, the one I had heard about, / coming for me and so I fled.... / I sought refuge in forbidden pleasures / I tried to drown out the footsteps.... / The more I fed my desires / The more they consumed me. / Each declared it was worth any price / And the cost was everything I had. / On and on I fled, / On and on his relentless pursuit.¹

If you don't know Thompson's story, it's a story of addiction and destitution. It's one of loss and hopelessness. It's the story of wandering aimlessly through life—wandering away from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Yet, Thompson in his poem and in his personal experience finds that Jesus will not let him go. Jesus is the hound of heaven who is relentlessly and constantly after him.

This morning we will begin a study through the Old Testament Book of Ruth, and we will find this same kind of wayward sinfulness among the ancient Israelites. They are offtrack. They are moving away from God. Yet, just like with Thompson, the Lord won't let them go. He relentlessly pursues and saves the lost.

Let's read our passage and begin to see how.

Ruth 1:1-5

1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelek, 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.

³ Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After

¹ You can view the entire adaptation in a beautifully done video [here](#).

they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Here's a super simple outline. (1st) We're going to meet **a wayward woman**. I'm really focusing on Naomi because this text focuses on her. It zooms in on her. She along with Ruth will be our main characters throughout this ancient, little book. (2nd) We're going to meet **a relentless God**. We will see how, even though the Lord isn't mentioned by name in these first five verses, he is very present. He is in pursuit of Naomi and Ruth.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

1. A wayward woman

Whenever we begin this little book today, we may not immediately recognize how our author is highlighting again and again that everything is seriously off-track. The original readers would have quickly grasped this. They would've seen the clues. They are in the narrative's details. Let me walk you through them.

- **“In the days when the Judges ruled...” (v. 1).**

For the ancient Israelites, this is how you started a tragedy or a horror story. If you wanted to set an ominous tone, you brought up the time when Israel relied upon Judges for guidance and direction. This period in Israel was as bad as it gets. There was idol worship. There was murder. There was rape. There was civil war. Picture *Hamlet* meets *Silence of the Lambs*, and you're on your way there.

So, when we read this beginning clause, we are to recognize that all of Israel isn't following after God—isn't living as it should. As the author of Judges tells us: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25). It's in this time period that our story begins.

- **“...there was a famine in the land” (v. 1).**

Here is another subtle clue that things aren't right. There's a famine in Israel. That's not supposed to happen—at least, not if the Israelites are behaving themselves and keeping covenant with God.

You see, whenever Israel entered into the Promised Land, God made covenant with them. If they obeyed his laws and worshiped him alone, he promised prosperity.

He pledged to bless their crops and livestock and to bless their instruments of harvest and their tools for preparing food (Deuteronomy 28:4-5). But, here we find famine. Something is rotten in the state of Israel—*the people have strayed!*

- **A family “from Bethlehem...went to live...in...Moab” (v. 1).**

We’re not even out of verse one yet! But, here’s a third clue things are wonky. Israelites are leaving their inheritance from God. They’re seeking greener pastures. They’re looking for something better. They aren’t turning in repentance to the Lord. They aren’t looking to God for help. Instead, they’re turning to their own strength and strategies for salvation. Their hope is *not* in the Lord (Psalm 33:20-22).

- **They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem (v. 2).**

This is the kicker. Our author gives us the family’s clan. This family descends from the Ephrathites of Bethlehem. Now, if you’re good with aristocratic lineages in Israel, then you will make a connection here. This isn’t just any old Israelite family who moves out of the Promised Land. This is one of the first families of Bethlehem. This is one of the leading families in Israel. The narrator is likely connecting them to none other than Caleb the great man of faith who—along with Joshua—led Israel into the land. Friends, this is like George Washington’s descendants leaving the U.S. and moving back to England. Things have gone terribly wrong!

So, what’s the point? What’s the take home here? What do we learn from this? We should ask these questions because this isn’t a picture or a history that’s faraway from us. No. This is our history being displayed in this text. As one of my professors in seminary used to say—“We [in the church] are always only one generation away from apostasy.”² In other words, it only takes a short time for us to lose our bearings and abandon our faith in God. One generation believes and follows after the Lord while the next does not.

Make no mistake about it. That’s the picture here. So how does it happen?

Well, it happens one small step at a time. It happens subtly—bit, by little bit. Not all at once. Not in some great event. *No!* It happens as we’re moved by the slow and steady drift of life in a fallen world.

² D. A. Carson often shared this warning in various settings (e.g. advisee group, classroom lectures, sermons, etc.) as well as in his writings.

There is a famine and this family doesn't consider the promises of the Lord. Instead, they think practically. They look to put food on the table so they move away. They leave the Promised Land.

And, notice also how their move evolves. Our narrator indicates their drifting when he contrasts their original plan with what happens. Look with me at verse one and verse four. Here's what we're told.

*So a man...together with his wife and two sons, went to live **for a while** in the country of Moab.... After they had lived there **about ten years**... (vv. 1, 4).*

I don't know what "a while" means to you, but I'll bet you don't usually think that it's going to mean ten years. My children better not mean that when they tell me that they're going to play video games for a while. And, this is the case here as well. This family left Israel with no intention of staying in the land of Moab for ten years, yet that's what they did. One thing led to another. One small decision then another and, before too long, ten years have passed. *They have drifted!*

And friends, this is how we can drift spiritually too. This picture is a warning to us. Like this family, we can subtly move further and further away from the Lord without ever intending to do so. Just one seemingly insignificant choice at a time.

- We give up regular fellowship in our church. We skip one worship service then two then we skip more services than we don't. "Life's just too busy," we tell ourselves. "I'll go back when things slowdown."
- We seek entertainment. We watch television endlessly. We go out to eat. We travel on the weekends. Yet, somehow we can't find time for prayer or for the reading of God's word.

So it happens. Just one step at a time. D. A. Carson explains it this way.

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have

*escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.*³

Isn't this how it is with us? Friends, if you're not intentionally pursuing God, you're drifting away from him. You cannot be neutral about your spiritual existence. Turn to Jesus. Pursue his will for you. It won't be easy. In fact, it will often be hard. But, there is no other Way to redemption and joy and eternal life—only through faith in Christ can these be truly found and experienced. Amen.

Well, let's turn to our next point.

2. A relentless God

You know, one of the most difficult things I'm beginning to learn as a parent is how and when to let my children fail. You see, sometimes you have to let them go if they're going to grow and learn and trust you. Sometimes relentlessly loving them and pursuing them means giving them over to their misguided hopes.

Let me give you a simple example of this. My kids often want to stay up late—way later than is good for them. Now, Natalie and I have established certain rules when it comes to bedtime. And, there is more and more freedom as the kids get older. Yet, there comes a point when you let your child have a sleepover with their friends, and they get to choose to sleep or not sleep. In short, they get to choose what's best for them. They get to realize their hopes of staying up all night. And what happens? Well, typically they come home tired and grouchy and miserable and wanting sleep, and hopefully they begin to trust your wisdom and guidance more and more.

Friends, I believe this is akin to the way in which the Lord is pursuing Naomi in this text. Naomi's family left Israel to go to Moab because Moab represented hope and salvation to them. "We'll find a better life there," they think—even though God told the Israelites to live in the Promised Land as his people, even though the famine should have called them to repent and turn to God for relief.

So, what does God do? He let's Naomi's family pursue life in its own fashion. The Lord let's them seek salvation by their own strength. He gives this first family of Israel over to its misguided hopes and dreams. *But they do not satisfy!*

³ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God (Volume 2)*, January 23 entry.

First, Naomi's husband passes away. Next, her two sons also die and are gone. This is all stated in a matter-of-fact way by the author. We're tempted to be critical of the narrator for communicating so little feeling in his description of these deaths. However, his very abrupt writing style does clearly communicate the abrupt reality Naomi now faces.

So, we're left asking with Naomi—*Where is hope now?* That's the question before Naomi. That's the question before us.

Friends, what are you running after for salvation? What are you hoping in? What are you trusting to bring you satisfaction and joy? This is an important question for us to ask ourselves—not just once but constantly, because we invent little saviors. Our hearts produce idols quite naturally.

- We attempt to fill ourselves up with success: how much we make or know.
- We try to find happiness in relationships but people always disappoint us or let us down.
- We run after pleasure—food, drink, sex—but they grow stale in the end.

Pick your poison. What are you worshiping now? And, if your being honest, does it really satisfy you? Does it meet your expectations? Does it save?

Friends, at every disappointment, just know Jesus calls to you. He's after you. The Hound of heaven is after you. The Lord is tireless in his pursuit of the wayward and the lost. God is relentlessly after Naomi here. When she finally hits rock bottom, he calls-out to her. (Here's a sneak-peek at next week's sermon. Drew, forgive me. I'm stealing your first verse.) This is what the author tells us.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she...prepared to return home... (v. 6).

Naomi has never been alone. God has always been there. He's been after her. He won't give up his pursuit. When her hopes and dreams have come crashing down around her, the Lord is there to welcome her home. He is in the highest of heavens; he is in the lowest of depths. There is no where we can hide from him (Psalm 139:7), for he is the gracious and glorious Hound of heaven.

I heard a story once; / an incredible story, / an amazing story. / It told of one who was relentlessly faithful / and loves with an unwavering love. It was said that he sorrows over broken people. / It was said that he tirelessly pursues each lost one, / never stopping, never giving up....⁴

⁴ An adaptation of Francis Thompson's poem "The Hound of Heaven."