

Series The Story of Ruth and Naomi

This Message #5

Scripture Ruth 4:1-17

At the end of chapter 3, both Ruth and Boaz departed the threshing floor — Ruth to return to her mother-in-law and Boaz to follow up on his promise to work out the kinsman-redeemer responsibility. Boaz was willing to serve as the kinsman-redeemer, but unfortunately, there was another person who was a closer relative than he was, and therefore this person had the primary responsibility to serve. The promise of Boaz to Ruth was clear, “If he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it” (*Ruth 3:13*).

Chapter 4 explains how the process of redemption was handled and describes the outcome.

Read Ruth 4:1-12

At the end of chapter 3 Naomi stated that Boaz would not waste any time before seeking a resolution to the matter of redemption. She was correct. Boaz went to the city gate, waited for the nearer kinsman to pass by, then gathered ten of the elders of the town to witness the negotiations, and presented to the nearer relative the opportunity to be the redeemer.

The location just inside the gate of a town or village was heavily trafficked. People passed through the gate on their way to and from their fields. Merchants set up their stalls to buy and sell their goods. The gate was a busy gathering place for gossip and business. It was the perfect location to connect with another person.

The elders were not elected officials nor were they a specific group of individuals. Any mature man with a good standing in the community could be an elder. The Hebrew word for “elder” referred to “men who had beards.” These “bearded ones” had an important role in society. They sat and listened to disputes, considered evidence, and made decisions. In the matter between Boaz and the other kinsman, their task was to serve as witnesses rather than jurors. In the absence of written records, information about the historical events and legal decisions of a community were retained the memories of the elders.

After the elders were seated, Boaz explained Naomi's situation. She wanted to sell the piece of land that belonged to Elimelech. All Israelites were familiar with the Old Testament laws which applied to land ownership. The general principle which applied to land ownership was set forth in Leviticus chapter 25, when God said to Moses, "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land." Then God explained how a family could retain its property. "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold" (*Leviticus 25:23-25*).

There was also a second way: family land had to be returned to the original owners in the year of Jubilee. The Jubilee year occurred every 50 years. During that year "each Israelite was to return to his family property and to his own clan." Buying and selling land in Israel was possible but very specific conditions applied. For example, "If you sell land to one of your countrymen or buy any from him ... you are to buy on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee, and he is to sell on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price. ... What is sold will remain in the possession of the buyer until the Year of Jubilee. It will be returned in the Jubilee, and he can then go back to his property" (*Leviticus 25: 8-17, 28*). If Elimelech had sold his property to someone for the years until the next Jubilee, then, according to the provisions of the Law, a kinsman-redeemer could buy back the remaining years until the Jubilee.

The fact that Naomi was "selling" the land has perplexed interpreters for centuries. Did Naomi actually own the land, and was she so destitute that she had to sell it? The answer to both questions was apparently "yes." Naomi, as the surviving member of her family and head of the family unit, was apparently the rightful owner, and, it would seem, she was so destitute that she needed the income from the sale to survive. In her case, it was the duty of the kinsman-redeemer to buy the land so that it would not be sold outside the family.

It was extremely important in Israel that land remain within a family from generation to generation. Boaz informed the relative of the opportunity to redeem Naomi's property. He reminded the relative that his relationship to Elimelech was closer than his own. He also declared his willingness to purchase the land if the relative was unable to do so.

The relative immediately agreed to redeem the property. The offer was very appealing to him. Naomi was a widow beyond childbearing age. Her sons were dead. The relative's purchase of the field would mean that she would have no descendants with a future claim on the property. What a great position the relative was in. By saying "yes" to the offer, he would be able, as the nearest kinsman-redeemer, to add the land to his present possessions without fear of the land being repossessed in the future.

It is at this point that Boaz brought up the other part of the transaction: the relative would have to marry Ruth, the Moabitess, in order to bear children to maintain the association of Elimelech with his property. The first born son of the marriage would become the legal heir of the property. By assuming the responsibilities of a redeemer in one area, concerning the land, the relative was obligated to fulfill all the functions of the kinsman-redeemer, and that included levirate marriage.

On hearing this information, the relative had a rapid change of heart. He quickly backed away from his desire to redeem the land. Marriage to Ruth in order to raise up a child to keep the property in Elimelech's family would jeopardize his own estate. He was unwilling to take resources which would be part of his own children's inheritance to buy land that would belong to Ruth's son. There would be no benefit to his existing family with that arrangement. His refusal to perpetuate the family of Elimelech was a violation of the Old Testament Law, and it revealed his inherent selfishness. He was unwilling to use his resources to help Naomi. We need to keep in mind that the right of redemption was for the benefit of poor people, widows, and orphans. This relative was not thinking about Naomi or Ruth or Elimelech, but only himself, and so he said to Boaz, "You redeem the land yourself."

Imagine that you were watching the events of this chapter as a movie. Can't you picture the people by the gate? Can you picture how the emotions of Boaz would be portrayed? Excitement. Nervousness. Determination. Anticipation. Uncertainty. Deflation. Elation. The emotions of Boaz would be on a roller coaster ride between verses 4 and 6, way down and then way high. In a movie this negotiation session would be filled with tension. One party would be portrayed as a selfish, worldly, scheming business man who had no concern for the impoverished widow. Boaz would be portrayed as a humble, compassionate, honest, and hopeful man who was required by circumstances, to offer to another man the opportunity he himself wanted. The cameras would zoom in on Boaz's face frequently to catch the variety of emotions. Great theater.

In order to indicate the finality of his decision, the relative took off his sandal. The writer of this story thought it was necessary to insert the explanation in verse 7 about the sandal. Through the centuries, there have been many symbolic gestures at the conclusion of agreements. A handshake, pricking fingers and mingling blood, animal sacrifices, exchanging personal items, eating salt. In the early history of Israel, removing one's sandal and handing it to another symbolized the completion of a transaction. Since this gesture was done in the presence of the elders and many other people, it was interpreted as final and irrevocable.

This opened the way for Boaz to announce publically, to the elders and all the people who were assembled, his legal obligation. He would buy from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, and he would take Ruth as his wife. He committed himself to maintaining the name of Ruth's first husband, "so that his name would not disappear from among his family or from the town records." Boaz began and ended his declaration of intentions with the same words, "Today you are witnesses."

The elders and the people responded to Boaz by affirming their status as witnesses. Boaz's willingness to redeem Naomi and Ruth evoked everyone's praise. They pronounced a blessing on him and Ruth. On behalf of Ruth, they asked the LORD to make her like Rachel and Leah, the two wives of Jacob. Between them these women had twelve sons, who became the heads of the tribes of Israel. They asked the LORD to give Boaz "high standing" in the community — this probably refers to material prosperity, and to make him famous.

To both Ruth and Boaz, the people asked the LORD to make the family like that of Perez. Perez is intentionally named because he was from a union based on the levirate practice (*see Genesis 38*), and also because he became the head of the tribe of Judah following the death of his father. Under Perez and his descendents, the tribe of Judah became the most prominent in Israel. The blessings pronounced on Boaz and Ruth were quite exceptional, and almost like prophecies in the ways they were later fulfilled. We will talk more about that next week.

Read Ruth 4:13-17

Verses 13 through 17 form the conclusion of the story. This conclusion, as I mentioned last week, is written to balance the beginning of the story. Both the beginning and concluding sections have the same number of words in the original Hebrew language. The focus of both sections is on Naomi. In the introductory section, Naomi was dejected, bitter, and empty. In the concluding section, she is fully satisfied, ecstatic about the positive changes in her circumstances, and confident about the future. In the first section, the LORD had disciplined and afflicted her. In the last section, the LORD blessed her and gave her a hopeful future.

After her marriage to Boaz, “the LORD enabled Ruth to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.” It is remarkable, in view of the essential roles that Boaz and Ruth have played in this story, that all the concluding sentences of the story are focused, not on Ruth and Boaz, but on Naomi and the baby. Notice that it was to Naomi that all the women gathered. Their praises went to Naomi, not Ruth.

It is also surprising that the baby was described by the women as Naomi’s “go’el,” her kinsman-redeemer. Boaz undoubtedly fulfilled his responsibilities in providing Naomi’s support as the legal kinsman-redeemer, but it was the baby who was proclaimed as the one to “renew” Naomi’s life and to “sustain” her in her old age. It was the child who took away the emptiness in Naomi’s life, and represented “family” to her.

The women proclaimed a blessing on the baby, asking the LORD to make him famous in all of Israel. Indirectly, Ruth also received praise from the women of the town. Because she gave birth to the son who lifted Naomi from the depths of despair and renewed her life, Ruth was described as “better than seven sons” to Naomi. In the Bible the number “seven” represented perfection and completion. In the Israelite culture, boys were usually more valued than girls because the parent who had sons would not only be assured of the continuation of the family line, but be assured of support in old age. Thus to speak of Ruth as being worth more than seven sons is giving her the ultimate tribute. Seven sons would represent the perfect family.

Verse 16 states that Naomi took the newborn child, laid him on her lap, and cared for him — a sentence which describes the delight and love of a grandmother. She had for many years despaired of ever having grandchildren, and what she had assumed to be impossible, had become reality. She had expected a lonely old age, but thanks to the devotion of Ruth and the kindness and compassion of Boaz, everything had changed.

The women named the baby “Obed,” which means “servant” or “helper,” because the destiny of the baby was to serve his grandmother. However, in time, Obed would marry, and Naomi’s great grandson would be named Jesse, and Jesse’s son would be David, who became Israel’s great king. In David all the blessings and prophecies proclaimed by the elders and people came to pass. That will be the subject of the next (and last) message in this series which will be next week.

In this story we can recognize:

God’s ability to turn negative circumstances into positive blessings

The goodness that comes from helping others

God’s blessings often exceed our expectations