

The Kinsman Redeemer

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[0 : 00] Ruth is a story.

Four words that I want to jam as deeply into your heads tonight as I possibly can. We believe it's a true story, nearly as good a story as could possibly be told.

An incredible story told by an incredible storyteller for an incredible purpose. But it's a story. And as Aaron has shared with us over the last couple of weeks, this story has two arcs.

Things that carry us from the beginning of the story to the end of the story. A historical arc and a narrative arc. And the historical arc begins in chapter 1, verse 1, which places us right smack dab in the middle of the judges period.

A period of perversion and a period of lawlessness. And the final verse of the book, 4, verse 22, ends with King David. And so the question of Ruth is how are we going to get from this muddled mess to this united kingdom?

[1 : 16] Or the narrative arc. It's a smaller story within this broader story of Israel. And it's the story of Naomi. And although this little story of Naomi is set in the context of the judges, it probably wasn't actually written down, put to paper, until the post-exilic period in Israel's history, after Israel came back from Babylon.

And this sheds some light on the purpose of the story of Ruth. Because the great question of writings like Ruth, the great question of these post-exilic writings was this.

We've come back from exile. We're back in the land. Yet the fullness of God has not fully returned to Israel. And so how, in this place between emptiness and fullness, are we meant to live?

And so the story of Ruth is remembered and retold and refashioned for just this context.

It's a little story that is a microcosm, a window into the great big story of Israel and the great big story of the Bible. Israel, you see, has been in exile.

[2 : 31] And the family of Elimelech, who goes to Moab, has been in a similar exile in Moab. And they come back empty, completely empty. They've gone a family and they come back as Naomi, a widow, and Ruth, a Moabite widow.

It's a family that's in sorry shape. And early in this story, Naomi names the fundamental problem that needs resolution. She says, I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.

I went away full, but the Lord brought me back empty. This is the problem of the story of Ruth. It's the problem that needs resolution.

The questions that Ruth is asking, that the story of Ruth is asking, is will Naomi be filled up again? And if God is the sort of God who does fill people up when they're empty, then how should we live in this time between emptiness and fullness?

I hope that these questions echo in your hearts and in your ears, because we too, like Naomi and Ruth, are exiles and foreigners who live somewhere between empty and full.

[3 : 46] We await the fullness of God's kingdom, and the question that burns in our hearts and that burns in my heart is will God fill us up again? And how should we live until he does?

Ruth is written to answer these sorts of questions, to instruct us how to live faithfully, even as God providentially seems to work in the shadows of our lives.

And so tonight, in coming to what Aaron has so generously given me as the climax of this story, the guts of this book, I just want to ask two simple questions.

What happens, and how does it happen? So first, what happens in Ruth chapter 3? And the first thing that you're going to want to notice about Ruth 3 is that structurally, if you put Ruth 2 and Ruth 3 next to each other on the page, they're almost identical.

There's a central scene in which Boaz and Ruth interact, bookended by two scenes right next to each other, right on the bookends of it, where Naomi and Ruth are conversing.

[4 : 59] So scene 1, verses 1 through 5, that Susie read for us, Naomi devises a plan which she hopes will lead to the rest and security of Ruth. And Ruth agrees to the plan.

Scene 2, verses 6 to 14, or 6 to 15. Ruth goes to Boaz on the threshing floor, and Boaz does as Naomi was hoping.

Ruth secures the provision of Boaz, the Redeemer. In scene 3, Ruth goes back to Naomi and delivers the good news. Everything has happened according to plan.

This is in Cliff Notes, Ruth chapter 3. But if we want to ask our question, what happens, then I want to focus first on scene 1 and scene 3 and say, what happens for Naomi from her plotting of this plan to when Ruth comes back with the fullness of what has happened?

So scene 1. Naomi begins the articulation of her plan with a really important line. She says, In Ruth chapter 3, there are going to be four different places where the author repeats a word in Ruth 3 that he has used earlier in Ruth chapters 1 and 2.

[6 : 23] And he doesn't just do this for repetitions sake. He does this because when he uses that word in Ruth chapter 1 and 2, he's introducing a sort of tension that in Ruth chapter 3 is going to be resolved when he uses that exact same word.

The storyteller of Ruth is like any good writer of a novel or any good writer of a film. They know that you can't have a good story unless there's tension, which at some point is released.

And so when the author uses these four words in Ruth 1 and 2, he's building climax to the point where we can finally in Ruth 3, breathe. So the first of those words is rest.

And in chapter 1 verse 9, Naomi prayed that God would deal kind... In chapter 1 verse 9 in the beginning, Naomi prays that God would deal kindly with Ruth and Orpah and that he would grant them rest.

And now, at the beginning of chapter 3, Naomi is devising a plan that will bring to Ruth the very thing that she prayed God to do in the beginning.

[7 : 32] We're going to see this three more times, but it's worth saying up front and it's worth saying it now. God's providential care oftentimes comes about through the faithful obedience of faithful people.

Naomi, it turns out, is the answer to her own prayer. She prays that God would give Ruth rest and that she devises a plan through which that rest will come.

So what was Naomi's plan? Well, as you giggled when Susie read, it is, to say the very least, daring. Ruth is to wash and anoint herself to put on a cloak and go to the threshing floor.

And once she is there, she is told to wait for Boaz to finish eating and drinking and to be merry. And then to note where he lies down, to find the spot, to go uncover his feet, and to lie down next to him, and then to wait for Boaz's instruction.

Now we're going, we're going to come back to all of this in scene two in more detail. But for the moment, I wonder if we can just appreciate the incredible danger of this plan. In the period of the judges, a period defined by lawlessness and perversion, a single Moabite widow is called to make herself attractive and appealing and to go to a place where men who had worked all day and partied all night would be waiting.

[9 : 05] She was going to a place, the threshing floor, which in the ancient Near East was known to be at the very least morally ambiguous, sexually scandalous. There was the possibility of physical abuse, emotional abuse, reputational abuse, and she was going alone.

And what is Ruth's reply? All that you say, I will do. And while we might want to rightfully celebrate Ruth for this utter commitment to Naomi, and we should, we may want to ask ourselves the question whether it is not profoundly problematic that a foreign widow would have to put herself in the sort of situation to gain the protection that she and Naomi seek.

One wishes in this story that Boaz or some other redeemer would have come to her before it came to this so that she wouldn't have had to go to the threshing floor to gain the security that she seeks. But where men fail, at least in the beginning in this story, the one woman succeeds. This is what Ruth must do. And so this is what Ruth will do.

Flip over to verses 16 to 18, scene three. Has Ruth's dangerous trek succeeded? It has. It has.

[10 : 35] In verses 16 to 18, Ruth returns. And can you imagine, can you imagine the relief on Naomi's face as she sees her daughter-in-law, Ruth, coming down the street to her?

And Naomi says to her, how did you fare, my daughter? Literally in the Hebrew, she asks, who are you? Now, of course, Naomi knows who Ruth is, but she doesn't know what she's become.

Are you Boaz's wife? Did it all go okay? Did it all go terribly wrong? Has she secured the redemption?

And Ruth opens her mouth and tells Naomi the good news, the gospel of all that Boaz has done for her. And handing Naomi the six measures of barley that Boaz had given to her, Ruth repeats the words of Boaz to Naomi and says this, you must not, these are the words of Boaz, you must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.

This is now the second word that our storyteller repeats. The second place in which the tension that was introduced in chapters one and two is now going to be resolved.

[11 : 52] The second place in which we've held our breath and now we can breathe again. In chapter one, Naomi cries, I've read it already, I went away full, but I've come back empty.

Now in chapter three, Boaz has provided so that Ruth and Naomi will be empty no longer. It's the same word in 317 as it is in 121.

And as we said before, God's providential care so often comes through the faithful obedience of faithful people. So what's happened?

Our first question, scenes one and three. Zoom it out to 1,000 feet. What's happened? An empty woman has become full. The problem has been resolved.

A woman who had lost everything in exile has come home and begun to see that God still cares for her. And Israel, after exile, coming home, wondering if God still cared for her, gets their answer through the story of Ruth.

[13 : 06] Our God is a God who brings fullness to empty places. This is a story that we need to inhabit. It's a story that we need to live.

Our God is a God who brings fullness to empty places. But how? How does he do it? If we've seen that Ruth and Naomi become full through Boaz's generosity, we need to ask our second question. How does it happen? And for that, we need to go right to the heart of the Ruth story. Chapter 3, scene 2, verses 6 to 15. Ruth has already told Naomi in verse 5 that she would follow the plan and now in verses 6 and 7, she goes out and she executes the plan.

The text says this, 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. This is a scene that is literally covered in darkness.

[14 : 26] It's the middle of the night. But it's also shrouded in mystery. It's rife with sexual connotations and it is deeply ambiguous. If you don't believe me, I have compiled a little list of what makes this scene, in my opinion, fraught with moral ambiguity.

First, she goes alone under the cover of night to the threshing floor, a place that we've already said is sexually at the very least ambiguous, more likely scandalous.

Second, in a culture where bathing would have happened probably at the most once a week and where anointing was an extremely expensive and rare event, Ruth is told to make herself as appealing and as attractive as she possibly can to go to the threshing floor to see Boaz.

Third, Ruth waits for Boaz to, again, at the very least, be relaxed after dinner. He's eaten and he's drunk and he's merry and she waits until he lies down in a semi-private place at the end of the heap of grain because some things are best left private.

Fourth, when Boaz lies down and falls asleep, she uncovers his feet and lies down. Now, this is admittedly ambiguous because the word that is translated feet here is difficult to translate but what it more likely means is something like legs.

[16 : 03] But there are also a number of places in the Old Testament where this very same word is translated as a euphemism for another part of the male anatomy. But even if this word doesn't mean that here and I'm not saying that it does but even if it doesn't, anybody who heard this story and who knew their Old Testament would know when she says this word that at least there's the possibility or at least it's a suggestive scene, at least it's a morally ambiguous scene.

Fifth, the verb for lie down is strewn everywhere in this story and it has, as you guessed, sexual connotations.

the only other place in the entire Old Testament where this verb is used with this sort of frequency is in Genesis 19, the story of Lot and his daughters where the daughters of Lot get their father drunk and sleep with him to reproduce, not exactly the center of Old Testament sexual morality.

Now imagine this. A foreign Moabite widow goes to the threshing floor, a sexually scandalous place, and she waits for Boaz, the wealthy man, to eat and to drink and to lay down and then she goes and she uncovers his feet and she lies down.

And lying underneath this story are persistent echoes of texts like Genesis 19 and Genesis 38 of Judah and Tamar which are more explicitly sexually deviant behavior.

[17 : 47] When you put all these things together, what I'm trying to say, if I don't get thrown out of the pulpit first, what I'm trying to say is that it is obvious that the storyteller has intentionally constructed a scene of ambiguity and tension and sexuality and temptation and question.

But why has the storyteller done this? Why shroud this scene in ambiguity and make people think when they're reading this of those other stories?

Because I believe that light shines most strongly in the darkness. The storyteller sets up a scene of moral ambiguity so that the moral clarity of the decisions of Ruth and Boaz can shine through like a light in the darkness.

This is Israel's darkest hour. It's the period of the judges and here we have two people who as we will soon find out get everything right right when everyone else is getting everything wrong.

So what actually happens on the threshing floor? Ruth invites Boaz to fulfill his responsibility and Boaz accepts. But catch the order of that.

[19 : 14] Ruth doesn't follow Naomi's instruction to wait for Boaz. Ruth initiates the action herself. It's incredibly ironic isn't it that a Moabite woman tells an Israelite man what the law requires of him?

It's incredibly ironic is it not that the strength of this woman encourages this man to finally have the strength to do what he should have done before?

Friends, before Boaz is a hero in this story Ruth is. And it is admittedly difficult to know exactly what Ruth is asking for on the threshing floor.

Is she just simply asking him to redeem the land or is she asking for marriage? It's difficult but this brings us to our third word the third place where this earlier tension is resolved and it's in chapter 3 verse 9 and it's the word wings.

Ruth implores Boaz to spread your wings over your servant. And this Old Testament vocabulary is marriage language and at the very least it provides a hint that Ruth has more in mind than just redemption of land.

[20 : 35] She's proposing marriage. And if you let your eyes glance over to chapter 2 on the opposite page, Boaz has prayed that Ruth would find shelter under the wings of God.

And now Ruth is proposing to Boaz that Boaz be the shelter and the wings that he prayed for. Because God's providential care oftentimes comes through the faithful obedience of faithful people. So how does Boaz respond? Will he run, flee, castigate Ruth for her presumption? No. He says this, May you be blessed by Yahweh, 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 my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. Boaz responds to Ruth using the exact same words that Ruth responded to Naomi with in verse 5.

[21 : 44] All that you ask I will do. There is of course the small matter that there is a nearer redeemer than Boaz. But Boaz's commitment to actually do this the right way is just further evidence of just how righteous a person he is.

Boaz is a worthy man. And Ruth is a worthy woman. And here on the threshing floor in this shroud of ambiguity moral clarity shines through.

Because of two righteous people Naomi's emptiness will be filled. There is a really important word, a small word, that stands at the center of Boaz's speech language, which indicates just how all of this is going to happen.

It's the Hebrew word chesed. And Aaron promised you in the past two weeks that we were going to talk more about it. So now here it is. It's translated kindness in your Bible.

Chesed means an act of generosity done not out of moral obligation or to fulfill a contract, but done out of kindness and out of love. It's unmerited generosity.

[23 : 00] It's mercy that goes beyond expectation. It's love that goes beyond the call of duty. That is chesed. Most often in the Old Testament, chesed is described as an attribute of God.

So in Ruth chapter one verse eight, Naomi prays that God would deal with Ruth and Orpah with chesed. And in chapter two verse 20, Naomi celebrates that through Boaz, the chesed of God has

come to Naomi and Ruth.

And now here in chapter three verse 11, it is Ruth who shows chesed to Boaz. She could have gone after younger men. She was not contractually obliged to go to the older man for redemption. But in order to provide for Naomi, Ruth goes to Boaz and does chesed, does kindness, does unmerited generosity towards him.

And because of Ruth's chesed, Boaz responds with chesed too. Do not fear. All that you ask, I will do.

[24 : 09] And Boaz will do more. As we will see next week, Boaz will do abundantly more than Ruth and Naomi could ever ask or imagine.

So our second question now has an answer. How is all of this going to happen? How will God providentially care for Naomi? He will do so through people who love and who do chesed. Through people who show unmerited generosity towards one another. God's chesed comes to us as we do chesed for one another.

And we can only do chesed because we have received the chesed of the living God through Christ first. So at the end of the day, friends, this is the providential kindness of God.

God is the hero of the story of Ruth. Not Naomi, not Boaz, and not even the amazing character of Ruth. So two things in conclusion.

[25 : 12] One about God, one about us. First about God. If you had forgotten or if the circumstances of your life had made you empty, I want to remind you that our God is a God who providentially cares for his people, who shows unmerited generosity towards us, and who loves to show his kindness towards you.

My prayer is that this story will help you to feel deep down in the depths of your soul that our God is for you and not against you.

That God cares for you and that he has poured forth his redemption for you in Jesus Christ. His providential care in your life may be subtle, it may seem like it works in the shadows, but it is care, and through it he's showing his kindness to you.

Second about us, I'm going to hammer this gong one more time. God so often expresses his providential care through the faithful obedience of faithful people.

God works for us, in us, through us, as God's people do chesed for one another. Friends, this has real life implications for our lives.

[26 : 49] We are called to righteous living, not just in our relationship with God, but in our relationship with one another. There's a beloved member of this congregation, Glenn Howell, who six weeks ago had really serious heart surgery, and ever since has been in the midst of a long and slow recovery that's difficult physically, emotionally, mentally, and every week there have been people from this congregation who have gone to Glenn and sat with him and cared for him and loved him.

Friends, that's chesed. It's unmerited generosity. It's unmerited kindness. And that sort of kindness has a domino effect.

When one person starts doing that sort of thing, when one person starts doing personal chesed, social chesed begins to abound because other people start to catch the drift of what it's like to provide unmerited generosity and love for one another.

Part of it what it means to need God is to need one another. Part of what it means to love God is to love one another. And part of what it means to know God is to know one another.

So when Naomi complains of being empty, let us not forget that it is God who fills her. But he fills her through Ruth and Boaz.

[28 : 20] And when Naomi prays that God would grant Ruth rest, God grants Ruth rest. But let's not forget that he grants that rest through Boaz. And when Boaz prays that Ruth would find shelter under the wings of God, God grants Ruth shelter under his wings.

But let's not forget that he does so through Boaz. And when Naomi prays that God would act towards Ruth with Chesed, God acts towards Ruth with Chesed.

But let's not forget that he does so through Naomi and Boaz. So the question we began with, how do we live as people between emptiness and fullness as we wait for the kingdom of God to arrive? Well, we live as a people who have learned to do Chesed. We live as a people who have learned to be kind and generous to one another because we serve a God who has shown unmerited generosity towards us in Christ.

Thanks be to God for his redemption and the redemption that he shows to us through others.
Amen. Amen.