

God's Smiling Face: Ruth 4
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This is our last week in the book of Ruth, and what we'll see this morning is the resolution of this suspenseful story. And we'll see again God's kindness in the lives of this family. You'll remember in Ruth 1 we saw the frowning providence that came upon Naomi and Ruth. But in the words of William Cowper's hymn, "behind a frowning providence, [God] hides a smiling face." And today, in Ruth 4, God's smiling face is clearly displayed. God's smiling face emerges even in chapter 1, with the end of the famine. And much more so in chapters 2 and 3, through the kindnesses of Boaz and even the possibility of a marriage between Ruth and Boaz. And now in chapter 4 we come to climax of the story. There are still a couple significant hurdles to get over, as we'll see, and then finally there's a very happy ending.

God's Smiling Face

There are two aspects of this chapter that I want to focus on this morning, and the first is God's smiling face. I want us to see the profound kindness of God which He bestows on this family. They don't deserve these kindnesses. They have done nothing to earn them. But God has chosen to bless them immensely. And the great lesson that we can derive from this story is that the blessings have come through much affliction. The deaths of chapter 1 finally give way to a glorious and miraculous birth in chapter 4. God has allowed Naomi and Ruth to face very difficult trials, and yet He is at work in all of those trials to draw them to Himself and show them His goodness.

Let me clarify something at this point so that we don't apply this story inappropriately to our lives. The reality that we each need to come to terms with is, My story may not have such a happy ending, at least not in terms of our earthly situation. We can't conclude from the book of Ruth that if I seek my refuge under the wings of the Lord, then I'll get the spouse I want and the baby I want and this or that thing that I really want. If I just trust in the Lord the way Ruth did, then everything will turn out right and good, and my life will have a happy ending just like we see here. That's not the case.

I think of the disciples who were persecuted and martyred because of their Gospel ministry. I think of Paul praying three times that the thorn in his flesh would be removed, but God's answer was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). I think of the believers around the world who are being persecuted for their faith today. I

think of those among us who are suffering with physical ailments, or emotional stresses, or family conflict, or have lost a loved one. I think of those who have longings for a spouse or for children, and God has not yet fulfilled those longings.

Please don't read the book of Ruth and think that there's some kind of magical key to unlock God's blessings in your life. The essential point that we each need to grasp is that God has some good purpose in the trials we are facing. And that good purpose may or may not include the specific things that *we* have in mind. But our hope is in the fact that God's good purpose *does* include what is far better than anything we might desire on this earth. God's good plan in our trials is to draw us closer to Himself and to sanctify us and to keep us from trusting in ourselves but trusting in Him, which will lead to an eternity of delighting in Him in His presence. That's what God is up to in the pain and hardships that meet us in this life. We may often quote Romans 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." But we need to understand that the "good" in that verse is not health, wealth, and prosperity. It's actually far better than that. It's the good of ultimately being glorified. We will be with Him!

Therefore, let's set our eyes on that reward. Let's look to that eternal inheritance that is ours through Jesus Christ. And we can certainly pray for the many considerations of this life like marriage and family and finances and health. But when our prayers aren't answered the way we had hoped, we need to trust that God has a better plan in the situation. And we need to be thankful for God's kindness in our lives, which is evident even in hard times. For Ruth, and for each of us, we can point to many undeserved kindnesses that the Lord has bestowed on us. But we cannot expect that God's goodness to us will be just as we prefer.

With that clarification, let's now look at the amazing things God does for Ruth and for Naomi. There are two more hurdles that have to be overcome, and these two hurdles continue the suspense of the narrative. In chapter 3 there's the very suspenseful moment when Boaz wakes up to find Ruth at his feet, and we all find ourselves on the edge of our seats to hear what Boaz is going to say. Certainly Ruth's heart must have been racing, as she prepared to speak and then listen, knowing that Boaz's response would have a huge impact on her future. Well, in chapter 4 we come to another moment of suspense in the conversation between Boaz and the nearer redeemer. Boaz told Ruth about this in their midnight conversation at the threshing floor, that there was a redeemer nearer than Boaz. And now Boaz is going to work immediately to settle this matter.

There are a couple of interesting things in verse 1. First of all, the statement, “And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by.” This is kind of like the statement in chapter 2 that Ruth “happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz” (2:3). Of course, in chapter 4 Boaz is on the search for this particular man, but it is still an act of God’s providence that he showed up. All of these details are being worked out by God exactly according to plan.

And then it’s also interesting that the narrator does not tell us the name of this man. In fact, the narrator goes out of his way to avoid naming him. Certainly Boaz knew the man’s name, and would have probably called him by name when he saw him. But the narrator uses an interesting Hebrew phrase that basically means, “So-and-So.” “Turn aside, So-and-So; sit down here.” It seems that the narrator wants to focus on Boaz, and simply use this unnamed man as a contrast to Boaz’s character. This Mr. So-and-So is unwilling to act as the redeemer, but Boaz will be the redeemer. This is also similar to the way in which Orpah is used as a foil for Ruth in chapter 1. Orpah’s waning commitment to Naomi serves to highlight Ruth’s character. As I mentioned last week, this book gives us an historically accurate account of these events, but it is also presented in a very compelling and intentional way. So we can appreciate the care that the human author took to capture what was going on in all of this, and much more so we can appreciate the fact that this is part of God’s inspired, inerrant Word, and therefore what is written here is exactly what He wanted to be written. These are amazing events, and they are recorded in such a moving way. In these verses, the good things God has done in Boaz’s life are highlighted against the backdrop of this unnamed man who is unwilling to be a redeemer.

Once Boaz found the nearer redeemer and gathered ten men of the elders of the city, they sat down to discuss the matter at hand. Like last week, there are some customs here that we don’t fully understand. Suffice it to say that customs concerning land rites and the custom of levirate marriage (the marriage of a widow to the late husband’s nearest kin) converge in this situation in a way that the narrator and the original readers would have understood, but we do not fully understand. Fortunately, we can still follow the story without grasping these details. And thus we come to this suspenseful point in the story when Boaz asks the nearer redeemer if he would like to buy the piece of property, and even though he hasn’t yet mentioned Ruth, we know that this is ultimately about Ruth. And the narrator has prepared us to want this guy to say no. As we’ve been tracking with the story, we have seen Boaz’s care and kindness. Boaz is our guy! He’s the one we’re rooting for. It just wouldn’t be right for this no-name

kinsman to show up on the scene and get the girl. So everything in us, as we're on the edge of our seats, wants Mr. So-and-So to say no. And therefore our hearts drop when he says in verse 4, "I will redeem it."

But Boaz doesn't give up there. He seems to know what he's doing, for it's only at this point that he shares the rest of the story. He now says in verse 5, "They 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." Those are not flattering words coming from a man who wants to marry this woman. The clear mention that Ruth is a Moabite and that she's a widow do not paint her in a good light. And this seems to be Boaz's intention. It doesn't matter to him that Ruth is a widow from Moab. He actually sees her virtue in the fact that she left her family and her homeland to accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem. But he knows that these details may deter this other kinsmen from wanting to marry Ruth. And, sure enough, this causes him to change his mind. Apparently he had financial concerns, that the purchase of the land and the obligation to provide for Ruth would be too much for him. And there was also the worry that his children's inheritance would be threatened if he were to have any additional children with Ruth. So we breathe a sigh of relief that Boaz and Ruth are going to end up together, after all.

Boaz and the other redeemer confirm this transaction with the sandal exchange and the statement of Boaz's intentions before the elders and all the people. And thus everything was settled, and the first hurdle was overcome—the hurdle of the nearer redeemer.

Look at the response to Boaz in verses 11-12. The people and the elders pronounce this blessing upon him and Ruth. They say, "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." Remember Rachel and Leah were each married to Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Jacob / Israel go back to the sons who were born to Rachel and Leah and their maidservants. The people are praying that Ruth will similarly be blessed by the Lord to conceive and bear children who will build up the house of Israel. Then they say, "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." Boaz was descended from Perez, as we see in the genealogy at the end of the chapter, and so the people now pray that Boaz's house would be like the house of Perez. There are certain parallels between Perez's parents and Ruth and Boaz. Perez was born to Tamar, who was a widow seeking to be married to a relative of her deceased

husband. But if you remember the story (Genesis 38), when this didn't happen, she disguised herself as a prostitute and slept with Judah, her father-in-law. And thus Perez was conceived. So there are certain parallels, but also some stark contrasts between the two situations. What we see in both situations is God's providence over sin and evil and trials, and how He superintends all of these things to bring about His plans.

The blessings spoken by these people raises the question that is the last hurdle in Ruth's story, and that is Ruth's barrenness. In chapter 1 we were told that Naomi's sons took Moabite wives, and "they lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died." And since no children were born to either of the women, the assumption is that they are barren. So the last element of suspense comes as we wonder if those prayers of blessing will be favorably answered. Will Ruth conceive and bear a child? Verse 13 gives the answer, "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." How great is the kindness of our Lord! Again He acted powerfully and graciously, just as He did in ending the famine, as it said in 1:6, "the Lord had visited his people and given them food." The Lord is the origin of these blessings, and of every blessing. And therefore we should thank Him for every good thing that we experience in life.

Just reflect back on Ruth's life. She was married to Mahlon for 10 years without bearing any children, and then Mahlon died. She then left her family and homeland to travel with her mother-in-law to a place she had never been, with no prospects of marriage. She was going to have to work hard to provide for herself and her mother-in-law. But God's smiling face was beaming down on her, leading her into Boaz's field, leading her into Boaz's heart, giving her a husband, and then blessing them with a son. What an amazing story of God's providence and God's goodness.

The story doesn't end, though, with us picturing Boaz, Ruth and their new baby boy. Instead, we're left with a picture of Naomi and the baby. Ruth is certainly a main character in the book—after all, it's named after her. But Naomi is also at the center of the storyline, and in verses 14-17 the narrator portrays the resolution to the tension that was present in Naomi's heart in chapter 1. Look back at Ruth 1:19-22. "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?” Here we have the women of Bethlehem coming around Naomi, but Naomi is bitter and feeling very empty.

Contrast that with the picture at the end of the book. Ruth 4:14-17. “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.” This is a similar, but opposite scene, with the women of Bethlehem gathered around Naomi, but Naomi is neither bitter nor empty. The Lord has blessed her immensely.

God’s Plan for All Peoples

My second point in this sermon, and the last theme that I want to focus on in this book, is God’s plan for all peoples. We see this in the fact that God chose a foreigner, a Gentile, a Moabite woman, to be part of Jesus’ genealogy. The Lord put it in Ruth’s heart to go with Naomi back to Bethlehem, making the commitment, “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (1:16). And God brought about all of these events such that Ruth, a Gentile, became the great-grandmother of King David. And King David was not only an ancestor of Jesus Christ, but also a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. For David’s reign over Israel was a pointer toward Christ’s everlasting reign (see 2 Samuel 7). Let’s read the genealogy given at the close of the book. “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.” And when we look at the genealogy in Matthew 1, Ruth is there, and also two other Gentile women. Tamar was most likely a Canaanite (Genesis 38), Rahab also was a Canaanite who lived in Jericho (Joshua 2), and Ruth was a Moabite.

The point is to notice the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s plan even in the Old Testament. God was drawing people to Himself, not only from among the Israelites, but from other people groups as well. After all, what did God promise to Abraham? “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-

3). We see glimpses of that blessing in the Old Testament, and then in the coming of Jesus Christ we see this promise fulfilled. For it will be through Jesus that every people group of the world will be blessed. And in our day we see that mission going forth to more and more people groups around the world. God's purpose is advancing around the globe. God's kindness will eventually extend to every ethnic group on earth. This is Jesus' mandate to His people in the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

We are going to be used by God to accomplish this great mission. And we venture on in this work, taking great risks and making great sacrifices, because we know that God is going to accomplish His purposes. Jesus said in John 10:15-16, "I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold [speaking of the Gentiles]. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." And in Revelation 5:9 this is confirmed in these words addressed to the Lamb, who is Jesus Christ: "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, was slain on the cross, and by His blood He ransomed people from every people group. Isn't that an awesome thought! Jesus' death assured the salvation of individuals from every tribe and language and people and nation. And now the Gospel message is being proclaimed in various places around the world, but still needs to be proclaimed in a lot more places, so that those individuals will hear the Good News and repent and trust in Jesus. God is on a mission to save His elect from every single ethnic group, and His mission will not be thwarted. Brothers and sisters, this ought to give us great hope in God and cause us to take great risks for this cause. If this doesn't excite you, then you're probably not saved. Our joy in God will overflow in the desire to see others experience that same joy, and as we see what God is doing and has promised to do among all the people groups of the world, we will want to be involved in the work of world missions, whether it's supporting missionaries with finances and prayer and encouragement, or going on short-term trips, or preparing ourselves to go permanently to some unreached people group. God is doing great things, beginning way back in the Old Testament and continuing to the end of the age. Let's open our eyes to see what He's doing in our day, and may our hearts fill up with hope in His great plans.

In closing, I hope that this short Old Testament book is a great encouragement to your soul. I hope this story will help you trust that behind a frowning providence, God hides a smiling face. I hope it will remind you of God's many kindnesses in your life. I hope it will help you see God's amazing providence throughout history and how He orchestrated every detail, big and small, in order to send His Son into the world to save sinners. And I hope this will send us all running to take refuge under the wings of our redeemer, Jesus Christ.