

Redeeming Ruth

Series on the book of Ruth

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Bible Text: Ruth 4

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Do take your Bibles and turn with me to Ruth 4 that we read and we come this evening to the nail biting conclusion of the book of Ruth, the story of a summer romance. So over a period of 3 months, a relationship has been building between these 2 people, Ruth and Boaz. A number of things, of course, have been happening in the background. Not only has this been a romance, we notice, for example, that long before he knew the details, he had noticed Ruth and had asked and inquired about her and had come to some conclusions about her character from he had heard from others and then as he gets to know her as he uses the opportunities that arise to share his picnic with her, to make things to smooth a path for her to get some grain that she came, as was the custom in those days, as a stranger and as a poor person, following behind the harvesters as they reaped the harvest, picking up what was left over and Boaz is making sure that Ruth is being taken care of. But there is something else going on in the story and that is the fact that Ruth has come as a foreigner, a stranger from the tribe of Moabites, the Moabites who lived some distance away and who had a very negative history with the Israelites. She comes as a widow, a young widow, with no prospects. She comes married to a man who has died and whose inheritance in Israel is now under threat. His mother, Naomi, needs to get rid of the property. They can't afford to keep the property. Things are complicated.

Then they get more complicated. You know, you go to some of these movies, you're pulled along by your wife or you pull your wife along or your girlfriend along to the movie. It's a chick flick, which I've been told not to say so I'm sorry if I just said it. It just kind of slipped out. It's a romantic movie, okay? A romantic comedy or whatever. And everything is going well. Boy meets girl. Girl likes boy. Boy likes girl. They have little encounters and so forth. They are building up their relationship. Things are going pretty well and then something inevitably happens. There is a problem that emerges, that just comes out of the blue. You're not expecting it. You're thinking everything's moving towards a final, a nice finale, a grande finale and then something happens that just seems to throw the whole story up into the air.

Now, we discovered that the last time we were looking at the story of Ruth. What she needs is not only a husband, she doesn't need a husband actually you can live without one but she needs someone to help her family out and the law of Moses made an allowance

for this. One of the things you'll have noticed if you were listening to the reading earlier is that there is a lot of talk in the text about the name, somebody's name, and somebody's inheritance within Israel. The name and the inheritance was very important in Hebrew society. Your identity and your place in the Promised Land. Every family had been allocated land, a bit of real estate within the Promised Land so that every family had a place that they could call home within the Promised Land. They had a part in it and you could forfeit that. You could forfeit that through bad financial planning or whatever. Every 50 years it was returned back to the family it belonged to in order that that was set in stone within Israel. You had an identity, a name and you had a place.

But here's a young woman, you see, who can't continue the name of her dead husband. He's dead. They can't have a family so the law of Moses in graciousness allowed that a relative could marry a woman and in any children that they might have, continue the name of the husband who had died and this man, Boaz, qualified because he was a relative. Rather distant but he was a relative. He qualified to be the person that they needed for that. The other thing that the law of Moses allowed for was that this person could choose to buy the property that had been lost or squandered or wasted or given away because of poverty or whatever. Buy that property back and return it to the family name and Boaz qualified in that account as well.

So Boaz is a highly qualified individual and at the end of chapter 3, we discover not only is he qualified but he is very willing. We have known, those of us who have been following this story, that he is very willing. He is very willing from just the point of view that he really, really, really, really likes Ruth but he's also very willing to help at this level. And everything is going wonderfully well. Ruth takes the initiative. Girls, don't be afraid to do that. Ruth is a great model and example. By model I mean just an example, of a woman who is able to take the initiative and use all of her charms to get the man to see that he needs to take action. It's a very difficult thing to do, to get men to see they need to actually take action. So rather than wasting her time wondering, wondering, wondering, now it's getting near the end of the harvest time. The opportunity for these coincidental meetings that have been happening all summer long is going to come to an end, a natural end. There is going to be no natural way in which they can reconnect and so Naomi, the mother-in-law, encourages her to go and have a bath, put on her best clothes and all her best perfume and wearing her cloud of perfume, off she goes to the fields and she identifies where he is. You know the story so that when they go to sleep at night, she sneaks in and she lies down at his feet and she uncovers his feet so that the cold wakes him up and when he wakes up, lo and behold, there is a woman lying at his feet out there in the fields. It's a ridiculous story but there she is and she says to him, "I had to talk to you but I couldn't talk to you in front of other people. They're all asleep. It's just you and me in the dark here. Nobody can see us and I need to say this, I don't know if you're interested or not. I don't know if there is any way in which you would even consider me but all I want you to know is that if you did have an interest, I might be sympathetic to that." I mean, really, you can find out the words. She uses them in order to tell him, signal to him that actually she might be interested in that.

Okay, that's where we are now. He says, "Yes, I am and I will do whatever I need to do. I certainly will go the second mile. I'll do anything that is required. But," back in chapter 3, verse 12, "There is a legal obstacle to us going forward with our relationship." That's the bummer at the end of chapter 3. Seriously, chapter 3, verse 12, "There is a redeemer nearer than I." The law of God allows for this but it says the nearest relative who is willing, who is willing, there's the key thing, has first dibs at getting the girl. That was the problem and Ruth goes back and she tells her mother-in-law that there's this legal obligation and so when we come into chapter 4, here is now Boaz acting like a man. He is going to address the issue head on. He wants the girl. He wants to do the right thing therefore he is now taking the initiative and he is going to deal with this legal problem.

Now, the interesting thing is, as we come to this, this last chapter is all about redemption then. We've looked at this idea of a redeemer, what it means and this last chapter is about redemption, that is buying back what belongs, the inheritance that belongs to the woman in order that the name and identity of her husband might continue within Israel. That's what redemption is all about and that's what this last chapter is about, the work of redemption here in this chapter. The work of redemption. The joy of redemption. Then we'll have an overview of the drama of redemption as we come to a close.

First of all then, the work of redemption. At the end of chapter 3, Ruth has reported to Naomi that there is this problem, this legal problem, but she has reassured her daughter-in-law at the end of chapter 3, "This man will not rest but will settle the matter today." Naomi has evaluated this man Boaz and she has evaluated him correctly. Here is the kind of man who is not just going to let things happen, who is going to sit on his hands and see the way things are going to fall. He will give all of his energies to put this matter right and he will do it today. He will not let the grass grow under his feet and that's what we find him doing.

Chapter 4, verse 1, we come to the next day and Boaz has gone down to the gate. That's the place in every town and village in Israel where the elders of the town, the mature, serious minded men of the town would gather to just talk about everything that was going on, a wee bit like we were doing as elders upstairs before we came down here, putting the world to rights and so on. But it was also the place where you went if you had a problem that needed to be resolved and that was what happened at the gate. So early the next day, Boaz has gone down to the gate and sat there. He is waiting for something and, look at verse 1, "Behold," remember I told you this is the "Looke here! Wow! Look!" word in the Bible, would you believe it, "Behold the redeemer of whom Boaz had spoken, came by." It just happened like so many things have been just happening in the book of Ruth. It just so happened that Boaz went down to the gate that morning and this guy turns up and Boaz invites him to have a cup of coffee with him and a chat. In fact, do you notice something very interesting? You may not have noticed this but when Boaz calls to him, remember I've just said, keep this in your mind, I've been emphasizing that the book of Ruth is all about names and identities and inheritances. But whenever Boaz calls this man to turn aside, to come for coffee with him, he deliberately, apparently deliberately doesn't use or the writer who is telling the story does not use the man's name. Literally in the Hebrew it says something like this, "ploni almoni" which just means, "Ho you," in

Glaswegian. Or, "Ho Jimmy," "Jimmy" is a word you use in Glasgow if you don't know who the other person is or you just want to kind of generalize it. "Jeanie" if it's female, "Jimmy" if it's male. I mean, that's what he said. That's the kind of language that's being used here. It's kind of indefinite. It's, "Mr. So-and-so, come over here. Let's have coffee together."

So he calls him over and he makes sure that there is a quorum. There are 10 elders there. Ten men of the elders of the city are there. There is a quorum. That is a group that can make a final decision and they are present. He calls them together. He calls the guy now over beside them and he engages him in conversation. I want you to notice how he engages in this conversation; what he says to this man. He starts as negatively as he possibly can. "Naomi, who has come back, she's an old girl. You know, she's in her 40s. She's nearly dead," in those days, you understand. "She's an old girl." She's probably a bit older than that even. "She has come back from the country of Moab," that's not a good thing, "and she's selling a parcel of land that belonged to our relative, Elimelech, so I thought I would tell you. I thought I would tell you and say, 'Buy it,' in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you want it, if you want to redeem it, redeem it." There he is. He's offering this stranger a financial deal: "Buy back the land for Naomi and you can add it to your property portfolio. I mean, she's old. She's going to die soon and when she dies, then it will just come to you. She's way beyond having any children and therefore you're pretty safe there." That's where he begins as he sells this deal to this man.

We're thinking, "Please. Cross your fingers. Cross your toes. Please, don't say yes," because we want Boaz and Ruth to get together. But what does he say? He says, "Yes, I'll do it. Sure." We all say, "For goodness sake. What can go wrong will go wrong." It's Murphy's Law all over again. We're not expecting this. We just thought this was going, you know, Boaz had finally resolved the issue and it's going to be his and hers. But no. But Boaz has an ace up his sleeve. Then Boaz said, look at this, Boaz said, "Buy the field from the hand of Naomi. When you do that," notice how he puts this, "you will also acquire Ruth," like he's saying, "Guess what goes along with the land? There is a bit of baggage with the land, Ruth the Moabitess." He doesn't know Ruth, by the way. This man doesn't know Ruth from a bag of potatoes so he has no idea. I mean, Boaz has met her. Boaz thinks she is Miss World but this man has no idea who this Ruth is and he is underlining, "She is a Moabitess." That's bad. That's bad news. That's not good. He emphasizes this. "She is the widow of the dead man and you have to take her on in order to perpetuate the name of the dead man and his inheritance." What he's saying is, "You buy the land, you get Ruth. You get Ruth, you have to have children. That means the children will inherit the property." It isn't such a sweet deal after all. You see? That's what gets through to this man. Dollars and cents start circulating around his mind. He's thinking, "I'm not going to put my money into that. I'm going to put my money into buying the property, then I'm going to marry this girl. Who knows what she looks like or what she's like as a person or whatever, and how many children she'll have and I'll have to look after her and I'll have to look after the children and all I can see is college and all the rest of it that's coming out and no way, Jose." He says to Boaz, well, he doesn't say Jose, he says, "Boaz, no way. I'm sorry. I can't do it. I just can't do it. I can't redeem her

for myself. I don't want to impair my own inheritance because actually, they'll get some of my inheritance as well as their own. You take my right of redemption."

So he says that publicly. He says it in front of all the witnesses. He even goes through this little regime that we have described in verses 7 to 10 that was the custom of the day about taking off your sandal. Obviously, they were wearing sandals without socks. But he takes off his sandal. That's against the law now and it certainly didn't happen then and if you're a sock wearing sandal wearer, I think that's a church disciplinary matter. Anyway, that's just a personal word just thrown in there. But the custom was that you took your sandal off and you gave it to the other person. It tells you all the details. Why is he telling you all the details? He's telling you all the details because he's saying this to you, "This man, Boaz, is a man of integrity. He would not subvert the law of God to get what he wanted. He would not stretch the law of God or go around the law of God, he wanted to do it but he wanted to do it the right way. He has an eye to the law of God. He will not renege on his commitment as a believer to doing the thing the right way. He had to fulfill all righteousness. He does it properly. He does it publicly and he does it in this way as we have described here." The whole chapter is about preserving names in Israel, as I've said, but this man's name is not preserved. He walks into the story, he walks off the story. He has no place. Do you realize he could have been the great, great, great grandfather of Jesus? And he misses out because he puts money before anything else. Boaz has set him up for it, of course, but nonetheless, he could have done the right thing. Boaz's name, on the other hand, is remembered forever and the same blessing comes upon Obed, his son, whose name is double blessed in verse 17.

Now, at this point, we just need to pause in the story. We've been trying to show that the story of Ruth and the redemption of Ruth is ultimately, of course, a picture of the redemption that we have in Jesus Christ and just as Boaz had a massive legal problem in the relationship with Ruth, our Lord Jesus had a massive legal problem with us. The problem with us, of course, was that we had forfeited our inheritance by forsaking our God, that we had by nature no natural right to remain in the inheritance of the Promised Land. We were like Naomi and Ruth, empty and had no rest. The law of God stood against us the way it stood against them. The written code of God's law merely declared our need, our outsider status in the kingdom of God and that if anything was going to be done for us, it had to be done for us the way it was done for Ruth. It had to be done ad extra, by someone outside of us, by another, by a redeemer. And our Redeemer, like Boaz, had to work by the law of God. Paul says in Galatians, "He was born under the law." Jesus explains to John the Baptist that he has come to fulfill all righteousness, to do the right thing, to be the man described in Psalm 1 who obeys the law of God in every part. Not only that but taking our place and taking the punishment that was due to us.

"In our place, condemned He stood;
Our pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!"

The writer of Ruth describes the great transaction being sealed by this ceremony that transfers to Boaz's name the status of Ruth and her family and unites them, as we will see

in a moment, in this marriage bond. He had done it all above board. He had done it all publicly. No one could question that the decision had been made at the gate of Bethlehem that day. There was someone else who had an interest who would not secure redemption but Boaz's claim pays off.

So that's the cost of redemption. It cost Boaz money to buy Ruth for himself. But then secondly, the blessing of redemption. There is a blessing for Boaz. He didn't do this, by the way, to get a blessing but he was blessed nonetheless. As you read this chapter, did you notice that there is an outburst of singing? There are 2 songs in the last part of this book, the song of the elders as they pray for a rich blessing from God upon Ruth. 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 because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman. Blessing upon blessing. That's what's promised to Boaz. The blessing of the marriage with Ruth. The blessing of the family through Ruth. And the blessing of fame that would come to Boaz. His name would be remembered in Bethlehem.

So we read in verse 13, "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." You know, there are only 2 places in the book of Ruth where we are told explicitly that God was active. He was active, we are told, in giving Israel a harvest, visiting people in Israel and giving them food. And he is active in blessing Boaz and Ruth with a child. There is a blessing for Boaz and there is blessing for Ruth. She discovers firsthand the chesed, the covenantal love and loyalty of God and she discovers that in that covenantal love and loyalty, there are other blessings. Another Hebrew word that's used is the verb "shuv" that's used on a dozen occasions. It means "to return or to turn back or to restore." God's intention was to restore what had been lost to her just as God's intention is to restore to us what has been lost by our sin in rebellion. One of the images of God in the Bible is the image of a potter who is able to take clay and to mold it into an image that he has created in his mind and sometimes that clay has been marred and spoiled and he's able to take that clay and to reshape it, reform it, remake it into something beautiful. That's what God was doing with Ruth and Naomi in this story. In fact, the whole of this book is about the covenant love of God, his faithful love to his people.

And the Lord opened her womb. She had come to follow the God of Israel. She had left her home and her family. She had left everything familiar. She had committed herself in loyalty to the God of Israel and the God of Israel had publicly, solemnly taken her into his family through this marriage to Boaz. It's an amazing thing that God does that for strangers. He did it for us. Some of us were as far away from God as it was possible to get and yet, to put it in the language of the Apostle Paul, God in his rich mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive so that he might show to us his immeasurable richness of his grace in kindness towards us. We just sang about it in what was one of John Calvin's poems, the song we just sang about the rich compassion and kindness of God towards his people.

Well, there is a blessing for Ruth and there was a blessing for Naomi. Naomi starts the story widowed, losing her husband and both her boys and one of her daughters-in-law and being left with Ruth. Everything had been taken from her. She comes back to Bethlehem and she says, "I'm empty. I have nothing. I come back with nothing. My hands are empty. My hands are empty. I come to this place having been away, come back and everything that was precious to me has been taken out of my hands. I come back empty." The end of the story, her hands aren't empty. Her hands are full literally. They are full of a little baby that she takes and that she cares for and she becomes the nurse for the baby and she looks after the baby. She ends up at the end of the story with her hands full. God has filled her life that she thought was emptied and God gives a blessing. Look at verses 14 and 15, "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 this boy.'" There is blessing in the book.

But I want thirdly and lastly to look at the drama of redemption. I've said repeatedly that we need to read the story at different levels. At one level it's a love story. Another level, it's a story of personal redemption and the story has a happy ending. But if you look at the story of Ruth and I think it is Ian Duguid in his commentary uses the illustration of the movie "Antz." I don't know if you've ever seen "Antz." It's all about ants and in the world of the ants, you know, things that are miniscule to us are enormous monsters to them. And the whole story is played out in their world until the very end where the camera pans out from their little world and you see that it's just an ordinary field, grass and stuff. The camera pans out and you discover that, in fact, that field is in Central Park in the middle of New York City. It's part of a bigger world and when you look at the story of Ruth and you pan away from her little story of her life and you look at the bigger picture of the Bible, you see that it's part of this huge story that dominates all of Scripture.

That's what that little thing at the end is all about, the list of names. It's not just there randomly. Starting with Perez. Perez was the fruit of the most bizarre union between the daughter-in-law and her father-in-law, Tamar and Judah, the father of the Jewish people in order to make him do the right thing and preserve the name of his murdered son. It's not a very nice story to read but it's part of the Bible story. Perez is mentioned here and all these other people are mentioned here including the son of another woman, Rahab, who was a prostitute. Now the son of Ruth and they all fit into this big story of David, the first and greatest King of Israel. You see, this story is linked to the promise of God to Abraham that he would give a name and a blessing, an inheritance and an offspring to his people, to the people of God, that would be a blessing to the whole world. It's linked to the coming of God's King. It starts within the days of Judges ruled where everybody did what was right in their own eyes. It ends with the mention of David, David who is the great King of Israel. It's linked to the story of Bethlehem. Do you notice the emphasis on the little town of Bethlehem in verses 11 and 12? "May you act worthily in Ephrathah," one of the names of Bethlehem. In fact, later on in Scripture, there are 2 Bethlehems in that region and so to identify one or the other, you mentioned it was Bethlehem Ephrathah. That's the one where David was born and somebody else was born there as

well. "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." May you be renowned in Bethlehem.

It was to Bethlehem that Samuel came and called out young David and anointed him to be King of Israel. And it was about Bethlehem that a prophet, Micah, would speak, "And you Bethlehem Ephrathah, you're not too little among the clans of Judah. From you shall come forth one for me, one who will be ruler in Israel, whose origin is of ancient times from of old." Because the real wonder of Ruth's story is that from her story comes Jesus, the Redeemer. In fact, it's from Ruth's story that that name "Redeemer" becomes very precious to Christians because we see in Boaz, you see, this very personal, lovingly motivated, highly charged affection driving the willingness to go to any lengths to do the right thing but also to pay whatever price needs to be paid in order to rescue and restore the beloved. That's what our Redeemer has done for us. That's why in the shorter catechism, the question is, "Who is the only Redeemer of God's elect?" and the answer is, "The only Redeemer of God's elect is Jesus Christ." He is our Redeemer. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace.

The book of Ruth is like an unfinished symphony. Through her son and her even greater descendant, she who left her own family was to find herself part of a really big family, our family, the family of believers. And on the day when Jesus comes and we're introduced to his earthly family connections, we'll meet Ruth and we'll say, "We really enjoyed ourselves on Sunday nights hearing about all your shenanigans in the fields and there are some questions we have about what you were up to and would you please explain the details?" and she will and you can take your time hearing from her firsthand how she met Boaz in the fields. How romance blossomed. And how God blessed an outsider and made her the grandmother of King David and the great, great, great grandmother of King Jesus and he can take you and bring you into the same family, however small you think you're little world is and give you an identity and an inheritance in glory.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for your word that inspires us, that encourages us in all our weakness, in all the littleness of our lives, in all the complications of our past, in all the difficulties of our circumstances and you take and restore and renew and we pray that you would do that tonight for each one of us here. Perhaps there is someone here on their own, feeling a bit isolated perhaps and feeling that they need to hear from you. We pray that you would speak into their ear and make them to think of Ruth, the ultimate outsider who became the ultimate insider because of your love and that you can do the same for them as they trust in Jesus. We pray in his strong name. Amen.