

The Romance of Redemption and the Glory of Covenant Love

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Ruth chapter 4 is the 4th and final act in this drama of redemption, a love story that runs deeper than any man-made love story, a true story that many have called “the romance of redemption,” and what I’m sub-titling “the glory of covenant love.” Romance is like the front door of a house, it’s important, but it can never serve as the foundation. The concrete and true foundation of a marriage is covenant love, not only on an earthly level, but on an eternal level.

Ruth 4:1–10 (NASB95) ¹ Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there, and behold, the close relative of whom Boaz spoke was passing by, so he said, “Turn aside, friend, sit down here.” And he turned aside and sat down. ² He took ten men of the elders of the city and said, “Sit down here.” So they sat down. ³ Then he said to the closest relative, “Naomi, who has come back from the land of Moab, has to sell the piece of land which belonged to our brother Elimelech. ⁴ “So I thought to inform you, saying, ‘Buy it before those who are sitting here, and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if not, tell me that I may know; for there is no one but you to redeem it, and I am after you.’ ” And he said, “I will redeem it.” ⁵ Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance.”

At this point, the drama has taken a turn that would make original audiences wonder what’s going on and may make you wonder as well. John Piper has written a poem that reminds us of the prior context. It’s about an old man in Bethlehem over 3,000 years ago:

How he did love to tell the tale
 Of how the God of Israel
 Turned famine into wedding feast,
 And formed the greatest from the least,
 And wakened love when it had died,
 And brought a Moabitess bride
 Into his life, and made a field
 Of Barley, barren once, to yield
 Such seed as he had never dreamed.
 He heard the boy awake, and beamed,
 "Young man, my son [Obed] tells me that you
 Are David [his grand] son." "That's true,
 And you're my great grampa." ...

The poem goes on to speak of this old man of 100+ years of life, whose mind and sight weak and dimming. He says to his grandson

“... put yourself back eighty years.
 Your grampa [Obed] isn't born. Great fears
 Grip all of Judah. Drought has left
 The barley field unsown, bereft”
 [My first wife died but first she cried]

"I had a priceless dream last night.
 I dreamed that God would show his might,
 And take your bitter providence,
 And by this famine here dispense
 For you a feast — a wedding feast —
 And make the greatest of the least,
 And waken love when it has died,
 And bring an unfamiliar bride
 Into your life, and make this field
 Of barley, barren once, to yield
 Such seed as you have never dreamed.
 And that he will be born esteemed
 In this our little town, so small
 Among the clans, and God will call ..."

... And ten years later, David, there,
 Just over there beside the stand, as fair
 As any in the world, stood Ruth.
 She rested in the gleaners' booth ...

*O barley field! O barley field! A paradise in truth
 You kept for me a better yield
 And brought to me my Ruth ...*

"This is my favorite spot," the old
 Man said, "And now you shall be told
 About that touch, and where it led.
 Here, seventy short years have sped
 Away since that great night. Because
 The heat was great by day, I was
 Down winnowing at dark. And when
 The work was done, I told the men
 To fetch the food and wine so we
 Could eat and rest. I couldn't see
 What God was just about to do.
 When I was full and tired, I threw
 This blanket over me and lay
 Down underneath that tree. Today
 It must be twice as big. I fell
 Asleep and dreamed about my belle."
 "You mean great-grandma Ruth?" "I do.
 And, David, then my dream came true.

At midnight something stirred beneath
 My blanket at my feet ...
 My leg. This is a human form [!].
 A child, in search of being warm [?] ...
 I whispered, so as not to wake
 The men, 'Who are you? Do not make

A sudden move" ... I pulled the blanket gently back
 And there, as still as night, the black
 And piercing eyes of Ruth. 'My name
 Is Ruth,' she said. 'Your servant came,
 Because Naomi told me I
 Should lie down at your feet and by
 This action say you are a kin
 To her, in hope that she may win
 Your willingness to raise up seed
 To Mahlon, if you are agreed.' ...
 She lay there motionless, then said,
 'My hearts desire is that you spread
 Your holy wing and cover me.'"

 "Great-grampa Boaz, I don't see
 What all this means."

"Well, David now ... You know why they do not allow
 The kids to come down to the play
 Each year." "But listen, here's the way
 It ends ... I spoke
 The hardest words, and almost broke:
 'There is another kinsman still
 More close to you than I, he will
 Be given legal right to take
 You if he will. Tomorrow make
 Your prayer, and I will settle this
 With elders in the gate.' No kiss
 That night ... And so
 As soon as light shown on the low
 Gate leading into Bethlehem
 I gathered elders, and to them
 Laid out my case, and to the head
 Whose right preceded mine, I said,

 'Naomi's land is yours. The claim?
 You marry Ruth, and keep the name
 Of Mahlon in your line. Declare
 Your will, for I am next, [I] swear
 That I will take her if you can't.'

I wondered how the Lord would grant
 The longing of my heart and by
 Another providence comply ... [?]

This is where the drama of the skillful narrator has left us hanging at the end of chapter 3 in this true story that is told by a masterful story-teller with his twists and turns. This is definitely a surprise in 3:12: there's another kinsman-redeemer, a closer relative than Boaz, who may fulfill the duty of kinsman-redeemer and husband.

Will romance give way to regulation and love give way to legality? It's as if the music stops and you can hear a pin drop, and your chin drops and you in the audience are saying, "No, not him, not this other guy. Where'd he come from anyways? This is just all wrong! Anyone can see Boaz and Ruth are meant for each other?"

But true romances aren't driven by Hollywood, they're to be driven by the Holy Word of God. In honoring its principles, Boaz and Ruth will be blessed by the Lord whose providence and whose covenant grace and redeeming love should touch our hearts tonight.

As the literary curtain opens on the final act of this drama, the final chapter, the mystery man (who is not named) walks by, this man who has thrown this love story for a loop, is walking his morning route to work and he and Boaz meet. And this other man doesn't have the character of Boaz, or the *kesed* (covenant lovingkindness) of either Boaz or Ruth, as we will see. Any ancient or modern hearer or reader of this story can tell this other man is not a match for the magnanimous loyal love of Ruth, who is described with the loftiest OT language of any woman, Jew or Gentile (3:11b, 4:15b).

What's with this other guy, and why does he get to be the redeemer and why does this other guy agree to redeem in 4:4? What does he know about true love? And if he's the closest family member, how come it seems he hasn't even sought out or helped Naomi since she came into town? In chapter 3, Naomi seems as surprised as we are.

Try and imagine yourself a young Jewish child now old enough to hear this story. It's the first time. You're sitting around a campfire, the light reflecting off the face of the storyteller, who stops at 4:5. He or she says, "Well, that's probably a good place to stop tonight with the other kinsman agreeing to redeem instead of Boaz. You kids look tired and it's past your bed-time, and plus I'm getting tired. We can finish the rest of the story tomorrow night."

The kids all blurt out at the same time, "No, keep going...please!" And the intended effect on any adults first hearing this story is the same. The story-teller smiles, and says "Ok, I suppose I can keep going a little longer if it's ok with mom and dad, but you all need to behave and be very quiet. Where were we? Oh, yes the next day. Let me start at the beginning of the next day again, before sunrise:

Ruth 3:12 (NIV) *Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I [closer relative in NASB].¹³ Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.*" [it would not be safe for her to walk home in the fields in the middle of the night in the days of the judges. As he did in chap. 2, he is protecting her from harm, guys]

¹⁴ *So she lay at his feet until morning* [the text makes clear she laid there and stayed there, nothing impure. OT language "at the feet" was the place of submission, the place a servant would assume]

... but got up before anyone could be recognized [very early dawn]; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor."

Again he protects purity even of appearance, and he wants to do things the right way first thing that morning, and make clear his intentions to the community before any gossip. The end of v.15 says he went back to town first thing that morning.

¹⁶ *When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?” Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her ...¹⁸ Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.” 4:1 Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down ...*

The OT readers or hearers knew the gate was a place of business, and a place where most would pass on the way to business, and a place where business transactions could take place, legal property or legal marriages or other legal matters could be addressed by the elders of the community, that perhaps Elimelech was once member of? It was the ancient outdoor boardroom or courtroom of a town.

...behold, the close relative of whom Boaz spoke was passing by...

Behold = look! Look who shows up right when Boaz sits to wait! Like in chapter 2, “it just so happened,” another meeting w/ Boaz. But if you’ve been following this story, you know this is not mere happenstance or coincidence, this is God’s perfect providence.

so he said, “Turn aside, friend, sit down here.”

Interestingly, the Hebrew is structured like an address to a proper name, but the text in an unusual way, doesn’t give this other man’s name. The Heb. phrase is *paloni-almoni*, a rhyming phrase probably closest in our language saying “Mr. So-and-so” or “Mr. Such-and-Such” or even saying of someone “what’s-his-name” or saying directly to someone “hey you”! KJV “*Ho! Such a one!*” NASB marginal note has “lit. a certain one” and NET Notes suggests ““John Doe” since it is a standard designation for someone who is a party to legal proceedings whose true name is unknown.’ Why the writer didn’t tell the name of this man we’ll come back to a little later, but it seems to be for an intentional and ironical literary effect on readers

“And he turned aside and sat down.² He took ten men of the elders of the city and said, “Sit down here.” So they sat down.³ Then he said to the closest relative, “Naomi, who has come back from the land of Moab, has to sell the piece of land which belonged to our brother Elimelech.⁴ “So I thought to inform you, saying, ‘Buy it before those who are sitting here, and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if not, tell me that I may know; for there is no one but you to redeem it, and I am after you.’ ” And he said, “I will redeem it.”

The land of Israel was a divine gift by God to His people and the land was in God’s law apportioned out to clans and family and it would only be in extreme cases where a family might have to give up their land due to the family name being cut off (no male heir) or due to extreme poverty they had to sell it, both of which had befallen Elimelech’s family; Naomi poverty-stricken, no male left.

Lev 25²⁴ *‘Thus for every piece of your property, you are to provide for **the redemption of the land.*** ²⁵ *‘If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative has sold ...* ²⁸ *‘But if he has not found sufficient means to get it back [i.e., buy back or repay] for himself, then **what he has sold shall remain in the hands of its purchaser until the year of jubilee; but at the jubilee it shall revert, that he may return to his property.*** [the chapter also specifies that the price of the land was to be basically pro-rated based on how many years till Jubilee] ... ³⁵ *‘Now in case a countryman of yours becomes poor and his means with regard to you falter, then you are to sustain him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you.* ... ⁴⁵ *‘Then, too, it is out of the sons of the sojourners who live as aliens among you [NIV “temporary residents,” ex: Ruth] that you may gain acquisition, and out of their families who are with you, whom they will have produced in your land; they also may become your possession ...* ... ⁴⁷ *‘Now if the means of a stranger or of a sojourner with you becomes sufficient, and a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to him as to sell himself to a stranger who is sojourning with you, or to the descendants of a stranger’s family, ⁴⁸ then he shall have redemption right after he has been sold. One of his brothers may redeem him, ⁴⁹ or his uncle, or his uncle’s son, may redeem him, or one of his blood relatives from his family may redeem him* ...

You can also study Deuteronomy 25 further in light of Ruth 4.

Notice the repeated “he” and “him” in relation to the land. There’s no “he” or “him” in Naomi’s immediate family left (Elimelech, Mahlon, Chilion all in 3 graves in Moab). Back in Ruth 4, it seems Mr. What’s-his-face is aware of this and what Mr. Boaz mentions to him sounds like a win-win business deal, so he agrees to redeem

Just because he’s called “Mr. No-Name” doesn’t mean he has no brain. He can do math: more land=more crops=more money=more for him and his future. He can see the dollar signs (or denarius or shekels) and as a bonus he will be seen as a good guy who honors his extended family, but the best bonus of all is there’s no male heir to claim the land when Naomi dies, which can’t be too many years in the future. Then Mr. Such-and-such gets such land for self.

⁵ *Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance.”* ⁶ *The closest relative said, “I cannot redeem it for myself, because I would jeopardize my own inheritance. Redeem it for yourself; you may have my right of redemption ...”*

There’s some textual debate as to what/who the text is saying must marry Ruth, but either way, the point is: there may be a male heir.

All of a sudden it’s no-go for Mr. So-and-so. Jewish tradition is that ‘the kinsman declined to marry Ruth lest he contaminate his seed with foreign blood.’¹ Scripture doesn’t explicitly tie in ethnic prejudice or considerations, but economic considerations are clear. Mr. What’s-his-name can’t back-pedal fast enough now, because the property would now go back to Elimelech’s family at jubilee or sooner if a son is born to Ruth, so this is not such a sweet deal now

He would lose money now and possibly (probably?) the land later.

One commentary sums up well what is taking place in Ruth 4:

‘In effect, the redemption of the property would become [less of a business profit and] more of a burden of love and compassion – self-sacrifice – rather than a means for personal gain. It would cost money to redeem the property. It would cost money and many other things (i.e., reputation, time, his whole life) to redeem Ruth, “*the Moabitess*” ... The personal pronouns tell the story of this anonymous [relative’s] true concern – I, myself, I and my [v. 6]. He was concerned about his own welfare, property, and posterity. Yet ironically, no one even knows his name today ...

⁷ *Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning the redemption and the exchange of land to confirm any matter: a man removed his sandal and gave it to another; and this was the manner of attestation in Israel* ⁸ *So the closest relative said to Boaz, “Buy it for yourself.” And he removed his sandal ...*

The narrator ... was evidently communicating that the custom of removing one’s “sandal” and giving it “to another” was how deals were “confirmed” concerning “any matter”, including “redemption.” The sandal was the “attestation/witness/testimony in Israel”. It served sort of like a handshake or signature in modern times. Many believe it was related to the idea of walking the land as a symbol of ownership (Gen. 13:17; Deut. 1:36; Josh. 1:3; 14:9) – and now the sandal that walked the land is handed over to the new owner ...² [and so the nameless guy is now a shoeless guy]

⁹ *Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses today that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon.* ¹⁰ *“Moreover, I have acquired Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, to be my wife in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance, so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his birth place; you are witnesses today.”*

Let’s return to this point in the poem we began with. Boaz said:

‘Naomi's land is yours. The claim?
 You marry Ruth, and keep the name
 Of Mahlon in your line. Declare
 Your will, for I am next, [I] swear
 That I will take her if you can't.'
 I wondered how the Lord would grant
 The longing of my heart and by
 Another providence comply
 With Ruth's appeal and my desire.
 And then I learned. He said, ‘Acquire
 It for yourself. The land I would
 Have had, for it is very good.
 But Ruth? She is a Moabite,
 And we are Jews. It isn't right.
 The land is yours, and Mahlon's name
 For what it's worth. And Ruth. And shame.'
 He took his shoe and gave it to
 Me in the gate. I turned and threw

It out to Ruth among the crowd.
 She caught it like a wreath and bowed.
 I quieted the shouts and cried,
 ‘What do you think of this my bride?’
 And she replied, ‘I think the Lord
 Has fought today, and with his sword
 Has stuck a sin up on the gate
 And hung on it our wedding date.
 As for the badge of shame, you tell:
 The line of Judah bears it well,
 And will for generations yet
 To come. The book of Moses set
 Me free. There is a mercy in
 The law of God beyond my skin:
 By faith God makes a person right,
 Be she a Jew or Moabite.”

Or to say it more modern terms, “let’s get this party started!” In more ancient terms this is what we read they said in v. 11b:

“We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem.

*...¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, “**Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel.**”¹⁵ “**May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age ...***

We’re not intended to read this story without thinking of spiritual truths behind the literal and historical truth of this true story. We should be reminded of the spiritual Sustainer of single ladies and widows, the ultimate Restorer of life, to use the language of v. 15.

Verse 14 makes clear there is someone greater than Boaz at work. As Jesus said, someone greater than Solomon has come, and as we read v. 14 our hearts should similarly praise the LORD that He has not left us without a Redeemer! And as selfless and loving as Boaz was, One greater than Boaz has come; One whose name and fame went far beyond Israel. In fact because He has the name that is above every name, and is One whose renowned glory spreads to all nations, to all outsiders like Ruth who share her faith and her Lord!

Like Boaz, He demonstrated true faith in action, taking the needed steps to provide redemption, fulfilling the requirements of the Law, showing love to the hopeless and helpless in their destitution and poverty of spirit, initiating the legal steps to redeem despite the great personal cost and loss. No other man was willing to sacrifice everything so selflessly and lovingly. No other man was willing to pay the price, and no mere man was even able to pay the price required by God. But Jesus suffered outside the gate and secured in the presence of many witnesses a redeemed bride paid for by blood

In v. 14 the language goes beyond the human hero to the One who is the ultimate Hero in every OT story as they say in v. 14 “Blessed is the LORD.” He is the kinsman of those He has chosen to enter a covenant relationship with, He is revealed in OT and NT as loving husband to His people, and amazingly His children receive every spiritual blessing and riches in the heavenly places in Christ, and are joint-heirs with Christ, partaking of His inheritance forever!

What we see on the human level in this chapter is no allegory, it’s a true story of romance, redemption, covenant love, the glory of marriage, and yet it ultimately beautifully breathtakingly incredibly shows to us a far greater reality behind the human drama: God’s pursuing love of His bride, the Lord’s redemption of His wife, the glory of marriage between Christ and His church, consummation of covenant love, and a wedding supper celebration that will be the greatest party this universe has ever known!

The scarlet thread that runs to the cross runs also through the OT to the NT, like the scarlet rope hung out the window by Boaz’s mother Rahab, the delivering redeeming grace of our Lord actually astonishingly is a thread that began before Genesis 1:1! The covenant of redemption, wedding plans for the Son, the price and terms of redemption were set, a bride was chosen ... and all this took place, get this, *before the foundation of the world!*

Ephesians 1:3–14 (NASB95) ³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,* ⁴ *just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world*
 ... ⁷ *In Him we have **redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace*** ⁸ *which He lavished on us ...* ¹³ *In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise,* ¹⁴ *who is given as a **pledge** of our inheritance* [that was language that could apply to marriage or covenant], *with a view to the **redemption** of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory*

2:12 *remember that you* [speaking to Gentiles like Ruth and like us] *were at that time separate from Christ, **excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*** [that was Ruth in Moab and us] ¹³ *But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been **brought near by the blood of Christ** ...*

... ¹⁹ *So then you are **no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household** ...*

And Ruth 4 illustrates that marvelously, Ruth’s full acceptance and incorporation in the covenant people of God, which is only further heightened and highlighted in the first page of the NT in the Jewish gospel of Matthew, chapter 1, which tells the ultimate story of redemption as prefigured in OT, completed in Christ and His bride

5:25b ... *Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her ...* ³² *This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.*

The real mystery is not human marriage, it's this divine marriage planned by the covenant of redemption (mystery = not revealed to man except in NT), God's eternal plan to get a bride for His Son.

I like how one commentator explains how this went down before the foundation of the world:

'Here's how He did it. The Son of God agreed to come to earth as a man. He came to make a redemption payment as Paul explains in Galatians 4:4-5, "*But when the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.*" In order to redeem man, God became a man. There could have been no redemption of the Son of God had not become our kinsman. So that's what He did. God the Son entered the world as a man through the virgin birth in the person of Jesus Christ. And while on earth, the perfect God-man willingly paid the redemption price for sinners ... His own life.

In the book of Ruth, the nearer kinsman *could have* but chose not to redeem. In contrast, Kinsman Jesus, like Boaz, not only *could have* but willingly and joyfully *chose* to redeem! ... It's one thing to *be able* to do something, but that's not enough. For a task to be accomplished the one who is able must additionally be *willing* to do so. And Jesus was! ... Boaz redeemed land and two helpless widows ... Jesus redeemed a multitude of undeserving sinners [from helpless humanity] by spilling His own blood. Did you realize that this is the theme of heaven's song? It is according to Revelation 5:9 "*And they sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men [KJV 'redeemed'] for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.*"³

¹ *Midrash Ruth Rab.* 7:7, 10.

² Rick Kress, *God in Everyday Life: The Book of Ruth for Expositors and Biblical Counselors*, p. 121-23.

³ Brad Brandt, *Ibid.*, p. 136-37.