

# CROSSING CULTURES

WITH RUTH

Lessons on Thriving in Mission

James Nelson

Crossing Cultures with Ruth:  
*Lessons on Thriving in Mission*



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## Publisher's Foreword



Each and every one of us makes many decisions every day. Not every choice has eternal consequences (paper or plastic? decaf or regular?). But many do.

When decisions involve your faith walk, your calling, and your ministry, the results may be mundane or life changing. Some decisions involve your church or ministry or organization. Others are more personal in nature.

Regardless of the circumstances, each of us is faced with the task of making important decisions, and at times that task can seem daunting.

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Our earnest hope and prayer is that this resource will help you discern how God may be guiding you through the decisions you must make. If you do find it helpful, could you please let us know? Write us at [publisher@gmi.org](mailto:publisher@gmi.org) and share your decision story with us so that we can celebrate with you as God uses you to advance his Kingdom.

God bless you in your service!

In him,  
Jon Hirst  
**Publisher/President, GMI**



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# Chapter 1:

## Your People and My People

“You have the greatest job in the world!” Angela told me. Angela and her husband were missionaries in a country where people were outlawed from converting to Christianity. The work was slow and challenging, but a few missionaries had seen amazing results, with whole families and neighborhoods coming to faith in Jesus.

I was doing what I typically do: research. Specifically, I was gathering stories from missionaries for Fruitful Practice Research, a project to identify the activities consistently practiced by missionaries who have seen churches planted—in Southeast Asia, in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Middle East and in other regions. Angela and her husband were helping me with my research. And yes, she was right—it was a great job.

But not all of the stories we were hearing from missionaries were happy. Some cross-cultural workers had seen new faith communities decimated by persecution; others had been jailed or persecuted themselves for sharing and demonstrating Christ’s compelling love.

To experience the work firsthand, I was embedded on a church-planting team in an Asian city. Groups of short-term missionaries regularly joined our team as interns for periods of training and hands-on experience. Members of our team took turns mentoring the interns and leading our weekly training meetings.

The information I was compiling about successful missionaries was compelling, but how could I pass these lessons on to the interns? They were already drowning in information:

*How to learn a new language.*

*How to adapt to a new culture.*

*How to work as a team.*

*How to learn about other faiths.*

*How to introduce people to Christ.*

*How to overcome objections.*

*How to be authentic about your identity without revealing that you are a missionary.*

*How to get and keep a visa in restricted-access countries.*

And on and on.

These interns were passionate and eager to learn as they considered giving their lives in full-time service. All of the information they were learning was important, but there was just too much to absorb. I wondered how I could help them remember the lessons I was learning from fruitful missionaries.

Several weeks later, while preparing to lead our team worship, I met a woman named Ruth through the Old Testament book that bears her name. Of course, I had read Ruth many times. But as I read the book from my new home in Asia—where I was working to apply cross-cultural ministry lessons in my own life and to encourage interns to do the same in theirs—I began to see amazing things in Ruth's story that I had never seen before.

In this book, I hope to pass on some of these amazing lessons to you.

## **Rethinking Ruth**

Ruth was a young adult who navigated the early stages of a long-term cross-cultural experience with a wisdom that was beyond her years. As I made notes about the characteristics Ruth exhibited, I saw many of the same strengths I had seen in my research on what makes missionaries successful.

Ruth was humble, determined, hopeful, hard-working, resourceful and bold. She trusted in God with all her heart, and God used her to transform a family, a community, and ultimately, a kingdom.

God also used Ruth to help transform you and me. As you can see by reading the genealogy of Christ found in the first chapter of Matthew's gospel, Ruth was the mother of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David. This family line led directly to Jesus.

The more I studied the book of Ruth, I began to see her as a teacher, mentor, and even companion in cross-cultural service. For interns and new missionaries, Ruth could be a memorable role model for the ministry techniques they were learning.

In addition to being a model missionary, she was also a real, three-dimensional person that young workers could easily relate to. And as I dove more deeply into this ancient scriptural story, I saw even more connections to the "fruitful practices" that respected church planters were implementing around the world.

My interest in Ruth as a cross-cultural companion continued long after I left Asia, and whenever I speak at missions conferences, I encourage young people considering mission service to look into Ruth's powerful story. Now, after years of further study and research, I can offer would-be missionaries this book to help them in their studies of Ruth.

## **An unlikely missionary model?**

Little has been written about Ruth as a model cross-cultural worker, perhaps because Ruth was not a “missionary” by most standard definitions. No one sent her. She had no missionary intentions. She brought no one to conversion. She was not even a Christian!

Rather, Ruth is a rich example of something every current missionary needs to be—a person who makes necessary cross-cultural adjustments skillfully, because her trust in God is deep and practical. Her example also points to that of her descendant Jesus, also a cross-cultural servant, who arrived as a newcomer in Bethlehem.

The book of Ruth was written to teach its original Jewish audience about God’s providence, his action in and through his people, the value of women and Gentiles, the importance of loving-kindness among his people, and the honorable heritage of King David. Christians can affirm each of those lessons. Also, like many other Old Testament accounts, the book carries additional significance in light of realities revealed in the New Testament.

Traditionally, the main characters in the book—which takes place about 1,100 years before Christ—have been interpreted as “types” that foreshadow New Testament roles. For example, Boaz is seen as symbolic of Christ the Redeemer. Ruth is seen as symbolic of the Church—especially the Gentile branch of the Church. Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, is often viewed as symbolic of Israel (which was made complete through the grafting in of the Gentiles).

I have adapted these traditional parallels slightly to explore lessons for cross-cultural servants. In the following pages, you will see how Boaz serves as the Master/Redeemer, working in the land long before the cross-cultural servant arrives. Ruth represents the

cross-cultural servant who partners with the Master to see new life brought forth. Naomi speaks as those who are in need of life.

### **Who can serve, and how?**

I pray that the following pages will encourage you to read, reread, and reflect on the meaning of the book of Ruth. Along the way, I also hope I can help you address two important questions: *Who* and *How*.

The *Who* question is one that confronts every follower of Christ who considers cross-cultural service. I have known many young people who mistakenly believe that cross-cultural service is only for highly educated, multilingual world travelers. One of the most encouraging lessons found in Ruth's story is the simple realization that if this humble woman can carry out this complex cultural task, maybe you can, too.

The *How* questions arise after one has made a commitment to cross-cultural service: *How* can I prepare? *How* can I begin well? *How* can I discern what God is doing? *How* can I know when to be bold or patient? *How* can I persevere through difficulties and the unexpected?

Although the book of Ruth is not a traditional missionary manual, I believe it contains profound, memorable lessons that can help each of us answer these practical questions about how to serve. After all, this is the woman who famously said, "Your people shall be my people."

If you're ready, let's journey together to the land of Moab some 3,100 years ago so we can learn from this amazing woman.



## Chapter 2: A Life-and-Death Problem

AND BOTH MAHLON AND CHILION DIED, SO THAT THE WOMAN WAS LEFT WITHOUT HER TWO SONS AND HER HUSBAND (RUTH 1:5).

### **The setting**

A panoramic view unfolded as Elimelech and his wife Naomi rounded a bend in the road. To the right, the rocky terrain tumbled down a thousand feet into the valley where Jericho lay. They saw the Jordan River emptying into the Dead Sea. Beyond were hills and in the distance, a solitary mountain.

It was their third day since leaving Bethlehem, and Naomi's thoughts turned to another pair who had looked out over that same valley a millennium before—her ancestor Abraham and his nephew Lot.

“My herdsmen and I will go that way,” Lot had said as they separated.

Naomi was certainly hoping that things would go better for her family than they did for Lot's family. Lot had been captured in a raid,

nearly assaulted by his neighbors and widowed in the escape from Sodom. He was reduced to living in a cave with his daughters. With no prospects for marriage, the daughters got Lot drunk and had sex with him. The surrounding land was named for one of the resulting children: Moab.

While Naomi thought about Lot, Elimelech gazed at the distant mountain and thought of more recent history. Two centuries before, Moses had stood on that mountain and looked across to where Elimelech now stood.

*Moses had wanted to come here, Elimelech thought. Now we are going there.*

The Moabites had refused to let Moses and his band of refugees cross through their land. The Israelites had been forced to circle through the desert to the east. God then told Moses to climb the mountain, Mount Nebo, and view the Promised Land. His people would enter, but Moses would not. He was buried in Moab.

Since then, relations between Israel and Moab had sometimes been friendly, though oftentimes not. At one point, the Israelites had been subject to King Eglon of Moab for a generation (Judges 3:14). At other times, the Israelites had disobeyed God and worshipped the gods of Moab (Judges 10:6).

Elimelech was concerned about how they would be received in Moab. But what could they do? Famine had come.

He looked toward the front of the family's small caravan where his sons—nearly adults now—walked. Even if the famine were to lift, Elimelech's small field in Bethlehem barely produced enough for them. It would never support his sons' families. They may as well leave now.

*I hope we receive a better welcome than Moses did, Elimelech thought.*

## Chapter 2: A Life-and-Death Problem

As Naomi and Elimelech turned their gaze back to the road, their thoughts returned to the present. One thing seemed certain: living in Moab had to be better than starving in Bethlehem.

IN THE DAYS WHEN THE JUDGES RULED THERE WAS A FAMINE IN THE LAND, AND A MAN OF BETHLEHEM IN JUDAH WENT TO SOJOURN IN THE COUNTRY OF MOAB, HE AND HIS WIFE AND HIS TWO SONS. THE NAME OF THE MAN WAS ELIMELECH AND THE NAME OF HIS WIFE NAOMI, AND THE NAMES OF HIS TWO SONS WERE MAHLON AND CHILION. THEY WERE EPHRATHITES FROM BETHLEHEM IN JUDAH.

THEY WENT INTO THE COUNTRY OF MOAB AND REMAINED THERE. BUT ELIMELECH, THE HUSBAND OF NAOMI, DIED, AND SHE WAS LEFT WITH HER TWO SONS. THESE TOOK MOABITE WIVES; THE NAME OF THE ONE WAS ORPAH AND THE NAME OF THE OTHER RUTH. THEY LIVED THERE ABOUT TEN YEARS, AND BOTH MAHLON AND CHILION DIED, SO THAT THE WOMAN WAS LEFT WITHOUT HER TWO SONS AND HER HUSBAND (RUTH 1:1-5).

### **Death, unembellished**

Death is a continual presence in God's Word. People are barred from the tree of life in Genesis 3 and do not regain permanent access to it and the river of life until Revelation 22. When all 1,189 chapters of the Bible are numbered sequentially, death arrives in Chapter 3 and is not defeated until Chapter 1,187.

Ruth's story also starts with death. Three people die within the first five verses. Amazingly, nothing is said about how they died. Focusing on the cause of death would draw attention away from the villain of the book: death itself. The first, last and ever-present enemy.

The battle between the forces of life and death is a core component of Christ's work, as he indicated one day when he himself was traveling cross-culturally:

...WHOEVER DRINKS OF THE WATER THAT I WILL GIVE HIM WILL NEVER BE THIRSTY AGAIN. THE WATER THAT I WILL GIVE HIM WILL BECOME IN HIM A SPRING OF WATER WELLING UP TO ETERNAL LIFE (JOHN 4:14).

Death and life. A spring of water can be the difference between life and death in the desert. Those who drink from Jesus' spring, who have tasted the living water and who share it with others, are life-bringers to those facing inevitable death.

At the heart of the book of Ruth is the struggle between life and death. Ultimately, Ruth becomes a cross-cultural servant who partners with a redeemer to bring forth new life. This is one of the ways that Ruth serves as a powerful model for those who serve Christ cross-culturally.

## **Matters of life and death**

Ruth's lack of hope is captured early on in the statement: "The woman [Naomi] was left without her two sons and her husband." Death had entered her story.

In a sense, the battle against the forces of death is a major theme of Ruth's book. The Ruth narrative includes acts of charity, but the main problem is not how widows will be fed. The story sees Ruth overcoming cultural barriers, but the main problem is not a foreigner's acceptance. There is legal intrigue, but the main problem is not justice; romance, but the problem is not loneliness. The problem is whether new, sustaining life will come.

As we see in the New Testament, the work of Christ directly addresses this issue of death:

## Chapter 2: A Life-and-Death Problem

I CAME THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE AND HAVE IT ABUNDANTLY (JOHN 10:10).

I GIVE THEM ETERNAL LIFE, AND THEY WILL NEVER PERISH, AND NO ONE WILL SNATCH THEM OUT OF MY HAND (JOHN 10:28).

### **Keeping death uppermost**

What about you? How do you respond to the presence of death in the world and in the communities where you serve? In everyday life and ministry, your attention can be so easily drawn toward the million needs around you, whether you are serving in a tribal village or inner-city soup kitchen. The myriad needs in the fallen world cry out for resolution.

As God leads, you should feed the hungry, empower the powerless, educate the ignorant, free the oppressed and mend the broken. These actions of compassion and justice enable life to flourish.

The core issue for all humans is life and death. Death will visit each family, but the Savior's lasting spring of life is the core need of all of humanity, both the goal and the source of power for service. The book of Ruth keeps the issue of life and death in sharp focus.

*Christianity Today's* Andy Crouch writes,

*“The world is passing away....The Christian hope is not for an improving world any more than it is for a fountain of youth. But Christian hope overcomes the forces of despair and decay in the midst of this world and provides foretastes of the coming kingdom where anyone who will receive the Lamb's sacrifice will be raised to life, and where the glory and honor of the nations will be presented as offerings to the*

*King of kings. Hope for a life beyond this life, and a world of shalom beyond this world of injustice, is the greatest resource for the work of justice here and now.”<sup>1</sup>*

God’s call may come to you as a clear directive, or you may simply feel conviction at the words of Scripture to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...” (Matthew 28:19). Although your objective may not be clearly laid out at first, each one of us is called to preach the gospel and serve the Lord. God can and will lay the path for you, if you will obey and take the next step. The hope that you bring to everyone you interact with is the assurance of a voice sounding from the throne of heaven, saying, “Death shall be no more. ...Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:4-5).

### **Does heritage matter?**

Death comes in many forms. In this case, Naomi is contemplating the death of her family name. In many parts of the world today, family structure is loosely held and not necessarily valued. But in Naomi’s day, a family name was a prize beyond measure.

Losing a family legacy is a common human problem, though the rate of loss varies from culture to culture. One statistician calculated that the likelihood of a 20th-century United States male family line eventually becoming extinct was 82 percent!<sup>2</sup>

The problem of lost family lines may seem counterintuitive during a century of global population explosion. But among the Chinese, for example, the number of family names in use has dropped from 12,000 to 3,100, creating identity concerns in a country with more than a billion people.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, a proposed law is currently before the British Parliament to grant gender equality in the inheritance of aristocratic lands and titles. If passed, Britain can boast of having the same

degree of inheritance-law gender equality that God provided for the Israelites in the case of the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27).

Building a lasting heritage is an important issue for many families. While a heritage connects symbolically to eternal life, it also connects practically to the impact of a family on its community. This was elegantly summarized by Clarence Oddbody, the angel in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, who said, "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"<sup>24</sup>

Retrospectively, this is the case with Ruth. Were it not for her, there would be no King David—at least not his particular, poet-warrior personality. Certainly God would have worked out his cosmic plan through other branches in Judah's family tree—but he delighted to work through this particular family by continuing the family line three generations before the psalmist was born.

In the end, heritage is important because God has adopted us as children and heirs. Paul writes:

BUT WHEN THE FULLNESS OF TIME HAD COME, GOD SENT FORTH HIS SON...SO THAT WE MIGHT RECEIVE ADOPTION AS SONS. AND BECAUSE YOU ARE SONS, GOD HAS SENT THE SPIRIT OF HIS SON INTO OUR HEARTS, CRYING, "ABBA! FATHER!" SO YOU ARE NO LONGER A SLAVE, BUT A SON, AND IF A SON, THEN AN HEIR THROUGH GOD (GALATIANS 4:4-7).

### **Identifying with the problem bearer**

Something else jumps out in the first five verses of Ruth: Death is Ruth's problem, too. She experiences deep grief, having lost her husband Mahlon as well as her brother-in-law. Elimelech may have died before Ruth entered the family, but the echoes of Naomi's grief

were evident daily. While Ruth does not despair, her loss and sorrow are real.

North American Christian culture almost demands that you find a silver lining in the midst of pain, loss or regret. But before thinking about how God will use Ruth's grief for good, take time to absorb the depth of her pain. God cares about Ruth's sorrow without having to use it for good. Hurt can stand by itself sometimes.

We will be learning much about how Ruth deals with the ever-present reality of death, but what about Naomi, the problem-bearer, an empty, bitter person without hope? She does not expect God to care or to be active in her situation.

When you have tasted of life from Jesus, it is hard to remember your own Naomi-like nature, to reflect on how lost you once were in sin and separation from God. But there was a time when sin declared its claim on your life, squeezing hope from you. Your hopelessness may be a distant memory or a recent reality, but the closer you can stand to Naomi without flinching from her pain, the greater help you can be to those like her.

Those of us who are involved in cross-cultural ministry long to identify with Ruth, the faithful servant, the beloved, the redeemed. But we also need to declare our kinship with Naomi—the bitter, the empty, the bereft.

“I once was lost, but now am found.” Embracing the truth of that lyric is a prerequisite for effective service. Only after remembering your lostness can you turn productively to the good that God will do with your pain and frustration. And God will use your pain and loss. Whether the process is understandable to you or not, he will redeem and redirect it for his purpose, as certainly as Ruth's grief gave her the empathy and compassion that led her to walk alongside Naomi in a foreign land.

Ask the Lord to help you reflect upon your past and your present with honesty and understanding—and then ask him to apply it for good among those you serve.

### **Numbers, names and faces**

Looking into the bitter face of Naomi is challenging. Recognizing that there are billions of Naomis around the world, each facing the ultimate problem of death without hope, is almost overwhelming. Today, roughly 150,000 people will draw their last breath.<sup>5</sup> About 100,000 of them will do so without having called upon Christ as their Savior—and about 40,000 of them will have lived in a community with no evangelical Christ-followers available to look into their face and share hope.<sup>6</sup>

Those numbers seem daunting. But they would be far, far, higher were it not for the faithful generations who have followed in Ruth's footsteps—especially during the days when crossing cultural boundaries was far more difficult and expensive and far more likely to see death arrive quickly. Millions of Christ-followers in Africa, Asia and Latin America today trace their spiritual heritage to those who cared enough to make an arduous cross-cultural journey in order to bring hope.

More motivating than numbers are the names and faces and stories of those you will meet—or have already met. As Ruth's initial connection with Naomi was deepened through hardship, take steps to walk closely with those you are called to serve, to enter into their pain so that you can bring hope.

Today you have the opportunity to participate in the journey for the Naomis of your time. You may already have a name and a face in mind—someone to whom God has connected you; someone who needs your witness of hope.

## Crossing Cultures with Ruth: Lessons on Thriving in Mission

As you serve, envision walking with that person in an eternity where God has been wiped away every tear. Then envision walking with generations of those who might trace their spiritual heritage through that person—and through you.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about one way that you have identified with the pain of those who do not yet have real hope.

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What are you doing to keep your attention on eternal life (even in the midst of other ministry)?

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What one thing can you do to envision a godly heritage among those whom you serve?

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Pray right now that God will transform and use your own loss and pain.

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## Chapter 3: Commitment Required

BUT RUTH SAID, “DO NOT URGE ME TO LEAVE YOU OR TO RETURN FROM FOLLOWING YOU. FOR WHERE YOU GO I WILL GO, AND WHERE YOU LODGE I WILL LODGE. YOUR PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE, AND YOUR GOD MY GOD. WHERE YOU DIE I WILL DIE, AND THERE WILL I BE BURIED” (RUTH 1:16-17A).

### **The setting**

Naomi looked blankly out the door toward the fields. She had been crying, but her tears had run dry again.

Life in Moab had not been easy for the Israelite sojourner. Her husband Elimelech had died some time ago, but there had still been life and laughter in the modest dwelling she shared with her two sons and their wives, both Moabite women. Naomi had directed the activities at home according to Israelite faith and custom. She had been hoping that a grandchild would come along soon.

Then suddenly, the young men, Mahlon and Chilion, were dead as well.

Shocked, the three women had prepared the bodies for burial. They had wept and mourned their loss together. But now they were forced to consider the urgency of their next steps. Food was scarce ahead of the spring harvest.

Each woman had relatives they could call upon. The Moabite women's families were nearby. Naomi thought of her clan back in Judah. She had been able to keep up with occasional news from home, but it had been 10 years since she last lived there. *How disgraceful to return with no husband, sons or grandchildren!* she thought. But she had few other options.

Meanwhile, she thought, the Moabite women would certainly return to their families. With the men dead, the bonds that tied the three women together had been broken. There was no benefit now in remaining with a foreign mother-in-law. They were young and might remarry.

As you read the following passage, think about what ties people together—and how those ties are sustained, changed or broken. What connects you to those you are called to serve? What ties to home or others may need to be released?

THEN SHE AROSE WITH HER DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW TO RETURN FROM THE COUNTRY OF MOAB, FOR SHE HAD HEARD IN THE FIELDS OF MOAB THAT THE LORD HAD VISITED HIS PEOPLE AND GIVEN THEM FOOD. SO SHE SET OUT FROM THE PLACE WHERE SHE WAS WITH HER TWO DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW, AND THEY WENT ON THE WAY TO RETURN TO THE LAND OF JUDAH.

BUT NAOMI SAID TO HER TWO DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW, "GO, RETURN EACH OF YOU TO HER MOTHER'S HOUSE. MAY THE LORD DEAL KINDLY WITH YOU, AS YOU HAVE DEALT

### Chapter 3: Commitment Required

WITH THE DEAD AND WITH ME. THE LORD GRANT THAT YOU MAY FIND REST, EACH OF YOU IN THE HOUSE OF HER HUSBAND!" THEN SHE KISSED THEM, AND THEY LIFTED UP THEIR VOICES AND WEPT.

AND THEY SAID TO HER, "NO, WE WILL RETURN WITH YOU TO YOUR PEOPLE."

BUT NAOMI SAID, "TURN BACK, MY DAUGHTERS; WHY WILL YOU GO WITH ME? HAVE I YET SONS IN MY WOMB THAT THEY MAY BECOME YOUR HUSBANDS? TURN BACK, MY DAUGHTERS; GO YOUR WAY, FOR I AM TOO OLD TO HAVE A HUSBAND. IF I SHOULD SAY I HAVE HOPE, EVEN IF I SHOULD HAVE A HUSBAND THIS NIGHT AND SHOULD BEAR SONS, WOULD YOU THEREFORE WAIT TILL THEY WERE GROWN? WOULD YOU THEREFORE REFRAIN FROM MARRYING? NO, MY DAUGHTERS, FOR IT IS EXCEEDINGLY BITTER TO ME FOR YOUR SAKE THAT THE HAND OF THE LORD HAS GONE OUT AGAINST ME."

THEN THEY LIFTED UP THEIR VOICES AND WEPT AGAIN. AND ORPAH KISSED HER MOTHER-IN-LAW, BUT RUTH CLUNG TO HER.

AND SHE SAID, "SEE, YOUR SISTER-IN-LAW HAS GONE BACK TO HER PEOPLE AND TO HER GODS; RETURN AFTER YOUR SISTER-IN-LAW."

BUT RUTH SAID, "DO NOT URGE ME TO LEAVE YOU OR TO RETURN FROM FOLLOWING YOU. FOR WHERE YOU GO I WILL GO, AND WHERE YOU LODGE I WILL LODGE.

YOUR PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE, AND YOUR GOD MY GOD. WHERE YOU DIE I WILL DIE, AND THERE WILL I BE BURIED. MAY THE LORD DO SO TO ME AND MORE ALSO IF ANYTHING BUT DEATH PARTS ME FROM YOU.”

AND WHEN NAOMI SAW THAT SHE WAS DETERMINED TO GO WITH HER, SHE SAID NO MORE (RUTH 1:6-18).

## Calling and commitment

Today, most employees don't hesitate to leave a job when circumstances change, or if the job doesn't turn out to be what was expected. There are other jobs. Sometimes change is good—except when there is more at stake than a job.

A calling or commission is much more serious and less likely to be abandoned with a change in circumstances. The option of leaving isn't a consideration. Mission mobilizers and trainers emphasize the early Protestant missionaries' commitment to stay the course until death.

Longtime missions pastor Paul Borthwick writes:

*“On a journey to Ghana, my host took me to a missionary cemetery where vast numbers of 25- and 26-year-olds were buried,”* writes Paul Borthwick. *“They had died within two years of coming to Ghana or to West Africa to bring the Gospel. Tradition says that the British missionaries journeyed to West Africa with their earthly goods packed in their own caskets. They knew when they brought the Gospel, they would not return home. They went to die there. And they did.”*<sup>7</sup>

*On that same trip, I visited a Pentecostal church in Ghana that is sending missionaries to 85 countries in the*

*world. This can happen now because people came a century ago and laid down their lives.”<sup>8</sup>*

As Ghanaians are inspired to serve in missions because of the commitment of saints who served a century ago, you can be inspired by the commitment of a woman who lived three millennia ago.

Ruth had a sense of supernatural calling. When Naomi told Ruth to go home—three times—Ruth’s essentially responded, “I am coming with you, and I am bringing my casket to make sure it goes next to yours.” She expressed total commitment to Naomi and her community. And she did not hesitate to invoke the potential of God’s curse upon her, should she waver from her promise.

### **Will I go where you go?**

Service requires commitment, but commitment-phobia is spreading rapidly in 21st-century western culture. While once upon a time, marriage was a commitment until death, many couples see divorce as a viable option for any reason, and other couples forego the marriage commitment altogether. Employers are only committed until the next quarterly earnings report; and employees only stay until something better comes along.

Fewer people today have seen commitment modeled, whether by their families, their employers or their friends. As a result, people are hesitant to make commitments—and they waver from the commitments they make.

Rob Hay, principal of UK missionary training center Redcliffe College and editor of *Worth Keeping*, a book on missionary retention, said that the young adults he has interviewed were not hesitant to commit to mission service. Rather, they did not want to make a long-term commitment to a mission agency or organization. Their concern was less about the people they are going to serve and more about traditional mission sending structures.

Recognizing this, many mission organizations have developed internships—field experiences of six months to three years with no continuing commitment—as a tool to encourage commitment-shy young people to explore what it means to live as a missionary. The hope and expectation is that many will remain and become long-term missionaries. Meanwhile, those who are not well suited to serve can make a graceful exit for other kinds of jobs.

One of the longest-running internships is Africa Inland Mission's TIMO program (Training in Missionary Outreach). AIM tracked the graduates of this two-year program over its first 15 years of its history through the 1990s and early 2000s. The organization found that the vast majority of interns continued to serve as long-term missionaries, whether with AIM or with others.

As such programs have become more common, however, the trend is moving away from internships as a bridge to long-term commitment. GMI occasionally surveys a group of thousands of young adults who are considering cross-cultural service. In 2012, we asked them about their interest in mission internships and what their motivation would be for taking part in one.

Response patterns revealed three segments:

First, some were seeking to learn **where to serve**—exploring whether a particular setting or agency was a good fit.

Second, some were considering **whether to serve**—seeking discernment about serving long term.

The third group was by far the biggest group—60 percent of those surveyed—and consisted of those who were eager to serve, with no concern about what might follow a one- or two-year term. To their credit, this group was focused on **those being served** rather than on themselves as servants. But the flipside of a living-in-the-moment perspective is the tendency to view every experience as temporary and commitment as both unrealistic and unnecessary.

### Chapter 3: Commitment Required

Ruth was focused on serving Naomi. But she did not hesitate to combine a servant heart with a willingness to commit to an unlimited term of service.

“But that was a different time,” someone might say. “A slower time, with fewer choices and opportunities.” That is true. But Ruth’s commitment to leave home and culture was a big decision, even then.

Look no further than Orpah for an example of one who expressed an initial commitment to leave home for another culture but was quickly dissuaded. She reflects the experience of many today who are drawn to the idea of living and serving cross-culturally, but who allow themselves at some point to be talked out of it.

U.S. mission agencies have seen their number of long-term residential international workers double in the past generation. However, almost all of that growth has come from non-North Americans—Ghanaians and many others—who are serving cross-culturally or in their home culture. The number of long-term cross-cultural workers from North America has remained flat since 1992, although the number of short-term workers has skyrocketed.<sup>9</sup>

Given such variable winds of culture, some in the mission community emphasize missions conferences and other events at which people are encouraged to make a commitment to serve. In addition to traditional student mission conferences, a whole new crop of events has emerged, emphasizing radical discipleship—with a commitment to cross-cultural service being one way that people can respond to God’s call.

GMI conducts evaluation research for many mission conferences. Sometimes this includes tracking commitments to serve cross-culturally, to see how they change over time. Results show that commitments do change over time—a lot. A glance at summary statistics shows that at many mission conferences, between 15 and

35 percent of attendees commit to long-term cross-cultural service. Six months later, those numbers have dropped slightly, with 10 to 25 percent indicating a commitment to long-term service.

But when individuals are tracked through the process, a more complex story emerges. Some people, as you might expect, make a first-time commitment at the event and then either maintain or back away from that commitment in the months following. But others arrive at the event already committed and then find themselves reconsidering that commitment. Still others enter and leave the event without making a commitment—but the experience is a catalyst in a process, and six months later they indicate a commitment to serve.

### **Solidifying your commitment**

Commitment can be a volatile thing, but certain behaviors practices have proven to help people in keeping the commitments they make. One of those is simply *talking with someone about the possibility of serving as a cross-cultural missionary*.

Giving voice to a vision—to a friend, a family member, pastor or campus fellowship leader—helps affirm and sustain it. If you are not yet serving cross-culturally, have you discussed the idea with someone? Find someone you trust and let them know what you are considering. Pray together for guidance and open doors, and discuss the barriers that need to be overcome.

Another behavior linked to maintaining commitment is taking a formal missions class. Far fewer do this than talk about their commitment—but those who do are very likely to remain committed. Whether you are a full-time student or not, consider taking this important step.

One option is *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, an insightful 15-week course created by the U.S. Center for World Mission and open to anyone. Visit [perspectives.org](http://perspectives.org) to learn more and find the nearest class location. You can audit the course or take it for

certificate or credit. Just the interaction with the scholars and cross-cultural workers who teach the course is worth the time and effort as you pursue clarity in your call.

### **Getting the silent treatment**

While Ruth lived in a different time and cultural context, one aspect of her decision to go closely parallels that of missionaries today: the lack of welcome they receive. Those whom you go to serve may not want your message—or your company.

Naomi frames her objections mostly in terms of Ruth's and Orpah's self-interest: "Stick with your family and your culture. Find another husband. I have nothing to offer you now."

This Israelite woman even goes so far as to mention the local gods as if she believed that they were a feature of the Moab cultural package to be promoted. The point is, she didn't want the help. She is trying to talk Ruth out of making this crazy commitment.

At the conclusion of the passage, Naomi doesn't respond with applause or thanks or even, "OK, if you say so." She sullenly resigns herself to Ruth's presence, essentially giving her the silent treatment.

At some point in your ministry experience, you may receive this cold treatment. Antagonism among those you serve may be overt, but more likely it will remain below the surface as people put on a friendly face or simply steer clear of contact with you. During my term in Southeast Asia, it was several months before I heard a directly antagonistic comment from a local. When it happened I was taken aback, because so many people had been friendly. Later I realized that many people carried an anti-foreigner sentiment—but few voiced it in public.

What you are more likely to hear are the objections from those from your home culture—active questioning rather than silent disinterest:

*“Why would you want to tell people how to live?”*

*“Aren’t there plenty of problems to take care of here at home?”*

*“I’m wondering when you’ll come home and get a real job.”*

*“I just could never live off of other people’s charity.”*

*“Missions is just neo-colonialism.”*

*“How will you ever find a husband out there?”*

These questions are real, and the answers you develop will give you the opportunity to examine and affirm your commitment to cross-cultural ministry. But realize that if you try to answer every objection, you may get stuck in endless debate. In most circumstances, a smile and a graceful redirection will serve you best, since the most important questions you have to answer are the ones coming from your Savior, who has called you to your work.

## **Whose God?**

Speaking of objections, some people may not consider Ruth to be a model for cross-cultural mission because she is a convert, coming into God’s people, rather than a missionary going out from God’s people. Of particular concern is the idea that they might say to those they go to serve, “Your God [will be] my God.”

First, consider the background: Yes, Ruth is a convert, but she has likely been one for some time as a member of the Israelite household into which she married. She has probably participated in household worship of the Hebrew God for some time. As such, she has made a conscious decision to follow the Lord. In the same way, you made a decision to follow Jesus, whether your family of origin worshipped him or not. Your decision to follow may have been influenced by your family, but it established your own faith journey, rather than a secondhand faith.

Second, consider the context: Ruth is responding to Naomi's suggestion that she should return to the gods of the Moabites. As a follower of the one true God, Ruth may well be offended by the suggestion. Yet Naomi's words reflect a fallacy common among those who have not lived cross-culturally: that culture and faith are completely and permanently bound to one another. While the ties of culture are strong, they are not absolute. No one knows that better than Ruth who, while still living in Moab, had already turned her heart away from Chemosh and the other gods of that culture.

Third, consider again the problem of the book and the role Ruth plays relative to it. The faith of the Israelites is the backdrop to the story—not its focus. The problem remains the need to establish a legacy. Ruth's declaration of commitment to Naomi is centered on walking together with her through this family crisis. It is for this that she is committing her life and walking in her faith.

### **Placing your ear against the doorpost**

Daughters-in-law in the ancient Near East were only barely above the status of servants. Even today in Middle Eastern homes, mothers-in-law hold unquestioned leadership over the younger women in the home. By thanking Orpah and Ruth and discouraging them from going with her, Naomi was releasing them from their obligation to serve and obey her. By remaining and declaring her loyalty, Ruth was committing to become Naomi's bondservant.

Exodus 21 describes the process through which freed servants become bondservants, deciding to remain in permanent service to their master. These special servants bore a visible sign of their loyalty:

[AND THE LORD SAID TO MOSES,] "WHEN YOU BUY A HEBREW SLAVE, HE SHALL SERVE SIX YEARS, AND IN THE SEVENTH HE SHALL GO OUT FREE, FOR NOTHING.

...BUT IF THE SLAVE PLAINLY SAYS, 'I LOVE MY MASTER, MY WIFE, AND MY CHILDREN; I WILL NOT GO OUT FREE,' THEN HIS MASTER SHALL BRING HIM TO GOD, AND HE SHALL BRING HIM TO THE DOOR OR THE DOORPOST. AND HIS MASTER SHALL BORE HIS EAR THROUGH WITH AN AWL, AND HE SHALL BE HIS SLAVE FOREVER" (EXODUS 21:2, 5-6).

*Bondservant* is the Greek term used in the last chapter of Revelation for those who see the face of God, live in his light, bear his name, and reign forever in service to him. It is also the term used of Christ in chapter 3 of Philippians, where Paul writes:

HAVE THIS MIND AMONG YOURSELVES, WHICH WAS ALSO IN CHRIST JESUS, WHO, THOUGH HE WAS IN THE FORM OF GOD, DID NOT COUNT EQUALITY WITH GOD A THING TO BE GRASPED, BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF, BY TAKING THE FORM OF A BONDSERVANT, BEING BORN IN THE LIKENESS OF MEN (PHILIPPIANS 2:5-7, ESV VARIANT).

This was Christ's commitment to you—to take the form of a bondservant for your sake. Ruth was of this same mind as she committed to identify with Naomi, emptying herself of all that was familiar and becoming as like her as possible, even to death. And it is the Spirit's charge to the Philippians—and to you—to have the mind of a bondservant, emptying yourself and identifying with those you serve.

How does that commitment work itself out on the field? In countless ways—usually including:

- Pursuing local language fluency
- Maintaining a standard of living that is similar to locals

### Chapter 3: Commitment Required

- Dressing in the local fashion
- Giving up your sense of personal space and schedule
- Communicating according to local patterns
- Celebrating and mourning with the people.

The commitment to become a bondservant is all-encompassing. By taking such a step and identifying closely with a community, you are able to have tremendous impact. Consider the depth and breadth of this commitment, as you identify with those you serve—even as you identify as a child of God.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you have drawn inspiration from those who have gone before you in commitment to serving others.

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What are you doing to clarify or affirm your commitment to those you serve?

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What one thing can you do to prepare to not be welcomed?

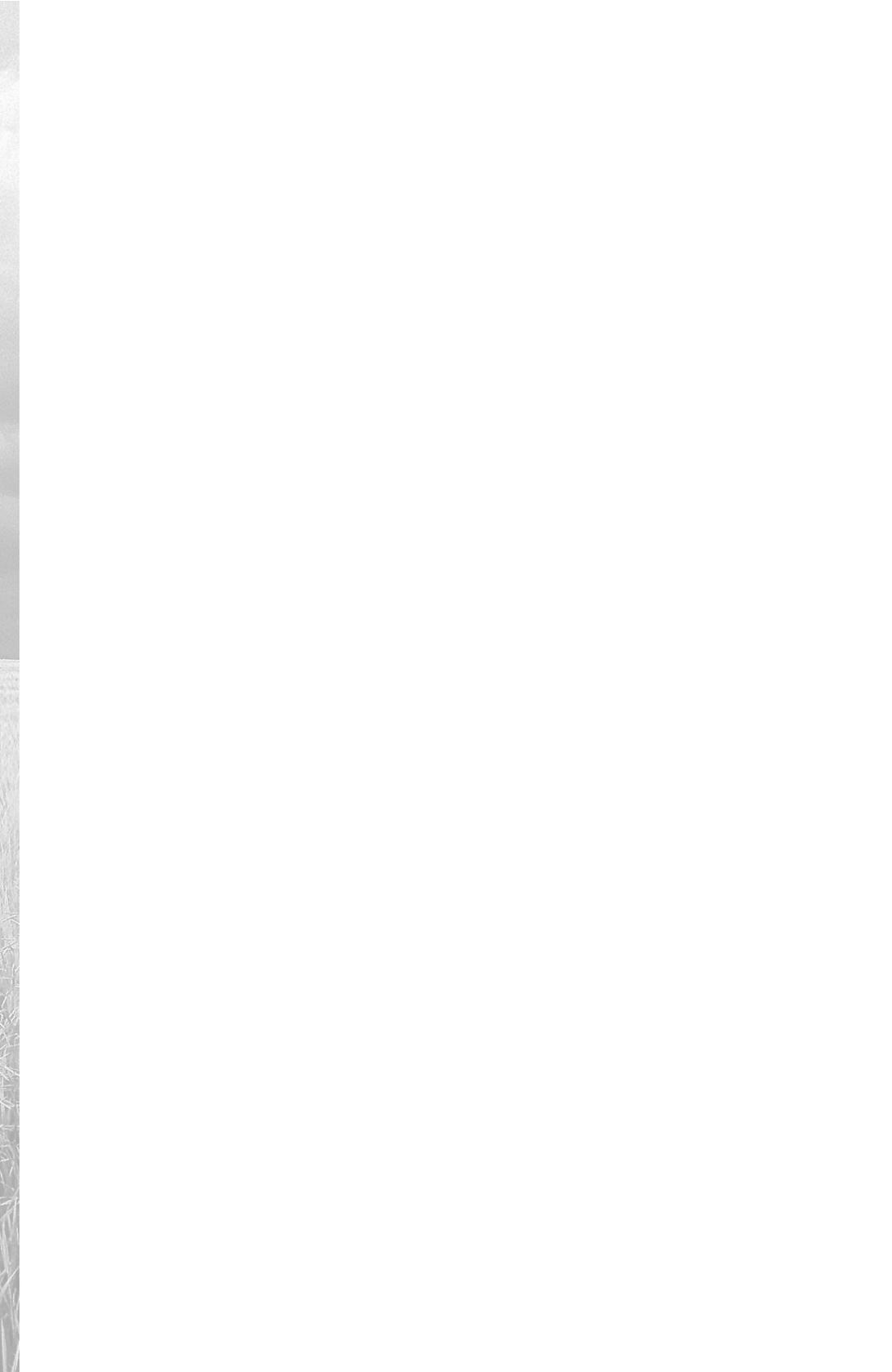
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Pray right now for God to help you better understand what it means to be a bondservant.

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## Chapter 4: I'm with Empty

AND WHEN THEY CAME TO BETHLEHEM, THE WHOLE TOWN WAS STIRRED BECAUSE OF THEM. AND THE WOMEN SAID, "IS THIS NAOMI?"...AND RUTH THE MOABITE SAID TO NAOMI, "LET ME GO TO THE FIELD AND GLEAN AMONG THE EARS OF GRAIN AFTER HIM IN WHOSE SIGHT I SHALL FIND FAVOR." AND SHE SAID TO HER, "GO, MY DAUGHTER" (RUTH 1:19B, 2:2).

### The setting

The two women walked side by side along the dusty path—together, yet saying little, alone with their thoughts. *It is difficult enough to rely on the welfare of relatives who will barely recognize me,* Naomi thought. *And Ruth will be another mouth to feed.*

Over Naomi's protests, Ruth had insisted on accompanying her mother-in-law on her journey back to Bethlehem, the town whose name means "House of Bread." Ruth made an oath to the Lord to signify her commitment.

The women have almost nothing. Naomi's late husband Elimelech had owned a plot of land, but she has been gone for a decade, and the laws of inheritance call for property to pass to male relatives. The widows will need the Lord's help and the kindness of the community to survive.

To make things worse, Ruth is a foreigner—and not just any garden-variety foreigner. She is a Moabite, a member of a nation that frequently clashed with the Israelites—and that at one point had ruled over the Israelites for a generation (Judges 3:14).

*How much like an Israelite can I become? Ruth wondered. I can do and say the right things, but my accent will always betray me.* Ruth had lived for some time in an Israelite household, by custom moving into her husband Mahlon's home when she married. She learned the dialect and became familiar with Israelite faith and customs. She knew that understanding would be useful as she moved to the heartland of Judah. But she also knew that she would encounter discrimination.

Here is what the Law of Moses instructed regarding Moabites:

NO AMMONITE OR MOABITE MAY ENTER THE ASSEMBLY OF THE LORD. EVEN TO THE TENTH GENERATION, NONE OF THEM MAY ENTER THE ASSEMBLY OF THE LORD FOREVER.... YOU SHALL NOT SEEK THEIR PEACE OR THEIR PROSPERITY ALL YOUR DAYS FOREVER (DEUTERONOMY 23:3, 6).

The command was stark, with little room for alternate interpretations. Ruth could not expect a favorable reception from the people of Bethlehem—which may explain why Naomi had urged her to stay behind.

While Ruth's nationality would work against her, the Law still provided some hope. God had told the Israelites to remember their own history as "guest workers" in other lands:

## Chapter 4: I'm with Empty

FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD...EXECUTES JUSTICE FOR THE FATHERLESS AND THE WIDOW, AND LOVES THE SOJOURNER, GIVING HIM FOOD AND CLOTHING. LOVE THE SOJOURNER, THEREFORE, FOR YOU WERE SOJOURNERS IN THE LAND OF EGYPT (DEUTERONOMY 10:17-19).

Beyond that, Naomi had mentioned that the Law provided charity for the poor through the harvest process:

WHEN YOU REAP THE HARVEST OF YOUR LAND, YOU SHALL NOT REAP YOUR FIELD RIGHT UP TO ITS EDGE, NEITHER SHALL YOU GATHER THE GLEANINGS AFTER YOUR HARVEST. AND YOU SHALL NOT STRIP YOUR VINEYARD BARE, NEITHER SHALL YOU GATHER THE FALLEN GRAPES OF YOUR VINEYARD. YOU SHALL LEAVE THEM FOR THE POOR AND FOR THE SOJOURNER: I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD (LEVITICUS 19:9-10).

Still, Ruth knew that although the Law had provisions for widows and foreigners, there was no guarantee that all the people of Bethlehem would follow through on it. She would need to find someone who knew and honored the Law.

Ruth was visible and vulnerable as a foreigner as she entered the Bethlehem community. She had much to learn quickly if she was to survive and thrive in her new environment. As you read the following passage, watch how she interacts with people in her new community. If you are preparing for cross-cultural service, think about what you will need in your transition.

SO THE TWO OF THEM WENT ON UNTIL THEY CAME TO BETHLEHEM. AND WHEN THEY CAME TO BETHLEHEM, THE WHOLE TOWN WAS STIRRED BECAUSE OF THEM. AND THE WOMEN SAID, "IS THIS NAOMI?" SHE SAID TO

THEM, “DO NOT CALL ME NAOMI; CALL ME MARA, FOR THE ALMIGHTY HAS DEALT VERY BITTERLY WITH ME. I WENT AWAY FULL, AND THE LORD HAS BROUGHT ME BACK EMPTY. WHY CALL ME NAOMI, WHEN THE LORD HAS TESTIFIED AGAINST ME AND THE ALMIGHTY HAS BROUGHT CALAMITY UPON ME?”

SO NAOMI RETURNED, AND RUTH THE MOABITE HER DAUGHTER-IN-LAW WITH HER, WHO RETURNED FROM THE COUNTRY OF MOAB. AND THEY CAME TO BETHLEHEM AT THE BEGINNING OF BARLEY HARVEST.

NOW NAOMI HAD A RELATIVE OF HER HUSBAND’S, A WORTHY MAN OF THE CLAN OF ELIMELECH, WHOSE NAME WAS BOAZ. AND RUTH THE MOABITE SAID TO NAOMI, “LET ME GO TO THE FIELD AND GLEAN AMONG THE EARS OF GRAIN AFTER HIM IN WHOSE SIGHT I SHALL FIND FAVOR.” AND SHE SAID TO HER, “GO, MY DAUGHTER” (RUTH 1:19 – 2:2).

## **Newcomers in Bethlehem**

Naomi’s arrival with Ruth received plenty of attention. She left accompanied by three Israelite men; she returns with a Moabite woman. She blames God for her sad and difficult circumstances.

Her sorrow is understandable, but her bitter words must have seemed especially harsh to her young traveling companion: “I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.”

Empty of hope. Empty of money. Seemingly empty of faith. But not empty of companionship. As Ruth stood by quietly, perhaps she thought, “Empty? Am I nothing to you?” But these are not words that a respectful daughter-in-law would give voice to.

You can imagine the awkward introduction that followed.

*Village Women*: “We are sad about your emptiness, Naomi—er, Mara. But who is this with you?”

*Naomi*: “Oh, just my daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabite.”

Despite Naomi's lack of acknowledgement, Ruth's presence was in itself a testimony of her commitment to—and identification with—Naomi. Ruth had emptied herself of all that was familiar to her. Her love was willing to cross boundaries—foreshadowing the boundary-crossing love of another newcomer from a foreign realm who would vulnerably arrive in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years later.

Cross-cultural witness has its ultimate model in the incarnation. A group of evangelical scholars affiliated with the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization said it “might be called the most spectacular instance of cultural identification in the history of mankind.”<sup>10</sup> Christ's followers bear witness to it each time they accept his commission to go into all the world.

You are sent as he was sent (John 20:21), whether you are welcomed into a new culture or ignored.

### **“What Would Jesus Do?”**

You are never more like Christ than when you cross cultures. How can I say that? Because Jesus crossed the greatest cultural gulf of all time. You are never more like him than when you are willing to empty yourself of your home culture—no matter how amazing and honorable that culture—and love those within another culture for the purpose of bringing life.

The journey of Christ to Earth from the heavenly realm is unique in all of eternity. But you can practice incarnational love based on Jesus' act on your behalf.

The greater the challenge, or the greater the cultural gulf to be crossed, the more powerful is the witness that effectively bridges the gap with the good news of God's kingdom.

It may not seem like Ruth crossed a huge cultural gulf. The tribes of Israel and Moab were separated only by the Dead Sea. Their languages were close cousins, and many of their ways of understanding were similar. Still, because of the history of conflict and prejudice between the two peoples, the most that could be hoped for by a Moabite in Israel would seem to be surviving, not flourishing—and certainly not influencing the course of a nation.

The fact is, crossing cultural barriers is never easy. Few are inclined to seek out those who are different from them, much less identify with them. Even Christ followers who step out to engage with other cultures tend to avoid those who are most different from them—those least likely to hear the life-giving message of Christ. Only one in 13 international missionaries serves among least-evangelized peoples.<sup>11</sup>

It is easy to presume that the least-evangelized will be reached by national believers, who have less of a cultural gulf to cross. The reality, according to researcher Todd Johnson, is that nationals are no more likely to serve among least-evangelized peoples than international missionaries—only one in 13 goes to peoples with no existing indigenous witness!<sup>12</sup> Reaching the least reached is difficult, regardless of whether or not you need a passport to reach them.

The least-reached will only be reached by messengers who intentionally take the courageous step of crossing cultural barriers—no matter their country of origin.

## **Cultural fluency**

Every kind of witness is valuable—whether you venture within a culture or across cultures. How great of a cultural gulf should you seek to cross? Listen to the Spirit to hear your own personal call. Your commitment will depend on God’s direction. But when you ask God the question, don’t be surprised if you hear Jesus responding through the Spirit, “How far did I go for you?”

One veteran South Asian worker I interviewed had already planted a church at the fringe of a traditionally Muslim community. He then relocated to the very heart of the city and began ministering there, because he felt increasingly called to reach those who were least likely to encounter Christ.

One North American worker went to serve among a previously unengaged people group. He selected his location of service by asking himself and the Lord, “How far can I go into the heartland of the people and still have a plausible reason for being there?” This worker knew that his English language skills would be seen as valuable in his new environment. Yet he was committed to learning and using the language of the people he served.

Fruitful Practice Research reveals that local-language fluency is the factor that correlates most strongly to fruitful outcomes in ministry. Recognizing the potential of English to distract him from developing fluency, the worker committed to speak only the local language in his first year, even with English-speaking locals who wanted to practice with a native speaker. When asked about this by locals, he indicated his practice as a point of respect for the local culture.

## **Going where the Savior is headed**

One of the most encouraging things about entering a new culture is the assurance that God is already there preparing the way for you. As you arrive, be watchful for ways that the Master is at work among the people.

Commit yourself to listening and observing—spiritually and culturally. Signs abound in the second chapter of Ruth to point to ways that God is providentially bringing Ruth to the places and people that she needs to encounter.

This truth has a striking New Testament parallel in the passage where Jesus sends out the 70 (or 72, depending on your translation)

to travel ahead to the places he planned to go. While this assignment was largely within the Jewish culture, the disciples had to rely upon God's providence and power in their moment of need. Many cross-cultural workers consider chapter 10 of Luke's gospel as a model for mission.

Parallels between that beautiful passage and this one include:

1. **See the harvest** (Luke 10:2). The passage starts with one of Jesus' best-known sayings: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Luke doesn't say that this account took place during harvest season, but wouldn't that make sense? Can't you see the disciples traveling to their assigned town, walking alongside the fields nearly ready for harvest? As the disciples walked, they would pray for more workers and anticipate the spiritual harvest that Jesus would bring.

Naomi is empty, but Ruth is looking for opportunity and suggests going out to glean. She is ready to roll up her sleeves and work. You too should envision and eagerly anticipate the harvest to come among those you serve.

2. **Go vulnerably** (Luke 10:3-4). Christ instructed the disciples to travel lightly in order to rely on the Lord's provision among those to whom they were sent. Ruth arrived in Bethlehem with little or nothing. Many are familiar with translations of Ruth 3:3 that

## Chapter 4: I'm with Empty

include the phrase, “put on your best clothes” (NIV and NASB). But the original text doesn’t include the word “best.” A literal reading is: “Put on your garment.” Ruth had no wardrobe—she probably owned one outer cloak or non-work garment. She came with nearly nothing and would need to rely on the goodwill of those who would receive her.

As you enter into cross-cultural ministry, how many provisions should you take with you? Some advocate for a minimalist approach, including the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, which calls for cross-cultural workers to leave their stuff and their money and their language at home, relying on God and seeking to avoid creating dependence or envy among those they serve. The AVM website says, “*We would like to see more people take the risks of contextualization and vulnerability in order to reap the rewards that only come to those who value local resources and invest in local languages.*”<sup>13</sup> Still, remember that this sending occurred within the culture of the chosen people. Jesus said, “The laborer deserves his wages,” considering it right that God’s people would support the disciples. In a cross-cultural setting, Paul took a different approach—at times working at a trade and at other times relying on the support of churches in other regions. Talk to God about what it means to rely on him as you go vulnerably.

3. **Seek the favor of the local host** (Luke 10:6). Christ directed his followers to seek out a welcoming person as a host—and potentially, as an advocate. As Ruth asks permission to go out and glean, she specifically mentions the need to find the favor of a local host. Not every landowner will honor the law and leave grain behind—or enough to make a difference. Some may not grant permission to glean—especially to a Moabite.

This passage gives rise to the “person of peace” concept that many cross-cultural workers use today as they seek out those whom God has prepared in advance. Many of our interviewees have shared about local hosts not only welcoming them, but also advocating for them and even defending them against persecution—long before embracing the gospel.

As you read further in Ruth 2, look for these other parallels:

1. **Stay where welcomed** (Luke 10:7). Jesus instructed his workers to remain with the local host rather than moving on to other homes in the community. Chapter Five of this book will explore how Ruth was similarly encouraged by Boaz to remain in his field through the end of the harvest season.
2. **Deliver good news** (Luke 10:9). Christ instructed his workers to heal and to announce that God’s kingdom had drawn near. In Chapter Six, we will see how Ruth’s

venture similarly results in her delivering good news to Naomi from the master: a healthy supply of grain.

3. **Celebrate success** (Luke 10:17-20). Jesus' disciples lacked for nothing and saw God's power work through them to drive out evil spirits. Jesus rejoiced with them, but he also warned them to keep spiritual power in perspective. The real cause for rejoicing is not wielding spiritual power, but being a spiritual person. Chapter Seven of this book will explore Ruth's emerging identity as an adopted member of God's people.

### **The power of a promise**

Ruth came to Bethlehem with very little—but she was anything but empty! The same is true for you. Those who are sent as Jesus was sent have been given authority and power. You have Jesus' promise that the disciples will do the things that he did—and even greater things (John 14:12).

With the Holy Spirit present in you, you have access to great power. Exercise it with confidence—and discernment! Like Ruth, you may need to overcome the negativity of others. You may have an opportunity to pray for healing—or for spirits to be cast out—as you experience new spiritual realities.

As you see spiritual power at work in and through you, be ready to celebrate all that God has done. But remember that exercising his power is not the ultimate goal. In the end, you serve to see hope restored as people identify with Christ and enjoy his legacy of life.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you have embraced vulnerability appropriately.

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How are you researching decisions to be made and identifying values that guide you in a new community?

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What one thing can you do to empty yourself of your own culture as you adopt Christ's attitude of cross-cultural humility?

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Praise God now for your identity as a child of God.

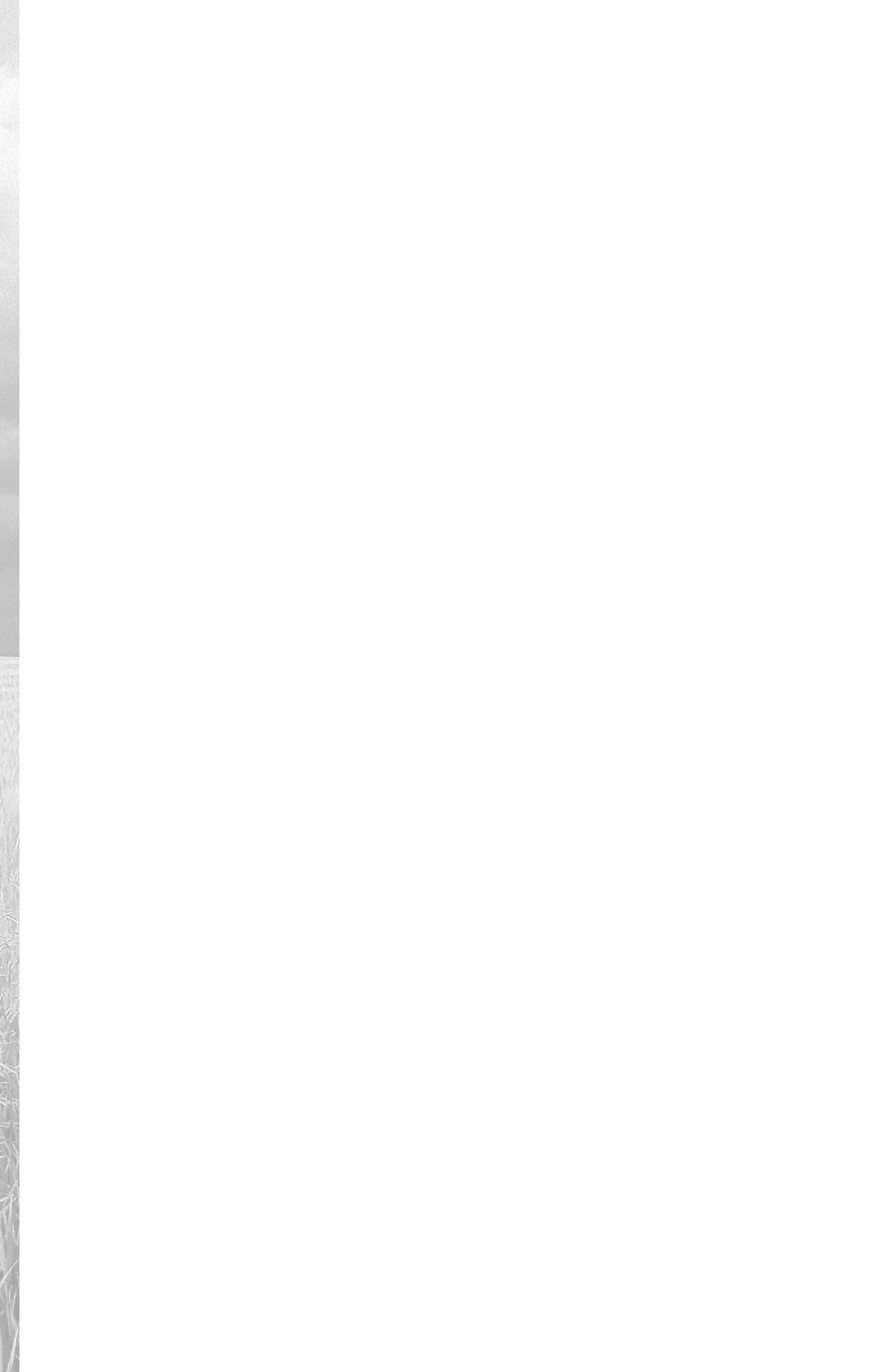
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Pray right now for God to prepare you to access his power through the Spirit.

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## Chapter 5: The Harvest Field Always Looks Whiter

THEN BOAZ SAID TO RUTH, “NOW, LISTEN, MY DAUGHTER, DO NOT GO TO GLEAN IN ANOTHER FIELD OR LEAVE THIS ONE, BUT KEEP CLOSE TO MY YOUNG WOMEN. LET YOUR EYES BE ON THE FIELD THAT THEY ARE REAPING, AND GO AFTER THEM (RUTH 2:8-9A).

### **The setting**

Ruth woke early. Outside, the faint suggestion of light appeared in the east—just enough to distinguish land from sky. She was eager, energetic and full of faith, but a little apprehensive. Gleaning would be new work for her. She was thankful that the Law of Moses required landowners to reserve some grain for the poor. Ruth and Naomi clearly qualified.

Having received Naomi’s permission to go out and glean, Ruth was halfway through the “gleaner application process.” Now, she needed a landowner or a harvest foreman to respond favorably.

The job seemed straightforward enough:

1. Go to the fields;
2. Pick up the grain that is left behind;
3. Repeat until the harvest is complete.

*But there is so much I don't know*, she thought as she began walking to the fields.

*How many gleaners will a landowner allow in his field?*

*How much of the field is left unharvested?*

*How often are sheaves dropped by the harvesters?*

Risks would abound for a woman from a despised race with no one to look out for her. Fieldhands could harass a young widow. Competition could be fierce among the poor for a limited amount of grain. Other gleaners could threaten or intimidate a newcomer.

And, as the fields become picked-over, gleaners would move on quickly, seeking the best opportunity during each day of the short harvest season. Ruth needs wisdom and discernment as she enters unfamiliar territory.

As you read the passage that follows, take note of all of the people Ruth encounters. Ask yourself and the Lord: How will I survive in unfamiliar surroundings? How can I discover the opportunities—and avoid the pitfalls? How will I know when to persevere and when to change?

AND RUTH THE MOABITE SAID TO NAOMI, "LET ME GO TO THE FIELD AND GLEAN AMONG THE EARS OF GRAIN AFTER HIM IN WHOSE SIGHT I SHALL FIND FAVOR." AND SHE SAID TO HER, "GO, MY DAUGHTER."

## Chapter 5: The Harvest Field Always Looks Whiter

SO SHE SET OUT AND WENT AND GLEANED IN THE FIELD AFTER THE REAPERS, AND SHE HAPPENED TO COME TO THE PART OF THE FIELD BELONGING TO BOAZ, WHO WAS OF THE CLAN OF ELIMELECH.

AND BEHOLD, BOAZ CAME FROM BETHLEHEM. AND HE SAID TO THE REAPERS, "THE LORD BE WITH YOU!" AND THEY ANSWERED, "THE LORD BLESS YOU." THEN BOAZ SAID TO HIS YOUNG MAN WHO WAS IN CHARGE OF THE REAPERS, "WHOSE YOUNG WOMAN IS THIS?"

AND THE SERVANT WHO WAS IN CHARGE OF THE REAPERS ANSWERED, "SHE IS THE YOUNG MOABITE WOMAN, WHO CAME BACK WITH NAOMI FROM THE COUNTRY OF MOAB. SHE SAID, 'PLEASE LET ME GLEAN AND GATHER AMONG THE SHEAVES AFTER THE REAPERS.' SO SHE CAME, AND SHE HAS CONTINUED FROM EARLY MORNING UNTIL NOW, EXCEPT FOR A SHORT REST."

THEN BOAZ SAID TO RUTH, "NOW, LISTEN, MY DAUGHTER, DO NOT GO TO GLEAN IN ANOTHER FIELD OR LEAVE THIS ONE, BUT KEEP CLOSE TO MY YOUNG WOMEN. LET YOUR EYES BE ON THE FIELD THAT THEY ARE REAPING, AND GO AFTER THEM. HAVE I NOT CHARGED THE YOUNG MEN NOT TO TOUCH YOU? AND WHEN YOU ARE THIRSTY, GO TO THE VESSELS AND DRINK WHAT THE YOUNG MEN HAVE DRAWN" (RUTH 2:2-9).

### **Persevering in service**

Ruth "happened" to come to Boaz's portion of the field.

I love the narrator's understated manner. The book shows how God

directs and provides, but only twice are the actions of God referred to outside of quotes from the book's characters: when he brings forth life in the grain fields (1:6) and in Ruth (4:13). Otherwise, the narrator does not presume to know the actions of God. The reader is left to marvel at and wonder about his providence.

Cross-cultural workers often do the same—and are wise to follow the narrator's lead in acknowledging—but not presuming—to know all that God is up to.

Circumstances suggest that God is working to direct Ruth's path. In Boaz's field, she finds success in gleaning and some valuable advice: Remain.

Sticking to the work of cross-cultural mission is harder than it seems. Spend a year or more on the field, and you are likely to see workers leave unexpectedly.

As we interviewed fruitful church planters, we asked how they defined their teams. One veteran worker responded, “We stopped defining our team formally because so many people came and went. We think of our team as those who stay, whatever their agency or accountability structure.”

GMI and other groups—notably the Mission Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance—have done extensive research on missionary retention and attrition. Many of the insights from that research are illustrated in chapter two of the book of Ruth. This passage provides memorable lessons to help workers remain.

A few disclaimers:

1. **Some workers may be called not to remain.** Many of these embrace Paul's model of rapid, apostolic sowing. They plant, someone else waters, and God causes the growth (1 Cor. 3:6). If this is your calling,

do not be dissuaded from it. If you are led to do a year-long internship with no ongoing commitment, then listen for God's voice for that year and then follow where he leads. Mission paths take many turns—but beware of suddenly open doors that appear to provide escape from what may seem like a long, muddy road.

2. **Some workers remain too long.** Most mission organizations recommend having an exit strategy—with markers tell you when it is time to leave. There is much wisdom in this. Almost every mission leader can tell you a story of an expat worker who refuses to turn over leadership because the national believers “aren’t ready yet.” Some missionaries have a need to be needed and unwisely cling to their role.
3. **Some workers confuse inaction with remaining.** Once, in the midst of a study on missionary retention, a wise leader asked me, “Why focus on retention? There are many missionaries who stay on the field but never get anything done. You should study effectiveness instead.” His point was that some cross-cultural workers get complacent over time and settle into a routine that has little to do with bringing forth new life. These workers ought **not** to remain.

Wherever you go—especially if you cross a great cultural distance—you should seek ways to both remain **and** be effective. This passage of Ruth can help you persevere in service and avoid the obstacles that derail cross-cultural witness before its time.

## The main differences in those who remain

The Engage study of missionary retention (2006 – 2008) featured in-depth interviews with current and former North American cross-cultural workers. The study identified five factors that tended to be present in those who remained—and missing from those who left.

These five factors can be presented through a memorable phrase: ChIN-UP. The “Ch” in ChIN-UP is a factor we have already discussed:

**Calling/hope.** Those who stay often feel that God has clearly directed them to work with a particular people. This enables them to press on through tough times and difficult circumstances.

Recall how Ruth invoked the name of the Lord: “May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” Commitment like that is not just your own. It reflects confidence that the Lord is also committed to the people.

One worker described it this way:

*I see potential everywhere and know that God has a big plan for his people.*

God’s calling leads to endurance, “and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit...” (Romans 5:4-5).

There are four other four important factors to consider in Ruth’s seemingly ordinary exchange with Naomi in 2:2. Ruth asks to go and glean, and Naomi says yes. That verse appears in the passage from the last chapter and again in the passage for this chapter. That was

intentional. I want you to be sure to remember that verse, and the acronym ChIN-UP, as keys that will help you to remain on the field and to keep making progress in cross-cultural ministry.

**Inclusion in Decision Making.** Ruth persuaded Naomi to allow her to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem. Then, Ruth asks for permission to work in the harvest fields and Naomi agrees. Cross-cultural workers who stick are those who feel that they have a voice in how their work gets done, whether they are accountable to a local team or to leaders who reside far away.

This isn't about having total autonomy. Missionaries—especially new ones—can be given *too* much freedom. This is about leaders who listen and provide encouragement to cross-cultural workers when they offer ideas.

**Need.** Ruth understands that Naomi has a pressing short-term need for food as well as a long-term need of a legacy of life. Workers who stay are those who have a sharp sense of people's need—spiritually and practically.

When asked what kept him on the field, one of our interviewees said it was...

*...the fact that people have souls that will never, never die and most here still have not heard the gospel.*

In the face of vast, undeniable need, workers who ask themselves, "If not me, then who?" are likely to stick and to stay focused on ministry.

**Usefulness.** It is one thing to perceive people's needs. But workers become discouraged if they cannot do anything meaningful about those needs in the short term. Usefulness bridges that gap. Workers who stick feel that they are being used by God and that what they are doing is making a difference, even if long-term goals are far from being realized.

Ruth demonstrates a desire for usefulness in her request. Right now, she cannot do anything to help Naomi preserve her family line. Yet she can still help. Harvest season has come, and she is ready to work! Later you will sense the joy that Ruth feels as she presents grain to her mother-in-law. Ruth is useful, which helps her to remain.

Look carefully for ways in which you can be immediately useful to those you serve. Developing a reputation for usefulness will almost certainly lead to opportunities for deeper, more personal impact.

**Provision.** Somewhere along the way, Ruth learned about the law of gleaning, which itself is a form of provision. God made a way for his people to provide for widows like Ruth and Naomi. So, Ruth suggests that she go out and glean. But there is more. Knowing that some will not respect the law, she adds, "...after him in whose sight I shall find favor." She recognizes that God must provide someone who will allow a foreigner to glean in his field.

Workers who stick have a strong appreciation for God's provision. They may not have the most resources—in fact, many say they struggled to raise financial support. But they stay, in part because they

know that their needs have been provided by God and his people.

Consider journaling about the ways that God is providing for you—expected and unexpected. When times are difficult, you will find encouragement in all that God has done and is doing to enable you to serve cross-culturally.

Use **ChIN-UP**—and Ruth 2:2—to remember the factors that help cross-cultural workers to stick.

### **Your eyes on the field; his eyes on you**

Naomi, Ruth and Boaz are mentioned by name in the passage. You also meet the foreman in charge of the workers. The reapers are heard responding to Boaz's greeting. They include young women (whom Ruth is instructed to stay close to) and young men (who handle the lifting of grain bundles and water jars).

And, of course, there are other gleaners. Boaz's comment indicates that some of them choose not to remain with the harvest team: they leave and go on to other fields.

In the Engage study, besides the in-depth interviews, more than 1,700 active cross-cultural workers were surveyed. About 15 percent of these noted that they were serving with an agency other than the one with which they began serving. Jumping agencies—and jumping fields within agencies—is common.

Some agencies do better than others in retaining staff. If you interview with agencies, ask about their retention rate. A 2003 World Evangelical Alliance study found that the top tier of U.S. agencies was on track to retain more than three-quarters of cross-cultural workers (78 percent) over a decade. Meanwhile, the bottom tier was on pace to retain less than half of that (38 percent)!<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes transitions make sense—people and organizations change over time. But the biggest concern with field-jumping is not the changes that occur in people and agencies. Rather, it is just the opposite: people who won't change.

Mission fields are like the fields of Bethlehem—many types of people striving to work together for a harvest. In such an environment, conflicts are inevitable. Some cross-cultural workers are taken by surprise when sharp differences arise in personal convictions, in ministry styles or in personalities. Cross-cultural situations—and multi-cultural teams—serve to heighten the differences.

Adapting, seeking common ground, peacemaking and submitting to others can be difficult and time-consuming. Some find it easier to part ways. Sometimes that means a move to another field or another agency. In extreme cases, workers return home bewildered or embittered. One ex-missionary summed up her field experience this way:

*We were always told that your biggest problems would come from other missionaries. I guess I did not believe it. My expectation was (that) we would all work together for the greater good. Boy was I wrong.<sup>15</sup>*

## Staying Focused

Many factors can cause your attention to be diverted from the main focus of mission: the people being served. Diversions can arise from team members, supervisors, nationals, agency executives, financial supporters, family members or government officials. Whatever the source, the result is the same: loss of emphasis on the people at the heart of the mission. Red flags begin to wave when you find yourself spending lots of time and mental energy on people other than the ones you were sent to serve.

## Chapter 5: The Harvest Field Always Looks Whiter

Boaz directs Ruth's attention to this risk in their first encounter:

LET YOUR EYES BE ON THE FIELD THAT THEY ARE  
REAPING (RUTH 2:9A).

This statement captures the single most important concept for you to remember about remaining on the field and becoming fruitful among those you serve.

For Ruth, the goal was gathering grain for her and Naomi. She didn't need run-ins with harvesters gossiping about her ethnicity or field hands getting too friendly or other gleaners overprotecting their turf. She needed to keep her eyes on the field.

So will you.

A harvest field attracts many people. But the grain is what matters. The grain is what sustains life and produces seeds that can multiply a hundredfold.

Thankfully, you have an Ally who has ultimate control over the field. He notices you. He takes action on your behalf. The next chapter will further explore the uncommon riches of his grace upon those who serve cross-culturally in his fields. For now, take heart that he has been there before you, and his eyes remain on you.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you resolved a conflict rather than allowing it to escalate.

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How are you keeping your eyes on the field and avoiding distractions?

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What is one thing that you can do right now to keep your ChIN-UP? (Select one of the factors that you can act on.)

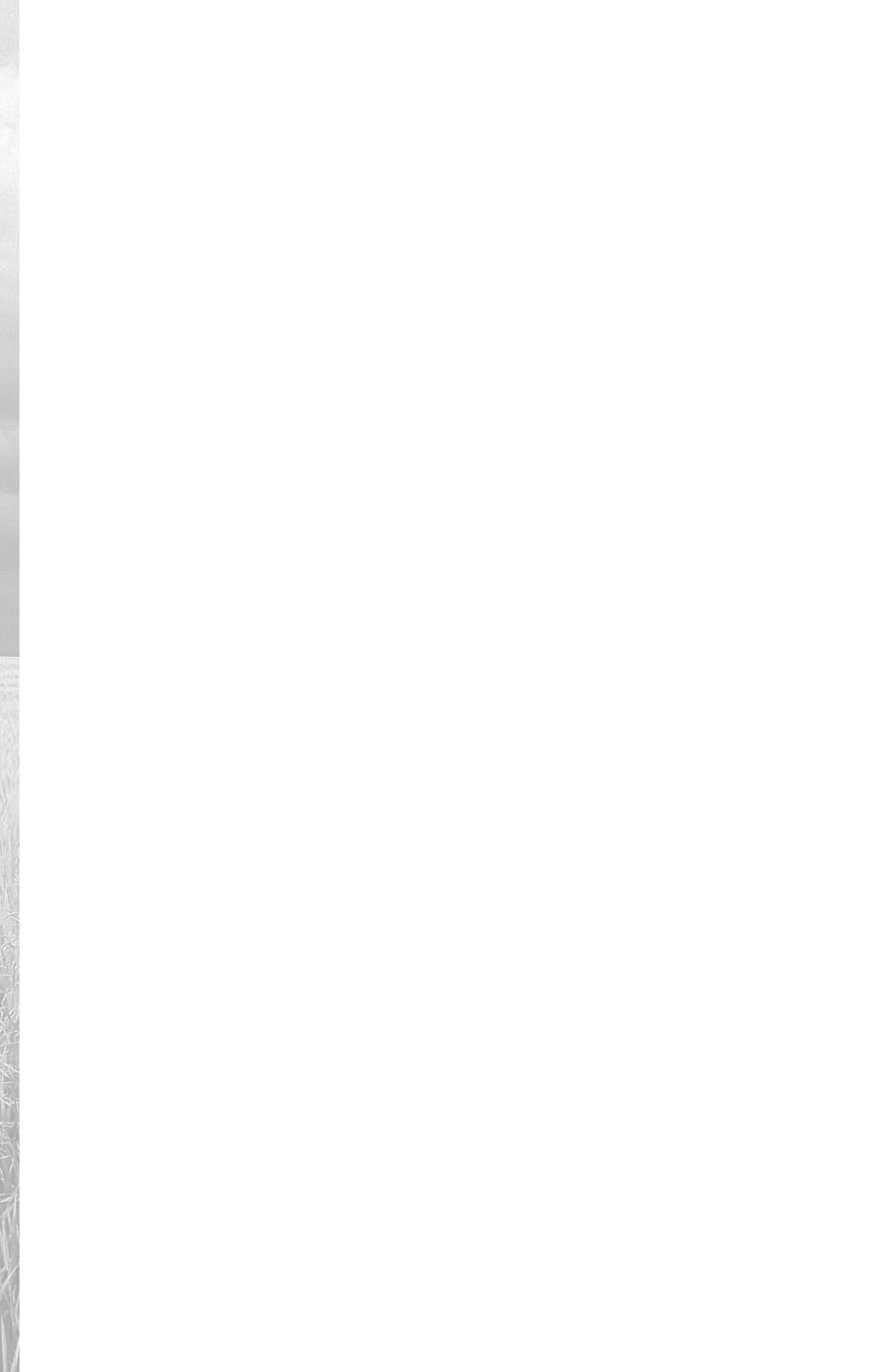
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Pray right now for his strength and perseverance to overcome discouragement on the field.

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## Chapter 6: Fullness on the Field

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!” (RUTH 2:12).

### **The setting**

The sun is high in the sky. Ruth has spent a full morning gleaning in the barley fields of Bethlehem. The work is tiring, and Ruth is not as experienced as the other gleaners. Her back is strained from repeated bending and straightening. She stands out for her ethnicity and her newness to the task. Still, just being here is an accomplishment. She took the initiative and found favor with Naomi and with the field foreman.

Now Boaz, the landowner, has arrived. He also notices Ruth. While some other owners show little concern for the gleaners, he pays attention to those who follow after his harvest workers, especially Ruth. He gives the workers special instructions to make sure that she is well-treated.

Boaz has a history of foreign blood in his own family. Tamar, the matriarch of the clan of Perez, was a Canaanite (Genesis 38:2). Boaz is also a direct descendant of Rahab of Jericho (Matthew 1:5), who harbored the Israelite spies. But family history is not the only reason for Boaz's kindness to Ruth. Bethlehem is a small town, and he has heard about her commitment to Naomi.

As you read the following passage about Ruth and Boaz's first encounter, think about what fullness means in the context of your life and ministry life, especially in a cross-cultural context? How do you measure progress or fullness in your ministry?

THEN SHE FELL ON HER FACE, BOWING TO THE GROUND, AND SAID TO HIM, "WHY HAVE I FOUND FAVOR IN YOUR EYES, THAT YOU SHOULD TAKE NOTICE OF ME, SINCE I AM A FOREIGNER?"

BUT BOAZ ANSWERED HER, "ALL THAT YOU HAVE DONE FOR YOUR MOTHER-IN-LAW SINCE THE DEATH OF YOUR HUSBAND HAS BEEN FULLY TOLD TO ME, AND HOW YOU LEFT YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER AND YOUR NATIVE LAND AND CAME TO A PEOPLE THAT YOU DID NOT KNOW BEFORE. 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!"

THEN SHE SAID, "I HAVE FOUND FAVOR IN YOUR EYES, MY LORD, FOR YOU HAVE COMFORTED ME AND SPOKEN KINDLY TO YOUR SERVANT, THOUGH I AM NOT ONE OF YOUR SERVANTS."

## Chapter 6: Fullness on the Field

AND AT MEALTIME BOAZ SAID TO HER, “COME HERE AND EAT SOME BREAD AND DIP YOUR MORSEL IN THE WINE.” SO SHE SAT BESIDE THE REAPERS, AND HE PASSED TO HER ROASTED GRAIN. AND SHE ATE UNTIL SHE WAS SATISFIED, AND SHE HAD SOME LEFT OVER.

WHEN SHE ROSE TO GLEAN, BOAZ INSTRUCTED HIS YOUNG MEN, SAYING, “LET HER GLEAN EVEN AMONG THE SHEAVES, AND DO NOT REPROACH HER. AND ALSO PULL OUT SOME FROM THE BUNDLES FOR HER AND LEAVE IT FOR HER TO GLEAN, AND DO NOT REBUKE HER.”

SO SHE GLEANED IN THE FIELD UNTIL EVENING. THEN SHE BEAT OUT WHAT SHE HAD GLEANED, AND IT WAS ABOUT AN EPHAH OF BARLEY (RUTH 2:10-17).

### **Expressions of fullness**

In contrast to Naomi’s emptiness, Boaz is all about fullness. As the master of the field interacts with the newcomer, four types of fullness are evident. Each of these expressions of fullness reveals something important about the master. Each represents a key theme as you represent and regularly connect with your heavenly Master.

#### **1) Fully informed**

First, Boaz is fully informed. He has a host of allies and servants who keep him in the know. As a result, he is fully aware of Ruth’s story.

As a foreshadowing of Christ, Boaz reveals that God is a listening God. This is evident in the same way any element of God’s character is known—because he revealed it. God declared this aspect of his character early and emphatically, in Genesis 16:11, when he sent

a heavenly messenger to Hagar, a woman alone and vulnerable in pregnancy.

Hagar was blessed to be the first person in history whose child's name was given by heavenly decree. That name was *Ishmael*, which means "God hears." Hagar responded by saying that God not only heard but also saw her, inspiring her to name the site *Beer-lahai-roi*—the well of the Living One who sees me.

God listens and God sees, but not for the purpose of gaining new information. Your Master is already fully informed. He listens because he is a God of relationship. Existing in eternal relationship—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—God is glad to make himself known and to listen to his servants.

From the moment he enters the scene, Boaz demonstrates the value that he places on relationship. He greets the workers publicly, and they respond with respect. He checks in with the foreman and finds out about the newcomer. Then he initiates conversation with her, extending favor and protection, an unusual step that stretches the bounds of culture.

Ruth expresses her amazement at his kindness, which seems out of proportion to her standing. He responds by praising her for her selfless love for Naomi. Boaz recognizes and understands the sacrifices that she has made.

As you serve cross-culturally, you may feel like the small acts of obedience and care that you engage in every day are invisible, that no one is noticing. Sometimes it may feel like your actions don't matter. In reality, nothing is unseen—reports of your service go out throughout the heavenly realm.

Paul wrote that his work among the Gentiles was done so that the "wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities *in the heavenly places*" (Ephesians 3:10, emphasis added).

You are part of a team of the Master’s servants—including angelic ones—and your service is noticed and appreciated by them, even as the servant in charge of the reapers reported to Boaz.

You will also find that you are being watched closely by those in the earthly realm as well. For cross-cultural servants, it is critical to develop a good reputation among the people. Ruth’s worthy behavior was noticed by those in Bethlehem, just as Christ “increased in... favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52). With such examples, it is no surprise that developing a “valued reputation in the community” was a consistent theme in interviews with fruitful church planters.

## 2) Fully rewarded

Second, Boaz prays **for God to reward Ruth fully** in response to her culture-crossing love for and commitment to Naomi. Ruth is listening closely. She will remember this prayer. Boaz’s words call to mind Jesus’ promise to the disciples in the wake of his encounter with the rich young ruler:

AND EVERYONE WHO HAS LEFT HOUSES OR BROTHERS OR  
SISTERS OR FATHER OR MOTHER OR CHILDREN OR LANDS,  
FOR MY NAME’S SAKE, WILL RECEIVE A HUNDREDFOLD  
AND WILL INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE (MATTHEW 19:29).

As a child of God, you are already an heir of eternal life. And your willingness to sacrifice for his name’s sake is already part of your eternal-life package, whether you serve cross-culturally or not. God notices your sacrifice.

The “extra” benefit here is that you will “receive a hundredfold”—the promise that you will be blessed in your relationship with God on a scale that you are not likely to experience without leaving houses and family and homeland. Your faith will grow in ways it wouldn’t if you stayed in familiar and comfortable surroundings. You get to

follow in the Master's culture-crossing footsteps and partner with Him. The hundredfold blessing is a glimpse into the future—a fuller experience in this life of the eternal promises that await.

### 3) Fully present

There is still more fullness to explore. Third is the way in which **the master fully invites Ruth into his presence**. Boaz encourages Ruth to join the team of harvesters for their meal. This kindness is amazing in itself, but then comes the kicker: *the master serves her*. She dines at his table—roasted grain dipped in wine.

You can see why Boaz is considered a foreshadowing of Christ. The New Testament parallels are clear:

- *Give us this day our daily bread* (Matthew 6:11).
- *And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God* (Luke 13:29).
- *But I am among you as one who serves* (Luke 22:27b).
- *If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me* (Revelation 3:20b).
- *And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them* (Luke 22:19a).

What further stands out about this passage is Boaz's fondness for Ruth. "Come and sit with us," he invites. "Here, try this. Have as much as you want. Take some home for your mother-in-law." He enjoys her presence. While he is clearly in charge, there is no signal that he adjourns the meal. Instead, the conclusion of their encounter reads, "...she rose to glean."

## Chapter 6: Fullness on the Field

Centering your day in prayer and the word, time with the Master, is essential to your fullness. In this story, the literal center of Ruth's day is time spent with the master at his table.

It is difficult to think about spiritual disciplines without “oughtness”—as in, “I really ought to spend more time in prayer and reflection and Bible study and praise.” And of course, neglecting your relationship with the Master can hamper your effectiveness in cross-cultural ministry. However, the trip from “ought” to crushing guilt is a short one. Cross-cultural settings already have a tendency to enhance your sense of spiritual unworthiness. Anti-human-trafficking missionary Laura Parker said it bluntly:

*“There’s nothing like moving to a foreign country to reveal all the crap that’s in your heart...Call it culture shock if you will, but I tend to think the stress of an overseas move thrusts the junk that was conveniently covered...out into the blazing-hot open.”<sup>16</sup>*

The enemy can multiply these feelings, jeering you about how foolish you were to think that you could be a missionary and emissary of holy God among the people.

Ruth's and Boaz's beautiful encounter at lunch is an antidote to that downward spiral. The Master takes joy in you. You are welcome at the table. Jeering is off limits. The Master is eager to spend time with you who have come to work in his harvest field. And if he takes joy in offering you his presence—will he not gladly offer you his vast resources for your sake and the sake of others?

Spending time with the Master can become awkward and intimidating when you focus on your own lack of deservedness. But

focusing on him and the extent of his love that is unconcerned about status will enable you to enjoy Him, even as you marvel at Him.

#### 4) Fully cared for

Finally, Ruth eats and **is satisfied**—full—with some left over. The master provides for her immediate need for nourishment and energy. Then, he provides for her ongoing need by encouraging the harvesters to leave behind extra grain for her and by allowing her to glean even among the grain waiting to be bundled.

As you serve in the harvest fields and find yourself growing weary, as Ruth did, look for your Heavenly Master to renew your strength and provide for the needs of your heart and soul—with extra to share among those you serve.

He also works behind the scenes in ways that you are not aware. As Boaz instructed his servants once Ruth rose to glean, your Master orchestrates events and situations to provide for and protect you in ways that you cannot know or imagine. His servants look out for you, reminding you of Hebrews 1:14:

ARE NOT ALL ANGELS MINISTERING SPIRITS SENT TO  
SERVE THOSE WHO WILL INHERIT SALVATION?

As you abide in Him, you can anticipate fullness of joy—with enough to share. It is no coincidence that this chapter on fullness immediately follows the one about remaining. In the Upper Room Discourse, Christ connected his instructions about abiding with this purpose statement:

THESE THINGS I HAVE SPOKEN TO YOU, THAT MY JOY  
MAY BE IN YOU, AND THAT YOUR JOY MAY BE FULL (JOHN  
15:11).

What could be greater than to experience the full joy of Christ in you?

## Savor your meals

Beyond your personal spiritual health, you can find ministry applications in each aspect of fullness. The Master's knowledge, hope, presence and resources are for others as well—and the cross-cultural servant gets to deliver, and often demonstrate, that good news.

Among the “Fruitful Practice” statements affirmed by hundreds of church planters working among resistant peoples are the following. Fruitful workers:

- Take advantage of pre-field and on-field research to shape their ministry. They imitate the Master in being as fully informed as possible.
- Pray for the needs of their friends in their presence. They are willing to ask for their Master in heaven to act on behalf of others.
- Practice an intimate walk with God. They enjoy the Master's presence even as he enjoys theirs.
- Address tangible needs in their community as an expression of the gospel. They demonstrate the Master's concern for practical human needs by relieving suffering and restoring wholeness.

You are indeed “blessed to be a blessing.” But don't be in such a rush to pass on the Master's blessings that you neglect to enjoy lunch with Him! Savor your relationship. He fully understands your situation. He promises to fully reward you. He fully enjoys spending time with you. And he fully provides for and protects you.

May his joy be full in you!

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you were fully provided for by the Master.

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How are you savoring his enjoyment of you?

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What is one thing that you can do to keep time with the Master at the center of your day?

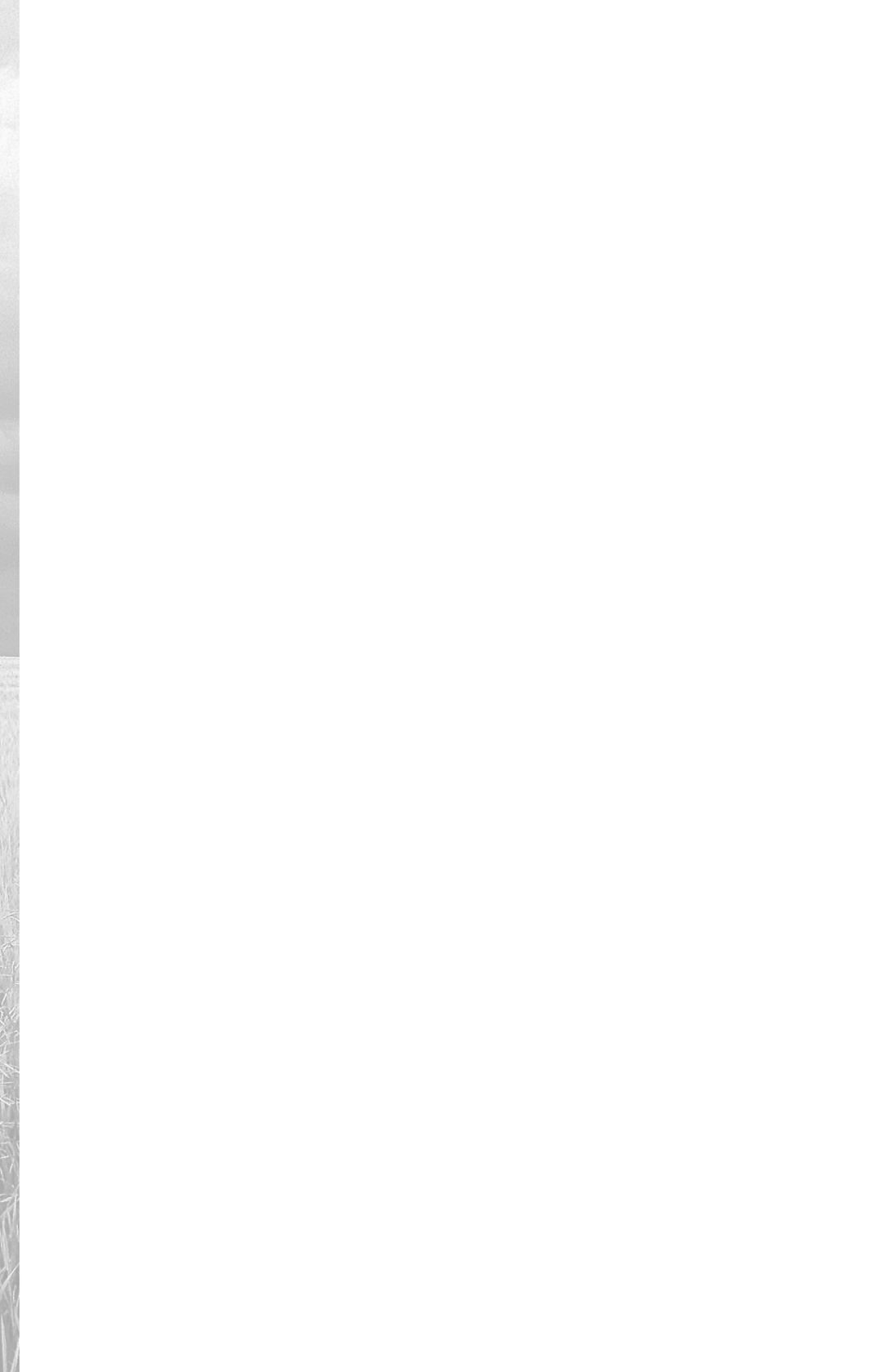
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Pray right now that God will enable you to trust the work he has been doing and the work that he is going to do.

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## Chapter 7:

# The Master and the Mother-in-Law

NAOMI ALSO SAID TO HER, “THE MAN IS A CLOSE RELATIVE OF OURS, ONE OF OUR REDEEMERS” (RUTH 2:20B).

### The setting

Boaz, a respected landowner, has been impressed by Ruth’s willingness to leave her homeland to help Naomi. When Ruth appeared to glean in his field, Boaz made a special effort to encourage her and grant her favor.

After her extraordinary experience with the master at the midday meal, Ruth has continued to work hard. With access to grain not normally available to gleaners, she has gathered an unusually large amount of barley—30 pounds’ worth!

In addition, she has the extra roasted grain given her at mealtime. Hired hands would expect to be fed as part of their payment, but gleaners would not normally be fed. This food is evidence that she was invited to join the harvesters.

She also has Boaz's invitation to continue gleaning in his fields—a promise of ongoing blessings.

Now it is time to go home to Naomi. The good things she brings are sure to be a surprise. Ruth wonders, *How will Naomi react? Will it change her perspective about our situation—or about me?*

At first glance, the passage that follows seems mostly to be a retelling of the last scene. But as you read, consider how information is transferred and interpreted. Pay attention to the way that Naomi refers to Boaz—and to Ruth.

In the course of your ministry, you will deliver good news and blessings to those you serve. Be attentive to how messages are received. Even when your communication is clear, recipients will assign their own meaning, emphasis and implications. Watch also for subtle changes in the way that you, the messenger, are received.

SO SHE GLEANED IN THE FIELD UNTIL EVENING. THEN SHE BEAT OUT WHAT SHE HAD GLEANED, AND IT WAS ABOUT AN EPHAH OF BARLEY. AND SHE TOOK IT UP AND WENT INTO THE CITY. HER MOTHER-IN-LAW SAW WHAT SHE HAD GLEANED. SHE ALSO BROUGHT OUT AND GAVE HER WHAT FOOD SHE HAD LEFT OVER AFTER BEING SATISFIED. AND HER MOTHER-IN-LAW SAID TO HER, "WHERE DID YOU GLEAN TODAY? AND WHERE HAVE YOU WORKED? BLESSED BE THE MAN WHO TOOK NOTICE OF YOU."

SO SHE TOLD HER MOTHER-IN-LAW WITH WHOM SHE HAD WORKED AND SAID, "THE MAN'S NAME WITH WHOM I WORKED TODAY IS BOAZ."

AND NAOMI SAID TO HER DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, "MAY HE BE BLESSED BY THE LORD, WHOSE KINDNESS HAS NOT

FORSAKEN THE LIVING OR THE DEAD!” NAOMI ALSO SAID TO HER, “THE MAN IS A CLOSE RELATIVE OF OURS, ONE OF OUR REDEEMERS.” AND RUTH THE MOABITE SAID, “BESIDES, HE SAID TO ME, ‘YOU SHALL KEEP CLOSE BY MY YOUNG MEN UNTIL THEY HAVE FINISHED ALL MY HARVEST.’”

AND NAOMI SAID TO RUTH, HER DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, “IT IS GOOD, MY DAUGHTER, THAT YOU GO OUT WITH HIS YOUNG WOMEN, LEST IN ANOTHER FIELD YOU BE ASSAULTED.” SO SHE KEPT CLOSE TO THE YOUNG WOMEN OF BOAZ, GLEANING UNTIL THE END OF THE BARLEY AND WHEAT HARVESTS. AND SHE LIVED WITH HER MOTHER-IN-LAW (RUTH 2:17-23).

### **Show me the barley**

Ruth had put in a full day’s work—and maybe more, as she had a lot of grain to beat out at the end of the day. However, when she arrived home, the focus was not on her work, but on the goodness of Boaz.

Saying the master was welcoming is one thing. Bringing home leftovers from the master’s table is another. Describing the master as “generous” is nice. Hauling 30 pounds of barley through the door is *amazing!*

In cross-cultural witness, evidence often validates the message and the messenger. Ruth is a woman of integrity, so it isn’t that Naomi would doubt her story without seeing evidence; rather, the evidence reflects the testimony of a second messenger—in this case, Boaz communicating to Naomi through the grain.

The same is often true in cross-cultural ministry. It is not that your words are unimportant. In fact, words are critically important,

especially when introducing someone to the Word through whom the world was created. But that testimony is confirmed and lives change when the Master reveals Himself directly.

You want to cross cultures with the gospel because you have experienced God's love in a personal, life-changing way. Yet you are not simply an emissary—you are a partner with the Master in his harvest field. You will find that he is often glad to provide evidence to underscore your testimony.

Stories from interviews with fruitful church planters help to illustrate:

*We had an experience with one individual in particular who was faced with this decision... And we said, "Well, why don't you just ask God? Why don't you ask Allah and let him, not us, tell you what to believe?" So, we got down on the floor and prayed with him right there. We just asked Allah to give our friend understanding as to what he needed to do. And in essence we practiced listening prayer with him.*

*After a few minutes of prayer, being still before God...we said, "Did God speak to you?" He said, "No."*

*Then we said, "Well, did you see anything? Did the Lord give you a vision?"*

*He said, "Yes, I see something right now."*

*And we said, "Well what do you see?" He said, "I see Isa [Jesus] standing in the corner across the room."*

*"Well, what's he doing?" "He's standing there with his arms open."*

*"Well what do you think he wants?" "I think he wants me to receive him."*

*"What are you going to do about that?" ...And then he said, "I think I need to pray."*

*...So without guiding him or leading him in any form of traditional sinner's prayer, he went back down, his face to the ground, and prayed out loud the most beautiful prayer of confession, contrition—asking Christ to be Lord.... It was wonderful.<sup>17</sup>*

Another worker told a beautiful story about the cumulative impact that answered prayer had on an elderly man who observed the daily interaction of a cross-cultural team in their morning prayer time:

*One of the things [the Christian NGO workers] do every morning...is the whole team prays together. And they have a flip chart...on which they write down the prayer requests. And every morning, they pray for those requests and they add any new ones and strike through any that have been answered....*

*This is, of course, totally outside the experience of this elderly Muslim gentleman, one of the elders of the village. This idea of really praying for things and really expecting God to intervene in at least some cases. It was then [that] he considered, began looking at all the flipped pages, looking over all of the prayer requests that had been answered. He realized, "These people... these are the ones God is listening to. It's their prayers in Christ's name that are being answered. Our people's prayers are rarely answered. The truth is with Jesus."<sup>18</sup>*

That elder went on to lead his family to Christ and help start several groups of Muslim-background believers in his area.

The leader of another team reported that a majority of the Muslim-background believers in one Central Asian country have dreams that influence their decision for Christ. In doing evangelistic Bible studies, this worker found that people often just want to argue. What actually brings them to Christ is a direct encounter, either through healing or a dream. No one can argue with the God who shows up and answers prayers.

*So our observation is [that] if we just try to teach biblical knowledge, they always try to compare. But if they have some kind of encounter—through a dream or vision or whatever—they realize, “Ah, the Bible is real truth, because ... God is a living God in our daily life.”<sup>19</sup>*

## **Redemption and the law**

Back in Bethlehem, Naomi receives the news and evidence of Boaz's favor with gladness. She asks God to bless his kindness in remembering the living—the widows—and the dead (their husbands). She also brings some new information to light. She reveals that Boaz is a near relative of Elimelech, referring to him as a “redeemer.” This title relates to the Jewish laws of redemption.

These clan-based social welfare laws are given in Leviticus 25. The underlying principle was that both land and people ultimately belong to God. Neither could be permanently sold—only “hired out” for a number of years. Every 50 years, all people were to be declared free and all lands to be returned to their clan.

In the meantime, relatives had the option to buy back lands that had come under the control of those outside of the clan—and the option to restore the freedom of family members who had become indentured servants. People who exercised this option were called redeemers. Redeemers could also be asked or expected to represent relatives in legal matters.

This passage leaves the reader wondering why Naomi had not already approached her redeemers, either directly or through a go-between, for assistance as she and Ruth were getting re-established in Bethlehem—or why the redeemers had not taken the initiative to approach the widows. One hint is that the widows' nearest kinsman is not mentioned by name—perhaps to save face for his lack of action.

### **An honorary Israelite**

Boaz's generosity awakens Naomi to new possibilities. In Moab, she dismissed the idea that she might remarry and have another son to carry on the family line. As fanciful as that idea was, it was not nearly as outlandish as the thought that Ruth—a despised Moabite, whose people were borne out of incest and declared permanently unclean in Israel—might be a candidate for marriage to an Israelite of status and reputation. The wheels of Naomi's mind begin to turn.

She says that Boaz is “one of our redeemers.” Suddenly, Naomi refers to Ruth as an honorary Israelite! The narrator wants you to notice this, because the next sentence begins, “And Ruth the Moabite said. . . .” Throughout the book, Ruth is referred to as “Ruth,” “her” or “she”—except in key moments where her foreign identity is important to the context:

- Upon arrival in Bethlehem (the phrasing showing the with-but-not-together context);
- When she asks permission from Naomi to glean (the gleaning law applying to foreigners);
- By Boaz at the city gate (as he seeks and then exercises the right to redeem);
- And in this passage—to mark the shift in Naomi's perspective.

The second chapter of Ruth opens by identifying Boaz as related to Naomi via Elimelech. It closes with Naomi identifying Boaz as being closely related to both her and Ruth. Naomi's willingness to upgrade Ruth's status to the equivalent of a native (foreigners could not be redeemed) is not lost on Ruth—and she will soon find a timely opportunity to express that identity.

“Your people will be my people,” Ruth had declared. Now Naomi has admitted as much!

This shift in identity reflects the journey of many cross-cultural workers. You are sent as Jesus was sent. Jesus “had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God” (Hebrews 2:17). Only he is the perfect high priest, but cross-cultural witnesses are also in the service of God as an emissary.

You will find yourself often identifying with those you serve—or struggling to do so. One western worker I know in Southeast Asia regularly prays, “How much more Malay can I become?” He says the answer he receives from God is always the same: “More.”

Now-retired Dallas Seminary professor Walt Baker used to tell his students about one of his most meaningful moments in cross-cultural service in Haiti: When the locals first referred to the exceedingly pale-skinned Baker by the Creole term “Nèg,” meaning “black.” A sure sign of progress is when those you serve begin to identify you as one of their own—not by mistake, but with full knowledge of your foreign origin. “They” becomes “we.” This opens the door for the message of the kingdom to take root in native soil.

Pray for the day that you will experience the blessing of being identified with the community. When it occurs, recognize and embrace the opportunity and responsibility that comes with it—to see the kingdom of God fully welcomed in culturally authentic ways.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you encouraged someone toward a direct encounter with the Master.

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How are you preparing for potential shifts in your identity — your self-identity or public identity?

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What is one thing that you can do to welcome the kingdom authentically among those you serve?

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Pray right now for God to reveal Himself directly to those you serve.

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## Chapter 8: Politics and the Threshing Floor

SPREAD YOUR WINGS OVER YOUR SERVANT, FOR YOU ARE  
A REDEEMER (RUTH 3:9B).

### The setting

Ruth, the cross-cultural servant, has been very helpful to Naomi. She has used the resources at her disposal—persistence, a willingness to work and awareness of the welfare law of gleaning. God has given her steady work, protection from harm, favor with her employer and a good reputation in the community.

Things have gone well. But seasons change. The barley harvest is ending. Ruth and Naomi continue to have needs. Plus, Naomi still has her fundamental problem: no heir for the family of Elimelech.

Naomi has been thinking—plotting, actually. She thinks, *Boaz has been very kind to Ruth and to our family. But with harvest nearly complete, the window of opportunity seems to be closing. I wonder...*

This wondering relates to the possibility of finding a permanent solution to their poverty—and producing an heir. She hatches a

plan that involves alcohol, the cover of darkness, and an intimate encounter between Ruth and her older male employer.

The plan is manipulative and risky, to say the least. It calls to mind some ugly family history. Elimelech was a descendant of Perez, who was born out of prostitution and incest (Genesis 38). Ruth is about to find herself in a dangerous position. Should she push back against the mother-in-law to whom she has pledged loyalty? Should she go through with a plan that could ruin her reputation (and Boaz's)? Any action is sure to permanently change her relationship with the influential man who has been helping her.

How will Ruth deal with this political quandary?

There is no script for seemingly impossible situations, where everything that you have worked for is at risk. You may not feel ready for unexpected challenges. But these are the moments that can greatly advance your ministry. As you read the passage that follows, watch what unfolds for Ruth. But before doing so, stop and pray in advance for wisdom and guidance for your own unseen future.

THEN NAOMI HER MOTHER-IN-LAW SAID TO HER, "MY DAUGHTER, SHOULD I NOT SEEK REST FOR YOU, THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU? IS NOT BOAZ OUR RELATIVE, WITH WHOSE YOUNG WOMEN YOU WERE? SEE, HE IS WINNOWING BARLEY TONIGHT AT THE THRESHING FLOOR.

WASH THEREFORE AND ANOINT YOURSELF, AND PUT ON YOUR CLOAK AND GO DOWN TO THE THRESHING FLOOR; BUT DO NOT MAKE YOURSELF KNOWN TO THE MAN UNTIL HE HAS FINISHED EATING AND DRINKING. BUT WHEN HE LIES DOWN, OBSERVE THE PLACE WHERE HE LIES. THEN GO AND UNCOVER HIS FEET AND LIE DOWN, AND HE WILL TELL YOU WHAT TO DO."

## Chapter 8: Politics and the Threshing Floor

AND SHE REPLIED, “ALL THAT YOU SAY I WILL DO.”

SO SHE WENT DOWN TO THE THRESHING FLOOR AND DID JUST AS HER MOTHER-IN-LAW HAD COMMANDED HER. AND WHEN BOAZ HAD EATEN AND DRUNK, AND HIS HEART WAS MERRY, HE WENT TO LIE DOWN AT THE END OF THE HEAP OF GRAIN. THEN SHE CAME SOFTLY AND UNCOVERED HIS FEET AND LAY DOWN.

AT MIDNIGHT THE MAN WAS STARTLED AND TURNED OVER, AND BEHOLD, A WOMAN LAY AT HIS FEET! HE SAID, “WHO ARE YOU?”

AND SHE ANSWERED, “I AM RUTH, YOUR SERVANT. SPREAD YOUR WINGS OVER YOUR SERVANT, FOR YOU ARE A REDEEMER.” (RUTH 3:1-9).

### **Incarnational and redemptive themes**

This passage is rich with meaning for the missional worker. Previous parts of the story have illustrated how those you serve often do not want your help. In this passage the reason is evident: People already have an idea about how to help themselves.

The gospel doesn't enter into an empty cultural space, where its light can shine brightly like the stars in the heavens. The gospel comes into cultures that have been wrestling for millennia with the meaning of life and the problem of death. They already have their own solutions. Those solutions make sense at some level—but without the saving love of God's perfect redemption, they are fatally flawed.

Naomi has a solution for her problem—and so will the people you go to serve. That solution will be inadequate without Christ.

The question is: How are you going to deal with that? You will need to proclaim the gospel boldly, confront faulty worldviews and help people to reason through the truth of the gospel. But each worldview has a basis in their history and culture, and head-on confrontation is unlikely to bring the results you are hoping for.

On the other hand, failing to address the shortcomings of other worldviews will not lead to the transformation of individuals and communities. As a cross-cultural worker, you must lean hard on God for discernment in how and when to confront others' flawed spiritual solutions. Ruth is a model for walking this dangerous path with grace, wisdom and even humor.

Consider Naomi's outlook. She mixes truth with falsehood. She has a correct understanding of her long-term problem: her family's missing legacy of life. She also understands that Boaz, a relative with means and compassion, represents a solution to that long-term problem, not to mention her and Ruth's day-to-day needs as a vulnerable "DWiNK" household (Double-Widow, No-Kids).

But remember—Naomi is embittered toward God. She doesn't trust him to work out the details in an honorable way. She doesn't believe that God is working on her behalf. It is all up to her. She sees Boaz's favor toward Ruth, but perhaps she cannot imagine that a respected Israelite landowner would marry a Moabite woman who has been previously married. With the seasonal need for harvest workers ending, Naomi wants to make the most of a fleeting opportunity.

Marriage, followed by the birth of a son, would be the best possible solution. But Naomi wants to hedge her bet. If marriage isn't possible, an illegitimate son is still a son. Such a child might be sufficient to motivate Boaz to permanently support the household.

So Naomi launches Operation Threshing Floor. And Ruth—amazingly—appears agreeable to the plan:

## Chapter 8: Politics and the Threshing Floor

AND SHE REPLIED, “ALL THAT YOU SAY I WILL DO”  
(RUTH 3:5).

On either side of that response—stretching back into chapter two and further on in chapter three—are parallel references to Ruth remaining, Boaz’s relationship to the family of Elimelech, an appeal for God’s blessing, and the provision of grain for Naomi.

The narrator emphasizes Ruth’s obedient response. Knowing Ruth’s character, this emphasis has led some people to defend Naomi’s plan, concluding that it was culturally appropriate. Some claim that the whole encounter at the threshing floor was a common, accepted means for proposing marriage under the Jewish law of Levirate marriage.

Chapter 11 of this book will address the issue of Levirate marriage and whether anyone in Bethlehem was under obligation to marry Ruth. For now, consider these clues:

1. Nowhere in the plan does Naomi reference the Lord.
2. Nowhere in the book of Ruth is Naomi praised, although Ruth and Boaz are praised multiple times.
3. Boaz says that Ruth’s appearance at the threshing floor would be considered scandalous if it became known.

Naomi is an opportunist. She is willing to risk Ruth’s hard-won reputation, along with Boaz’s standing as a community leader, to achieve her goal. But the really clever part is that there is “plausible deniability” in the scheme. Naomi doesn’t actually tell Ruth to seduce him. She merely instructs her to get pretty, show up where he’s sleeping and follow his lead.

It’s a bad plan, yet one that is repeated throughout Scripture—when God promises an heir, at times God’s people try to fulfill his

promise with their own plans. An illegitimate son would not be considered a true heir in the line of Elimelech. Yet Naomi forges on. With her two sons dead, utterly unable to produce an heir, she seeks to solve the problem herself by manipulating the kinsman redeemer.

The scheme has a vivid New Testament parallel in Luke 15, where Jesus tells the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. In the first two, the sheep and the coin are utterly unable to find themselves. In the third, the prodigal son, motivated by hunger, seeks to manipulate his way back into his father's household through a dubious apology and a flawed plan.

Kenneth Bailey writes convincingly about the prodigal's less-than-acceptable plan:

*Hoping to soften his father's heart, the prodigal plans to offer his solution to the problem of their estrangement: job training. He will acquire a skill, work as a paid craftsman and be able to save money. For the present the prodigal will not live at home. Only after the lost money is recovered will he presume to suggest reconciliation. Having failed to find a paying job in the far country, he will try to obtain his father's backing to become gainfully employed in his home community. He will yet save himself by keeping the law. Grace is unnecessary. He can manage alone—so he thinks!<sup>20</sup>*

Similarly, Naomi's scheme is morally and legally inadequate.

This is not surprising. The world seeks God in innumerable ways. Most of those attempts involve some degree of truth and wisdom. Elements of the Four Noble Truths and the Five Pillars are commendable. But all attempts that do not rely wholly on the initiative of Christ, the Kinsman Redeemer, are insufficient.

## Helping those who try to help themselves

So, how do cross-cultural workers handle this type of situation?

1. By respecting those you are serving.
2. By placing your full trust in the Master.
3. By discerning moments of opportunity that demand bold courage.
4. By recalling and communicating the Master's words.
5. By identifying with those you are serving.

Watch how Ruth's visit to the threshing floor demonstrates each of those characteristics.

1. **Respect**—Ruth does not directly confront Naomi about how the plan places her and Boaz in a character-compromising situation. It isn't clear from the story if she was offended by the suggestion, but a young woman living abroad in the home of her mother-in-law is in no position to show outrage. Ruth honors Naomi and obeys her, carrying out the plan with only a slight twist.
2. **Trust**—Ruth fundamentally trusts Boaz as a master who will not take advantage of her, even when no one else is looking. She is willing to go to him and to follow his instructions.
3. **Courage**—Ruth recognizes that a timely opportunity indeed exists. Boaz can provide the women with security. He could also help solve Naomi's ultimate

problem were he to marry Ruth. Naomi gives Ruth permission to initiate an encounter that is worth the risk to her reputation.

4. **Testimony**—Ruth faithfully carries out the plan without alteration up to the point where Boaz asks, “Who are you?” Then, she adds her twist, with wordplay that recalls the blessing that Boaz spoke at their first meeting. Then, he had referenced “the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” Recalling his words, she challenges him, respectfully, to become the answer to his own prayer of blessing. You can almost see the sparkle in her eye as she says, “Take your maidservant under your wing,” referencing not only the corner of his garment but also his ongoing protection. Talk about a creative marriage proposal!
5. **Identity**—Then, to top it off, she adds, “...for you are a close relative.” Imagine the smile breaking across Boaz’s face at the irony of those words! Ruth, the Moabite, had days earlier asked him how he “should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” Now she appeals to him as a close relative? Yet there is truth as well as humor here. Ruth had pledged to fully identify with Naomi and her people, and at this critical moment she gives voice to that identity.

Ruth defuses an explosive situation with respect, grace, boldness, creativity, thoughtfulness and humor. What a winsome cross-cultural emissary!

## Adopting Ruth's model

Emulating Ruth's pattern is a difficult challenge, but you can do it. God's people are doing it every day as timely opportunities emerge. Here are three simple stories of similar bold-yet-gracious servants that have been gathered through personal interviews with effective church planters.

**1) Making peace.** In one Arab-world community marked by regular calls for violence in response to continuing injustice, a young Muslim-background believer came to faith and was being discipled by cross-cultural workers. Given the opportunity to speak at a community gathering, the new believer chose peacemaking as his theme, using the example of Jesus.

Afterward, three leading elders asked to speak to the young man in private. He trembled to consider the fate that might await him—but the sheikhs wanted to know more about this message from Isa al-Masih. They soon threw the weight of their leadership into a movement to introduce their people to the Prince of Peace. Each of these sheikhs now leads communities of Jesus followers.

**2) Being sensitive to context.** In sub-Saharan Africa, a native worker from a major city has been called to live and bear witness among rural tribal people groups with no church. He identifies culturally with the people while also boldly proclaiming the uniqueness of Christ. Listen to his context-aware approach:

*When we meet with others, we greet each other saying "As-salam alaykum," meaning "Let peace be unto you." When we come to the Injil (New Testament), the Lord had also said, "Let peace be unto you." If first I will say,*

*“As-salam alaykum” to the man, that means I’m coming with the Muslim culture. Then that man will listen to me. We will greet each other and we can discuss many issues. He also understands that he is talking with someone he knows. He will listen when I talk to him.*

*When it is prayer time, especially if I am going to the villages, I (pray together) with them because it is a community thing. The only difference is, I will raise up my voice when I say the Shahadah, and instead of (saying, “There is no God but God)...and Muhammad is his prophet,” I will say “(There is no God but God)...and Jesus is the Word of God and the Spirit of God,” which is Quranically and Islamically acceptable. Then, automatically all of them that are educated will know that I am a Christian, not a Muslim.*

This fruitful worker boldly goes into the mosque and proclaims his identity in Christ! He respectfully invites families and communities to enter into relationship with the Redeemer and to identify themselves clearly as followers of Christ.

**3) Obeying Scripture.** An expatriate missionary in the Arab World has often been surprised at the degree to which new believers are willing to follow the Lord in obedience to Scripture. He described one instance at a weekly prayer meeting when the leader of the Muslim-background believers said:

*OK, we want you to pray because we are going to this city that is under the control of Islamic fundamentalists. The Lord is putting in our hearts that we need to obey what you were teaching us about in the book of Acts. There is*

## Chapter 8: Politics and the Threshing Floor

*no church there and no one who knows the gospel that we know of. We want to go there and plant a church and so they will know about Jesus too.*

*I was very concerned when I heard that. I was thinking, “Oh no, you had to choose...that city!” Because...radical Islamists...were in control there. So then, we prayed for them and we released them. Because we had made a commitment with God and ourselves that we were not going to be the ones instilling fear.*

The missionary went on to say that he is convinced that many times, “Fear comes from the workers” and inhibits them from being bold in witness. He continued:

*So we said, “We’ll be praying for you.” They left and we were praying being hopeful and at the same time being afraid of hearing bad news about the team. But they went there and people were just snatching the New Testaments from their hands. I mean, they took a few and they were lamenting that they didn’t take more.... They had opportunity to follow up, to go to people’s homes and share the gospel with them. So they returned very encouraged. And one of the persons who responded to the gospel was a teacher. He...became a leader of a church that in a year had grown to over 100 people.... And he’s now, even now, engaged in planting churches in the villages around this city. He has withstood [persecution for] the gospel. He’s very faithful.*

The expatriate workers had intentionally committed to avoid communicating fear. So they were ready for the moment of

opportunity. As a result, the believers were emboldened to step out and bear witness. And God brought more fruit.<sup>21</sup>

### **Seizing the moment**

Moments of risk and opportunity like these await you as well. You will feel your heart beat fast as you wonder, “What do I do or say now?” But you will know, because you have continued to immerse yourself in the Master’s words. You have continued to affirm your commitment to the people. You have continued to count the cost of courageous witness. You are continually instructed by the Spirit, and you continually appeal to the Master—through Jesus, your close relative—to cover you with his wings of discernment.

As a result, you will be like the scribe Jesus spoke about who understood the kingdom of heaven, the one “who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52).

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you remembered and drew upon the Master's words.

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What are you doing to develop courage?

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What is one thing that you could do to better understand and address flawed belief systems?

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Ask God right now to help you develop discernment as you serve.

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## Chapter 9: He Likes to Be Asked

AND NOW, MY DAUGHTER, DO NOT FEAR. I WILL DO FOR YOU ALL THAT YOU ASK, FOR ALL MY FELLOW TOWNSMEN KNOW THAT YOU ARE A WORTHY WOMAN (RUTH 3:11).

### **The setting**

Ruth has laid it all on the line, boldly approaching Boaz at the threshing floor in obedient response to Naomi's plan to win Boaz's long-term commitment to the family.

After waking Boaz, Ruth put her own twist on Naomi's plan by mentioning Boaz's earlier prayer for refuge for her, and she disarmingly refers to him as a "close relative." While humorous, her appeal to him is on the basis of his relationship with God and her relationship with his extended family. She goes big with her request—in so many words, asking him to marry her rather than to take advantage of her in the middle of the night, as he might otherwise assume.

How will Boaz respond to this big, bold request? He is a man of means and influence, used to giving orders. Here is a marriage

proposal from a young foreign woman who has nothing to offer except assurance that the pair will become the centerpiece of Bethlehem gossip.

The likely outcome is that he'll say no. If he were interested in marrying her, wouldn't he be the one to propose? Given the imbalance of power in the relationship, no one would expect her to initiate such a proposal!

As you read this passage, marvel at how Boaz responds to Ruth, and consider the parallels to the partnership of prayer between you and your Redeemer.

AND HE SAID, "MAY YOU BE BLESSED BY THE LORD, MY DAUGHTER. YOU HAVE MADE THIS LAST KINDNESS GREATER THAN THE FIRST IN THAT YOU HAVE NOT GONE AFTER YOUNG MEN, WHETHER POOR OR RICH. AND NOW, MY DAUGHTER, DO NOT FEAR. I WILL DO FOR YOU ALL THAT YOU ASK, FOR ALL MY FELLOW TOWNSMEN KNOW THAT YOU ARE A WORTHY WOMAN. AND NOW IT IS TRUE THAT I AM A REDEEMER. YET THERE IS A REDEEMER NEARER THAN I. REMAIN TONIGHT, AND IN THE MORNING, IF HE WILL REDEEM YOU, GOOD; LET HIM DO IT. BUT IF HE IS NOT WILLING TO REDEEM YOU, THEN, AS THE LORD LIVES, I WILL REDEEM YOU. LIE DOWN UNTIL THE MORNING" (RUTH 3:10-13).

### **Instructions worth repeating**

Boaz, the kinsman redeemer, clearly adores Ruth, this woman from another culture who embraces her new homeland. He is struck by her character and all that she has done for her mother-in-law—including coming to the threshing floor and proposing marriage, which will help Naomi in more ways than one.

## Chapter 9: He Likes to Be Asked

He acknowledges their age difference and suggests that she would have had other options for marriage, perhaps more physically attractive ones. His comment acknowledges that he does understand the heart of a young woman for a suitable husband. The interaction between Boaz and Ruth echoes the song “Matchmaker” in *Fiddler on the Roof*, where the young women hope for a man who might be scholarly for their father’s sake, wealthy for their mother’s sake and handsome for their own sake.

But first, Boaz invites the Lord to bless her; then he addresses her as “daughter.” What a beautiful response! In a few words, he shows that he understands and embraces both of the references she made in her appeal: First, that he is a man of faith, as indicated by his prayer for her. Second, that he is a close relative, a kinsman redeemer. His response affirms her grasp on both her standing before God and with others in her new community.

Boaz’s response is a gracious and generous one, because based on gender, age and ethnicity, he held a position of power and superiority. But rather than pointing out the outrageousness of a poor foreign widow proposing marriage to an Israelite landowner, he turns the tables completely and indicates that she has done him a great kindness in not pursuing younger men.

Then, he makes references that have multiple parallels with a New Testament passage of Scripture: the Upper Room Discourse in John’s gospel (John 13-17). In that passage Jesus gives authority to the disciples for their ministry (to follow his death and resurrection). Jesus also gives them instructions that he is careful to repeat so that the disciples will remember them after the crazy events that are to come.

Three of these are foreshadowed in Boaz’s response to Ruth:

1. **Do not fear**—Do not let the uncertainty of the situation affect you. Fear is a natural human response to situations beyond your control, but in the midst of such emotions, faith acknowledges that God is in control. Jesus, knowing that fear is a natural human response, twice instructs his disciples not to fear (John 14:1, John 14:27). Boaz, the kinsman redeemer, gives Ruth this same assurance.
2. **I will do all that you ask**—I have heard (will hear) you and I will act on your behalf. Jesus three times gives the disciples this promise (John 14:13-14, John 15:7, John 15:16). This promise is based on their faith in Jesus and their remaining/abiding in him. Boaz likewise pledges that he will do what Ruth has asked because she has already proven her character.
3. **Remain/abide with me**—Stay with me and allow me to be your source of power and protection. Jesus uses the word 10 times in John 15, citing it as a condition for fruitfulness in ministry, as a condition for his response to their requests, as a condition to avoiding punishment and as a model of the love shared by the Father and the Son. Boaz concludes his response by instructing Ruth to remain at the threshing floor through the night, echoing his earlier instruction to her to remain in his fields throughout the harvest.

If you have been reading with a skeptical eye about how an Old Testament convert could legitimately be a model for mission today,

consider this: On the night of his betrayal, as the ultimate Kinsman Redeemer oriented his disciples for missional living, he drew on—if not patterned his message after—Boaz’s response to Ruth at the threshing floor.

With the New Testament and Old Testament both emphasizing those points for missional workers, you should make every effort to follow those instructions and believe that promise for your own ministry.

### **Issues of power and control**

Michael Sack is a cultural researcher who explores worldview using visual images. One dimension that he investigates is people’s understanding of power and how it relates to their understanding of peace. The points emphasized by Boaz and echoed by Christ in the Upper Room Discourse incorporate both of those key elements of spiritual understanding. “Do not fear” is assurance of peace; “I will do all that you ask” is assurance of power. The Master is fully in control of the situation and is willing to act in response to his servants’ request.

Still, it is easy to be fearful and faithless amid challenges and unexpected circumstances. That is why the Master provides another instruction designed to counter those natural responses: “Remain with me.”

As you live out your ministry calling, reflect deeply on what it means to abide in Christ and in the community of faith. Ask God, “How can I demonstrate confidence in you without fear? What should I ask for on behalf of myself and those I serve? Who have you placed in my path to help in fulfilling your plan?”

Boaz’s response is gracious and encouraging—but it leaves an unanswered question: Why hadn’t Boaz taken the initiative? Why didn’t he bring up the idea in the first place? Ruth had caught his

eye. They had chatted during lunch earlier in the story. He knew her story and the family's immediate need, as well as Naomi's lack of an heir. He was a relative with resources and connections to help. Why wait for her to come to him before swinging into action?

He might have had an associate inquire about the possibility behind the scenes. Instead, he goes on with life as a landowner, content with the minor role of ensuring that Ruth's and Naomi's daily needs are met through honorable labor. If he were willing to do more—why didn't he do more sooner, before Naomi became desperate for a solution?

We learn in chapter four of Ruth that public gossip about the marriage was not a barrier. Boaz's words indicate that Ruth may have had other marriage options with younger men (despite the ethnic, economic and non-virginal strikes against her), so he may have assumed she had other plans.

We can speculate about those reasons or others—but no one can know for sure. What is evident is that he was ready to respond when asked.

Your Master is also ready to respond. In short, as my friend (and longtime cross-cultural worker) Bonnie Aldrich says, he likes to be asked.

Intercessory prayer is so foundational to everyday ministry in cross-cultural settings that it is difficult to say anything new about it. You pray and fast for yourself and for others. You pray through Scripture. You pray privately, as well as visibly, for and with friends among whom you serve. You plead for individual needs, for community needs and for the needs of whole peoples. You confess your own sins and weaknesses and those of the people with whom you identify. You pray for God's Kingdom to be welcomed and for his will to be done. You have an extensive prayer network to lift up regular prayer requests and specific needs.

## **A strategy of prayer**

One of the major themes to emerge from fruitful practice research with church planters working in the Muslim world is the priority of prayer. This commitment to prayer works itself out in many ways.

One of the most striking examples comes from a South Asian husband and wife who felt led to move to a new community and plant a church among a traditionally Muslim people group. They started by gathering in their home with their co-workers and having focused times of prayer for the community. They waited for God's direction before doing any Gospel communication.

During their second week of praying, a knock came on their door. A local person asked, "Is this where the prayer meeting is?" No one on the team had said anything to anyone about their meeting. They answered yes, assuming God's Spirit was moving. Then others came. They continued to pray with the growing community and saw people come to faith in Jesus.

When asked how their strategy and activity had shifted over time, they responded, "It's still the same [more than a year later]. We are still gathering for prayer, waiting for God to reveal what is next. He has never given us a new direction. Our church has begun solely through the power of prayer and it continues solely with the purpose of prayer."

Is such a strategy sustainable? Will it produce fully mature disciples? I don't know. But the couple's confidence for their strategy is in God and his Spirit, who are the true experts in church planting. A posture of listening and prayer is the best way to discern each step along the way. The story is a powerful reminder of relying wholly on God.

## **His response—why not his initiative?**

He likes to be asked. The lesson is easy to declare and remember,

but it can be a difficult promise to cling to, especially if you work among a resistant people and progress is slow.

The question, “Why doesn’t he seem to take the initiative?” persists today. You may find yourself asking it on the field. You are also likely to encounter it among those who may (or may not) be supportive of you in your journey. This question digs at people’s deepest uncertainties and insecurities about God.

Why would the God who loves people unconditionally—who took the initiative to reveal himself in Scripture, who became human in Christ, who lived and died to lift people out of hopelessness into the fullness of joy and abundant life—why would this God rest so much responsibility for his plan on people? People so often tend to be poor ambassadors of his love and life.

Several years ago I was involved in a research project that sought to explore why emerging generations seemed less likely than older generations to give financially to international missions—and how to motivate them to do more. Focus groups were organized among active churchgoers to discuss the matter. Concerned that some reasons for not giving might be subconscious or difficult to express, we came up with an exercise to indirectly explore attitudes about global mission.

Participants were given an exercise that resembled this:

*Imagine that you work directly for the CEO of a powerful global enterprise. One day, the CEO says to you, “Someone valuable to me and the enterprise is in a remote location overseas and is very sick. He needs medicine that we have available here. While I am traveling, I am giving you primary responsibility to get the medicine to him on behalf of our company.” How would you respond? What would you do?*

After the first evening of focus groups, the moderator called me to report frustration. “The participants mostly objected to the task,” he said.

The moderator went on: “They complained that such a task should not be part of their job responsibility. They said that if the CEO cared for the man, then he should take the initiative to have the medicine delivered instead of delegating it. They said that if they absolutely had to do the task, they would outsource it to a logistics professional who understood that kind of stuff.”

The moderator may have been frustrated, but I was thrilled. “I think you just identified some of the unspoken objections to missions work,” I responded. People don’t think missions should be their job—and they have missed the truth that all are called to share God’s story with those in their sphere of influence. They don’t understand why God would give them responsibility for it, and if they absolutely had to be involved they would try to find a missions specialist to do it for them.

In short, people don’t understand how a compassionate God who is all-powerful and all-knowing could place primary responsibility for delivering and living out his message to the nations on those as unreliable as humans. It is a logical objection—one that missionaries have faced at least since the days of William Carey. The pushback he got from senior clergy upon suggesting that Christ’s Great Commission should still be in force was: “When God pleases to convert the heathen, he’ll do it without consulting you or me!”<sup>22</sup>

You are likely to face this objection, too, in various forms:

*“God doesn’t need you—or anybody—to reach the nations.”*

*“Why should you be the one to go?”*

*“You’ve done your share. Don’t you think it’s time to come home and let someone else do it?”*

*“Most non-Christian people have made their own choice not to be Christian.”*

All of these are different ways of expressing doubts about the way that God works (or has yet to work) among the nations—and in partnership with his children.

Few responses are likely to satisfy those who voice such objections. But you must answer them for yourself. God values his partnership with you enough to patiently wait for you to respond. He longs for your heart to beat for the things that he longs for. He likes his children to ask.

### **The Father’s child; the Savior’s Bride**

One error that I made in designing the focus group exercise was to frame it in a corporate context. If kingdom work is a business at all, it’s a family business—one carried out in partnership with the Redeemer and one that is passed along to the next generation.

Christ worked in obedient, intimate partnership with the Father. The Bride of Christ is sent as he was sent. Her obedient partnership—your obedient partnership—produces great pleasure for God and for you.

“IF YOU KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS, YOU WILL ABIDE IN MY LOVE, JUST AS I HAVE KEPT MY FATHER’S COMMANDMENTS AND ABIDE IN HIS LOVE. THESE THINGS I HAVE SPOKEN TO YOU, THAT MY JOY MAY BE IN YOU, AND THAT YOUR JOY MAY BE FULL” (JOHN 15:10-11).

Boaz was a willing partner, and he was elated to discover that Ruth was also willing. It would take an intimate partnership to solve Naomi’s problem.

## Chapter 9: He Likes to Be Asked

As you serve cross-culturally, remember that, like Boaz, God has been there before you, preparing the way. Ask him to help you watch and listen to understand how he has been working. Ask to work in partnership with him. Take joy in asking him on your own behalf and on behalf of those he loves. He likes to be asked and he will respond to your willing partnership.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you demonstrated trust in the timing of God's response to a need or prayer.

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What are you doing to understand how God is already present and working among the people?

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What is one thing that you could do right now to make sure your cross-cultural ministry is saturated in informed, specific prayer?

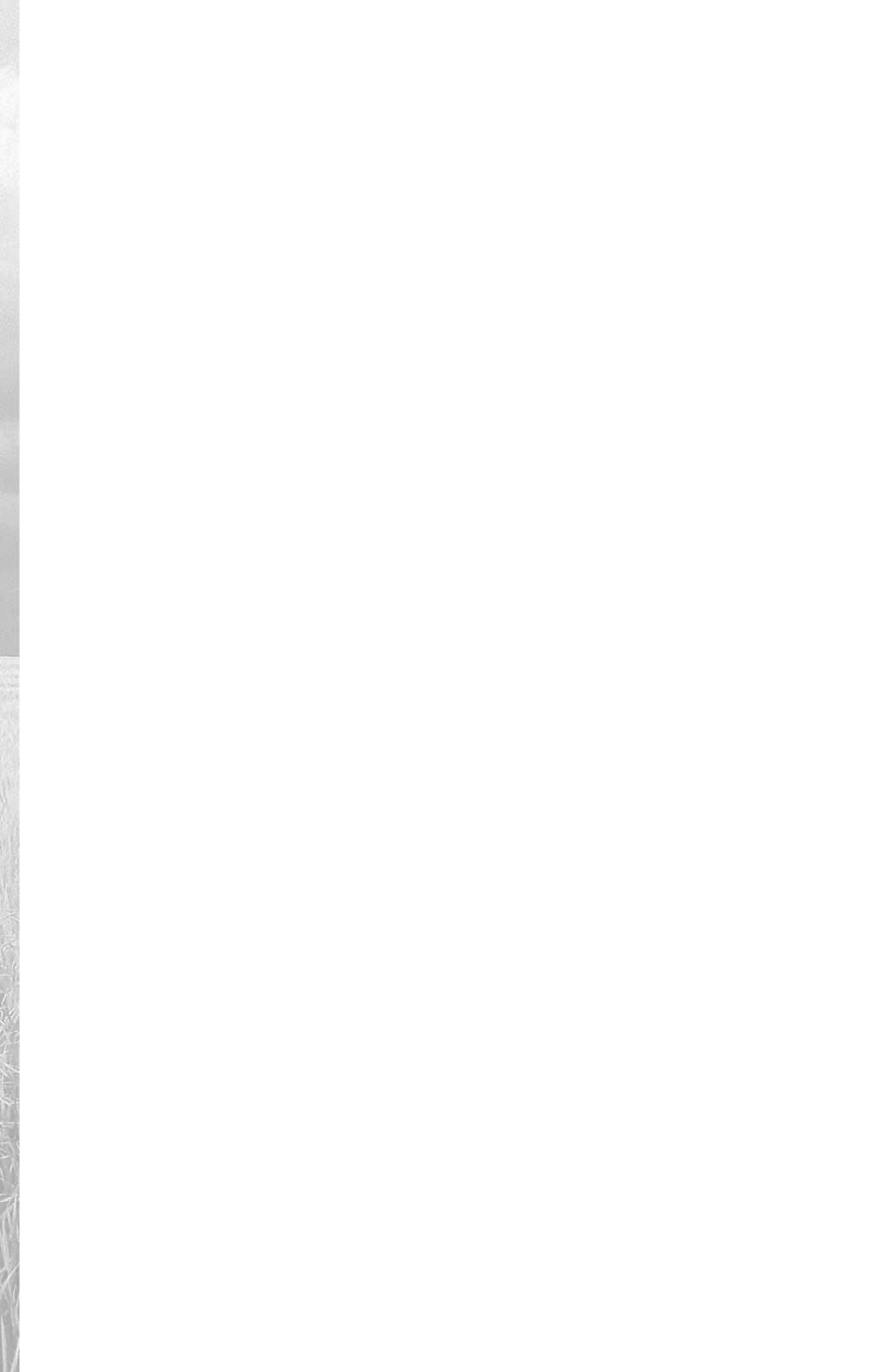
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Take initiative right now to appeal to the Savior on behalf of those you serve (or will serve).

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## Chapter 10: Wait? Really?

SHE REPLIED, “WAIT, MY DAUGHTER, UNTIL YOU LEARN HOW THE MATTER TURNS OUT...” (RUTH 3:18A).

### **The setting**

Ruth has boldly proposed a marriage partnership with Boaz, her employer. His response made her dreams come true—or even exceeded them. He affirmed her membership in Elimelech’s family—and his role as her kinsman redeemer. He complimented her wisdom in approaching him rather than seeking a younger man. He agreed to do all that she asked, ensuring that she would be redeemed and provided for.

But he also explained that the customary order of family relationships must be honored. Another kinsman has priority.

Ruth wonders about this other kinsman who has “first choice” of her. Is he kind? Is he honorable? Does he love God? Will he care for her and Naomi as Boaz has? So little is known about this nearer

relative. He does not appear to have shown any interest in the widows since their return. Naomi had not mentioned this other relative. Is the whole plan about to unravel?

You know how the story turns out, but as you read this passage, put yourself in Ruth's position. The night before, she showed amazing boldness in approaching Boaz. Now, she can do nothing—not even accompany him as he works out the details. In cross-cultural service you too are likely to face situations that are beyond your control.

SO SHE LAY AT HIS FEET UNTIL THE MORNING, BUT AROSE BEFORE ONE COULD RECOGNIZE ANOTHER. AND HE SAID, "LET IT NOT BE KNOWN THAT THE WOMAN CAME TO THE THRESHING FLOOR."

AND HE SAID, "BRING THE GARMENT YOU ARE WEARING AND HOLD IT OUT." SO SHE HELD IT, AND HE MEASURED OUT SIX MEASURES OF BARLEY AND PUT IT ON HER. THEN SHE WENT INTO THE CITY.

AND WHEN SHE CAME TO HER MOTHER-IN-LAW, SHE SAID, "HOW DID YOU FARE, MY DAUGHTER?" THEN SHE TOLD HER ALL THAT THE MAN HAD DONE FOR HER, SAYING, "THESE SIX MEASURES OF BARLEY HE GAVE TO ME, FOR HE SAID TO ME, 'YOU MUST NOT GO BACK EMPTY-HANDED TO YOUR MOTHER-IN-LAW.'" 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" (RUTH 3:14-18).

Boaz again shows his awareness of the widows' immediate need, but this may not be the only reason he provided grain. Boaz mentions

Naomi specifically—he understands that she is the one behind Ruth’s visit to the threshing floor. The grain ensures that Naomi will understand his pledge to meet their long-term need.

Now Ruth—who was rewarded for her boldness—must do the exact opposite: she must wait. Boaz says he will be quick to act, and Ruth trusts him, but even Naomi’s assurance that the matter will be resolved in a day doesn’t make waiting easy, especially with the outcome uncertain.

As the story proceeds, the narrator allows us to watch the kinsman redeemer in action at the city gate. But Ruth does not have the luxury of third-person narration; she is at home, waiting.

You will probably find yourself in the same position at times—waiting, unable to see the work that is happening in the spiritual realm. You will be dependent on others’ unseen action for outcomes beyond your control. And you may find yourself waiting for much longer than a day. The Redeemer is quick about his work—but he is not bound by your sense of time.

## **A season of waiting**

Demonstrating patience is difficult, especially when supervisors and supporters are expecting regular progress updates on your ministry. When the wait is long, you can easily begin second-guessing your ministry decisions.

At least three potential missteps lurk when you are in a season of waiting in ministry:

### **1) Abandoning your strategy too quickly**

The research director of a large mission agency told me that among its church-planting staff in the Muslim world, two-thirds have yet to see a church planted—or even a group gathering for Bible study that might become a church. With results like that, you can

understand why, sooner or later, many cross-cultural workers ask, “Am I doing something wrong?”

This is not a bad question. It reflects a healthy willingness to adapt to circumstances and incorporate more effective methods. You don’t want to spin your ministry wheels in frustration. But then comes the next question: “If not this strategy, then what?” You can quickly find yourself chasing after the latest fad, seeking one tool or technique to unlock the puzzle of people’s hearts.

In response, consider these thoughts based on feedback from hundreds of fruitful church planters:

1. A healthy strategy is an adaptive one. Fruitful church planters usually have a number of tools in their ministry toolkit. Make sure you have ways to test and incorporate new concepts.
2. Any strategy requires commitment. It often takes time. Just because another approach has helped lead to results elsewhere does not mean that you should abandon everything you have been doing. Focus on process rather than results.

Some of those who have seen movements develop—large numbers of people turning to Christ and sharing with others—understandably get enthusiastic about their methods. They begin sharing their techniques and training others, which is good stewardship of their fruitful experience. A few even suggest that their methods, if faithfully executed, will consistently result in church-planting movements.

Patrick Johnstone, creator of *Operation World*, challenges this thinking. He says that the Spirit moves where and when it wills, yet most widespread movements to Christ blossom out of a complex set of conditions—spiritual, environmental, social, political. Missionary

methods are one of many variables involved. A formulaic approach cannot unlock the movement of the Spirit.

What you do to live out and communicate the gospel matters—immensely. But don't confuse a specific method or tool with the broader strategy that it reflects. Strategy is rooted in broad principles, which can be applied in many ways. Focusing on methods will constrain you. Focusing on principles will give you the freedom to use methods in a way that considers your specific setting and that expresses your unique gifting.

One church-planting team that I interviewed in Southeast Asia had not yet seen measurable results. As the team members worked through an assessment exercise rooted in principles drawn from fruitful teams, they were surprised and encouraged to realize how many fruitful practice principles they were applying.

Because the team hadn't yet seen people come to faith, the workers seemed conditioned to think that they were not doing well. But the assessment helped them to see that they were mostly on the right track, even though results were slow in coming. The team recommitted itself to carrying out its core ministry strategy.

## **2) Losing heart when your expectations aren't met**

Most workers go to the mission field with high expectations. Having faith that God will move is a healthy thing. Still, many get a harsh reality check when the work moves more slowly than they expected.

The danger is when expectations swing too far the other way. You can convince yourself that change is never going to happen. When cross-cultural workers believe that lie, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy as workers start to simply go through the motions of ministry—or begin to find fulfillment in things outside of the core of their calling.

Find that place where expectant hope walks hand in hand with reality. I met a worker in a remote part of East Asia who had not seen a convert in eight years of ministry. I asked him how he found the motivation to keep going. He answered, “Every morning, I wake up and remind myself of two things. First, that I’m going to stay here as long as it takes to see people come to Christ. Second, that today might be the day.”

That is a worker who has not lost heart.

### 3) Over-interpreting a “breakthrough”

Some cross-cultural workers have a tendency to over-interpret the work of God in their midst. The desire to understand what God is doing is very strong. As you anticipate God’s work and carefully observe and reflect on what is happening, be humble enough *not* to presume to know all that the Redeemer is doing.

You may think that a particular breakthrough experience represents the Ruth-ian spiritual equivalent of a marriage deal going down at the city gate—or the birth of an heir. But more often than not, you will find that the Redeemer is loading your cloak with six measures of grain as encouragement.

Many workers we interviewed shared about exciting breakthroughs that were followed by discouraging reversals. This sometimes left them wondering, “What was that, Lord?” Fruitful teams often relate histories that sound like a slow advance of the tide: two steps forward, one or two steps back.

One team in Asia saw an exciting, national-led church-planting movement emerge. When asked to describe the work over the previous three to five years, they insisted on relating the full 18-year saga of advances and reversals.

First, the people group was difficult to get access to. So the team was thrilled when it was invited to teach English in a religious school

in the group's traditional heartland. *Breakthrough!* But a few months later, the team was kicked out of the school and the region.

Later, a refugee crisis enabled workers to return to the area. *Breakthrough!* But after a season of fruitful work, the political climate changed and the team had to leave again. A water project gave the team permission to return a third time. *Breakthrough!* But that episode ended with arrest, trial and jail time for proselytism.

Still, prison proved to be fertile ground for testifying to Christ's faithfulness, and inmates began coming to faith. *Breakthrough!* Then, predictably, the workers were released and the expat workers expelled from the country.

In the end, that final apparent reversal of progress became a catalyst for the movement that followed, as believers from the people group began to recognize that they could not rely on missionaries and must instead take personal responsibility for the continuing spread of the gospel. God's ways are often mysterious.

## Points of patience

A Fruitful Practice principle specific to sub-Saharan Africa is the recognition of *time* and *process* in people coming to faith. Patient love is essential for many cultures. An African church planter said that he practices three particular points of patience in a place where resistance is strong:

1. He waits to discuss the secret of Jesus the Messiah until a personal friendship is solidified and a person's heart prepared;
2. He waits to distribute Scriptures in the local language until a person is deeply immersed in the teachings of Jesus; and
3. He takes care not to promise anyone material benefits for coming to faith in Jesus.

Why does he demonstrate patience in evangelism? Partly because following Christ in the cultures where he works is such a significant commitment—one likely to result in persecution. Therefore, he wants to develop disciples whose commitment is well rooted in the gospel so that they will be ready to stand firm in their faith.

As you prepare to serve, ask God to give you discernment about boldness and patience. Be ready to practice both. Remain confident that God is working, but remember that his ways and times are not always to be known or understood.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you demonstrated perseverance in service (regardless of outcome).

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What are you doing to demonstrate your agreement with God that his timing is perfect?

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What is one thing that you can do to keep expectant hopes in balance with realistic patience?

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Pray right now that God will help you give you his perspective on cross-cultural ministry — including apparent breakthroughs.

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## Chapter 11: Spending Your Reputation

THEN BOAZ SAID, “THE DAY YOU BUY THE FIELD FROM THE HAND OF NAOMI, YOU ALSO ACQUIRE RUTH THE MOABITE, THE WIDOW OF THE DEAD, IN ORDER TO PERPETUATE THE NAME OF THE DEAD IN HIS INHERITANCE” (RUTH 4:5).

### The setting

Boaz has accepted Ruth’s assertion that she is a close relative through marriage. He has agreed to take on the role of kinsman redeemer. But what does that role mean?

Ruth intends this role to include marriage. But Boaz knows that the Jewish Law of the *Goel*, or kinsman redeemer, does not specifically address marriage, but the buying back of land to ensure that it stays within the clan. The law applied to buying back slaves, too—but Ruth is no slave. She and Naomi are widows whose welfare should be considered by Elimelech’s extended family.

During the encounter at the threshing floor, Boaz informed Ruth that another man was a closer relation and must have the first

opportunity to act as kinsman redeemer. Boaz has promised to find the kinsman the next morning.

In the early morning hours, Boaz ponders how to present the matter to the man. Boaz's negotiating position was not strong. He would need the right setting and the right sequence in the conversation. The opportunity could easily slip away. Like, Naomi, he develops a plan.

In this exciting passage, Ruth, the model for missional living, does not appear. Instead Boaz, who foreshadows the Redeemer, takes center stage. As you read and observe Boaz in action, consider that one way that cross-cultural workers bear witness is by imitating their Redeemer's example of sacrificial love (Eph. 5:1, 1 Cor. 11:1).

The narrative now shifts from the actions of a cultural outsider to those of a cultural insider. As a cross-cultural worker, you are likely to work closely with near-culture workers from whom you can learn much. Over time, as you identify with the people you serve, you too may become thought of as a close relative—one whose understanding and reputation approaches that of a native. Ask God for the wisdom and will to know how to use that reputation.

NOW BOAZ HAD GONE UP TO THE GATE AND SAT DOWN THERE. AND BEHOLD, THE REDEEMER, OF WHOM BOAZ HAD SPOKEN, CAME BY. SO BOAZ SAID, "TURN ASIDE, FRIEND; SIT DOWN HERE." AND HE TURNED ASIDE AND SAT DOWN. AND HE TOOK TEN MEN OF THE ELDERS OF THE CITY AND SAID, "SIT DOWN HERE." SO THEY SAT DOWN. THEN HE SAID TO THE REDEEMER, "NAOMI, WHO HAS COME BACK FROM THE COUNTRY OF MOAB, IS SELLING THE PARCEL OF LAND THAT BELONGED TO OUR RELATIVE ELIMELECH. SO I THOUGHT I WOULD TELL YOU OF IT AND SAY, 'BUY IT IN THE PRESENCE OF THOSE

## Chapter 11: Spending Your Reputation

SITTING HERE AND IN THE PRESENCE OF THE ELDERS OF MY PEOPLE.’ IF YOU WILL REDEEM IT, REDEEM IT. BUT IF YOU WILL NOT, TELL ME, THAT I MAY KNOW, FOR THERE IS NO ONE BESIDES YOU TO REDEEM IT, AND I COME AFTER YOU.”

AND HE SAID, “I WILL REDEEM IT.”

THEN BOAZ SAID, “THE DAY YOU BUY THE FIELD FROM THE HAND OF NAOMI, YOU ALSO ACQUIRE RUTH THE MOABITE, THE WIDOW OF THE DEAD, IN ORDER TO PERPETUATE THE NAME OF THE DEAD IN HIS INHERITANCE.”

THEN THE REDEEMER SAID, “I CANNOT REDEEM IT FOR MYSELF, LEST I IMPAIR MY OWN INHERITANCE. TAKE MY RIGHT OF REDEMPTION YOURSELF, FOR I CANNOT REDEEM IT.”

NOW THIS WAS THE CUSTOM IN FORMER TIMES IN ISRAEL CONCERNING REDEEMING AND EXCHANGING: TO CONFIRM A TRANSACTION, THE ONE DREW OFF HIS SANDAL AND GAVE IT TO THE OTHER, AND THIS WAS THE MANNER OF ATTESTING IN ISRAEL. SO WHEN THE REDEEMER SAID TO BOAZ, “BUY IT FOR YOURSELF,” HE DREW OFF HIS SANDAL (RUTH 4:1-10).

### **The light of day; the gaze of witnesses**

Boaz’s plan of action differs at virtually every point from Naomi’s plan. These contrasts highlight the righteousness of Boaz’s plan and suggest that Naomi’s plan was contrived to solve a problem but was driven by fear rather than faith:

**Naomi's Plan**

Occurs during the night  
Very private setting (witnesses avoided)  
Decision centered on opportunity  
Skirting around the Law  
Goal is gaining security

**Boaz's Plan**

Occurs during the day  
Very public setting (witnesses called)  
Decision centered on responsibility  
Fulfilling (or going beyond) the Law  
Goal is sustaining the legacy of life

Boaz makes every action as public and visible as possible. He doesn't go to the nearer kinsman's home or field. Instead, he goes to the Bethlehem city gate. He calls witnesses before any negotiation occurs. And not just two witnesses, as the law required, but 10 from the village elders.

Bethlehem is no great city—probably just a village of several hundred people. But it is clear that Boaz has the influence and reputation to arrange this assembly with no advance notice. Although he acts quickly, he also carefully constructs the scene. He is about to propose something daring—and he may need to spend some of his political capital.

The importance of building a good reputation was mentioned in Chapter Six. Here we see a key reason for developing a good reputation: *so you can spend it* at key moments. This was just such a moment for Boaz.

## A legal mystery

Ruth's proposal to Boaz revealed information about a nearer kinsman. This passage brings another new revelation: land that belonged to Elimelech is available for sale.

The story takes on a new level of intrigue, not only because of the implications for Ruth and Boaz, but also because the discussion at the gate does not fully align with what is understood about the Law of Moses. This legal mystery offers insights that can help you deal with the ambiguous situations that many cross-cultural workers encounter.

Key questions include:

- **Who is the legal owner of the field?** Boaz says that Naomi is selling the field that belonged to Elimelech, but the Law did not allow inheritance by a widow (see Numbers 27:1-10). Is the field really Naomi's to sell? <sup>23</sup>
- **Is the redeemer obligated to support the widows?** The Law of Redemption in Leviticus 25 was designed to restore property to the clan. But that law does not require the redeemer to provide for widows of prior landowners. Will the widows be compensated?
- **Is the redeemer required to marry the widow?** Because sustaining the family name was so important, the Law of Levirate Marriage (Deuteronomy 25) instructed the brother of a deceased, childless man to marry the widow and raise up a son as an heir for the dead man. However, the law does not mention kinsmen outside of the immediate family.

The spirit of these laws was to protect property and bloodline. But the letter of the laws may not have applied to Naomi and Ruth at any level.

Dr. Donald Leggett, following extensive research into scholars' interpretations of the passage, concludes: "...there did not exist, either for Boaz or the prior *goel* [redeemer], a compulsory legal obligation to redeem the property or to enter into a levirate responsibility."<sup>24</sup>

Boaz could be opposed on three levels: first, that Naomi had no right to sell the land; second, that the Law of Redemption carried no responsibility to provide for the widows; third, that the Law of Levirate Marriage did not apply beyond immediate family.

I believe that Boaz knew all of this, and that his argument at the gate was a calculated risk. He would declare that the relatives of Elimelech would do more than the Law required, hoping that the setting and his reputation in the community would lead to the desired outcome.

### **Boaz's higher standard**

Boaz starts by deliberately mentioning that Naomi plans to sell the field—and then quickly jumps to the question of who would redeem it. He wants to test if the other kinsman will argue that the field is already rightfully his as the nearest living male relative. If that objection is raised and sustained, Boaz's plan fails. He would no longer be second in the line of inheritance, as the nearer kinsman's sons would have priority.

Thankfully, the nearer kinsman does not object, perhaps due to the watchful eye of the town elders. Compensating Naomi for the field would be viewed as just. So he agrees to redeem the field instead of claiming it as his right. Boaz scores a victory for Naomi and Ruth: payment for the field. Importantly, Boaz also keeps his status as second-in-line to redeem.

## Chapter 11: Spending Your Reputation

Then, Boaz makes another bold move. Because Naomi's right to sell the field was not challenged, he can assert that a widow of marriageable age is lawfully linked to the property. Therefore, he repeats that the field is being purchased from Naomi and then declares that the buyer must marry Ruth and assume responsibility to produce a son for Mahlon to sustain the family line.

Will the nearer kinsman—or the elders—object? This idea goes far beyond the Law of Redemption and the scope of levirate marriage. Besides that, the widow is a foreigner! If the point is not challenged, the land will not pass to the redeemer's estate, but will be reserved for the descendants of Mahlon. Redemption will become a purely selfless act.

Whatever the reason, the nearer kinsman does not cry foul. His head may have been spinning from the speed of the deal and the changing terms. The opportunity has lost its luster—the land will not be passed down to his sons, and if the marriage were to produce new sons, they could complicate his own estate. No, this won't work.

The episode not only reveals Boaz's cleverness and confirms his reputation, but it also points to the purity of his motives. There is no profit in the land redemption for him, either. And, like the nearer kinsman, he is under no obligation to act. Boaz redeems out of voluntary love—just as Christ the Redeemer would a millennium later.

Did Boaz distort the truth by declaring that the kinsman redeemer must acquire Ruth as his wife? I prefer to see it as Boaz raising the Law to its fullest expression, turning people toward God's higher standard. Jesus did a similar thing in the Sermon on the Mount. Six times, he drew contrasts between traditional interpretations of the Law and God's higher standard, such as: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say

to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

Boaz declared that the relatives of Elimelech would do even more than the Law required—and he placed his reputation on the line in doing so.

### **Spending your hard-won reputation**

The application for cross-cultural workers is clear: Be ready to both earn and spend your reputation on behalf of those you serve. Ask God to show you clearly when to adhere to cultural expectations and when the time has come to counter them.

A longtime cross-cultural worker in the Muslim world told me this story (paraphrased):

*“I have sons,” he said. “And I mean to teach them that a husband should honor his wife. One way I do that is by helping my wife with chores around the home. Helping one’s wife is not often modeled in the culture where we live.*

*“One thing that I do is hang the laundry out to dry. In our town, people hang their laundry on the balcony to dry in the breeze. It is very visible to the neighbors, so I know that I am being seen. I also know that men in this culture do not hang laundry. It is women’s work.*

*“Hanging laundry is a choice to spend some of my reputation. When I do it, I know I am going to have to spend more time drinking tea with the men in the café in order to restore my relationships and reputation. But I do it because it is important for my sons to learn to become the men that they should be.”*

The story was not told as an example of influencing the culture around him—it was just a story about passing along values

generationally. Still, it illustrates a key truth in mission: Reputation is not designed to be hoarded, but to be spent.

As you imitate Christ, consider how he applied this principle. Jesus grew in favor with God and man, but he also made calculated decisions to do counter-cultural things. His words nearly got him thrown off a cliff at Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30). They thinned out the crowd of disciples at Capernaum when he mentioned eating flesh (John 6:24-69). They nearly got him stoned in Jerusalem when he declared, “Before Abraham was, *I am*” (John 8:20-59). Eventually, his words were the basis of his death sentence.

Christ still transforms cultures today. As you represent Him, be prepared to exchange your reputation for witness that leads to transformation. This is the pivot of mission.

### **Ripples of influence**

Embracing new life in Christ is a pivot point in a spiritual journey. Sometimes, new followers of Christ will make their decision after consciously rejecting another worldview. Other times, families or communities will interpret their new life in Christ as a new chapter in an ongoing spiritual story. They see how God has worked in their midst, preparing the way for them to receive the gospel. Be ready for either pattern to emerge in your work.

Also, be mindful, as Boaz was, of the role of community leaders. Working intentionally with leaders is not the only pattern for fruitful ministry—new life often enters a community through ministry among those who are neglected or powerless. But God places leaders into their roles for a purpose—and that often includes helping advance the gospel throughout their sphere of influence.

One church planter told the Fruitful Practice Research team a story of a fellowship of Muslim-background believers who were instrumental in forming a new group of seekers in a neighboring

community. Rather than designating leaders, the church planters encouraged the local people to choose their *own* leaders for directing the process of exploring the Scriptures—even before they had heard anything about Jesus Christ!

People in the community felt free to participate because local leaders were involved. When opposition arose at one point, the leaders were quick to speak up in defense of the new meetings “because they had already established ownership.”<sup>25</sup>

The church planter noted that releasing control can be “scary and exciting at the same time”—scary because the worker released control to national believers; exciting because of the rapid growth that followed.<sup>26</sup> Such release of control acknowledges that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate influencer in changing lives and advancing the gospel.

As your work progresses and as you grow to identify with the people and build a reputation among them, you may find it natural to want to retain control. To counter this temptation, fully entrust your work to the Holy Spirit in the beginning. Seeing your work as the Spirit’s work will enable you to trust him as he works in and through the lives of new believers.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you chose to spend part or all of the reputation you had earned.

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What are you doing to prepare for spiritual transformation in expected and unexpected patterns?

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What is one thing that you can do to call people to move from the standards of their culture to God's higher standard?

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Pray right now. Acknowledge the Holy Spirit's control of your ministry and ask for readiness and discernment to release control to Spirit-guided believers the proper time.

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## Chapter 12: Multiplying Love

SO BOAZ TOOK RUTH, AND SHE BECAME HIS WIFE.  
AND HE WENT IN TO HER, AND THE LORD GAVE HER  
CONCEPTION, AND SHE BORE A SON (RUTH 4:13).

### **The setting**

Before the elders of Bethlehem, Boaz accepts the sandal from his kinsman. With it, he wins the right to fulfill his promise to Ruth. By God's grace, his plan has worked. He asserted Naomi's right to sell the family's property, ensuring that she and Ruth would be provided for. Then, he linked the property to Ruth and the hope of an heir for the family.

Seeing that redemption has become a selfless act of family devotion, the nearer kinsman bows out, and Boaz gladly steps in. He knows the worth of the cross-cultural servant who waits patiently at home.

Now he is ready to publicly declare his commitment to Naomi, to Ruth and to the family legacy. He looks forward to the marriage bed,

but he sees far beyond that. Hope for the day has become hope for the next generation.

As you read the passage that follows, note how clearly Boaz declares his purpose in redeeming. Note how the townspeople respond. Consider also how your Kinsman Redeemer has declared his love for you, seeks intimacy with you and has a vision for the fruit of your partnership. Enjoy him.

If the story were purely a romance, or if its object were to emphasize Ruth's and Boaz's noble character and bold initiative, the curtain would drop here. But the curtain does not drop, for

THEN BOAZ SAID TO THE ELDERS AND ALL THE PEOPLE,  
“YOU ARE WITNESSES THIS DAY THAT I HAVE BOUGHT  
FROM THE HAND OF NAOMI ALL THAT BELONGED TO  
ELIMELECH AND ALL THAT BELONGED TO CHILION AND  
TO MAHLON. ALSO RUTH THE MOABITE, THE WIDOW OF  
MAHLON, I HAVE BOUGHT TO BE MY WIFE, TO PERPETUATE  
THE NAME OF THE DEAD IN HIS INHERITANCE, THAT THE  
NAME OF THE DEAD MAY NOT BE CUT OFF FROM AMONG  
HIS BROTHERS AND FROM THE GATE OF HIS NATIVE  
PLACE. YOU ARE WITNESSES THIS DAY.”

THEN ALL THE PEOPLE WHO WERE AT THE GATE AND  
THE ELDERS SAID, “WE ARE WITNESSES. MAY THE  
LORD MAKE THE WOMAN, WHO IS COMING INTO YOUR  
HOUSE, LIKE RACHEL AND LEAH, WHO TOGETHER BUILT  
UP THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL. MAY YOU ACT WORTHILY IN  
EPHRATHAH AND BE RENOWNED IN BETHLEHEM, AND  
MAY YOUR HOUSE BE LIKE THE HOUSE OF PEREZ, WHOM  
TAMAR BORE TO JUDAH, BECAUSE OF THE OFFSPRING  
THAT THE LORD WILL GIVE YOU BY THIS YOUNG WOMAN.”

SO BOAZ TOOK RUTH, AND SHE BECAME HIS WIFE.  
AND HE WENT IN TO HER, AND THE LORD GAVE HER  
CONCEPTION, AND SHE BORE A SON (RUTH 4:9-13).

### **More than a love story**

Don't you love the romance of Ruth? It appeals to the heart of storytelling: the guy with the heart of gold (who couldn't see himself winning the girl) sees beyond the young woman's background to her noble character. He risks his reputation to marry her. Then he sweeps her off into "happily ever after." If it were a Hollywood movie, they would share a kiss and the townspeople would cheer as the credits begin to roll.

The romance is real. But that is not where the book of Ruth ends, because the wedding does not solve the original problem. Boaz declares his purpose in redeeming Ruth: to carry forth the legacy of life for the family of Elimelech. His partnership with Ruth is just getting started.

Don't dismiss Boaz's statement as mere cover for what you understand to be his true motivation: his love for Ruth. The book is consistent: the problem from beginning to end is the lack of an heir. The hope in the union of Boaz and Ruth is that they will have a son. While the story doesn't emphasize the risk, Ruth has been married before and had not produced an heir, so there is no guarantee of a son—but there is great hope.

The townspeople do cheer—but their blessing also anticipates offspring. They talk about Rachel and Leah, who bore the sons of Jacob—Israel himself. They mention Tamar, who despite the ugly family history gave birth to the patriarch of the clan. They also wish Boaz honor and fame, but they also understand the importance of sustaining the family line.

Boaz loves Ruth deeply, but romance is not his chief end. He gladly provides for the needs of Ruth and Naomi, but welfare is not his primary goal. His focus is life itself, which makes love possible and welfare meaningful.

### **Practicing fruitfulness**

Verse 13 straightforwardly mentions the couple's marital relations, conception enabled by God and Ruth's delivery of a male child. Consider all that this brief verse entails for Ruth:

1. First, she becomes the bride of the redeemer, experiencing full intimacy with him.
2. Second, while she is designed to bear offspring, the Lord must enable her to conceive.
3. Third, she carries a child to term (likely in frequent discomfort) and then gives birth (certainly in great pain and at considerable risk to her own life and that of the child).

Each of these points has a corresponding parallel for you as you partner with your Redeemer in cross-cultural ministry.

1. As in marriage, the Redeemer is committed to working in close partnership with his redeemed people. The Church is called "the Bride of Christ" for a reason: Jesus opens himself to us—and asks us to open ourselves to him—in amazing intimacy. The marriage bed is a fitting (if sometimes uncomfortable) analogy. John Eldredge describes the significance of the marriage act:

## Chapter 12: Multiplying Love

*The man comes to offer his strength and the woman invites the man into herself, an act that requires courage and vulnerability and selflessness for both of them. . . .When both are living as they were meant to live, the man enters his woman and offers her his strength. He spills himself there, in her, for her; she draws him in, embraces and envelops him.*

*. . . .And that is how life is created.<sup>27</sup>*

Ruth has already shown courage and vulnerability and selflessness—in going to Bethlehem, in gleaning the fields, in her bold approach at the threshing floor, in patiently waiting as Boaz worked his plan. Marriage requires a new degree of each trait as she opens herself up to be the means through which life is created in partnership with the redeemer.

In mission, expect the same. Cross-cultural living will lay you bare in new ways. Your sin will be more evident—as will God’s grace. You will find discover new ways to experience being loved by Christ, receiving strength through the Holy Spirit. You have been specially designed for the role of serving and bearing witness.

2. As with conception, God brings new life. You have responsibilities, but you simply cannot will belief among those with whom you work. In the story of Ruth, there was no guarantee of an heir, even after her marriage to Boaz. They had no control over the outcome of their union, even if they entered into it hopefully and faithfully. Ruth’s previous marriage did not produce an heir.

When results are slow in coming, it is tempting to blame yourself, thinking that if you were just a little more spiritual or committed or disciplined, results would come faster. Don't play that game. Yes, abiding in Christ is essential for bearing fruit—be accountable to the Lord and to others. Beyond that, you must trust in the Redeemer's timing for new life; sometimes it involves multiple generations of missionaries.

3. As with pregnancy and childbirth, the process of love-leading-to-new-life is often uncomfortable, painful and dangerous for those committed to ministry. You will feel sad and not know why. You will be uncomfortable—feeling like you don't fit in your adopted culture or your home culture. You will experience pain and uncertainty and danger. Worse, you will have no due date to which you can point and anticipate that all will be resolved.

As difficulties come, don't be surprised. Don't consider them to be a circumstantial sign that you are doing something wrong, or that the Redeemer is slow to hear. Even after all your sacrifices for ministry—the leaving home, the awkwardness and vulnerability of living as a foreigner, the building of a reputation, the identifying with your people, the bold action on behalf of others, the waiting—even after all this, participating in the birth of new life in Christ will be full of tears. But joy is ahead for you and for generations of Christ-followers.

Remember the Redeemer's love for you. Remember that he has a vision for your partnership. Enjoy him. Trust him. And ask him to continue to reveal his vision for your partnership in cross-cultural service.

One family I know has served in Southeast Asia for two decades. Through illness or circumstance, every member of the family has at some point had a brush with death. But through their faithfulness, God has brought forth a national-led movement that has seen churches planted to the 12<sup>th</sup> generation!

### **The miracle of multiplication**

A key theme emerging from Fruitful Practice Research is *intentional multiplication*. Most fruitful evangelists and church planters don't envision one convert or one church. They look to give birth to disciples and churches that multiply a hundredfold through many generations.

If you don't envision "many" from the beginning, your focus can easily move to protecting and providing for the first small band of new believers. But Christ desires spiritual multiplication. He said that when the seed falls on good soil, an abundant harvest results. He said the Master will praise stewards who see their talents multiplied into a good return. In another parallel with the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus mentioned that bearing much fruit is a mark of the disciple.

What does focusing on multiplication look like—especially when no disciples yet exist among a people? One idea is encouraging people to retell Bible stories and lessons even before they come to faith. One successful church planter explains it like this:

*I tell them: "I'm giving you my time, and the price of that time is that you share the story with a friend or someone else." The question they always have is, "Who do I do it with?" I tell them, "Start with your wife. Just sit down and tell your wife what you learned from me." So, right from the beginning we build in the concept of reproducing. They have this concept built in: what I learn, I share with someone else.*

In many cultures, the social barriers to sharing gospel stories are lower *before* a person makes a decision to follow Jesus. When listeners share what they hear from the beginning, there is little social risk. They are not professing a new faith; they are simply sharing something they heard. It's an interesting story!

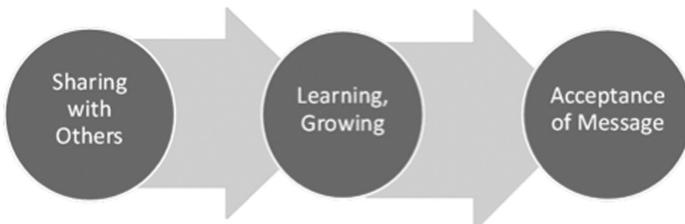
Fascinating things happen when non-believers begin to share Bible stories with other non-believers. They talk about them, think about them, and ask questions about them. They retell them to others. Their understanding grows as repetition and interaction reinforce the message. Ideas for applying lessons to life circumstances emerge, validating the content.

As story is added to story, some listeners begin to realize that God authored the stories. That they are true—and that their truth requires a response of faith.

In the West, the process of evangelism and discipleship is commonly viewed like this:



But the pattern in emerging communities of believers is often exactly the reverse.



## Seeing life spread through networks

Another multiplication principle is seeking to spread the gospel through natural social structures and networks. Such networks—extended families, student groups, professional associations and interest-based groups—provide encouragement to maintain commitment, grow together and pass the message along to others.

In a 2008 study, Fruitful Practice Research asked 200 successful church planters about the composition of the churches they had seen emerge. Workers whose churches were mostly comprised of people who knew one another previously had seen, on average, more than twice the number of churches begun as those who gathered together people with no prior relationship.

There is not one “best” way to plant churches—God is glorified through a diversity of church types and outreach styles. However, church planters are wise to consider such dynamics as they rely on the Spirit to fulfill their calling, especially among resistant peoples.

You may be tempted to say, “Just wait until we get a few believers—then we can think about multiplication.” But that approach can lead toward an inward focus or an unhealthy dependence on you. Instead, seek multiplication from the start.

While Naomi was concerned about a single household, Boaz was considering future generations. His love for Ruth expressed itself in a purposeful partnership to help meet others’ needs in a sustainable, reproducible way. Open yourself to the Redeemer and his plans for multiplying life among those you serve. Ask him to strengthen you for your roles in that cherished partnership.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you opened yourself to greater intimacy with the Redeemer.

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What are you doing to encourage the spread of the gospel through social networks?

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What can you do to focus on multiplication of life from this point on in your ministry?

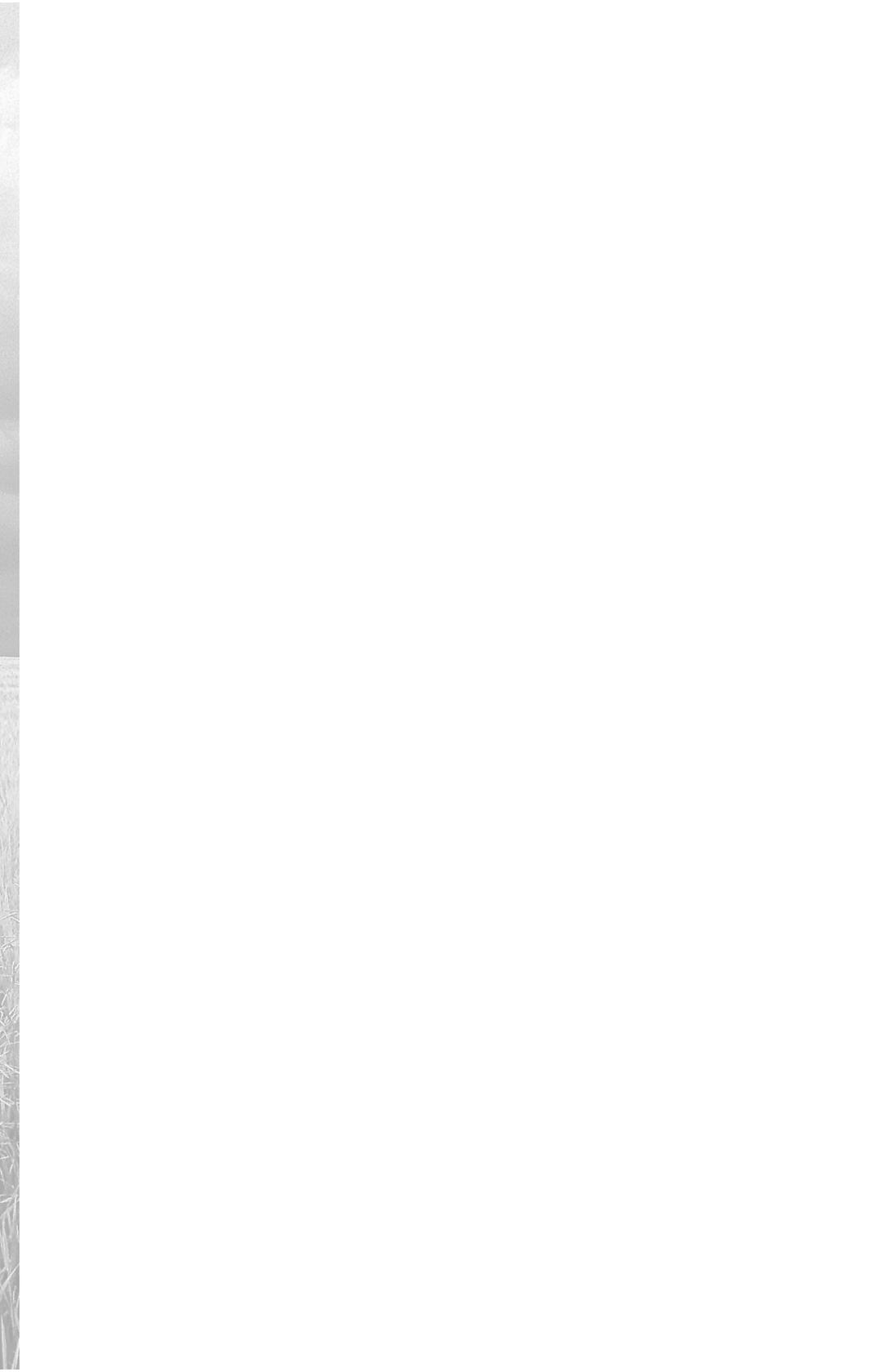
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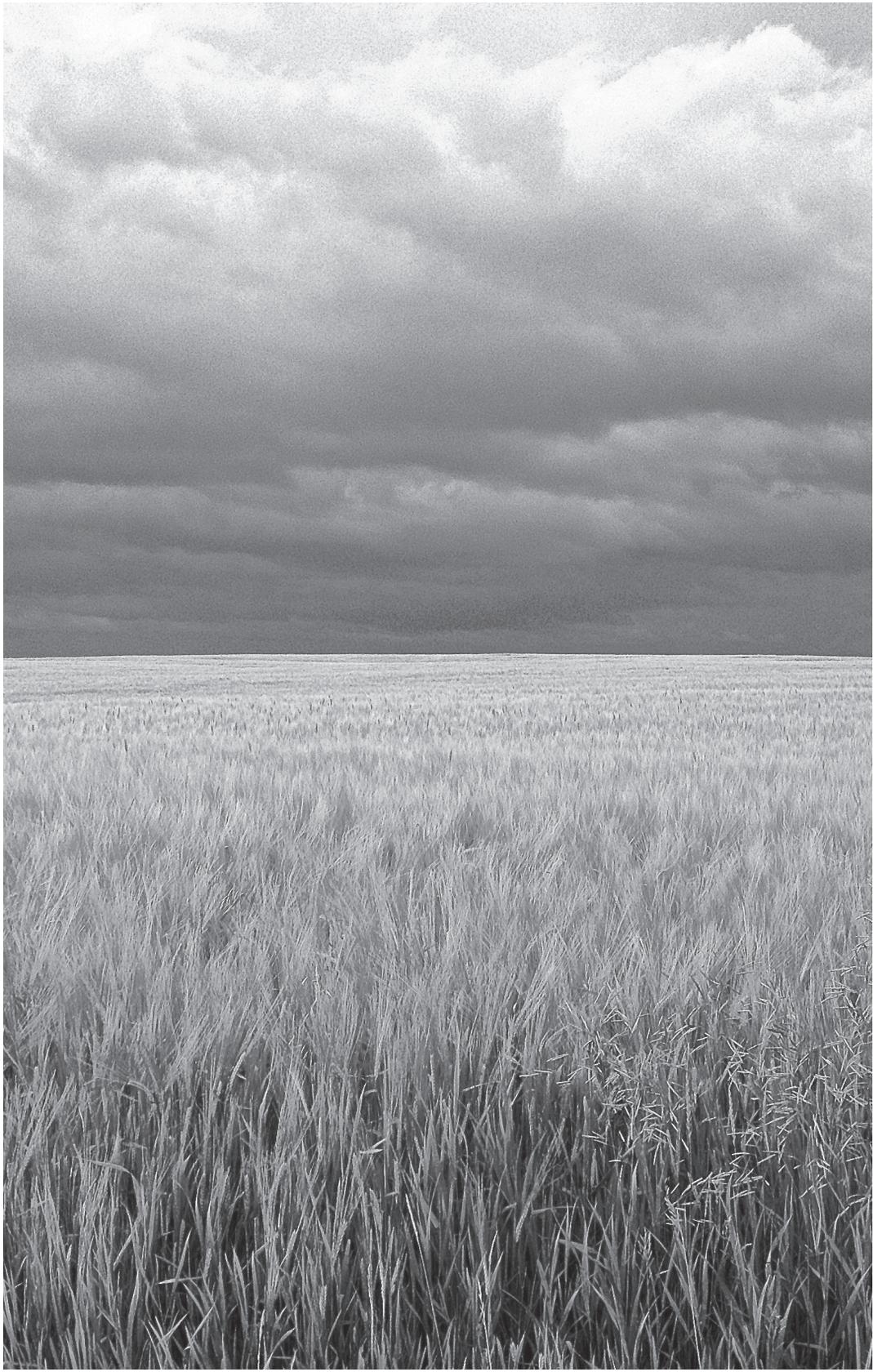
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Meditate right now about the depth and freshness of the Redeemer's love for you.

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## Chapter 13: Testimony from the Chorus

HE SHALL BE TO YOU A RESTORER OF LIFE AND A NOURISHER OF YOUR OLD AGE, FOR YOUR DAUGHTER-IN-LAW WHO LOVES YOU, WHO IS MORE TO YOU THAN SEVEN SONS, HAS GIVEN BIRTH TO HIM” (RUTH 4:15).

### The setting

In Bethlehem, life has gone on since the dramatic events at the threshing floor and the city gate. Millet and lentils were harvested in mid-summer, grapes and figs in late summer. The fall festivals were celebrated. The early rains followed, and Boaz and other growers plowed and planted their fields anew. The soaking winter rains came, allowing the wheat and barley seedlings to sprout and the countryside to turn a rich shade of green as new life emerged from the ground.

God has not only brought forth new life in the fields of Ephrathah, the “fruitful land,” he has also brought forth new life in the household of Boaz. Ruth has given birth to a son—an heir for the

line of Elimelech and Mahlon. The new life that seemed so unlikely has arrived.

It is a joyous occasion for all, but especially for Naomi, who had declared herself bitter and empty before the community. Now she is full, as the family legacy has been restored. The townspeople, who had expressed hope for children at the wedding, come again to rejoice with Naomi in the child—and in the partnership of love through which he came. The women prepare to offer another blessing.

As you read the concluding passage of the book, make note of the role played by the women of Bethlehem in affirming what God has done. Observe the hopes and expectations they express for the child.

Think about how the community of those you serve will interpret the events of your cross-cultural service in partnership with the Master. Consider how your interaction with those you serve may change once God brings forth new life.

THEN THE WOMEN SAID TO NAOMI, “BLESSED BE THE LORD, WHO HAS NOT LEFT YOU THIS DAY WITHOUT A REDEEMER, AND MAY HIS NAME BE RENOWNED IN ISRAEL! HE SHALL BE TO YOU A RESTORER OF LIFE AND A NOURISHER OF YOUR OLD AGE, FOR YOUR DAUGHTER-IN-LAW WHO LOVES YOU, WHO IS MORE TO YOU THAN SEVEN SONS, HAS GIVEN BIRTH TO HIM.”

THEN NAOMI TOOK THE CHILD AND LAID HIM ON HER LAP AND BECAME HIS NURSE. AND THE WOMEN OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD GAVE HIM A NAME, SAYING, “A SON HAS BEEN BORN TO NAOMI.” THEY NAMED HIM OBED. HE WAS THE FATHER OF JESSE, THE FATHER OF DAVID.

NOW THESE ARE THE GENERATIONS OF PEREZ: PEREZ FATHERED HEZRON, HEZRON FATHERED RAM, RAM

FATHERED AMMINADAB, AMMINADAB FATHERED  
NAHSHON, NAHSHON FATHERED SALMON, SALMON  
FATHERED BOAZ, BOAZ FATHERED OBED, OBED  
FATHERED JESSE, AND JESSE FATHERED DAVID (RUTH  
4:14-22).

### **A walking answer to prayer**

An heir has been born! The chorus resounds at the birth of the child. The women of the community welcome the child into the world and declare his significance.

The story concludes, as it began, with Naomi. As she holds the baby in her lap, the women of Bethlehem bless the child and his grandmother, expressing their hopes—even their charge—for the relationship they will share.

They also celebrate Ruth’s heroic role. “Your daughter-in-law... loves you [and] is more to you than seven sons,” they say with joy and humor.

But in the end, there is one Hero above all: “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer.” They know the child represents the family legacy over which Naomi had despaired. He will carry on the family name. He will receive the inheritance purchased by Boaz.

Then, in an amazing twist that reflects how public the family’s story has become, the women of the community give the baby his name! This is the only time such a naming is evident in the Old Testament!<sup>28</sup> Not only that, but they name the child after themselves: *Obed* means worshipper (or servant). The child is significant to the whole community, and the name reflects their joy. As history would bear out, Obed was also significant to the whole nation.

The biblical narrative brings to mind a moving story told by a church planter interviewed for Fruitful Practice Research. She

described an incident where a group of 12 Muslim women brought her a newborn baby:

*This baby was the size of my palm. “How old is this preemie?” I asked. And they said, “It was 28 weeks in the mom’s womb.” I just told them, “I’m not a witch doctor. I do not have supernatural power on my own, OK? I am not a medical doctor. But I know the Physician who is all-powerful. Can I tell you some stories about his desire to heal?”*

*And then I told them some stories about when Jesus healed. I said, “You know what? It is not about the physical healing that Jesus is after—even though he’s all-powerful and we are to ask in his name. It is about the ultimate healing of us—of being reconciled to a Holy God. That’s what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Can I talk to you about that?”*

*So we prayed for healing, and we talked about the power of the Lord and the authority of Christ.<sup>29</sup>*

The church planter went on to say that the baby girl was indeed healed and was six years old at the time of the interview.

Can you imagine how such a child was perceived by the community? She became a walking witness to everyone of the stories of Jesus the healer.

## **Releasing the story**

Such was the case for Obed. He is the solution to Naomi’s problem—the child of a foreigner who identified with the community and put down roots. He is the offspring of costly love that was boldly expressed at the city gate. He is much more than the child of Boaz

and Ruth—he has become the story of Bethlehem. Naomi becomes his nurse, and the women of the town claim his naming rights.

In a final act of costly love, Ruth is called upon to share her new child's identity with the people of the town. What did the neighbors do to earn such a part in the story? They bore witness.

Perhaps the ultimate gift in cross-cultural service is the opportunity to give up ownership of the movement that emerges. The community of faith will celebrate together the work of God's Spirit. Your own role may or may not be celebrated, but the praise goes to God—and the story of his work is owned and shaped by the community into which new life comes.

As that story is worked out in the worship, praise and obedience of each new faith community, light is cast on new facets of the Father's glory, evident for others: the global community of believers and the heavenly host.

Releasing the legacy of your work to others is easy to acknowledge in principle. But it can be challenging in practice once you have fully identified with those you serve. Prepare in faith, and ask the Master to give you the will, humility, discernment and courage to release that for which you are giving much.

### **Singing praise down the generations**

The brief conclusion of the book of Ruth points to future generations. The account was probably handed down orally before it was committed to the manuscript in its current form, as we can see by the mention of David, by the framing that the events occurred “in the days when the judges governed,” and by the explanation given about the custom of holding up of the sandal that was attributed to “former times.”

Obed serves as the walking testimony to his parents' acts of lovingkindness. His son, Jesse, does his part to keep the family legacy alive by having eight sons. Then, David becomes the anointed king

through whom God promises to establish a permanent legacy. That promise is fulfilled in Christ, who offers an everlasting inheritance to all who believe in Him. Every great story of faith begins and ends with God.

When the New Testament genealogies of Christ are reviewed, a frequent observation by commentators is that Christ is descended from David via Mary in terms of bloodline—and via Joseph in terms of legal inheritance.

A similar situation occurs in this passage with Obed. While the story emphasizes the need to preserve the line of Elimelech, the final genealogy is given through Boaz. While this seems contradictory, Obed in fact is descended from Judah through blood via Boaz, and through inheritance via Elimelech.

Left unstated is how many generations Ruth and Naomi lived to enjoy. Did they help celebrate the birth of Jesse? Might Ruth have lived long enough to see her great-grandchild David born? No one knows.

What is clear is that David, the poet-warrior-king, knew and valued the story of Ruth. His psalms bear witness to that, for they mention the phrase “the shadow of your wings” or “the shelter of your wings” no fewer than five times (Psalms 17, 36, 57, 61 and 64). A sixth psalm, one not attributed to any author, says that “under his wings you will find refuge” (Psalm 91:4).

Surely, David regularly reflected on Boaz’s prayer that Ruth find refuge under the wings of the God of Israel—and on Ruth’s appeal to Boaz to cover her with the wings of his cloak.

David preserved a key lesson from the book of Ruth in his divinely inspired poems. While the community of faith will determine how the story is passed along, you may have opportunity someday to share your part of the story and your perspective to future generations of faith. May God use you as an inspiration, even as you are inspired by the example of Ruth, a model of cross-cultural servanthood.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you saw the community of faith take initiative to work together effectively.

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What is one thing that you can do to share with others the lessons you have learned from your study of the book of Ruth?

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Ask God right now to help prepare you to release control of your cross-cultural ministry to the leadership of the faith community.

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## Chapter 14:

# As the Father Has Sent Me

JESUS SAID TO THEM AGAIN, “PEACE BE WITH YOU. AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME, EVEN SO I AM SENDING YOU” (JOHN 20:21).

### The setting

Eleven hundred years after Ruth’s journey from Moab, another stranger arrives in Bethlehem. He had originated from far away and arrived vulnerably, as she had. If, as many scholars believe, his mother was a descendant of King David, they shared another similarity: DNA.

Like Ruth, he identified with the people. Like her, he was uniquely called and gifted to deliver a solution to the people’s problem—one that would be brought forth through physical pain and that would impact generations.

As he approaches that time, he pours out his heart in prayer for his followers. He says that he has put a pattern in place for his disciples to follow (John 17:18-20).

A few days later, his followers see him again. Except now he is different—*really* different, as if from another realm. Locked doors are

no barrier to Him, yet he is no ghost—he can be physically touched. He is full of life.

He again wants to tell them about a pattern for ministry. This must be important.

In the weeks to come, he will give his followers further understanding about what to do: teaching, baptizing. He tells them where they are to do it: in and near their own culture and cross-culturally, to the ends of the earth. He instructs them about how they are to do it: in the power of the Holy Spirit.

His early disciples will follow his instructions and “turn the world upside-down” (Acts 17:6). And the pattern continues to this day. As you serve cross-culturally, you are also following in it.

ON THE EVENING OF THAT DAY, THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK, THE DOORS BEING LOCKED WHERE THE DISCIPLES WERE FOR FEAR OF THE JEWS, JESUS CAME AND STOOD AMONG THEM AND SAID TO THEM, “PEACE BE WITH YOU.”

WHEN HE HAD SAID THIS, HE SHOWED THEM HIS HANDS AND HIS SIDE. THEN THE DISCIPLES WERE GLAD WHEN THEY SAW THE LORD.

JESUS SAID TO THEM AGAIN, “PEACE BE WITH YOU. AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME, EVEN SO I AM SENDING YOU.” AND WHEN HE HAD SAID THIS, HE BREATHED ON THEM AND SAID TO THEM, “RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT” (JOHN 20:19-22).

## Twenty powerful parallels

Each passage of the book of Ruth offers lessons that apply to cross-cultural servants today. I find this amazing, considering that the

events that took place more than a millennium before Christ took human form. I hope you have discovered many useful ways that Ruth can serve as a model for you in cross-cultural service.

Of course, our ultimate cross-cultural model is Christ. Yet, because of the uniqueness of Jesus' role and identity, I am sometimes uncertain about the extent to which I am to live and act as he did. Although I know that Jesus-followers are to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14), "walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:6) and "be imitators...of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1), I remain unsure about how far to go in imitating him.

But when Jesus prays to the Father, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18), he has my attention, especially when he says that his prayer is not only for his disciples, but for those who will come later. He says it again when he first commissions the disciples in the upper room on the evening of the resurrection, using a present-and-ongoing form: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). It seems clear that you and I are to imitate Jesus in his sent-ness.

As mentioned earlier, you are never more like Christ than when you reach across cultures to bring life. Ruth did exactly that.

Throughout this study Ruth and Boaz have been considered according to their traditional biblical "types," with Boaz symbolizing Christ the Redeemer and Ruth symbolizing the Church, Christ's bride.

Yet, as I study Ruth, I continue to be struck by the parallels between Ruth and the incarnational ministry of Jesus. Consider these 20 parallels:

Crossing Cultures with Ruth: Lessons on Thriving in Mission

1. Both originated from a foreign realm;
2. Both willingly came to serve people without hope;
3. Both arrived in the village of Bethlehem;
4. Both arrived in vulnerability;
5. Both learned and understood the Law of Moses;
6. Both grew in favor with the community;
7. Both stayed to complete an appointed season of service;
8. Both provided for the needs of a mother/mother-in-law;
9. Both were obedient to her—even when she pushed the timing of things;
10. Both were bold in approaching the Father/master;
11. Both drew upon the Father/master's words in a time of testing;
12. Both became like and gladly identified with those they came to serve;
13. Both yielded their wills and placed themselves fully in the Father's/master's control;
14. Both related to the Father/master intimately;
15. Both had their faithfulness attested to by the Father/master;
16. Both were uniquely qualified to help solve the problem of those they served;
17. Both could bring that solution only in partnership and unity with the Father/master;

## Chapter 14: As the Father Has Sent Me

18. Both brought forth the solution—new life—through great bodily pain;
19. Both courageously entrusted that new life, shortly after bringing it forth, to those they came to serve; and
20. Both, when their foreign nature was especially apparent, confirmed to a woman in distress that they served the same LORD.

This last one may seem surprising, since the phrase “and your God, my God” is one that could be used to discount Ruth’s missionary role. But Christ used virtually this same phrase—reversed—when Mary Magdalene recognized that the risen Christ was not the gardener. He told her to “go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (John 20:17). Four verses later, he is in the upper room, sending the disciples as he was sent.

These 20 parallels have led me to wonder: Is it possible that Ruth may be symbolic not only of the Church, but also of Christ, the cross-cultural servant?

Asked another way: Is Ruth also a type of Christ?

If Ruth is a type of the Church, and if the Church is sent as Christ was sent, then parallels between Ruth and Christ should not be surprising. The parallels make it possible to consider extending Ruth’s symbolic role to foreshadowing the culture-crossing servanthood of Christ.

Whether or not Ruth is a type in a formal sense, she has much in common with Christ, who voluntarily left all that was familiar to him in the heavenly realm. In the time before time, Christ, in perfect oneness and relationship with the Father and the Spirit, was no more of an Israelite than he was in his pre-incarnate appearance to Joshua

as the captain of the Lord's host, when he declared that he was neither for the Israelites nor for their enemies. He was a foreigner. He had not yet become as they were.

### **The repeating pattern of mission**

Not long ago, an author wrote critically about the concept of incarnational ministry, saying that imitating Christ in becoming like those you serve is inferior to the mission model of "union with Christ."<sup>30</sup> The book of Ruth, however, teaches that you don't have to choose sides in that debate. You are sent as Christ was sent—in your identification with those you serve, in your intimate unity with the Master and in your shared purpose of bringing forth life.

In *The Word Made Flesh*, Australian scholar Ross Langmead affirmed that incarnational ministry involves all of these roles, and that each of them offers a valid framework for mission:

1. Following Jesus as the pattern for mission;
2. Participating in Christ's risen presence as the power for mission; and
3. Joining God as a partner in his ongoing mission of creating and seeking after creation.<sup>31</sup>

That order indicates the way that these roles are usually experienced by cross-cultural servants: First, you humbly empty yourself and identify with others in obedience to Christ's pattern. Then, as you serve, you experience the power of the Master's presence. Finally, you see the fruit of partnership with him, as people become new creations in Christ.

This sequence is mirrored in the narrative of Ruth. She identifies with Naomi and her people. Then, Boaz's power shines through as

## Chapter 14: As the Father Has Sent Me

their partnership is established. Finally, the fruit of their partnership yields a life-giving blessing to Naomi and the community.

May you also see this pattern—established by Christ and foreshadowed in the book of Ruth—repeated in and through you to bring life to the nations. And may God’s joy be full in you as you serve.

## ACTION PLAN

Write about a time when you saw the community of faith take initiative to work together effectively.

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What is one thing that you can do to share with others the lessons you have learned from your study of the book of Ruth?

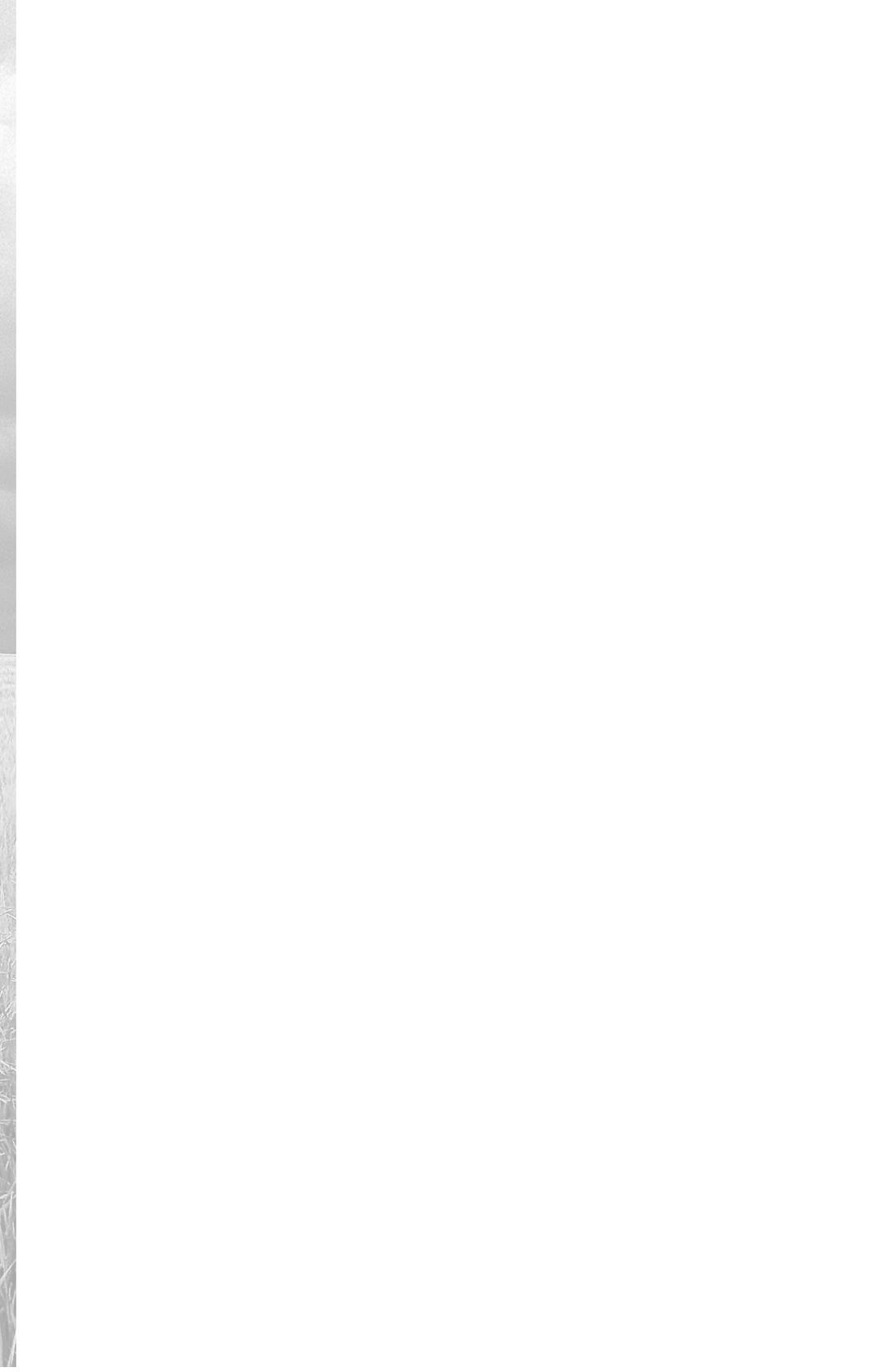
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Ask God right now to help prepare you to release control of your cross-cultural ministry to the leadership of the faith community.

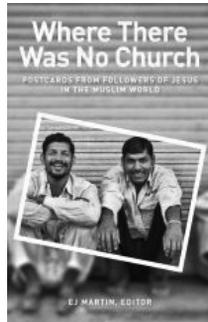
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## GOING DEEPER: FRUITFUL PRACTICE RESEARCH

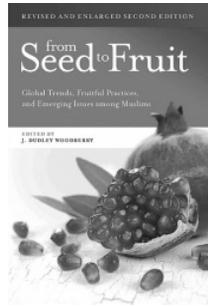
These helpful resources use additional research data from Fruitful Practice.



*Where There Was No Church:  
Postcards from Followers of Jesus in the Muslim World*

This book examines fruitful practices that have helped followers of Jesus invite Muslims to follow him, too. If you work in the Muslim world or are interested in doing so in the future, you will find this an excellent resource. The principles illustrated through the stories will also be of value to anyone living among other peoples where there is no church. Questions for reflection are included with each chapter to help the reader further his or her understanding of the chapter, or to use in group study.

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***Global Trends, Fruitful Practices,***  
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