

Redemption accomplished

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Date: 26 November 2017

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[0 : 00] Well, as you've lost your place, we'll be defining it in that section of Ruth, chapter 4, that we read. We'll be focusing on the first part of chapter 4 of the scene.

And in this passage, we see a new aspect of Boaz's character, as we meet Boaz, the cunning strategist. And then we see this character confirmed in what we already know, that he is the gracious Redeemer.

And then he stands particularly in contrast to the other key character of this account, to this rival, Redeemer. That rival was introduced, wasn't he, in an unexpected twist back at the end of chapter 3, that pick-up on the road to weather bliss for Boaz and for Ruth.

And the question as we come into our passage is, will this relative stand in the way, or will everyone's hopes be met as Boaz and Ruth can finally be together? Just as Naomi had promised, Boaz wastes no time, does he, in doing as he had promised Ruth.

He sets out straight away to find this other relative and to get this situation resolved. As verse 1 tells us, he goes to the town gate and then sits, waiting. Not Boaz being passive, rather this is a wise cause of action.

[1 : 12] This is a straightforward way to achieve his goal. In a day before telephones, and a wise mobile telephones, rather than chasing around and trying to find this guy and risking missing him, Boaz heads for the one place that he is sure to be before long.

No one can avoid passing through the town gate for all that long, can they? This is likely the only way in and out of a place inside the Bethlehem, and likely also the only gathering place of any size.

Unlike towns and villages here, they didn't tend to design their cities with a square or a marketplace in the middle, but rather within the walls there would be quite dense network of streets and houses, and so typically the only open space of any size is to be found at the gate.

So that gate then functions not only as the route in and out of the city, but also as the gathering place, the social hub, the marketplace, and indeed at times as the courthouse. And it's something akin to that last use that Boaz has in mind here.

Now isn't it a criminal case or a civil case in view? Rather this is a family matter to be worked out between the relevant relatives and then the wider society informed.

[2 : 26] Nevertheless, the elders and the onlookers that Boaz gathers have a role to play, because in a society where the written word is pretty rare, the main method of proving the contract has been undertaken is to gather a group of people around to watch it happen, so that if it's necessary in the future, they will testify that this is what happened.

And so here this is essentially an administrative process, not a judicial one. And though as our cunning strategies begins by placing himself in this other the demons like the bath, he's ready to intercept, and so, verse 2, he does.

He gathers the elders, and he begins. And here then we have our first surprise. Verse 3, he said to the Redeemer, Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative, a little like.

Now, hang on. Now our first concern at this point, and we rather thought Boaz's first concern, is for Ruth, isn't it? Back in chapter 3, verse 13, he said, 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 believes, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning. Ruth's concern was, who would be her Redeemer? Boaz's concern seems to be, who would redeem Ruth?

[3 : 48] So why is he off talking about a field? And for that matter, this is the first we've heard of a field belonging to a little like. Where did this come from? Why is it being solved? Why is Boaz focusing here? As for those first couple of questions, to be honest, we don't really know where this came from, or why it hasn't figured in the story before.

The intricacies of Israelite property law in the days of the judges are not a topic on which we have a huge amount of information. Best guess would be that essentially Elimelech rented it out for the duration of what was intended to be a brief stay in Noah.

In any case, it is always true that Old Testament law prioritises land remaining within the family. And so whatever the case one, why ever Naomi has it to sell, whatever has brought that amount, it is right and proper that in this case, it be restored to the next available relative.

As for the third question, why Boaz is focusing on the field, all will soon become clear. Now, as soon as Boaz made this offer of the field, then it is accepted.

Ended verse 4, he said, I will redeem it. Of course, the field at this point is a very attractive prospect, isn't it? You can imagine, it can't be smiling at his good fortune.

[5 : 05] Is he going to snap the side and let Boaz redeem the field? Of course not. For not that much money, he can do the good, the virtuous thing.

He can play the part of the Redeemer, and ultimately he can do so without seeing it as to himself. But as he knows quite well that the Elimelech has no way as to reclaim the property later, he knows there's no threat, and they're only changing that fact anytime soon.

And even the year of Jubilee that Leviticus tells us lands were to be returned to those who sold them, even that poses no threat to his ownership because there's no one to return it to. So from this small investment, he'll get years of productive and profitable harvests.

It will acknowledge the inheritance of his heirs. What does he have to lose? So of course he accepts. Now I'm not sick. I mean, never mind the worry of him being initially mentioned back in chapter 3, verse 13.

This is the whole point, isn't it? This is the point of worry. Do you not wish that Boaz could have been just a little bit less morally upset? Could he have schemed around just a small amount?

[6 : 13] Couldn't he have at least made the prospect look less attractive? Why is he being so passive? Why is he acquiescing to this custom that gives the uncle the first right of refusal?

Boaz, why are you not fighting for it? Fortunately, Boaz is not an idiot at all. Boaz is a cunning strategist.

Verse 5, then Boaz said, The day you buy the field from the hand of Neymar, you also acquire Ruth the Moabart, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.

And here he introduces a big problem for this guy's plans, because the field suddenly doesn't have no strings attached. Now actually, the younger Redeemer should have known this.

We know Ruth is fairly well known for the town at this point. In 311, Boaz said, all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. And this other Redeemer doesn't object to Boaz pairing Ruth with the field.

[7 : 16] So if we don't fully understand the different customs that bring these two things together, he acts out that to take on one is to take on the other. He doesn't tell Boaz, never mind Ruth, I'll have the field anyway.

That doesn't seem to be an option that's on the table. But why is Ruth a problem for him? Two possibilities. Firstly, notice that once again she is referred to as Ruth the Moabite.

Possibly Boaz is playing here on an ethnic objection. Remember that the relationship between the Israelites and the Moabites is not a great one, and there are those prohibitions in Juherami against Moabites coming into the temple.

But to be honest, it's hard to see how that would justify the kinsman saying that he cannot redeem verse 6. That's really a case of don't want, not cannot, isn't it?

So in fact, it seems likely that the reference to Ruth the Moabite is more a case of legal precision of we have to know who we're actually talking about rather than trying to make her look unattractive.

[8 : 22] And indeed, Boaz uses the same term for that in verse 10 as he takes her to be his wife, so he can't intend it too much as an ethnic slight. So the second possibility, which seems much more likely, is that the issue comes at the end of this verse.

You acquire Ruth in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance. Because unlike Naomi, Ruth could actually produce an heir, didn't she?

And this then becomes a whole different law game because there are three more kids. That means he's splitting the existing inheritance all ways. What is the mother of his current children going to have to say about that?

We might wonder. Suddenly, this same investment becomes very risky. Not only does he take on Ruth as another man to feed, not only likely more children he will have to feed, not only do they dilute the existing inheritance, but more than that, Ruth's firstborn will have the right to reclaim the field that originally belonged to a little egg and won't have to pay anything to do so.

So this redeemer will have paid out money to get a field that he won't be able to keep very long and will have ended up with a whole bunch of extra dependents that he can't afford. That's the reading he gives in verse 6.

[9 : 36] I cannot redeem it for myself lest I impair my own inheritance. So Bowers' plan is not so foolish after all, is it? Bowers has been shrewd in his dealings just as Jesus commended in the parable of the dishonest manager.

And in fact, Bowers is better than that manager because he's been equally shrewd without any sense of moral compromise, without any hint of impropriety. So then Bowers has successfully moved aside his rumble.

He's cleared a path forward to happiness for himself and for Ruth. And he's done it in a way that is entirely legal and above all. And in fact, the narrator seems to be at pains to point out to us that all of the legal boxes have been ticked.

We've spent quite a bit of time establishing that with the gathering of the elders and the witnesses, verse 2, their numbers specified just in case somebody comes back to check. They really have a quorum for that meeting?

Did you know the Free Church has a rule that minutes are only valid if it says at the beginning of the minutes that the meeting was constituted with prayer and at the end that the meeting was closed in prayer.

[10 : 44] Without those two bits, the whole meeting is invalid. It didn't really happen. This happens for co-sessions for presbyteries right all the way up to the general assembly. Now, you would hope that we wouldn't need reminding to open and close our meetings in prayer, but nevertheless, probably a good rule to have.

And it seems to me that that is the kind of thing that's going on here, that it's recorded in such a way as to make it entirely clear that what is happening is above board. given that we're talking here about the ancestors of royalty, it's perhaps hardly surprising, is it?

The narrator is writing his account at some move. We have this explanation in that's there of this strange thing that they're taking off of the sandal. It's a good job that's there, isn't it?

Because it would be really, really strange to us if it didn't. I dare to think what kind of harebrained explanations commentators would come up with for why he was taking off his sandal at this point if the narrator hadn't explained it for us.

And when he does that, he's not buying or selling anything, is he? He doesn't own the field, he doesn't own Naomi, he doesn't own Ruth. All that he does as he hands over that sandal is to formally give up the right of redemption.

[12 : 00] He's saying officially to buyers, you can go ahead. So it's not even the actual process of purchase and acquisition, but it is recorded. All is legal and above the world.

And again, despite the fact that surely by this stage it was perfectly clear what Boaz is doing, he still spells it out in verses 9 and 10. And the witnesses do respond, we are witnesses, we have seen it done.

When I worked before as an electronic engineer, we had a particular job for which we produced our specification documents, as we always did. It ran, I think, to around about a thousand pages by the time we'd put everything in order of what we were going to provide to the client.

Not uncommon in a complex system that cost a few million pounds to produce. But what was unusual was that the clients on this job decided that a signature, yeah, wasn't good enough for him.

He needed a signature on every single page. page. I think he demanded it not only once, but he demanded that both the project manager and the senior engineer sign every page.

[13 : 05] Fortunately, I was a little junior engineer. All I had to do was hit print and make sure the page was within the right order. Please go and put it on someone else's desk. It's that kind of level of making sure that all the T's are crossed and the I's are dotted and we really have done it just right.

That's what's here. But that's what's no doubt at all. He has done anything legally and above thought. Boaz is a cunning strategist and he gets his way.

But secondly, we see that Boaz is a gracious redeemer. I mean, by this point, this is exactly what we expect of him, isn't it? We've seen his gracious generosity time after time through this narrative.

This is, if you like, the icing of the cake, the crowning example of his generosity. I wonder if you noticed something about this other redeemer. Did you notice that we never find out his name?

In fact, it seems even to be deliberately obscured back in verse 1. Behold, the redeemer of whom Boaz has spoken came by. So Boaz said, turn aside, Frank, sit down here.

[14 : 13] And he turned aside and sat down. Turn aside, Frank. In fact, it's even more remote than that translation makes it sound. If you take a literal rendering of the Hebrew, it's not this kind of quasi affectionate term like Frank.

It's something more like Mr. So-and-so. It's even not that kind of sing-song sound in the Hebrew as well. Now it is surely inconceivable that Boaz does not know this guy's name.

And indeed, our narrator must know his name as well. But he chooses not to report it. He's hiding that from us. Why does he do that? Is he trying to spare this guy's blushes maybe?

Keep his descendants from the shame of the ancestor who didn't do his duty? Well, the Bible is certainly clear that that refusal to act as it should is a shameful thing.

But I don't really see why the narrator would want to keep this guy from being known as such. In fact, I think this is every bit as deliberate as the fact that in Exodus chapter 1 the new Pharaoh, that great man in the eyes of the world is not named.

[15 : 19] And Shibra and Huah, the two Israelite midwives, are named. It is deliberate that the Pharaoh is some anonymous figure, and these lowly midwives are named, and we remember their names to this day.

I think here in Ruth, the narrator's attitude is, hey you, you who were so concerned for your name to be remembered, for your inheritance to be preserved, for your family life to be okay.

No. You lose your name. You fade into anonymity. You are no good. And the contrast between him and Ruth Boaz could not be more clear could it?

Because this guy is only out for what he can get himself. He's willing to redeem the field so long as it's an attractive prospect for him, so long as he's going to get something out of it.

But Boaz's concerns are very different. This guy thinks he's being careful, he thinks he's being sensible with what he has, that he's looking after interpossessions for the sake of his children. And where does that go?

[16 : 23] He's certainly been better off at the end of the soil in the start. McCartan had done his reputation in the community end favors, and here he is with an anonymous end, if you like.

And all of those concerns for why this other guy doesn't want to redeem, surely they apply to Boaz, too, don't they? I mean, I guess it's conceivable that he doesn't yet have an heir, so this issue of diluting the inheritance doesn't apply, but it seems pretty unlikely that a guy of such standing in the community is in that position.

I guess maybe he has deeper reserves than this other redeemer, that he can afford more dependence, but even if that's true, the fact remains the other redeemer did not do his duty, did not fulfil the requirements of righteousness.

And the contrast is similar, isn't it, to between Alper and Ruth back in chapter one, one of whom does the ordinarily predictable the same thing, Alper goes back to her family in Moab, and the other does the radical thing, does the brave thing, Ruth steps out in faith, and Boaz does the same.

The picture that we've built up of Boaz here is surely of a man who would have acted this way, even if he was looking at his finances and not sure how he was going to make it work to have two extra dependents.

[17 : 46] Surely the picture that we've built up by now of Boaz is of a man who, if he only had two pennies to rub together, would give one of them to the guy who had one. As Boaz risks financial loss, as he shows the kind of exemplary, sacrificial, devoted love that God commits, as he does that, we're reminded of the words of Jesus in Mark chapter 8 and verse 35.

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. Boaz takes that risk.

Boaz risks his own life, his own security, his own safety, for the sake of the man. And we conclude tonight with the words that were commented by the name of Stephen Dry.

He says, too often we only do what is right because it suits us. We need to learn from Boaz. Once again we notice that Boaz was motivated by mercy, tells Matthew 2.13.

He was motivated by mercy as one who had received mercy. Like the unnamed Redeemer, too often we only do what is right when it suits us.

[19 : 03] Let's pray. Lord God, we pray that you would keep us from the kind of self-serving righteousness that wants to look good in our own eyes and in the eyes of those around us, but is not ultimately concerned with doing what is right, whatever it might cost.

Lord, would you give us the confidence in you and your provision for us that will enable us to step out of faith, to do the difficult thing, to do the right thing, even when it looks like it could cause us great difficulty.

Would you give us that kind of confidence in you, we ask? Amen.