

December 15, 2019

A GLORIOUS REDEMPTION  
Ruth 4  
*(3 of 3 in a series through Ruth)*

After a reference to journaling in last week's sermon, I decided to read back through some of my journal entries from the end of 2001 and beginning of 2002. I think I may make my instructions on my death bed for someone to go get them and burn them. It's painful to read of my self-absorption in so many of those entries, but it's even more painful just to see the difficulty, confusion, heartache, and anxiety of those days. In one particular journal entry I was lamenting deeply to the Lord, asking the Lord in a prayer of mourning question after question concerning why certain things were unfolding as they were, how long another situation would last, and on and on. From my perspective, it felt like there was great disunity in the body, and you could read in line after line how eager I was for it all to end, even if it meant me leaving the pastorate. The painfully humorous thing is that I end that day's journal entry saying that Lili and I would love to have a child, but I can't figure out how we would be financially able to do so if I left my job—something I was desperate to do.

As I read it I thought how helpful it would have been to have my 2019 self walk into that office so that I could tell the Lee in his twenties, typing out those painful words, that all the heartache, anxiety, and fretting just aren't worth it and that the main thing to do is to keep trusting and obeying the Lord. After all, I—in 2019—have the advantage of knowing where this story goes. I could tell him that being one of the pastors of Cornerstone is going to be one of the richest joys of his life, that he will come to realize that people would line up to change positions with him. I would love to tell him to not be crushed by the darkness of the moment, just because he couldn't see how things might turn out.

But that can't (or couldn't) happen. We can't have somehow have our future selves come and tell us how things will be. But I want to suggest this morning that we have something even better. *You* have the God who created the world, who works everything after the council of his own will, who set his affection on you before the foundation of the world, who tells us that nothing can separate you from his love, and who has promised us that he will work all things together for our good, as your God and Father and Lord. In other words, the God who loves you enough that he has made you his own child is the God who is powerfully working everything for your good, making you more like Jesus. And what we're going to see this morning in Ruth 4 is a picture of him doing this in the lives of three of his children—Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi. But what we need to remember is that their God is our God. And just as they trusted in him, so you and I should trust in him today.

So, with that said, let's finish this glorious story told in the book of Ruth as we come to the last act of the story, the last chapter of the book—Ruth 4. And the way I want to approach this is by simply walking through this climactic act of the story and then noting some themes that we

should recognize from it. So, first, the conclusion of the story (with a brief recap of where we've been).

When last we left the story of Ruth, Boaz had told her that he did indeed desire to be her redeemer, which is to say he would like to assume the role of taking and managing her deceased father-in-law's land, caring for her widowed mother-in-law, and marrying her and providing for the family. He noted, however, that there was one relative who was actually more closely related to Elimelech, and so he would have to go check with him first. If indeed that unnamed relative desired to marry Ruth and become the redeemer of Elimelech's clan, then so be it, but if not, Boaz would marry her and serve as the redeemer. And that's where we left things, awaiting the conclusion in chapter 4.

This chapter begins, then, with Boaz doing just that. We're told that he went up to the town gate and sat there. This may seem odd to us, even looking like he's not getting on with the pressing issue at hand, but this act of sitting at the gate would have been recognized as an official act of wanting to conduct business.<sup>1</sup> And the text tells us, "And behold the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by" (v. 1). This would be an example of what we saw in last week's text when the author wrote, "she happened to come by the part of the field belonging to Boaz" (2:3). That is, this is the author being intentionally ironic so that we might see clearly that the hand of the Lord is making this happen. Just as Ruth "happened" to come into Boaz's field, so—behold—this man came by within moments of Boaz sitting down. So Boaz naturally asks him to sit down beside him.

Now, because this isn't a matter of just a private discussion but of official business, Boaz also gathers "ten men of the elders of the city" (v. 2) to sit down with them as well and serve as witnesses. Then Boaz begins to lay out the situation. He tells the man, "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 sitting here 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" (vv. 3-4).

Now to be clear, though the ESV translates this in terms of Naomi selling the land, that is probably not the clearest idea. This isn't a sell of land the way you or I might put up a piece of land that belongs to us for sale. The idea, rather, is that Naomi is publicly authorizing the court to transfer this land to the nearest relative.<sup>2</sup> And, perhaps to our surprise, the man answers, "I will redeem it" (v. 4). And with that our hearts are a bit broken, aren't they? But the good news is that the story isn't over yet.

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary, 705.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 710.

Boaz has actually held out a piece of information that complicates the entire transaction. So he chooses this moment to add this complicating detail, saying, “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” (v. 5). That is, this isn’t simply an issue about adding a parcel of land to all the assets the man might own. Rather, there is responsibility here. To be the redeemer, he would need to marry Ruth, the Moabite, have children with her to carry on the name of Elimelech, and care for Elimelech’s widow, Naomi, as well.

And with this added detail, the man decides he no longer wants to serve as the redeemer. Specifically the reason he gives is because he doesn’t want to impair his own inheritance, which is to say put at risk the land he already owns. Now his reasoning isn’t exactly clear. His reasoning could go a few different directions.<sup>3</sup> It could be that he just sees taking on financial responsibility of Naomi and Ruth as potentially making him poorer so that he couldn’t keep up his own land. It might be that he was considering that if he married Ruth—who, mind you, had already been married for ten years without having any children—she might not be able to produce children for him either. Not only had she perhaps been barren in her years married to Mahlon, but she’s also at least ten years older now. Therefore, the logic might work in his mind, that if he took Ruth as his wife, he’d be really rolling the dice with having children himself, and then he couldn’t ensure that his own land would be inherited by one of his children, thus putting his inheritance at risk. Or maybe he just didn’t like the idea of his land coming into the hands of someone who would be part Moabite, which his children would be if Ruth were to become his wife. But for whatever reason, he says, “No,” and tells Boaz that he surrenders his right as redeemer to Boaz.

Now the author tells us about this odd custom “in former times” where a transaction would be made by taking one’s sandal off and giving it to another. The reason he’d need to note this is because apparently this custom had since disappeared, so if he’d just told you that the man took off his sandal and gave it to Boaz, you’d think, “Well, how about that! That’s weird.” So, he tells the reader why the man did it; it was the way of signaling that he’d forfeited the right to act as redeemer for Elimelech’s clan and was handing that responsibility to Boaz. Now, in addition to all the witnesses, this sandal would serve as proof that this man had made this surrender and couldn’t come along later claiming that the property should be his.

At this point, then, Boaz, notes to those who’d come to witness this that they are official witnesses of this transaction and that Boaz indeed is going to act as the redeemer, and he is going to marry Ruth. All as we hoped is going to happen. And the witnesses not only acknowledge that they officially bear witness to this but bless Boaz and his upcoming marriage. They ask the Lord to make Ruth like Rachel and Leah (who were the matriarchs of the tribes of Israel), to bless Boaz with wealth (probably the meaning of “act worthily”<sup>4</sup>), and to make the

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<sup>3</sup>Each of the following options are suggested by Block, 716-17.

<sup>4</sup>Block, 723.

name of Boaz renowned in Bethlehem, blessing him with offspring, as the Lord blessed Judah and Tamar with Perez and his house. The reason, most likely they make reference to Tamar is because this was a prior occasion where it looked like a line was going to be cut short because a woman's husband had died but the Lord had provided a husband in Judah and offspring in Perez, just as they were asking the Lord to do with Ruth.

And then our story jumps ahead nine months. Boaz and Ruth got married, Ruth conceived, and now she's given birth to a son named Obed. Naomi is there, treasuring her grandson, and several women of the town are praising God who has given Naomi (the one who said God had left her empty-handed) a daughter worth seven sons and this grandchild, whom we know as the grandfather of David, whose descendant will be no one less than Jesus himself. It's a glorious story of God's gracious providential work in blessing this family. But I want to highlight a couple of aspects of this story specifically. The first thing I want to point out is that our redeeming God is always doing more than we can see.

### **Our redeeming God is always doing more than we can see**

Since we've arrived at the end of the story, we can speak in light of beginning to end for these characters. Think back to Naomi. She's come back from Moab, where she's lost her husband and two sons, and she is bitter, thinking God has left her empty-handed. And what we know now is that even in the midst of her bitterness, God was working and orchestrating a means of showing her great kindness. By the end of the story, not only is she no longer empty-handed, but she has a daughter-in-law who is worth more to her than seven sons, a redeemer, in Boaz, who can care for her and her daughter-in-law, and a precious grandson. When the text says in verse 16, "Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse," the closest word we have for this idea in Hebrew is "Nanny."<sup>5</sup> She is going to get to be a nanny to her grandson—who can nourish her in her old age—something she no doubt at one time felt was impossible.

But Naomi isn't the only one toward whom the Lord is doing more than anyone could foresee. We also see it in Ruth. Think about Ruth. She was at one time a Moabite. Then an Israelite comes along and marries her, only for her to realize she's not getting pregnant over ten years of marriage, and then her husband dies. Then she decides she'll commit herself to her mother-in-law, only to find out when they first enter Bethlehem that the instant reaction of her mother-in-law is to declare she is bitter against God, who has left her with nothing—ignoring Ruth herself. There's got to be some moment, don't you think, where Ruth thinks, "This is not how I imagined my life would go." But by the time we get to the end of the book, as Boaz completes the transaction, and we know he'll marry Ruth, the townspeople are praying, "May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel" (v. 11). They're praying that for a Moabite woman, that she'd be as blessed as the two women who were mothers to the twelve tribes! And yet that's just what the Lord does.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 730.

Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David and one whose name is mentioned in the genealogy of Christ.

And then, you have this theme of one's name that runs throughout this chapter. We first see it in verse 5 where Boaz is speaking to the one relative more closely related to Elimelech than he, and he says to him, "The day you buy the field from the and 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." The reason it's said that way is because the idea of one's name dying out was a painful reality. It's as if the person would be gone and forgotten. But if there was offspring, then the name would continue—if you will—in the child and in the person's land being passed down to that child. Then, in verse 10, Boaz clearly sees himself as accomplishing this goal of continuing Elimelech's name, saying, "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."

But interestingly, the theme doesn't stop there. As the men of the town pronounce blessing on Boaz, after the legal transaction is complete, they say, "May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem" (v. 11), which literally translated is "may a name be called in Bethlehem." That is, may the name of Boaz be remembered in this town. And finally, as the ladies bless Naomi, who is with her grandson, they say in verse 14, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name [which if you read on, "his" is clearly in reference to the child] be renounced in Israel!" Interestingly, it looked like Elimelech's line would die out, but not only is his "name" preserved in that he has one who can redeem and inherit his land, but the names of all these individuals are still known and spoken of today because they are the means the Lord used to bring his Son into the world.

So, I want us to stop and think for a second about our lives. It's impossible this morning that the you of twenty years from now might encounter you after this church service and say to you, "Let me tell you why you shouldn't be bitter or fret about your place in life right now." That's not going to happen. But it doesn't have to happen, because what we're seeing in this story of Ruth is our God—your God and my God—who loves us and is working every miniscule detail of our lives toward his purposes of doing us good and making us like his Son. I'm sure there was a point where Naomi thought to herself, "I'm embarrassed that I ever spoke of my bitterness against God in front of those people and charged God with leaving me empty-handed in light of all that he was working for my good." Brothers and sisters, let's go ahead and trust him now because we know the same is true for us. And I don't know what that means. It doesn't necessarily mean you'll find a husband or have a child or get that great job. But it does mean that our God will withhold nothing from you that is good for you and will work everything in such a way that in eternity, you and I will be praising God for his perfect working in our lives to make us more like Jesus. Let's trust right now that our redeeming God is doing more in our lives than we can see.

And this story also reminds us that our God is extraordinarily gracious toward his people.

**Our God is extraordinarily gracious toward his people**

I noted earlier that the interesting inclusion in this story is Perez. The men of the town say of Boaz in verse 12, “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 woman.” I noted this earlier, but I think it’s likely that Tamar is mentioned at this point because this was a prior moment when the royal line was threatened from being cut off. It looked like it would end with no offspring. Yet, God continued to show grace, giving a son—Perez—to Judah and Tamar, even when his conception had come about because of Judah’s sin. Even our sin God works for good—which is no reason to sin but a gracious motivation to holiness, isn’t it? But the point in mentioning Tamar is that Ruth is no exception. God has continued to work in this way. In fact, this line of Christ—forward and backward—will be filled with what seemed to be impossible measures. God will open barren wombs (think of Sarah), utilize offspring who came about through sin (think about Solomon through Bathsheba), and ultimately a virgin (Mary). And the reason why is not because we’re supposed to marvel at how impressive these people are but so that we might see the power and grace of our redeeming God. The reason he opened barren wombs and ultimately gave his Son through a virgin is so that we might see clearly that this is the work of God alone. The reason he includes women like Rahab and Ruth is to show that our God is a redeeming God, in his kingdom there are no second-class citizens. The reason he uses Judah and David, despite their sin, is to show that his forgiveness is real and full and final. And he is our God.

In fact, the most glorious aspect of this story is not what we did for Naomi, or Boaz, or Ruth, but what he did for us. He gave us his Son. He preserved this line of people because before the foundation of the world he purposed to send his Son into the world to live, die, and be raised for us. Jesus died and was raised so that you and I might be made children of God, worth more to our Father than Naomi’s daughter-in-law meant to her, redeemed more thoroughly than anything Boaz could do, and whose names have been written down in the book of life as God’s treasured possession. In light of who our gracious and redeeming God is and what he has done, we have more reason to trust him and obey him than Naomi or Ruth had. So, let us imitate their faith now and trust and obey our Lord. And let us proclaim that this morning as we come to the table. Amen.