

Light at the end of the tunnel

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[0 : 00] So the first reading this morning is on page 200. It's Deuteronomy chapter 25, reading verses 5 to 10.

If brothers dwell together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go into her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.

And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, my husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel.

He will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me. Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him. And if he persists saying, I do not wish to take her, then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face.

And she shall answer and say, so shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house. And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, the house of him who had his sandal pulled off.

[1 : 36] The second reading is from Ruth chapter 3 and can be found on page 269 of the Church Bibles. Then Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, my daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?

Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash, therefore, and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak, and go down to the threshing floor.

But do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet, and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.

And she replied, all that you say, I will do. So she went down to the threshing floor, and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her.

And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly, and uncovered his feet, and lay down.

[2 : 57] At midnight, the man was startled, and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet. He said, who are you? And she answered, I am Ruth, your servant.

Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. And he said, may you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask. For all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. And now it is true that I am a redeemer.

Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. 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.

Lie down until the morning. So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.

[4 : 17] And he said, bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out. So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city, and when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, how did you fare, my daughter?

Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, these six measures of barley he gave to me. For he said to me, you must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.

She replied, wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out. For the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.

Well, good morning, everyone. I think you'll find it a help to keep that passage open. So if you've closed your Bibles, why not turn back to page 269, and shall we pray as we prepare to look at Ruth chapter 3 together?

The New Testament tells us that the Old Testament scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, and are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training us in righteousness.

[5 : 30] Pray, our Father, that as we look at this part of the Old Testament this morning, you would indeed be doing those things, teaching us and correcting us, rebuking us and training us in righteousness, and in particular, teaching us more about the Lord Jesus, that we might put our trust in him.

And we ask it for his namesake. Amen. Rousseau, the French Enlightenment philosopher, famously argued that man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.

It's a view shared by many in our modern world that man is naturally free, yet becomes enslaved by oppression, or capitalism, or inequality, or religion, or whatever tyranny it might be.

But the Bible tells us that the reality is actually the opposite. Far from being born free, man is born in chains, a slave to his own sinful nature.

That's why all of us from our earliest days have a natural bent to do that which is wrong, or selfish, something very apparent, I guess, to anyone with young children. We're slaves to sin, as Jesus puts it, and deserve God's rightful judgment because of it.

[6 : 52] And what we need most of all, therefore, is to be set free, to be ransomed by a saviour or redeemer. We need to be redeemed.

And that's why this Old Testament book of Ruth, which we're studying at the moment, is such good news for us. You see, over the past couple of weeks, we've been following the story of two women who were also in dire need.

They were both widows with no husband to support them and no children to continue the family line. One of them, Naomi, was advanced in years. The other, her daughter-in-law Ruth, was a Moabite, a foreigner with few rights.

And like us, these women needed a redeemer who'd rescue them. We've been following the story of this one troubled family who were part of God's people during the dark days of the judges.

And as we've studied the experience of these women, we've observed some very helpful lessons about the God they served and what it means to trust him. But the book of Ruth is actually about far more than just one little family in ancient Israel.

[8 : 01] Because the distress which Ruth and Naomi underwent and their subsequent deliverance from it are a picture of a far greater deliverance. Last week, we were given a glimmer of hope as we met a man called Boaz who was described in verse 20 of chapter 2 as one of Naomi and Ruth's redeemers.

And the redemption experienced by Naomi and Ruth is a foreshadowing of the greater redemption that one of Boaz's descendants would later bring. Boaz redeemed Ruth and Naomi from their material poverty.

But it was another man from Bethlehem from the same family line a man to whom Boaz points who redeems us from our spiritual poverty bringing that rescue from judgment we so desperately need.

As we mentioned last week, Charles Spurgeon the great Baptist preacher described Jesus as our glorious Boaz. And we're to see Boaz as a picture pointing forward to him.

And that means as with all Old Testament narrative that we both need to read the story of Ruth by zooming in on the actual events that are recorded and considering what they would have meant then. And yet, we must also zoom out and read those events with our New Testament spectacles on to grasp the big picture in terms of God's great plan of salvation.

[9 : 31] So what we're going to do this morning is those two things. We'll spend most of our time just walking our way through the chapter considering what we can learn from the actions of the characters and the story itself. And then right at the end just in our last minute or two, we'll step back to think about the big picture, the telescopic rather than the microscopic view in order to see more fully how these verses apply to us in the 21st century.

So it'll be a little bit different this morning which is why there are no headings on your handout. Now the opening three chapters of Ruth contain three dramatic scenes each framed by comings and goings and a report of the food situation in Israel.

The book is structured very carefully. Chapter one begins with Elimelech, Naomi's husband, going to Moab because there was a famine in the land of Israel assigned God's people under his curse.

But at the end of the chapter his widow Naomi and Ruth come back we're told to Bethlehem just as the barley harvest begins. The author seems to be hinting that an upturn in their fortunes was around the corner.

And in chapter two Ruth frantically trying to make ends meet goes to the fields to glean for food and she just so happens to stumble across the field of this man called Boaz.

[10 : 50] More on him in a minute. And things begin to look up. Boaz allows Ruth to glean in his field and is very generous providing for and protecting her so that at the end of the chapter Ruth goes back home to her mother-in-law with an abundance of food.

And the chapter ends with another of these agricultural reports telling us that Ruth gleaned until the barley harvest the barley and wheat harvests had finished. That's in verse 23 of chapter 2.

Well we pick up the story this week at the beginning of chapter 3. seemingly as harvest time is coming to a close. Again the chapter begins with Ruth going somewhere to Boaz's field once more and ends with her returning to Naomi.

And once more the situation at the start of the chapter is critical. Each chapter of the book begins with a crisis. You see summer was drawing to an end and that created fresh anxiety for Naomi and Ruth.

For the previous few months they've been able to survive off the crops left behind by Boaz's men. But what now? How would they survive the long winter?

[12 : 03] Well Naomi a changed person from the bitter woman we met in chapter 1 has an idea. She's seen God's hand at work in chapter 2 and thought that maybe just maybe God was working out a plan of redemption for her and her daughter-in-law.

Last week the author let us in on a little secret. He told us in verse 1 of chapter 2 that Boaz was of the clan of Elimelech. It's not something Ruth would discover until she returned home at the end of the chapter.

And we saw this was very significant. Now we just need to concentrate for a moment because this is a little bit technical but it's crucial if we're to understand what was going on. In ancient Israel there was a practice derived from places like Deuteronomy 25 that we read earlier known as Levirate marriage.

Basically if a man died and left behind a widow as had happened with both Naomi and Ruth then that dead man's brother could and ought to redeem the widow by taking her as his wife so ensuring the continuation of the family line.

But the problem for Ruth was of course that her husband had only had one brother and he also was dead. So there was no obvious kinsman redeemer for Ruth as such a person was often known or simply redeemer as our Bibles here translate it.

[13 : 27] But the custom had developed that if there was no brother-in-law around to marry a widow then the next nearest male relative of her dead husband ought to fulfil this role of kinsman redeemer.

Usually an uncle would be next in line and then a cousin. It might seem a quaint idea to us but in the ancient world it of course ensured widows were looked after and that a dead man's family line and its inheritance weren't lost.

Now can we see the significance of all this? Because when Naomi discovered at the end of chapter 2 whose field Ruth had been working in and when she learned of this man's generosity suddenly her heart filled with hope.

From blaming God for her troubles in chapter 1 she now praises him as the one who hadn't stopped showing kindness to her or her dead husband. Because when Ruth mentioned the name Boaz Naomi recalled her husband's family tree and Boaz was part of it.

Notice how in verse 9 and verse 13 Boaz is again described as a redeemer. Well back to the story. Naomi thought it surely couldn't simply be coincidence that Ruth had found herself in Boaz's fields.

[14 : 46] The fields of one who very possibly as far as she knew was her closest kinsman redeemer. She saw God's hand God's providence seemingly at work.

And so like all good mother-in-laws she has a plan for her daughter-in-law. She tells her to scrub up in her finest outfit and then go and lie at Boaz's feet.

And the reason is given in verse 1. Have a look. My daughter should I not seek rest for you that it may be well with you? And if you just look back to chapter 1 verse 9 we find Naomi used the same word when speaking to Ruth and Orpah her other daughter-in-law.

Have a look back. Verse 9 she said there the Lord grant that you may find rest each of you in the house of her husband.

More on that later because rest is an important Bible word. But what's clear here is that for Ruth finding rest included finding a husband. And this time in chapter 3 Naomi seeks to be the answer to her own prayer.

[15 : 59] This time it's not simply the Lord grant that you may find rest. But should I not seek rest for you? She's being proactive. And just in passing there's a lesson for us here I think.

You see Naomi doesn't just let go and let God as some would advise. I wonder if that's a phrase you've heard people use. While it's true we ought sometimes to let go of things and leave them to God in the sense we ought to trust him and not be anxious.

I'm not sure how helpful a slogan that is because the danger is it ignores the fact we often have a part to play in fulfilling God's purposes. Last week we saw God's providence his sovereign ordering of events for good.

But his providence doesn't mean we simply sit back and just let him work his purposes out. In fact here it spurs Naomi to take action because God chooses to use us to work out his purposes.

We're to play an active role albeit guided by his word and serving in his strength and Naomi now understood that it seems. Of course she was taking a risk here.

[17 : 21] It was a bold perhaps provocative gesture for Ruth to creep up on Boaz at night and uncover his feet. There was no way of knowing for certain how he'd react. He could have taken advantage.

But Naomi and Ruth in obedience to her mother-in-law in a right sense stepped out in faith having seen an opportunity God had seemingly created. I wonder where we might be able to imitate them.

Again we need to be a little bit careful where God hasn't promised to act we can't know his plans for certain and we mustn't presume God will always do what we want just because we take a risk.

But we can have faith God will be at work for our good and his glory and that he wants to find ways to use us. In a sense Naomi is acting as a matchmaker here.

She knows Boaz is a potential redeemer for Ruth so sends her out to meet him. And I hope it's not too much of a stretch to say we could follow her example by taking the initiative in bringing people to the one to whom Boaz points.

[18 : 28] To Jesus the great bridegroom the redeemer of all people. Like Naomi let's be proactive in seeking to introduce people to him by speaking of our faith publicly or inviting them to join us at a Christianity explored course perhaps that they might too be redeemed by him.

I wonder where we could be proactive this week in being spiritual matchmakers. You see God can't use us when we sit back and do nothing.

Naomi received no direct guidance from God no guarantee her plan would succeed but she used her initiative in seeking to carry out the Lord's will and trusted the outcome to his sovereign goodness.

In fact one of the striking lessons of the book of Ruth is for the most part how ordinary everything is. In the days of the judges when this book is set God sometimes worked miraculously in the victory of Gideon for example or the supernatural strength of Samson.

He sometimes worked through mighty deliverances such as that in the time of Deborah but here in Ruth he worked through his usual ordinary means simply ordaining the events of history unnoticed behind the scenes to bring about his purposes.

[19 : 47] using his people as he does so. Can I say that's every bit as supernatural in a sense as those other workings of God. And as we'll see next week the whole direction of salvation history was being shaped and God's whole plan of redemption being preserved through these seemingly ordinary events God was controlling.

Well back to the story again and Ruth does exactly as she's told. Now personally I don't think there's anything improper going on here. Some accuse Naomi and Ruth of seeking to be inappropriately manipulative or attempting to seduce Boaz but there's no evidence uncovering his feet would have constituted an inappropriate sexual advance.

Although there's no doubt the intimacy of the whole episode was in a sense a kind of invitation to Boaz to marry Ruth so he could lie with her. No to lie at someone's feet as Ruth does was rather first and foremost a picture of petition and dependency.

Ruth was appealing to Boaz to take hold of his duty as her kinsman redeemer. Far from being a case of inappropriate seduction her actions flow from the provisions of God's law and were a plea to Boaz to do what he was obliged to do.

As the Bible commentator David Jackman writes in his commentary on Ruth, from our contemporary Western perspective at first sight Naomi might seem to be the archetypal scheming mother-in-law and couldn't Ruth's behaviour be interpreted as somewhat forward not to say immodest?

[21 : 25] But we need some vital background information. In all of this Naomi demonstrates a down-to-earth common-sense approach. Behind these highly unusual actions lay a sincere trust in the Lord's care and protection.

Faith always grows when it acts on the basis of what the Lord has already accomplished and provided. So Ruth and Naomi were it seems acting in the hope of finding refuge according to the provisions of God's word, seeking to throw themselves on the mercy of the redeemer he brought them into contact with.

Indeed it's unlikely Boaz would refer to Ruth as a worthy woman in verse 11 sometimes translated a woman of noble character if her actions were inappropriate. Well imagine Boaz's surprise when he awakes in the early hours of the morning to discover a woman at his feet.

But Ruth's nerve doesn't fail her. Nor does she seek then to sinfully manipulate God's will by seduction as she easily could have. She simply makes her bold request.

Verse 9 I am Ruth your servant spread your wings over your servant for you are a redeemer.

[22 : 45] Now on one level this is just a request for marriage an ancient Israelite way for Ruth to symbolically ask Boaz to be included under the marital duvet as it were.

But it's also much more than that. You see Ruth had remembered some words that Boaz had spoken to her back in chapter 2 and was now holding him to them by repeating them back to him.

Bible writers want us to notice when they repeat words and as with the word rest earlier we're supposed to spot the repetition here. Like Ruth you may remember that word wings appeared in verse 12 of chapter 2.

There Boaz perhaps have a look spoke of the Lord the God of Israel under whose wings you have come to take refuge. In chapter 2 it's God's wings under which Boaz says Ruth finds refuge.

But here in chapter 3 Boaz has that role. The writer wants us to understand that the way in which God would spread his wings over Ruth would be as Boaz spread his wings over her.

[23 : 56] Boaz is the means by which God is preparing to redeem Ruth and Naomi. Ruth's appealing for him to do his duty to redeem her and her mother-in-law. Well Boaz is flattered.

Perhaps he's been falling in love with Ruth anyway and he's full of admiration that in order to redeem her mother's family line she's seeking his hand in marriage, the hand of an older man rather than chasing after younger men.

But like all good dramas there's a fresh twist in the story. Because it turns out Boaz isn't the next redeemer in line after all.

There's another man, a closer relative who must be consulted first. And again Boaz's behaviour here is another model for us to follow. He could have taken advantage of this helpless vulnerable girl by sleeping with her there and then.

he must have been faced with immense temptation waking to discover a beautiful young woman lying at his feet with no one else around. He didn't have to tell Ruth about the closer kinsman redeemer.

[25 : 05] And his self control and desire to do things with propriety is an example for us to follow especially in a culture where such things are now so rare.

I guess Boaz had a high view of marriage and wanted to preserve its sanctity even in midst temptation. And so he waits to sleep with Ruth until they're married.

Indeed in verse 14 he's keen not even to give the impression to others that anything improper had occurred which might bring his and Ruth's names into disrepute. He's a man of total integrity and purity.

Again pointing forward to Jesus himself. And so as the chapter ends we leave the story in suspense once more. How would this closer kinsman respond?

Well we'll have to wait until next week to find out. And we're not the only ones who needed to wait because look at verse 18. Ruth has returned home to Naomi again with a large gift of food from Boaz a sign of his affection.

[26 : 10] Once more the emptiness of which Naomi had complained in chapter one was being filled by Boaz. And Naomi instructs Ruth wait my daughter until you learn how the matter turns out.

It's interesting. At the start of the chapter Naomi tells Ruth to go. She takes the initiative but here she tells her to wait. It's a reminder to us that sometimes we must step out in faith and be bold as we seek to serve God.

But on other occasions we're to wait patiently. We can't always control events. Ruth had done her bit but matters were now out of her hands. And sometimes we too must simply wait and prayerfully trust God will work out his purposes according to his good will.

Indeed like Ruth waiting here for her redemption we have to wait patiently for our final redemption and the heavenly wedding banquet which will follow when Jesus the church's bridegroom returns.

So that's the story of Ruth 3. On first reading it's hard to know what to draw from it. In a sense the chapter is largely a bridge that sets up the climax of chapter 4.

[27 : 28] Some of the lessons I've tried to draw out I feel a little tentative about. It's not always easy to know what we're supposed to make of Old Testament narrative passages and we're not always supposed to imitate everything we see.

Narrative is often descriptive more than prescriptive. Even the heroes of the Bible act wrongly sometimes. But just for these last couple of minutes I want us to zoom out from the microscopic view to the telescopic view as it were to the bigger picture where we're on safer ground I think.

And I very quickly want to observe two applications for us in light of the big picture of Ruth. Remembering as we saw at the beginning that we're also in need of redemption and that Boaz is a picture of Jesus.

So application number one. Understand your need for rest. Understand your need for rest. You see like Ruth and Naomi we're in need of redemption.

Spiritual redemption. We're spiritually bankrupt in chains to our sin. We need a redeemer to rescue us. And the use of that word rest in verse one of chapter three is a little hint I think that we're supposed to understand Ruth as being about more than simply redemption from poverty.

[28 : 49] The word rest is of course a big theme of the Bible. It's a picture of relationship with God. Back in Genesis 2 as those of us in growth groups saw a few weeks ago God rests after creating the world and he allows Adam and Eve to share his rest in Eden.

But they forfeit that rest that relationship because of their sin. And while we're told that their descendants experience partial rest in the days of Joshua and Solomon it's only in Jesus that true rest is found.

Remember Jesus says come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

Just as Ruth finds her rest in Boaz. So Boaz's greater descendant Jesus offers us rest for our souls. A rest we'll one day be able to enjoy fully.

As the writer to the Hebrews tells us looking forward to heaven the new creation there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. So we need to understand that like Naomi and Ruth we're helpless people in need of rest.

[30 : 01] Restoration of our broken relationship with God. And then secondly and briefly because he alone meets our need for rest we're to take refuge under the wings of Jesus.

That's our other application. Take refuge under the wings of Jesus. The way God spread his wings over Ruth was through Boaz. And the way God spreads his wings over us is through Jesus our glorious Boaz.

So have we, I wonder, asked Jesus to spread his wings over us. Not to cover our bodies with a marital duvet but to cover our sins with his blood through which he redeems us.

Have we recognised that Jesus is our kinsman redeemer? The one who redeems not our family line but our souls. Have we, like Ruth with Boaz, approached Jesus, lain at his feet in submission as it were and asked him to redeem us?

I wonder if we're those who've done that. Shall I lead us in prayer as we finish? A couple of verses from elsewhere in the Old Testament deliberately picking up on the language of Ruth.

[31 : 17] the prophet Ezekiel writes, when I looked at you and, God speaking here, when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body.

I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the sovereign Lord, and you became mine. The psalmist writes, how priceless is your unfailing love, O God.

People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. We thank you again, our Heavenly Father, of what we learn here, not just of Boaz, but the one he points to, the Lord Jesus.

And we thank you for your love for us, your people, who don't deserve it, that you shelter us and give us refuge, that you spread your wings over us because of Jesus, the one who has redeemed us by his blood.

And we pray that you would help us to be those who are proactive in going to Jesus and introducing others to him. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.