



ONCE UPON A TIME

Ruth 1:1-5

The opening verses of the book of Ruth remind us that economics and an easier life must not be the determining factors in major life decisions. We must be guided first and foremost by God's Word and recognize that spiritual compromises can have tragic consequences.

Years ago, I can remember reading to my daughters the enchanting stories of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. Although they heard the same stories over and over again, their excitement never faded when Prince Charming finally showed up.

We all enjoy a good fairytale, but we know they don't come true. They're just make-believe.

Well, there happens to be a love story in the Bible that has some of the same elements as a classic fairytale—including a damsel in distress and a prince who comes riding in to save the day. But let me tell you, *this* one's for real. It's called the book of Ruth.

According to Jewish tradition, God used the prophet Samuel to record this love story between Boaz and Ruth so that future generations could read it. And here in the opening verse, we're told that this love story took place "in the days when the judges ruled."

Now we have just finished the book of Judges, and it reveals that this was a time of national defiance against God. This means Boaz and Ruth don't have many good examples. They live in wicked times; but let me tell you, they are going to prove that it's possible to live a godly life in the midst of an ungodly culture.

Here is how the book of Ruth begins:

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were



Bethlehem region as it looks today



Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

(verses 1-2)

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During these wicked days in Israel, during the days of the judges, God sends a famine to the land. Elimelech, his wife, and two sons are living in Bethlehem, and now they are facing a genuine crisis. The hayloft is empty, and so is the cupboard. Bethlehem means “house of bread,” but the people living in the “house of bread” are starving.

More than likely this is the famine mentioned in Judges chapter 6, which would place the book of Ruth into the time frame of Gideon. This famine was the result of Israel’s rebellion against God, and it was intended to bring the nation to their spiritual senses. God didn’t want people to leave the House of Bread but to repent. The problem is, Elimelech is not going to wait around; so instead of repenting, he leads his family into the idolatrous region of Moab.

In Psalm 60:8, the Lord calls Moab His “washbasin”—a bowl for washing your dirty feet. Moab was not only a real place but also a metaphor that indicated filth and trash. So, here is a family leaving the House of Bread and moving to the trash heap.

Now there are six individuals on the stage during this opening scene. There is Elimelech, whose name means “My God is King.” His wife is Naomi, which means “pleasant.”

Their sons are Mahlon and Chilion. In the Hebrew language, their names rhyme, and some scholars believe they are twins. Their names might rhyme, but they don’t have very good meanings. Mahlon means “weakly,” and Chilion means “wasting.”

And these boys get married to unbelieving Moabite girls. Verse 4 gives us their names. Orpah, means “obstinate”—what a lovely name for a girl. And then there’s Ruth, whose name means “comfort,” or perhaps “friend.”

Here in this love story, all the characters play out the meanings of their names in one way or another—all except one: Elimelech. His name says that God is his master, but none of that comes through in the decisions he makes.

We are told here in verse 2 that Elimelech and his family were “Ephrathites.” These were leading citizens in the town of Bethlehem.

Elimelech could stand on the ridge of hills there on the edge of Bethlehem and see the fertile fields of Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea. Maybe he told himself, “I’ll only take my family over there for a few months. God won’t mind. Why stay here and starve when the grass is greener over there in Moab?”

But notice the digression in the terms here.

- Verse 1 says they “*went to sojourn*,” referring to a temporary stay.
- Verse 2 says that they “*remained there*”; that is, they settled down.
- Verse 4 says that they “*lived there about ten years*.”

Now there’s no immediate sign that God is unhappy with Elimelech. In fact, for ten years he and his family have food and a home to live in, and they even celebrate two weddings. The problem is, they walked away from a community they should have helped return to the Lord.

I don’t think Elimelech intended to adopt Moabite culture and their worship of Chemosh, which included child sacrifice. He probably said to himself,



“We’re not going to become Moabites; we’re just going to live with them until this famine blows over.”

But before you know it, he picks out a couple of Moabite girls for his sons to marry. And ten years pass by.

Listen, nobody ends up in the trash heap of sin overnight. It’s a lot of little steps—it’s just one short phone call, one small bet, one tiny sip, one little lie, one click of the mouse. And before you know it, you have traded in the house of bread for the trash heap.

That is what Elimelech did, and he never made it back home. Look at the consequences here. Verse 3 says, “Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.” Then in verse 5 we are told, “Both Mahlon and Chilion died.” That verse adds for emphasis that Naomi “was left without her two sons and her husband.”

Let me make two observations from this opening scene in the book of Ruth. First, *doing what seems to make sense might be disobedience*. Moving to Moab made wonderful economic sense, but it became a great spiritual loss.

Disobedience can make sense to us because we can justify anything. In fact, the heart of all our problems is the problem in all our hearts. *We* are often our greatest obstacle to living for God because our hearts, Jeremiah wrote, are “deceitful . . . and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9).

The opening scene in this drama ends with three funerals and three widows. Maybe Naomi realizes for the first time how far they have strayed from God.

But here’s the second observation I want to make: *No matter how far you have strayed, it’s never too late*

to come back to God. If you’re a believer in Christ and you have made some sinful decisions that dishonor God, don’t let the distance you have traveled keep you from taking the first step in coming home to God.

The consequences may last longer than you would like, but let them become reminders of the dangers of sin and, at the same time, the grace of God.

Now the good news is, this isn’t the end of the story. God has a way of redeeming wasted years, and this opening scene is the introduction to something surprising—something that happens in the heart of one of these idolatrous Moabite widows.

Consider a time when you “moved to the trash heap.” What habits and attitudes led you to choose “trash” over “bread?” What warnings did you ignore? How committed to God’s word and prayer were you at that time? Who did you surround yourself with during that time?

What advice from your own life would you give an unbeliever who is about to make a decision based on “doing what makes sense?” Explain how your decisions become stepping-stones or hurdles to an unbeliever’s seeking God?

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THREE WIDOWS . . . THREE WAYS

Ruth 1:6-22

Hardships often force us to make decisive, life-altering choices. Ruth demonstrates that in such moments, and as we face challenging circumstances, God's silence, and the advice of bitter people, we must steadfastly put our trust in the Lord and leave the outcome to Him.

More than 200 years ago, an American statesman wrote a letter to his friend in which he stated, "The art of life is the avoiding of pain."¹ I don't believe that is true. The art of life is not how to avoid pain but how to respond to pain. God's Word tells us that He uses painful times to develop maturity in us as we respond correctly. (Psalm 119:67,71)

I heard someone say years ago that 10 percent of life is what happens to you and 90 percent of life is how you respond to it. Suffering creates a crossroads, and the path you choose to take in responding to it will make an incredible difference in your life. And by the

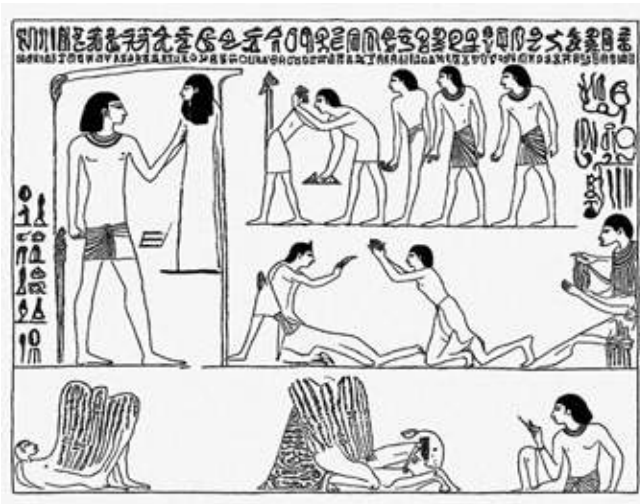
way, beloved, you don't get to choose your crosses; but you can choose your responses.

Here in the first chapter of the book of Ruth, Naomi has become a familiar sight at the funeral home. Her husband and two sons have died, and right now, Naomi's survival is at stake.

When she learns that the famine is over and Bethlehem has food again, Naomi makes up her mind to head back home. In verse 7, we're told that Naomi "set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah."

Bethlehem was a three-day journey from Moab, and perhaps they walked together as far as the border there at the edge of the Jordan River. Naomi turns to these two young widows, Orpah and Ruth, and says to them in verse 8:

"Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me."



Egyptian drawing of harvesting work being supervised



Now you might think it's strange for Naomi to encourage them to return—did you notice—to their mother's house.

This expression refers to the mother's bed chamber, where marriages were typically arranged in this day. In other words, she's saying to them, "You have your whole life in front of you; go back and make plans to get married again."

Then she blesses them in verse 9:

"The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

This is a heartbreaking scene. This isn't one damsel in distress but three. Here they are at this crossroad of sorrow, and all three of them will respond differently.

First, there's Naomi. Her name means "pleasant" or even "sweet." However, she has become embittered and angry. Four times she tells her daughters-in-law they need to leave her alone and go back home.

She is even convinced that God no longer loves her. She says in verse 13, "It is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me."

Naomi is saying, "Even God is against me, and He obviously doesn't love me." But she goes one step farther—listen to what she tells Ruth, down in verse 15: "Your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." Is she serious? Go back to your gods?

Some scholars suggest Naomi doesn't want anybody back in Bethlehem to know that she and her husband permitted their sons to marry pagan Gentile girls—she wants to cover that up. I don't think that is her concern at all. I believe she is counseling Ruth based on her own unbelief. Her God doesn't seem very real to her; He evidently isn't watching out for her; frankly, He's not really making it worth following Him.

So, she effectively tells Ruth, "Look, I've been to the graveyard now three times in a matter of months; it's obvious God doesn't care about me."

And notice down in verse 20, when she arrives in Bethlehem, she says to the women there: "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me."

"Mara" means "bitter." She's saying, "Don't call me Sweet anymore; call me Bitter. And it's all God's fault. He's made my life bitter."

Then she adds this comment in verse 21: "I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty." Now in a way, she is right. God *has* brought her back. She just doesn't realize at the moment that she was already empty in Moab; but she is going to be satisfied in Bethlehem.

Naomi has no idea that God is at work in her life now more than ever. There is no evidence of that, as far as she is concerned; so, let's not be too quick to judge her. When we are suffering, it's easy to assume that God doesn't care about us anymore.

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Now, let's go back and take a quick look at these two younger widows. When Naomi first tells these women to return to their mothers, both of them refuse. So, Naomi lays out the reality moving forward: They have no promise of a husband in Bethlehem; and since they are Moabites, they don't have much of chance at anything but a difficult life.

Orpah sheds a few more tears, but she then kisses her mother-in-law good-bye and heads back to Moab (verse 14). This is the critical crossroad in her life; her



decision actually determines her eternal destiny. She decides to go back into idolatry—back into darkness, back to her gods. She disappears, and the Bible never mentions her again.

Now Ruth stands here at this crossroad, and in verse 15 Naomi essentially says to her, “Aren’t you going to leave? Aren’t you going to go back with Orpah?”

And what happens next is one of the greatest confessions of faith found anywhere in Scripture.

Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” (verses 16-17)

Wow. Ruth is saying, “No matter what the future holds and no matter where this road takes us, I am staying by your side, and I am choosing to follow your God—your God is now my God.”

And what is she getting in return? There are no promises; there are no guarantees. The Bible simply says, Ruth clung to her.

I was in France with my wife a number of years ago; we stayed with a French pastor and his wife. John-Pierre could not speak English well, so his wife, Jocelyn, would often translate. One evening John-Pierre told us about a young woman who had recently be-

come a believer in Christ. Because of her decision, she lost her friends, and her family disowned her. Then John-Pierre said something that Jocelyn was having a hard time translating into English. Finally, she said, “My husband is trying to say that in spite of everything, this young lady has gripped God.”

Here are three widows, with three responses to the pain and suffering of life.

- Orpah rejected God. She essentially said, “I’m going back to my old way of life.”
- Naomi blamed God: “God doesn’t seem to love me anymore.”
- But Ruth chose to grip God. From this point forward, no matter what might happen in her life, she will hold to Him for the rest of her life.

Let us be more like Ruth, today.

Does your view of God shape your response to tragedy, or does tragedy shape your view of God? How does your answer impact your ministry to fellow believers? Why is your answer critical to your ministry to unbelievers?

Who is watching your life? What evidence can they point to that you have “gripped God?” If they asked you why you’re “gripped,” how would you answer? If they ask how they can be gripped too, specifically how would you answer?

¹ Thomas Jefferson, from a 1786 letter to Maria Cosway, cited on the Thomas Jefferson Quotes and Family Letters website, tjrs.monticello.org

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NO SUCH THING AS CHANCE

Ruth 2

God is always at work, but His quiet providence is usually recognized and appreciated only by those who are actively seeking to honor Him in their lives. Both Boaz and Ruth faithfully went about their daily duties in a way that honored God, and they saw Him do amazing things.

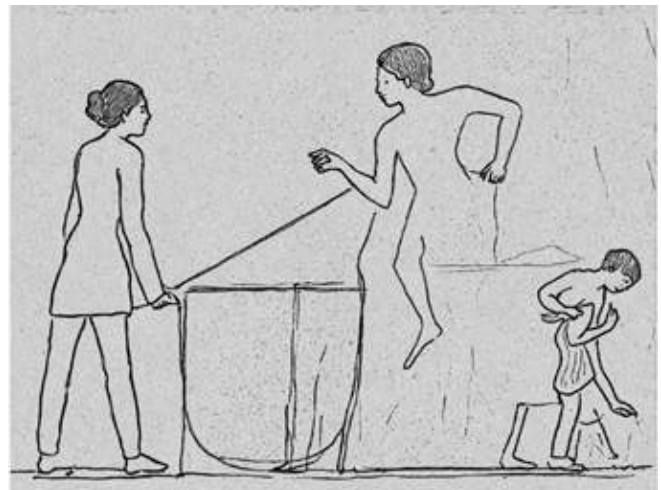
Two widows now arrive in Bethlehem. One is a converted Moabite idolater named Ruth, and the other is an older Jewish woman from a leading family of Bethlehem, now widowed and completely destitute.

Ruth chapter 2 is where it all begins to turn around. Somebody might read this chapter and say that Ruth and Naomi were *lucky* with all these *coincidences*. My friend, there are no coincidences and there is no luck in life. What is happening is the invisible orchestration of circumstances as God works all things together for good (Romans 8:28). Now that doesn't mean everything in your life is good, but God is fitting everything together for your good.

This chapter is going to highlight that invisible work of God in the midst of ordinary decisions—what we call God's providence. There are no voices from heaven and no writing in the sky, but God will work through people and circumstances to accomplish His perfect plan for Ruth and Naomi.

Ruth 2 opens with the hint that God is already at work. Verse 1 says: "Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz."

This rather loaded verse tells us that Boaz is related to Naomi's late husband; so, he's qualified to redeem,



Egyptian painting from the tomb of Nakht with farmers carrying baskets full of wheat

or purchase, Elimelech's property, and marry Ruth, the widow of Elimelech's son. This is the law of the kinsman-redeemer in Israel. (Leviticus 25 & 27)

Now in verse 4, Boaz goes out to his fields, and he says to his field hands, "The LORD be with you!" So, here's a wealthy, godly farmer coming out to his fields and essentially telling his employees, "God bless you as you work out here today."

In Leviticus 23:22, God commanded farmers to leave the corners of their fields untouched at harvest time. And any grain the reapers missed or dropped was to



be left on the ground as well; this was God's provision for poor people, who trailed along behind the reapers, gleaning, or picking up the leftovers.

Boaz is probably one of the few farmers in these days of the Judges who is actually obeying God's Word. Verses 2-3 tell us:

Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor." ... and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz.

She just "happened" to go into Boaz's field. To Ruth, it was an ordinary decision to walk over to this particular field. To the world this would be good luck. But God's Spirit is moving Ruth's heart to decide, "I'm going into *this* field."

She doesn't know it yet, but she just so happens to glean in the fields of her potential kinsman-redeemer. And Boaz *just so happens* to come out to his fields that same morning. He quickly spots Ruth in the field gleaning and asks one of his field hands, "Whose young woman is this?" (verse 5). The man replies:

"She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.' So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest." (verses 6-7)

Boaz immediately knows he is a potential redeemer since he is related to Naomi's late husband. He knows he has the legal right to purchase Naomi's family property and marry Ruth in the process.

He evidently starts thinking about how he is going to meet Ruth. And he eventually comes over to her with a little speech—and it's a thing of beauty.

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn." (verses 8-9)

Boaz is making sure Ruth doesn't go to any other field from then on. She is invited to drink from the company water cooler, and he has already commanded his field hands to leave her alone.

No wonder Ruth responds as she does in verse 10: "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?"

Boaz tells her in verse 11:

"All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land."

Boaz is saying, "I know all about your suffering; I know about the sacrifices you have made for Naomi."

But first and foremost, he is impressed with her personal testimony of faith in God. I love what he says next in verse 12:



“The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!”

Boaz has just met Ruth, and he is already talking to her about God.

Let me tell you, if you are dating somebody right now, here is your model. If that person doesn't talk to you about God and about the things of God and if that one isn't impressed with your testimony for Christ, you need to lace up your boots and run. Don't even look back. You need to make sure that anyone interested in you is even more interested in God.

You need to make sure that anyone interested in you is even more interested in God.

Now lunchtime arrives, and look who's waiting for Ruth here in verse 14: “At mealtime Boaz said to her, ‘Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.’”

Boaz essentially asks her out to eat. You could call this their first date. Well, it might be a group date, but it's a start.

Now get this picture: here's this poor widow—an outsider, a former idolater—invited to eat with this godly, wealthy landowner. What a picture of God's grace this is. We are impoverished, destitute sinners invited to the banquet table of God's love and grace.

As soon as Ruth leaves, Boaz adds one more surprise in verse 15: “Boaz instructed his young men, saying ... ‘pull out some [sheaves] from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean.’”

Boaz is telling them to drop stuff on purpose. You can only imagine Ruth gleaning out there, oblivious to what has been said behind the scenes on her behalf. We are often oblivious to the behind-the-scenes work of God's providence, providing for our needs.

We're told in verse 17, “Then [Ruth] beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley.” This is around twenty-five pounds of grain! She has enough to feed herself and Naomi for a month. And when Ruth tells Naomi in verse 19 that she had gleaned in the fields of Boaz, Naomi says, “The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers” (verse 20). One look at all this grain and the mention of Boaz, and Naomi starts hearing wedding bells for Ruth.

Beloved, Boaz is a picture here of your Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is at work right now on your behalf. There are no coincidences; your life isn't left to luck or chance. Let's have eyes to see and hearts to appreciate the grace of God at work as He unfolds His plans for our lives.

Why is it important to trust that God is working providentially in your life? What encouragement does this truth give you for the present? Why would Satan work to distract you from trusting God's providence?

To whom do you have the opportunity to model the grace of God on a daily basis? In what ways have you earned the right, through your lifestyle, to ask them simple questions about their views of God?

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A MIDNIGHT PROPOSAL

Ruth 3

We can't control all the circumstances in our lives, but we can control how we respond to them. Ruth responded to her difficulties with humility, faithfulness, and a determination to do the right thing in the right way. And God led her to a man who shared her godly character.

When I proposed to my wife several decades ago, it was a pretty simple setting and really nothing all that elaborate. Frankly, I would love to be able to do it all over again so much more creatively.

I read about one guy who had his girlfriend picked up in a limousine, driven to a resort where candles lined the sidewalk and an orchestra he had hired was playing a love song he had written for the occasion. When she arrived, he got down on one knee and proposed to her. When she said yes, he stood up and sang the final stanza of his original love song, accompanied by the orchestra, while fireworks exploded overhead. That guy makes me sick—that's just not fair!

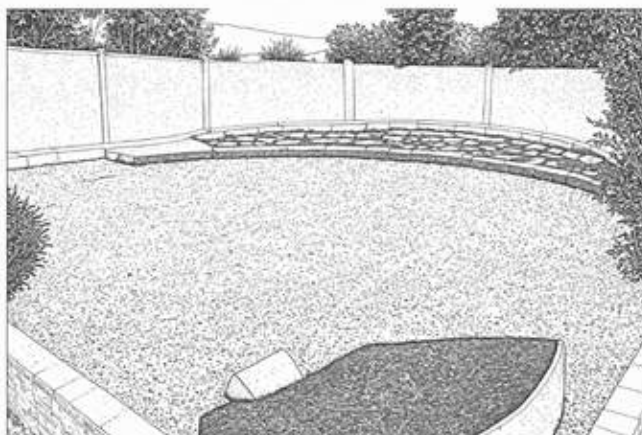
I read about another guy who wasn't quite as creative. He actually pretended to have died. He planned it all with his friends who worked at the funeral home. He was all dressed in his best suit, lying in the coffin; and when his girlfriend arrived and stood over the casket sobbing, he suddenly sat up and asked her to marry him. She screamed, and then said yes. I think they both need counseling.

One of the most remarkable proposals is found in the Old Testament love story known as the book of Ruth. And this time, Ruth will do the proposing.

Now we last saw Ruth gleaning in the fields of Boaz. But harvest season is almost over, and their lunch dates together are about to come to an end.

Here in chapter 3 and verse 1, Naomi says to Ruth: "My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?" What that means is, "Ruth, we have to do something about getting you and Boaz together." And if there's any doubt this is what's on Naomi's mind, the next verse settles it, as she says, "Is not Boaz our relative?"

According to the law in Deuteronomy 25, a Hebrew widow could ask the closest relative of her deceased



Threshing floor with sledge



husband to marry her and redeem the property of the late husband. Their firstborn son would inherit this property in the name of her *first* husband. This would continue the family name and keep the family property intact for another generation. So, Ruth has every right to propose to Naomi's relative, Boaz, asking him to become her kinsman-redeemer.

Naomi tells Ruth, "He is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor" (verse 2). How does she know that? Well, she has been planning this for weeks.

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the Word of God.*

The season of threshing the crops was hard work, but a time of rejoicing and feasting. And all this provides the perfect setting for Ruth's proposal.

So, here in verse 3, Naomi tells Ruth to wash and anoint herself with perfume. Ruth evidently had some perfume from her past. J. Vernon McGee used to say that it was a bottle of perfume called *Midnight in Moab*.

Naomi tells Ruth to wait until Boaz lies down to sleep, and then she adds a strange detail in verse 4: "Observe the place where he lies [down]. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do."

Some say Naomi is telling Ruth to go down and proposition him sexually—that *uncovering his feet* was a euphemism for sexual relations. Frankly, that interpretation comes from a dirty mind. We happen to know that Boaz is a godly man; in fact, a few verses later, he is going to praise Ruth for her *moral character*.

"Uncover his feet" literally means—here it is—to uncover his feet. But why do it? This will wake him up without startling him out there in the open. And that's exactly what Ruth does in verse 7.

Sure enough, sometime around midnight, Boaz wakes up because his feet are cold. He leans forward to cover them up, and he sees somebody down there by his feet. When he says in verse 9, "Who are you?" Ruth answers, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer." That's another way of asking, "Will you marry me?" She is saying, "Boaz, you're a close relative; you have the legal right to marry me, so will you?"

Now why would Ruth do all this under the cover of darkness? Well, I believe Ruth is showing him great respect. She is not going to force him to make a decision in front of the town leaders.

I also believe she and Naomi already know there is another man who is a closer relative and has the first right of refusal to the hand of Ruth. So, Ruth is just coming here secretly to let Boaz know she loves him and wants *him* to redeem her rather than that other man.

Did you notice how Ruth asks him to spread his "wings" over her? She is actually using a word Boaz used when they first met out in the field. Back in Ruth 2:12, he said to her: "The LORD repay you for what you have done . . . under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" So here Ruth effectively asks Boaz to be the wings God uses to protect and love her.

Now the question is, Are Boaz's cold feet going to stay cold? Well, he can hardly contain himself. He whispers back in verse 10, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter." That's the long way of saying, "Yes, I want to marry you!"

But then Boaz says in verse 12, "There is a redeemer nearer than I." Boaz can play the part of the *goel*, the kinsman-redeemer, only if this closer relative is not interested.

Boaz's next words in verse 13 are amazing to me:



“Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you.”

Let me tell you what this means: it means that Boaz is going to play by God’s rule book regarding the kinsman-redeemer. It means he is willing to lose the woman he obviously loves rather than disobey the Word of God.

But he also makes a promise to Ruth that if the other relative is unwilling, he will be honored to redeem her. Then early the next morning, Ruth heads for home, and Boaz heads for the city gate.

Now as soon as Ruth tells Naomi what happened, Naomi says to her, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today” (verse 18). “Wait” can be translated, “rest” or “sit still.” “Just let Boaz go to work on your behalf.” The truth is, there really isn’t anything Ruth *can* do now. If she’s going to be redeemed, it will be up to Boaz, her kinsman-redeemer.

What a wonderful picture of salvation this is. All we can do is tell Christ we love Him and want to be taken under His wings. Jesus Christ has done all the work of redemption on our behalf.

Only Jesus can pay the price of our redemption. Only Jesus can settle our debts and make us His bride and bring us into His family.

Ruth can rest, because Boaz is at work. Ruth can sit still because Boaz is doing anything *but* sitting still. He is racing off to the town hall to arrange for the redemption of his bride.

Let’s recapture today a fresh vision of our Redeemer. Let’s sing with David the psalmist, who wrote, “[Lord] in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge” (Psalm 57:1).

What do Ruth’s actions reveal about her view of God’s word and her faith in God? How does she challenge your faith? Consider the implications of this question: what blessings are waiting for you that your obedience to God’s word will release?

What in Boaz’s attitude and actions exemplify Christlike love? What desire in your life are you willing to set aside in order to obey God? What attributes of God assure you that making that choice to obey will result in blessing and peace from God?

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SEALED WITH A SANDAL

Ruth 4:1-12

One measure of godly character is Christlike love—love that is selfless, sacrificial, and undeterred by obstacles. Boaz’s determination to do everything he had to do to marry Ruth and care for her serves as a wonderful example of the love God wants to produce in us all.

The last chapter of the book of Ruth could not be more dramatically different from the first chapter. Chapter 1 began with three funerals and three widows; chapter 4 will close with a wedding and a baby boy.

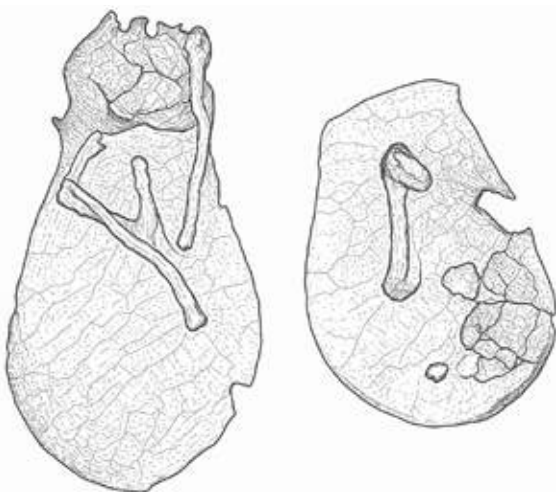
And in between we have seen God providentially bring Ruth and Boaz together. We have watched their relationship develop and witnessed that midnight proposal on the threshing floor.

We also have held our breath over a big problem. There’s another relative who has the legal right to claim Ruth as her kinsman-redeemer and to purchase

the family farm belonging to Naomi’s husband (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). He is first in line for this claim, and Boaz is second in line.

And that brings us now to the city of Bethlehem:

Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, “Turn aside, friend; sit down here.” And he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, “Sit down here.” So they sat down. (Ruth 4:1-2)



Ancient Egyptian sandal

The city gate was the place where business was conducted and legal transactions were carried out. There were rooms just inside the gate where administrative offices were built. I’ve stood there at the ancient ruins of city gates in Israel and seen these areas just inside the gates where legal cases were heard.



By the way, this helps explain Jesus' promise to His disciples that the "gates of hell" will not prevail against the church (Matthew 16:18). He meant that all the *decisions and plans* of the demonic world would never be able to eliminate the church.

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Now Boaz invites ten elders to sit down and hear him. That was the legal quorum for this proceeding. Verse 1 tells us that the other kinsman-redeemer *just so happened* to walk by. Obviously, the author wants us to know that God is providentially arranging these details.

Boaz then says to the man, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech" (verse 3). "Relative" in this context is a broad term; this land belonged to the extended family of Elimelech. Naomi was going to have to sell this land to make ends meet, and Boaz is rather casually reminding this relative that he has the right to purchase the land and keep it in the family of Elimelech (Leviticus 25:25).

Boaz's heart is no doubt pounding away on the inside. He says in verse 4:

"So I thought I would tell you of it and say, 'Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people.' If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is

no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you."

In other words, "If you don't want it, I might as well buy it for myself and keep it in the family."

And the man answers here, "I will redeem it." Boaz's heart skipped a beat or two; but if you study his strategy here, I believe Boaz expected this man to respond with interest.

Now watch Boaz respond in verse 5:

"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."

This other man evidently had not thought about Naomi or Ruth; and Boaz just lays out the "bad news" one piece at a time. Naomi and Ruth come with this parcel of land. And who is Ruth? She's a Moabite—you know, those idolatrous people who are enemies of Israel. And Boaz adds that she's the "widow of the dead," which means whoever buys the land is required by law to marry her.

Oh, and there's one more thing Boaz just sort of throws in here: the redeemer is going to have to "perpetuate the name of the dead." In other words, he's going to have a child with Ruth, Lord willing, and this child will become heir of the land in the name of Ruth's former husband. And then he will have to give this land to that child when he grows up.

Now who would want to marry a Moabite woman and purchase a piece of property only to have to give it away later? There's only one person in the world who would want to do that—someone who happens to be in love with the widow!

And as quickly as this man said, "I will redeem it," he is now looking for the back door. He says to Boaz in verse 6: "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair



my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.”

Then Boaz shouts, “Yeeeeeha!” Well, that’s in between the lines.

This decision is ratified in verses 7-8:

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other . . . So when the redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it for yourself,” he drew off his sandal.

The man is essentially saying, “Boaz, you can walk in my sandals—you can take my place.”

Ruth chapter 4 does not give us any details of the wedding, the wedding garments, the feasting, or the days of celebration. It simply informs us that Prince Boaz has effectively rescued this damsel in distress. The bride and groom are married at last.

Now let me ask you this: Why would Boaz be willing to marry a foreign widow to begin with? Why would a godly man like him jeopardize his reputation and have children that are half Israelite and half Gentile? His name is going to be whispered about town as the man who married a former Gentile idolater.

Well, for one thing, Boaz knows Ruth has become a follower of God and it wasn’t for money or any advantage. In fact, remember that following the Lord meant Ruth had walked away from her family and friends; everything she knew, she had left behind in Moab.

But let me tell you, Ruth reminded Boaz of someone else he loved. You see, Boaz already knew the testimony of a Gentile woman who had left her country and her idols to follow the God of Abraham. It was his own mother. We know her as Rahab, the harlot.

That’s right—the same woman who had helped the Israelite spies years earlier, the same woman who had followed after Israel when the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. Rahab had converted from idolatry to faith in the true and living God.

And the Bible tells us that later on an Israelite man named Salmon married her—think of it—a Gentile woman with a sordid past. And they happen to end up in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, in Matthew chapter 1 and verse 5.

So, Boaz was willing to do the very same thing *his* father had done years before. God had already prepared Boaz’s heart to love a Gentile bride and become her kinsman-redeemer.

Don’t forget, beloved, your Kinsman-Redeemer, Jesus Christ, is now redeeming His bride—the church—and every one of us has a sinful past. But let me tell you, His love for you has not ruined His reputation; it has exalted His grace as your faithful Kinsman-Redeemer.

God’s providence worked alongside Boaz’s faith and obedience to God’s word. How does that fact affect your understanding of God’s providence in your life? What act of faith or obedience is God waiting on you to exercise in order to finish bringing resolution to a godly desire in your life?

What encouragement do you draw from God’s willingness to overlook a person’s sinful past and use their faith to include them in His plan of redemption for the whole world? How might that encouragement become fuel for your daily walk with Him?

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AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Ruth 4:13-22

Hope is key to turning bitterness to joy. And hope comes from faith in God and living faithfully for Him. For Naomi it was a long trek from bitterness to joy. Her journey, however, reminds us that in the Lord we have joy that reaches beyond our circumstances and into eternity.

As we come to the end of the book of Ruth, we have uncovered a remarkable love story between a poor widow and a wealthy landowner. I have referred to this book as a fairytale that actually came true.

Now, let's watch the last few scenes here, beginning in chapter 4 and verse 13:

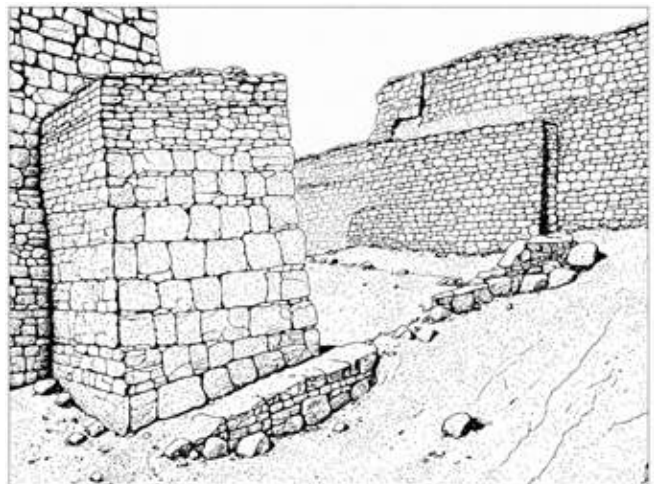
So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son.

After giving us several chapters on their courtship, in just two sentences here we have a wedding, a home established, and a baby boy delivered.

Now if we could slow it down for just a minute, we know the wedding ceremony would have been a joyful, elaborate event. The entire town of Bethlehem would have been invited. Normally, the celebration would have lasted a week or so, depending on the wealth of the family—and Boaz was a wealthy landowner.

Now after all of that—a year or so later—notice how the focus of the book returns to Naomi:

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 sev-



Gate chamber at Arad showing bench where people would sit to conduct business



en sons, has given birth to him.”

(verses 14-15)

The women are basically telling Naomi, “Because of Ruth and Boaz and now your grandson, your life has been restored. You have been given fresh enthusiasm and joy in your old age!”

Just look at Naomi now. Verse 16 says, “Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse.” That word “nurse” refers to a guardian or caregiver. She is his nanny. So, the book of Ruth that opened at the cemetery now concludes in the nursery. And even the neighbors notice that this little boy has put a bounce back in her step and meaning back into her life.

One medical doctor who authored a number of books on the subject of grandparenting wrote that the bond between a child and a grandparent is the least complicated form of human love.¹

I agree. It isn’t complicated, is it? It’s all about the relationship. And grandparents don’t worry about the details either. If the grandkids want to eat dessert first or have another Popsicle, I’m sure there’s a verse somewhere to support that!

My grandmother, on my mother’s side, lived in my hometown of Norfolk, Virginia, where she served as a missionary alongside my parents. Every Friday night, one of us four boys got to have a sleepover at her house. Granny, as we called her, had been widowed for many years and had dedicated the rest of her life to serving as a “missionary mom” to the servicemen and servicewomen stationed in Norfolk.

Now this once-a-month sleepover at Granny’s house meant I was going to stay in my pajamas on Saturday morning, watching cartoons and eating my favorite cereal. On top of that, she would let me have a cup of coffee loaded down with sugar and cream. It was dessert in a cup. And that’s the way I like it to this day.

After breakfast, she would open her well-worn Bible and read some verses and then pray. She prayed around the world—they were really long prayers—and then she would pray for me. I was blessed with that loving, faithful relationship.

If you are a grandparent, you have the ability to impact their grandchildren in so many ways. Take advantage of it.

- You can teach your grandchildren the plan of salvation, like young Timothy learned from his mother *and* grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5).
- You can be a wise counselor with your years of experience and biblical knowledge.
- You can cheer on your grandchildren without having to worry about all the details.

Have you ever thought about the fact that Ruth was a new follower of God who knew little of Jewish customs and biblical traditions in the home? Ruth knew little of the history of Israel and the law of Moses. She barely had time to learn these things before her son would have begun asking questions. Naomi would have been a tremendous resource as a grandmother, working alongside Boaz and Ruth as they raised their son to learn God’s Word.

*Jesus Christ was
able to pay the price
for our redemption.
The price wasn’t
money but His own
lifeblood.*

We are told here in verse 17 that Boaz and Ruth’s son grew up to become “the father of Jesse, the father of David.” You know what that means? It means that Ruth, a poor gleaner in the fields of Bethlehem, has joined the family tree, not only of King David, but also of the Descendant of David, our Messiah, the Lord Jesus (see Matthew 1:1-16).

Now as we wrap up the book of Ruth, I want to highlight four similarities between Boaz, Ruth’s kinsman-redeemer, and Jesus Christ, our Kinsman-Redeemer.



First, *kinship with the bride was required*. In order to meet the conditions of the law and qualify to redeem the bride, the kinsman-redeemer had to be related to the extended family of the bride.

Likewise, the Son of God had to become our relative—a member of the human race. And the Bible tells us He did: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

Second, *the kinsman-redeemer’s role was voluntary*. The kinsman could not be forced to perform this role; he had to be willing to redeem the bride. Boaz could have walked away just like that other man did. But he didn’t, because he loved Ruth.

God the Son became our Kinsman-Redeemer, not because He *had* to, but because He wanted to. First John 4:19 tells us, “He *first* loved us.”

Third, *the kinsman-redeemer had to be capable of paying the redemption price*. It wasn’t just about love. No matter how much Boaz loved Ruth, he had to be able to buy Elimelech’s land; redeeming the bride was costly.

So also, Jesus Christ was able to pay the price for our redemption. The price wasn’t money but His own lifeblood. The apostle Paul wrote, “In him we have redemption through his blood” (Ephesians 1:7). When Jesus hung on the cross and said, “It is finished” (John 19:30), that Greek term meant “paid in full.” All your debt of sin has been completely paid off by Christ.

Finally, *the kinsman-redeemer’s provision was life-changing*. Think about it: Boaz lifted Ruth out of poverty and even changed her status. She was no longer a Moabite widow but the bride of Boaz. Likewise, Jesus Christ changed your status from lost to saved, from an outcast to a member of His family.

The fairytales I used to read to my daughters when they were little always ended with the words, “And they lived happily ever after.” Those words belong to every member of God’s family. No matter how difficult, challenging, or painful your life is right now, you *will* live happily ever after.

Then on the last page of those fairytales my girls wanted me to read were those two words: “The End.” But let me tell you, beloved, there will be no *end* to your story. You will be taken away one day by your Prince, swept away by your Bridegroom and taken into the presence of your Kinsman-Redeemer. There will never be “the end” to your “happily ever after.” It’s going to last forever.

And with that, our Wisdom Journey through the book of Ruth comes to an end.

How have you seen God redeem desperate situations in your life or the lives of others? What has this taught you about God and His providence?

Why is it important to not let “impossible” situations defeat your faith?

How does the story of Ruth and Boaz deepen your appreciation for Christ and His work? In what ways might the book of Ruth be effective in reaching unbelievers with God’s message of grace and hope?

¹ Arthur Kronhaber, quoted by Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories* (Thomas Nelson, 2000), 388.

