

The Redeemer: Ruth 3
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Sunday, February 8th, 2009

Everybody loves to hear a good story. This is why people read novels. This is why people go to plays. This is why people watch movies. We love to hear the stories of other people's lives—their trials and their triumphs, their joys and their sorrows. We can often identify with the characters in a well-told story, and it helps us to wrestle with the deep questions of life. It helps us to feel the significance of love and heartache, pleasure and pain, gain and loss. And, of course, the most moving stories contain all of the above. Defeat gives way to triumph. Sadness and tragedy give way to hope. Loss becomes gain.

What we find in the Old Testament book of Ruth is not only a true story (an historically accurate story), but also a very well-crafted presentation of the story. The human narrator here, whose identity is unknown, conveys this riveting story with great care and intentionality. Also, it was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so we know that it was not just a stroke of genius by some human author, but it is exactly what God intended to be written about these events which He brought about in this family. Isn't God good to us to reveal His character and His great works throughout history? Isn't He good to show us who He is and instruct us in how we ought to live? 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

So what we have here is a great story, but it is much more than a great story. It is part of God's inspired, inerrant Word, and it is intended for our instruction and sanctification. And therefore it is our duty and our great joy to walk through this story, and as Ruth did in that field, to glean as much food as we can. God knows we need it. And I pray that you and I will know how much we need it, too, so that we are diligent in gleaning from God's Word, both in our personal lives and when we come together in corporate worship. I hope this morning that you count it a great privilege to be here together with brothers and sisters in Christ, opening the Word together, to glean spiritual sustenance for our souls.

Let's look at the third act in this great story, the third chapter of this moving narrative. These events which were ordained by God so meticulously and beautifully, and recorded so poignantly by this author, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Ruth 3 does contain some very curious events, as we'll see. And you may wonder about the beauty and even the

appropriateness of some of these actions. But I hope that by the end of the message you'll be able to see the purity and godliness of these individuals. I hope that you'll be able to see their hope in God and their dependence on God. And my ultimate hope is that as Ruth sought her refuge under the wings of Boaz, her redeemer, that you and I will seek our refuge under the wings of Jesus Christ, our redeemer.

Hope and Risk

First of all, let's talk about hope and risk. At the beginning of chapter 3 we see something new and different about Naomi. Do you remember what her attitude was like in chapter 1? She was depressed. She thought that God was against her. She wanted to be called Mara, meaning bitter. She said to Ruth and Orpah in 1:13, "No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." And she said to the women of Bethlehem in 1:21, "I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty."

Naomi understood the sovereignty of God, but in the midst of her trials she could not fathom the goodness of God.

In chapter 2 we see Ruth going out to work hard in the field, but Naomi stays at home. The narrative doesn't tell us why this is, but we can speculate that her depression had sapped any motivation to work. She was despondent. She was without hope for the future. But at the end of chapter 2 something happens that has a profound impact on Naomi. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth, comes home from a day gleaning in the field, and tells her of an amazing coincidence—an amazing providence—that the field in which she gleaned belonged to a man named Boaz. Ruth didn't know anything about Boaz, other than the fact that he was a wealthy landowner and had shown great kindness to her. But with this news Naomi was reminded of something that she had forgotten during her season of darkness. In her despondency she had not thought about the relatives she had in Bethlehem. She forgot about the kinsmen-redeemers who could potentially be a husband for Ruth. So the mention of Boaz, and the kindness which he had shown toward Ruth, was for Naomi like a beautiful sunrise after a dark and stormy night. "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5). The morning has come for Naomi, and this new-found hope changes her whole perspective on things.

Of course, she should have been hopeful all along. She should have trusted that whatever hardships and trials she faced, God had a good plan in it. That's not easy to do, as we know. In fact, it's impossible apart from God's grace working in our lives to give us an eternal perspective rather than being limited to an

earthly perspective. But Naomi knew enough about God that she should have understood that God sometimes uses pain and loss and heartache in order to bring about good ends. Naomi was surely familiar with the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, who was sold into slavery by his own brothers, and once in Egypt was thrown into prison even though he was innocent. But God ordained all of these events for a very good purpose, such that at the end of the story Joseph was able to say to his brothers, “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20). Naomi should have trusted that even though she had encountered many hard things, God had ordained them all for good purposes.

And we, too, should have this attitude in the midst of our trials. We must remember that behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face. The reality, however, is that we are sinful human beings, and our spiritual perception of things is often distorted. Like Naomi we forget about the great acts of God in the past. We forget that God is not only sovereign, but good. And we fail to recognize ways in which God could be using the present trial for good purposes. In those situations we should pray for insight and spiritual perception. We should pray that God will show us what He is up to. And we should remind ourselves of the great things God has done in the past—the great acts of God recorded in the Bible, and the great things He has done in our own lives. And then we must simply trust in Him. He is God. He is in control. And He is good.

God used this news of Boaz to awaken Naomi from her depression. She could now see that God was at work in these circumstances. He was not against her, as she had thought. Rather, He was doing something far better than Naomi could even imagine, something even better than providing a worthy and wealthy man to marry Ruth. God was planning to send His own Son into the world—the Messiah—who would be a descendant of Ruth. At this point Naomi didn’t know what was going to happen, but she now had hope. And hope produces action. Hope in God produces righteous activity. Previously, there was not much activity in Naomi’s life because there was not much hope in her life. But now she has hope, and now she acts. Her hope in God stirs her heart and mind in such a way that she develops a plan, and as we’ll see, it is a very risky plan.

And thus we see here a relationship between hope and risk. Naomi’s hope in God produced action. It caused her to plan and then implement that plan. And it was a risky plan. As she sent Ruth to approach Boaz, she didn’t know what Boaz’s response would be. Ruth could be totally rejected, and worse yet, these

actions could tarnish her reputation forever and make it impossible for her to find any husband. But Naomi saw the hand of God working in these events, and her hope in God prompted this venture.

Someone might say at this point, Was her hope really in God, or was her hope in the prospect of Boaz marrying Ruth? Her statements at the beginning of chapter 3 may seem like she's putting her hope in Boaz. But I think Naomi's words to Ruth in the previous chapter indicate that she sees the Lord's kindness in what is happening, and she is anticipating what the Lord is going to do. She said to Ruth in 2:20, "May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" And I think she's speaking of the Lord's kindness there. She may also be thinking of Boaz's kindness, but the statement surely has the Lord's kindness mainly in view. And then she goes on to say, "The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers." I think Naomi is marveling at the hand of God in these events, and her mind is racing with the potential of what this could mean. God's kindness could include much more than an ephah of barley. God could actually be providing a husband for Ruth.

Certainly many people then and now would accuse Naomi of acting foolishly in these plans. This was putting Ruth's reputation on the line, and it could have done great damage to both Ruth and Naomi. But Naomi was not being foolish. She had clearly thought through these plans, and she knew that although it was risky it was the right thing to do. She saw God's kindness, and she anticipated further kindnesses from the Lord. And she thought long and hard about how to proceed. We don't understand these customs that Naomi explained to Ruth—going and uncovering his feet after he had fallen asleep. But apparently it wasn't as strange to them as it sounds to us, because Boaz understood what was being communicated. Once he knew it was Ruth, and heard her request, he understood what was going on. Still, he could have easily misread the situation. And therefore it was a risky plan. Not a foolish plan, but a risky one.

Hope produces risk. Hope in God prompts us to take risks—risks that demonstrate that our hope is in God, risks which show that our hope is not in the things of this world but in God's plans. God is sovereign, and God is good. And as we see His hand working, we venture out in ways that may cost us our reputation, or our financial stability, or our comfortable lifestyle, or our very lives.

It was the great missionary William Carey who said, "Expect great things from God, Attempt great things for God." There is a profound and necessary connection between these two things, and the order in which William Carey says it is also crucial.

On the one hand, if you attempt great things for God in your own strength, not expecting Him to do great things, but instead expecting Him to repay you for your great deeds, then you're simply a proud legalist. You'll think about all the great things you're doing for God, as if you can offer something to God, as if you can earn something from God, as if God needed you. We are not to attempt great things for God if those attempts are not built upon a hope in what God is doing. On the other hand, if we don't attempt great things for God, then we have to question whether we have much hope in Him. If we're not willing to take risks for the cause of Christ, then we have to wonder if we really trust that God can do what He has promised to do. We have to wonder if we really believe that God is at work in us and around us.

I think this plays itself out very practically in the realm of personal evangelism. We fear that our reputation will be tarnished if we talk to our co-workers about Christ. We're scared of being rejected. We're fearful of the tension it might cause in our family if we talk too openly about our faith. But if God is moving in our hearts and producing in us a great hope in Him, then we will take those risks. It will still be uncomfortable. We will be rejected at times. And our reputation may be tarnished in the eyes of certain people. But these are risks worth taking, because God is sovereign and good, and He is at work around us.

I also think of missions overseas. The same risks are involved, and to an even greater degree. But as God gives us an excitement about the Gospel and an overflowing joy in Him, He will prompt many of us to travel overseas to preach this Good News to people groups who have never heard it.

Another risk that comes to mind may sound petty in comparison to evangelism and missions, but I think it's something we're just as scared of—the risk of being vulnerable with one another. The risk of sharing with other believers what our struggles are. The risk of confessing our sins to one another. I'm picturing in our small groups when the men are praying together and the women are praying together, or in an accountability group of some kind, or talking on the phone (brother to brother, or sister to sister), we need to be open and honest about our sin. It's risky, of course, because those we share with may think badly of us. They may judge us. They may gossip about us. But it's a necessary risk. We're commanded to do this. James 5:16, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." And we need this! This is a means of grace that God has ordained for His people, that we would be strengthened and sanctified as we are vulnerable with one another and help one another along in the fight of faith. If we

trust God's word and have hope in Him, then we will take the risk of being vulnerable with one another.

Finally, as I think about our church right now I can't help but think about the financial risk of buying a building. We are presently making plans, and thinking through the details, of purchasing the church building on the North Side, which we've been talking about for several weeks now. And the fact is, it will be a financial risk. We will no longer have the savings that we've been accustomed to, because we'll use it as a down payment. Our financial situation won't be as comfortable as it has been. But I have a tremendous hope in God, that He is sovereign and He is good. And I have seen so clearly how His hand is at work in the details of these plans. I feel so strongly that God is leading us to take this risk, trusting that He is at work and expecting great things from Him.

The Outcome of the Risk

Let's move on now to the scene at the threshing floor, and we'll see the outcome of the risk. Naomi has given her precise directions, and Ruth responds in verse 5, "All that you say I will do." That's trust. That's faith. Ruth doesn't fully understand these customs, and neither she nor Naomi knows how Boaz will react. She is being sent out on this very risky errand. But she agrees to do just as Naomi has instructed her, because she trusts her and trusts the Lord. Remember the wonderful words we looked at last week when Boaz said to Ruth in 2:12, "The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." Ruth left her family and her homeland in order to take refuge under the wings of Yahweh. And now here she is, continuing to take refuge under the Lord's wings and hoping for the Lord's continued kindness in her life.

She does just as Naomi had instructed her, and the narrator stresses this point in verse 6. Then beginning in verse 7 there is the account of what happened. "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." One may be tempted to read into this that Boaz was drunk, but I don't think that's the case. Maybe he was feeling some of the effects of the wine he had with his dinner, but I think his heart was merry mainly because he was experiencing the Lord's kindness in producing such an abundant harvest after years of famine. This was a time of rejoicing. So with a merry heart, after a long day's work and a satisfying meal, "he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain." And this is when Ruth "came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down," just as Naomi had told her to do. Clearly Boaz had already fallen asleep, because it

appears that some time passes before verse 8, where it says, “At midnight the man was startled [I assume because his feet were cold] and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet!” Again, we don’t know anything about this custom. We don’t know what this was all about. We do know that it was risky on Ruth’s part—risking her safety by being out in the middle of the night, and risking her reputation by approaching a man in his sleep like this. But once Boaz knew the identity of this woman, that it was Ruth, he knew exactly what these actions meant.

In verse 9 he asks, “Who are you?” Her reply, “I am Ruth, your servant.” And then here’s the request she makes, “Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” This is quite an act of faith on Ruth’s part. She is a poor woman, from a foreign land, a widow, and she is approaching a wealthy Israelite landowner, asking him to become her husband. And this is evidence of her profound faith in the God of Israel. Her risky request that Boaz spread his wings over her is built on the reality that she is ultimately seeking her refuge under the wings of the Lord. Ruth’s hope is that Boaz’s prayer of blessing for her in chapter 2 will be fulfilled through Boaz, himself. Boaz said in 2:12, “The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” And Ruth’s hope, and what in fact happens, is that Boaz becomes the means by which this prayer is answered.

Boaz’s response to Ruth’s request is amazing. In verse 10 he says to her, “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 rich or poor.” Boaz is very pleased that Ruth wants to marry him. He is happy that she hasn’t gone after the young men, and it’s implied that, at least in Boaz’s mind, there were plenty of men who would have desired to marry Ruth. Everyone had heard about her character, as Boaz mentions in verse 11, “all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.”

And so there’s this beautiful dynamic here between Boaz and Ruth, that neither of them feels worthy of the other. Ruth comes to Boaz with the humble request, “Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” And Boaz, having perceived the strength of Ruth’s character, is astounded that she would pick him! That, by the way, makes for a great marriage, when both husband and wife can acknowledge in their hearts that it is the kindness of God that this person wanted to marry me. With all of my issues and sins and failings, it is an amazing kindness that this woman would agree to be my wife. That’s a good place to be.

Let me draw a couple applications for dating / courting relationships, and then we'll come to the closing point. The question that plagued me as I studied this passage is, Why didn't Boaz pursue Ruth? Why does this story seem so backwards in terms of biblical manhood and womanhood? And I still don't have a very satisfying answer to that question. I think the fact that Boaz was quite a bit older than Ruth may have something to do with it. It may have been very awkward for him to ask Ruth to marry him. According to his comments, he was assuming that Ruth would end up marrying one of the young men in the community. Maybe he just thought he didn't have a chance.

And then on the other side we know that it wasn't actually Ruth who initiated all of this, but Naomi. Ruth was simply following her mother-in-law's instructions. What I think we can say with certainty is that this is a unique situation. God was working in some very mysterious ways in this relationship, and He was bringing about many surprising events. Therefore we should not read this book as a manual for courtship. What we find here is not a model for courtship and engagement, but rather a picture of God's mysterious providence. Stacy and I would never counsel a single woman to go and uncover some guy's feet while he's sleeping and then ask him to marry her. That would be a wrong way to apply this book to your life. Instead, seek to emulate Ruth's character and purity and faith, and trust that if it's the Lord's will, He will lead a godly man into your life.

What should also be applied from this story is the sexual purity demonstrated by both Ruth and Boaz. Here they are alone in the middle of the night (again, not something I would recommend), and yet they both restrain themselves. They're attracted to each other. They will likely be married soon. And they maintain absolute purity. This is something that must be applied to courting relationships and engagements. Do not compromise. Do not dishonor God by taking something beautiful that He intends for the marriage relationship alone, and defiling it outside of the marriage covenant. Be inspired by the purity exemplified in this story, and pray for God's grace to do likewise.

Christ our Redeemer

I want to close by observing how Boaz resembles and points us to Jesus Christ. I want us to think about Christ our redeemer. In the context of Ruth, the word redeemer has a very specific meaning related to family relationships and marriage customs. Boaz was a relative of Elimelech, Naomi's deceased husband, and so he had the responsibility and opportunity to provide for, and even marry, this young woman who was the widow of Elimelech's son. He was a kinsmen-redeemer. He

wasn't the only kinsmen-redeemer, as he freely acknowledges in verses 12-13. "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." This is another evidence of Boaz's godliness and integrity. He proceeds with honesty and takes all the necessary steps to make sure this is done appropriately.

But he is a redeemer, and as we'll see in the next chapter, he does redeem Ruth. He extends his wings over her. He loves her and protects her and provides for her. Even at the end of chapter 3 he continues to show kindness to her by sending her home with a large amount of barley. Ruth doesn't deserve these kindnesses. In many ways, she is such an unlikely candidate to become the wife of this wealthy and worthy Israelite man. But she is seeking refuge under the wings of the Lord, and seeking refuge under the wings of Boaz, her redeemer.

These images point us to the astounding Gospel truth that Jesus Christ is our redeemer, and there is no redeemer nearer to us than Him. He is the One who is willing and eager to redeem all those who seek their refuge under His wings. His kindnesses are unending. His love and protection and provision are far greater than anything we could find in this world. For He grants us eternal life in His presence. He loves us with an everlasting love. He protects us from sin and Satan, even ourselves, by causing us to persevere in the fight of faith. He provides us with His Word and the Holy Spirit and the fellowship of believers and many other daily blessings. He is our redeemer, and may we all say to Him, as Ruth did to Boaz, "Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."