

Wanted: One Redeemer

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[0 : 00] I said to you at the start of the sermon last week that the question of chapter 2 was the same as it had been throughout the story, how are these women going to eat?

And that has been the presenting crisis throughout, has explained how they were put food on the table. But beyond that, behind that, there has been another question, what is to become of a family life or whatever?

We saw right back in our first week in our studies in Ruth that God genuinely cares for these people. He cares not only for the immediate crisis, but he cares as well for their longer term good. So chapter 2 has met their immediate need for food, certainly for the near future, and they're fine in that regard. And so now they can turn their attention to something less pressing, but I guess ultimately more important.

Verse 1, then Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, my daughter, should I not see the rest for you, that it may be well with you? Naomi's concern here is for a longer term, isn't it?

[1 : 12] Naomi's concern. She recognises that spending the years ahead scraping by, by gleaming, by being dependent on the goodwill or at least the toleration of others, that that is hardly a sustainable plan for them.

So Naomi looks ahead to the future and she is concerned. She's worried even for what will come of Ruth after Naomi's death. She wants to see things settled and safe and secure.

This week, rather than kind of pulling together the elements from different characters, as we've done the last few times, we're going to work our way through the story as it's told and we'll see what we see as we go along.

And so we begin in verse 1 with Naomi's plan. This plan for the future, and unsurprisingly, given his significant role in the story so far, that plan revolves around Boaz.

We're reminded, first of all, that he is a relative and he's made provision for them already by allowing Ruth to work alongside his young women. He's already shown kindness and Naomi, by whatever method, has worked out his movements where he's going to be.

[2 : 19] Maybe she's been listening to the talk around the village and she knows tonight it's Boaz's turn to go and stay and guard the pile of grain. Or maybe she's just watching the weather and knows that tonight is going to be the night that there will be the sort of breezy wind that they need in order to go and fresh the barley, that the wind will carry away the chaff when they throw it up into the air.

By whatever means, she knows tonight is the window of opportunity. And again, as she lays her plan out before Ruth, she has clearly been thinking this through, hasn't she?

She's doing her very best not to leave anything open to chance. And so Ruth is to go scrub up to make herself as attractive as she can and then wait for her moment.

Naomi sets it up so that Boaz and Ruth have this rare opportunity to speak in a secluded spot privately and undercover of darkness. She's working to achieve what she prayed for all the way back in chapter 1 and verse 9.

The Lord grant that you may find rest each of you in the house of her husband. At that point she was trying to send her daughters in the way, wasn't she? She was sending all of her and Ruth back to their own families that they might seek a new husband in the land of Moab.

[3 : 38] But here now her desire is the same. She knows what Ruth needs. We know from her prayer that she rightly sees it as God's providence to provide these things.

The Lord grant that you may find rest. And yet we see her here working to those same ends. Has she changed her mind then? Has she decided God's being too slow?

He isn't keeping up his every bargain? Of course not. Naomi knows full well that there isn't any disconnect. There's no thing congrueting between praying for something to happen and then working to make it to come about.

Just as in chapter 2, Boaz provided the blessing that he prayed for Ruth. Here Naomi works to provide the rest. That she has prayed for Ruth. Only sheer folly is a tip to suppose that having prayed we should ignore the opportunities in front of us.

I don't know how many of you watched West Wing. I guess it's a few years old now. But it's a great program. And there's an episode where the president is speaking to a Catholic priest about the crisis we face.

[4 : 43] And the priest tells him this story. He reminded me of the man that lived by the river. He heard a radio report that the river was going to rush up and flood the town.

And that all the residents should evacuate our homes. But the man said, I'm religious. I pray. God loves me. God will save me. The waters rose up.

A guy in a rowboat came along and he shouted, hey, hey, are you in there? The town is flooding. Let me take you to safety. But the man shouted back, I'm religious.

I pray. God loves me. God will save me. A helicopter was hovering overhead and a guy with a microphone shouted, hey, you, you down there. The town is flooding.

Let me drop this ladder and I'll take you to safety. But the man shouted back that he was religious, that he prayed that God loved him and that God would take him to safety. Well, the man drowned.

[5 : 41] And standing at the gates of St. Peter, he demanded an audience with God. Lord, he said, I'm a religious man. I pray. I thought you loved me.

Why did this happen? And God said to him, I sent you a radio report, a helicopter and the guy in a rowboat. What on earth are you doing here?

Now, we should be careful about getting our theology from TV shows or indeed from Catholic priests. But in this case, it's a fair point, isn't it? Now, it is unlikely to be this dramatic for most of us. But there is that danger that we become like the guy standing on his rooftop and praying for help and ignoring the provision right in front of him. There's a danger that we pray diligently and then we sit back as if there is nothing else for us to do.

But remember, Ruth is the story of God's providential provision for ordinary people in an ordinary place, through ordinary people, by ordinary means. So is it vitally important that you pray for your non-Christian friends to come to faith?

[6 : 47] Yes, of course it is. But you should also, you know, go and have a conversation with them. Should you pray that God will help you do well in your exams or in your presentation of work?

Of course you should. But you should go and do some revision too. Should you pray for your children every day that they might grow up knowing and loving the Lord? Of course you should. But you should teach them about it too. You should long grace to them. You should teach them to love his family, the church. You get the point. Naomi prays. Naomi plans.

And Naomi acts. Or rather, she sends Ruth to act. Because verse 5, Ruth agrees to the plan that Naomi puts forward. Again, she shows her humility, her willingness to put Naomi first by agreeing to do as she suggests.

And so she goes and does. And in verse 7, Boaz comes back on stage. He's finished his work. He's had his meal. He's feeling content. There's no particular reason, by the way, to read any more than that.

[7 : 52] As she phrased his heart was merry. Some people want to suggest that that's pointing to him being drunk, or at least well on his way. But the Hebrew word there translated merry really doesn't have that meaning at all.

There's no support for that. And certainly would hardly match up with what we know of Boaz's character with it. He's satisfied with a good day's work and a hearty meal with any more than that. And so he falls asleep, contented. Ruth waits and observes where he is. And at the right moment she goes and she uncovers his feet. And she waits until the cool night air causes him to wake up. And in the middle of verse 8, And behold, a woman lay at his feet. I think we're meant to catch something of a sense of his surprise here at this encounter.

But those of you who are parents have maybe had the experience of waking up in the early hours of the morning, clearly opening your eyes to discover a face three inches away from your eyes.

[8 : 57] I don't know, maybe they're cries unusually stealthy, but the first time that happened to me, the whole house was awake soon afterwards, as I screamed terror. I mean, as I let out a gruff and madly shout of surprise.

And then spent the next quarter of an hour comforting the poor child who wondered why I learned that was screaming in his face. If it's disconcerting, finding somebody unexpected in your bedroom is surely at least worrying to find someone unexpectedly there beside you out in the open countryside.

Because the likelihood that this is a problem for you is that much greater, isn't it? And so I imagine it took him a few moments to get himself back under control before we get to verse 9 when he asks who she is.

And this here, this is where Ruth departs from Naomi's plan. Naomi's instructions back in verse 4 were, wait to be told what to do.

But instead of just answering his question and waiting, Ruth goes firm. In fact, instead of waiting for Boaz to tell her what to do, she tells him what to do. He said, who are you?

[10 : 03] And she answered, I am Ruth your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. Or in the NIV, who are you? He asked.

I am the servant Ruth, she said. Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian redeemer of our family. I imagine with whichever version you've got there, you've probably got the other translation, sorry, a footnote, either wings or the corner of your garment.

There are a few different things to note going on here. And the first depends on the meaning of the corner of the garment. Scholars seem to be quite well agreed that this is a marriage proposal.

In fact, this is a custom still practiced in some Arab countries to this day, of spreading the garment over the woman as part of the marriage ceremony. And there are references to something at least very similar in Ezekiel chapter 16, in Deuteronomy 22 and 27, and in Malachi chapter 2 as well.

So this would seem to be a proposal from Ruth to Boaz. And she's being pretty forward here. A proposal from the woman was even less common then than it is today.

[11 : 15] Ruth is being very bold. Secondly, there's the other meaning of this same word, either the corner of the garment or the wings. That's the meaning that the ESV brings out, the spring of the wings.

And this goes back to chapter 2 and verse 12, to Boaz's prayer. So in Ruth's request here, in the words that it's reported to us, there is a reference back to Boaz's own desires for Ruth to be well provided for, to be protected, to be cared for.

So if you like, she's asking him to marry her, particularly as her protector. And that seems to be part of the origin of the symbolism of the husband spreading his garment over his wife.

But that is symbolic of his protection for her. So she comes proposing marriage. She comes asking for protection. And thirdly, the kind of marriage that she asks for.

I think Naomi's plan is just that Ruth will find her husband, who can provide security for her, who can give her happiness. But Ruth goes one better.

[12 : 31] Ruth finishes her request with, For you are a redeemer. Spread your garment over me because you are a redeemer. Give us protection because you are a redeemer.

In other words, she's asking Boaz not only to be her husband in a general sense, but to act specifically as their kinsman redeemer. So she departs from Naomi's plan because of her great devotion to Naomi.

She asks Boaz to be the redeemer because Naomi needs security as well. It's not enough for Ruth to have hope. Naomi needs somewhere as well. And Elimelech still needs an heir.

And Boaz has obligations in that regard as the kinsman redeemer. But notably, Ruth doesn't have such an obligation. Ruth has no obligation to provide a new heir for Naomi, for a little heir.

Boaz does. Ruth does not. And so when she offers this proposal in these terms, she's going beyond what she needs to do. She's choosing to meet Naomi's needs.

[13 : 38] And that is why in verse 10, Boaz says that this last kindness has exceeded the first. She's outdone herself. Not only did she show devotion to Naomi by returning with her foot in Boaz, not only did she go out believing to provide for her mother-in-law, but even in this marriage proposal, she seeks Naomi's good.

Her concern is not only for herself, but it has this profoundly selfless dimension as well, as she seeks Naomi's good. And Boaz, fortunately, is not offended by her forwardness in this proposal, but

rather seems to be flattered, commends her for coming to him, and not to the young men, whether rich or poor.

Incidentally, the word used here for young men, this isn't the same as the one used for the young men working in the fields in the previous chapter. The word that's translated young here means maybe even something closer to choice men.

It carries overtones of vigor and youth and handsomeness. Clearly, Ruth's reputation in the village at this point is such that Boaz thinks she could have married a much more immediately attractive prospect than Boaz.

Boaz was probably at least twice her age. He reckons she could perhaps have chosen someone more immediately appealing to her.

[15:06] Again, she shows her kindness towards Naomi. And Boaz is very happy with her plan. He tells her that everyone knows she is a worthy woman. Maybe you remember that term, worthy, from the description of Boaz back at the start of chapter 2.

Not an uncommon description for a man, but only two other times in the Bible that it refers to a worthy woman. Proverbs chapter 12 and verse 4. An excellent wife, a worthy woman, is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones.

And Proverbs 31 and verse 10. An excellent wife who can find. She is found precious at jewels.

Excellent wife, worthy woman. Incidentally, most orderings of the Hebrew Bible, you will find Ruth placed immediately after the book of Proverbs.

So immediately after the description in Proverbs 31, of the wife of a noble character, the excellent wife, the worthy woman, it seems that there is a deliberate use of the book of Ruth to further demonstrate what a truly excellent wife is like.

A parent encourages us, I think, to look at Ruth and see what we can learn from our own behaviour, from how she acts. And so we come up to verse 12.

[16:26] And did you hear in your head the dramatic music of the film soundtrack as we got to that point? Plot twist. And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer that eye.

We are all here, aren't we, getting ready for the happily ever after, for the wedding bells to ring. And suddenly Boaz introduces the problem. Like any good love story, there is a rival suitor on the scene. Another relative with a closer claim. Indeed, a closer obligation. Now, Boaz maybe could have tried to wriggle around this in a number of ways. And by this stage, certainly it is clear that Boaz, Naomi Ruth, and we the readers are all happy with this match.

We want Boaz and Ruth to end up together. He could have tried to work his way around the other way. But as an upright Israelite, he bells before the custom. He acknowledges the prior claim.

Once again, he is presented as a man of integrity. And in another masterstroke of storytelling, we have another crisis along the way. But Boaz isn't going to let her worry.

[17:32] He knows that despite this new wrinkle in the plan, that she needs her concerns. And so he assures her in verse 13, that one way or another she will be provided for.

His use of the phrase, as the Lord lives, invokes a great curse upon himself if he does not do as he says. If the other guy doesn't step up, Ruth will not be left with the manhood.

Now, Boaz knows that people there, just as people today, have suspicious minds and can't be trusted.

And so he knows it would be dangerous for her to return home now as well as the night, that she could be accosted on the way. And he also believes that wagging tongues, seeing her coming home from the freshen floor in the morning, would not do anyone any favors.

And so he makes sure she's on her way in the morning before one could recognize her. He provides her with another generous help of grain, not only serving as a gift, after his already well-established generosity, but also maybe gives her a plausible cover should she be spotted on her way home.

[18:45] And so Ruth returns to her mother-in-law. She relates what has happened and she's counseled to patients. Naomi knows enough of Boaz's character to be supremely confident that he will not let the matter rest, but he will do as he has said.

Ruth needs a Redeemer. Naomi needs a Redeemer. And she is confident that one way or another, they will get one. And that will be our story for this week.

But I think it would be right that we spend a few moments reflecting on some theological implications of this story. Because the impact of the book of Ruth isn't limited to the immediate, is it?

It speaks of something greater. Jesus says that all of the scriptures speak of him. And so it is right that we consider the ways that this book points to him. Because Boaz stands as what is called a type of Christ, by which we mean he's an image, he's a figure of what is to come, or rather who wants to come.

One of the ways that we can see in the New Testament is that it shows us Jesus as the great kinsman Redeemer. Boaz said in verse 12, And now it is true that I am a Redeemer, yet there is a Redeemer nearer than I, speaking of this mother relative.

[20 : 04] It would be equally true to him to say, there is a Redeemer greater than I. Firstly, then, we note that to be a Redeemer, you have to be kin to those who would redeem.

And so Jesus had to become like us in order that he might be a kinsman Redeemer. Hebrews chapter 2 and verse 17, Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

This is why we need the Incarnation, this is why we need Christmas, this is why we need God, to become man, because to be a Redeemer, he must be like us. Secondly, we've seen Boaz loving God, we've seen Boaz delighting to do God's will, we've seen him not only fulfilling the bare demands of the law, but going far beyond that into overflowing generosity according to the true will of God.

We saw that last week in the abundant provision that he made for Ruth and Naomi, and we see it again this week. Because he could have just said, not my problem, this other guy is your Redeemer, go and talk to him.

Now, Boaz delights to do God's will. Jesus delights to do God's will, to come and fulfill all of God's commands. Thirdly, not to jump ahead, but we'll see next week, that Boaz's redemption of Ruth is actually a costly one.

[21 : 44] That's why the other guy ends up not wanting to go through with it. Redemption can be costly. And Jesus gave up his own life to pay the price of our redemption. Number four, by redeeming Ruth, Boaz makes now his wife.

As Boaz does that, he shares his bed with a penniless alien. He shares his bed with a woman who doesn't really bring anything to the marriage, who doesn't come with anything to recommend her. By redeeming us, Jesus makes us his bride. Jesus is ready to share himself with those who are not only bringing nothing, but are actively his enemies.

Fifthly, we see Boaz acting to provide a secure future for the hopeless Ruth. And how much greater a future Jesus has secured for us.

That the hope of eternal glory is ours because he has won it for us. And so Ruth has this story of God's ordinary provision for ordinary people in an ordinary place.

[22 : 56] This story sheds light on God's extraordinary provision. sheds light on the mind-blowing provision that he makes for equally ordinary people, not only in our day-to-day today, but that he makes for us for our eternity.

It sheds light on the provision that he makes for us that we might have a hope, our future, and an eternal glory yet to come. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for the book of Ruth.

We thank you for the many levels on which it operates. We thank you for the many things that you are teaching us through it. Lord, we thank you for the example of how true righteous believers are to act, to behave, to treat one another, and to regard you.

We thank you for the example that points us to Jesus as the one true and holy redeemer, as the one who became like us in order that he might buy us back for himself, the one who is willing to share himself with those who break nothing at all.

Lord God, we thank you for that glorious truth. Amen. I'll finish them by singing again, and we will sing that he's a redeemer.

[24 : 33] I hope that we have you. Thank you. goddess Rebecca M