

SERIES: The Book of Ruth
 SERMON: **Drama at the City Gate**
 SCRIPTURE: Ruth 4:1-22
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
 DATE: June 6, 2010

We come today to the end of our month-long study of the Book of Ruth. We began this series with the observation that “everyone loves a good romance,” and last Lord's Day we saw the relationship between Ruth and Boaz develop into a full-blown romance. Even more importantly, we saw how their relationship serves as an incredible picture of the divine romance between God and His people.

Ruth was a poverty-stricken foreign widow who decided to move to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Naomi, also widowed, simply because she loved her and was committed to her. Ruth went to glean in a field belonging to Boaz to keep herself and Naomi alive. Boaz, a man of stature and of great integrity, noticed her and showed extraordinary kindness to her. Naomi got excited when she heard of this, because Boaz was a near-kinsman to her late husband Elimelech. This meant, according to Jewish law, that an appeal could be made to him to marry Ruth and provide security for her. So Naomi laid out a plan by which Ruth could legitimately propose marriage to Boaz. By the way, Gary Bugg came up after last Sunday's sermon and asked me, “Aren't you glad that when Ruth proposed to Boaz he didn't get cold feet?” Not bad, huh? (If that goes over your head, read 3:7-8 again).

Well, last week I suspect we all found ourselves rooting for this relationship, but then suddenly, just as the wedding bells were beginning to ring, Boaz revealed a huge potential roadblock to the story-book ending we were hoping for. The Law said that when a man died leaving a childless widow, his nearest eligible male relative had the right and responsibility to marry the widow and perpetuate the dead man's name. Boaz was a near kinsman alright, he was more than willing, he had the resources, and he was free himself, but he was not the nearest of kin.

Today we come to what I have called, The Drama at the City Gate. Once again, the spiritual lessons are profound.

Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down.

Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. Then he said to the kinsman-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line."

"I will redeem it," he said.

Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the

Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property."

At this, the kinsman-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it."

(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.)

So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." And he removed his sandal.

Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!"

Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

Boaz chooses to fulfill all the requirements of the Law. (1-5)

Having received Ruth's proposal of marriage with gratitude, and having promised Ruth that he would accept if the nearer kinsman declined, Boaz goes to the town gate and sits down. The gate in an ancient city was equivalent to the city square of a small town today. If you drive through little towns in rural America you'll usually find the courthouse in the middle of town on a square block by itself, with the main shopping center clustered on the four streets surrounding the square. And depending upon the weather you'll often find a few old men sitting on the benches around the city hall chewing the fat and deciding the great issues of state.

In ancient Israel the city gate is where the elders gathered, men who were viewed as having

significant authority. The gate was, in effect, the courthouse. Boaz must have known that his relative, the nearest of kin to Naomi's deceased husband, used that gate to go to work, so Boaz waits until he arrives, and then addresses him, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." By the way, the word "friend" is not in the original Hebrew, and putting it in tends to mask some of the pathos of the moment. What the Hebrew actually says is, "Hey you (or Hey, so-and-so), sit down here." I suspect one of two things is going on. One possibility is that the narrator himself removed the man's name so as to spare his descendants embarrassment over the man's conduct. Or perhaps Boaz (who surely knows the man's name, for they are closely related) can't bring himself to be overly warm or encouraging because he doesn't really want the man to agree to the redemption. Thus the greeting falls somewhere between cold and polite.

Boaz' next priority is to assemble a legal quorum for the proceedings. He invites ten elders of the town to sit down. The number "ten" is significant in the judgment of a case like this, because it ensures that the hearing would be fair and impartial. In fact, almost everything in this part of the story conforms to the legal requirements of the day.

The nearest of kin is subpoenaed before a jury of his peers and granted his right to redeem. But please notice that Boaz doesn't bring up Ruth's name or the issue of marriage. Rather he begins by telling the man that Naomi is so poor that her husband's land has been put on the market. The only way to keep the land in the family would be for some close relative to buy it. The price of the land depended upon the number of years until the Year of Jubilee (which occurred every 50 years), when all land reverted to the original owner.

As we noted last week, the Law of Redemption of the Land and the Levirate Law of Marriage work together, so that the one who buys Elimelech's land (considered by inheritance to belong to Mahlon, Ruth's late husband) must also marry and raise up children to Mahlon's widow. But Boaz mentions only the land. He says in verse 4. "If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line."

The response of the nearest of kin is found at the end of verse 4: "I will redeem it." One can imagine him smiling to himself at his good fortune. For very little money he can carry out a respected family duty and perhaps enhance his civic reputation. And there is very little risk with the investment, for there are no known heirs of Elimelech to reclaim title to the property later. How could he lose?ⁱ

But, of course, we don't *want* him to redeem it. We want Boaz to redeem it. And if that's what *we* want, how much more is it what Ruth wants! My imagination sees her in the background watching intently as the drama unfolds. And I can almost hear her gasp as the nearer kinsman declares of the land, "I will redeem it."

I can see, too, the concern on Boaz's face, but he is not unprepared for such an eventuality. He has one trump card left (if you'll pardon the expression) and the time has come to play it. So he responds, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property." I don't think

it's an accident that Boaz refers to Ruth as "Ruth the Moabitess." Her alien status would undoubtedly be considered a liability to the average Israelite, and if Boaz can discourage the man while still being truthful, he seems willing to do so.

For a moment the issue hangs in the balance. Will the nearest kinsman accept the additional responsibility and claim both the land and Ruth? Then he breaks the silence, and I suspect Ruth breathes a sign of relief, as he says, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate."

He acknowledges his inability to redeem and renounces his right. (6-8) While he doesn't mind having some more land to farm, the last thing he's interested in right now is a new wife. One might make a deduction here that the moral of the story is that it is cheaper to buy and operate a farm than it is to acquire a wife. (Please understand I'm not suggesting that one *should* make that deduction, only that one *might*). The nearest of kin claims he cannot do both. Perhaps he is single and, as one bachelor friend of mine likes to refer to himself, he is saved, sanctified, single, and satisfied. Or maybe he is a widower with children of his own, and to remarry and have more children will endanger the inheritance he plans to leave the children he already has.

So he says to Boaz, "You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it." And to legalize the transaction he takes off his sandal and gives it to Boaz, as specified in the Levirate Law. He would rather that his line be referred to as *The Family of the Unshodded* (remember Deut. 25:10?) than to take on the responsibility of land *and* widow. Boaz is now free to fulfill the promise he had made to Ruth.

Boaz fulfills his promise. (9-12)

He calls the elders and all the people together, and tells them,

"Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!"

He redeems *both* the inheritance *and* the person. He is not selfish; he isn't going to help Naomi and leave Ruth in the lurch, nor is he going to obtain a wife and leave his relative Naomi to fend for herself. He purchases the land, and he acquires Ruth as his wife. The words Boaz uses are actually a fixed Israelite legal formula used to notarize transactions contracted orally: "Today you are witnesses!" And the elders and the crowd respond with another legal formula: "We are witnesses."

A blessing is then prayed upon all the participants. (11-12) The elders and all those at the gate, including presumably much of the town, are excited and invoke God's blessing, first upon Ruth. Speaking to Boaz they pray, "May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel." Rachel and Leah

were Jacob's wives, from whom the whole nation of Israel was descended. It was a well-known fact that Rachel and Leah were alternately barren and fruitful, and that it was God who opened and shut their wombs. Ruth, of course, is so far childless, for she and Mahlon had no children when he died. So I believe they are praying for children.

They also pray a blessing on Boaz, namely, "May you have standing in Ephrathah, and be famous in Bethlehem." They are praying for influence and success for Boaz. I think it is not without significance that the OT prophet Micah, had predicted that Messiah Himself would come from Bethlehem in Ephrathah. Could there be a connection between Boaz and Messiah? Hold that thought for a moment.

They also pray that Boaz' family, through the offspring God gives to Ruth, may be like that of Perez. The house of Perez was the clan from which Boaz and most of the audience was descended. This may simply be a wish that Boaz' family be prominent. However, if you know OT history, you know that Perez was born to Tamar through scandalous circumstances. Tamar, like Ruth, was a foreigner, but unlike Ruth, an immoral woman. The author may well be drawing attention to the fact that God in His providence draws straight lines, even genealogical lines, using crooked sticks. Hold that thought for a moment as well.

As the drama at the city Gate draws to a close, we are deeply satisfied to see that without any miracles being performed but simply through the providence of God, bitter Naomi's inheritance has been redeemed, diligent and faithful Ruth has found a husband, and godly Boaz has a wife. Only one question remains: Will Ruth and Boaz have a child? We don't have to wait long for the answer.

Boaz marries Ruth, with the result that *everyone* is blessed. (13-22)

In the last ten verses we have a record of the happy destiny of all three main characters in the story.

Boaz is blessed with a son while Ruth's childlessness is removed. (13) Verse 13 reads, "So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her and the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son." To a Jewish man the greatest sign of God's blessing was to be given a son. And to a woman of that day the greatest blessing was the removal of what they considered the curse of childlessness.

Naomi is blessed with an heir, receiving from the Lord's hand "double for all her sins." (Isa. 40:2) In a real sense Naomi is the focus of the last half of Ruth 4. It is she to whom the women address their words; it is she who takes the child and cares for him, apparently as his nanny. And it appears that she and her friends even name him. Naomi is overwhelmed by God's grace.

The phrase, "double for all her sins" is an expression I have borrowed from that greatest of all chapters in the Bible, the 40th chapter of Isaiah, where the prophet offers hope to the children of

Israel, promising that if they repent, God will be gracious to bless them double—i.e. to make up for the sufferings caused by their sins. I think that is a characteristic of God. He hates sin and His holiness demands that sin be punished and the sinner disciplined. But at the same time He is so gracious that He will invariably reward repentance with blessing far greater than is ever deserved. We see that in the story of King David; we see it in the parable of the Prodigal Son; and we see it here in the life of Naomi.

Look at verses 14 & 15:

The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

Remember our first sermon on the book of Ruth? We found Naomi under the chastening hand of the Lord, bitter and feeling hopeless. The women of the town greeted her upon her return from Moab by observing, "Can this be Naomi?" She had aged so much and was so depressed that she was hardly recognizable after just ten years' absence.

Now these same women are praising God for Naomi. So much has changed. She has seen the providence of God working in her behalf. She has slowly regained the confidence that God is on her side. I would say she has slowly repented. And God does more than restore her.

The women praise God for the Kinsman-Redeemer He has provided for Naomi and for a daughter-in-law who is better than seven sons. Allow me to comment on the latter phrase first. In ancient times daughters were tolerated but sons were cherished. If someone had seven sons he had the perfect family. But here is a daughter-in-law who is deemed better than the perfect number of sons. I believe the women are saying to Naomi, "You were angry because God removed the men in your life. You thought life could be secure only if there was a man there to take care of you. But you know what God did? He gave you a daughter-in-law who is better than seven sons would have been. God was there for you the whole time, and you didn't realize it."ⁱⁱ Naomi doesn't say anything. She just sits there holding her little grandson Obed with a great big smile on her face. Friends, God has ways of meeting our needs that aren't always what we would expect; they're better.

But the most important statement from the women is this: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer." Do you realize that they are not speaking of Boaz at all, but rather the offspring of Boaz. But ultimately this is not even a reference to the infant himself, who was named Obed. Rather it is a prophetic reference to a descendant of Obed. Hold that thought for a moment as well.

Ruth is blessed by entering the cherished Messianic line. (18-22) It is said that the hope and dream of every godly OT woman was to bear the Messiah. Well, Ruth didn't bear the Messiah, but she is one of only four women listed as an ancestress of Messiah, and the only one of the four who was not an immoral woman—the other three being Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba. The genealogy with which the book of Ruth closes shows us that Ruth was the great-

grandmother of King David and, of course, Jesus was of the Davidic line.

All of God's people are blessed by the heir *par excellence* who descends from Ruth and Boaz. Just glance at the last five verses of the book of Ruth. Then turn with me to the book of Matthew, chapter 1, where those five verses are repeated except that Matthew includes the names of two mothers. Let's start reading at Matthew 1:5: "Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David." And when you get down to verse 16 of Matthew 1, the genealogy culminates with, "Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

The women's praise for Naomi's kinsman-redeemer is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. And the prayer of verse 14-15 ("May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age!") comes true ultimately only in Jesus Christ. And that is the case not only for Naomi, but for all those who put their faith in Him.

That's the conclusion to this remarkable love story entitled simply, Ruth. But once again I must observe that if we stopped here we would be missing some of the amazing spiritual analogies that are latent in this account. I'm not saying the human author of Ruth intended these, but to me they are too obvious to ignore. This romance is more than a love story, more than a drama; it is almost a parable of how God has redeemed us in Christ Jesus. So I want you to take the outline we've used this morning and I want you to think back through it with me briefly.

The first thing we noticed at the city gate today was that "Boaz chose to fulfill all the requirements of the Law." If Boaz is a picture of our Kinsman-Redeemer, Jesus Christ, which I trust we demonstrated adequately last Lord's Day, what spiritual truth does Boaz' careful attention to legal details portray for us? I think it illustrates the perfect attention to the Law Jesus exhibited in His personal life. Never once did he violate the moral law of God, though at times, of course, he violated the Pharisaical interpretation of the Law. This enabled Him to be a sacrifice without defect or blemish.

Also we saw that the nearest-of-kin admitted his inability to redeem Ruth and forfeited his right. If Boaz is a picture of Christ and Ruth a picture of those who are strangers to the covenants and promises, then who does this nearer kinsman represent? I want to suggest to you that the nearer kinsman is illustrative of the Law itself. It had a prior claim on our lives because we had sold ourselves to sin and ended up under its condemnation.

The Law had to be given an opportunity to see whether or not it *could* redeem us. Could it? Gal. 3:21b says, "If a law had been given which was able to impart life (but of course it can't), then righteousness would indeed have been based on law (but of course it's not)." In everyday language Paul is saying, "You can take the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, a list of do's and don't's a mile long or any other set of laws you want and they can never impart life, they can never redeem you."

Why? Because eventually you're going to break one of those laws and then that law is going to point a finger at you and accuse you of being a law-breaker. Instead of being your redeemer the Law ends up being your accuser. In fact, the Law will say, "The soul that sins, it shall die." And "The wages of sin is death." But thankfully, according to Romans 8:3, "What the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did . . ." He did it through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.

We also found "Boaz fulfilling his promise." Just as Boaz purchased both the inheritance and the person, so Jesus has purchased both our inheritance and us. 1 Peter 1:4 speaks of "an inheritance what can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you!" It is reserved; no crooked schemer can ever deprive us of the inheritance that is ours as children of God. And Hebrews 9:15 puts the redemption and the inheritance together: "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed."ⁱⁱⁱ

The final scene in the book of Ruth concerns the blessings that come to all the principals. First, Jesus, represented by Boaz, is blessed with heirs, as those who believe in Him become joint-heirs with Him. Second, those who are already part of the family of God, represented by Naomi, are blessed as they repent of their sins and return to the Lord. And finally, the outsider who is adopted into the family, represented by Ruth, is blessed with all the rights and privileges of a natural child. By the way, Josh is going to preach next Sunday on the biblical doctrine of adoption—you won't want to miss it.

Conclusion: You know, I'm certain Ruth never looked back on her life with Boaz without immense gratitude for the grace he showed her in redeeming her, a poverty stricken widow, a foreigner, one who grew up in pagan idolatry, with nothing to commend her. The price was high for Boaz to redeem both her and her inheritance, but he did it because he loved her.

We too have been bought with a price, the most awful price ever exacted—the death of God's One and Only Son. Our hearts should likewise be filled with gratitude, and our goal should be to glorify Him in everything we do. As 1 Cor. 6:19-20 reminds us, "You are not your own, for you have been bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body."

Allow me one final point. It's regarding the issue we started our series with—the providence of God. It is always at work, usually behind the scenes, in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, in the painful as well as joyful. We must come to grips with the fact that there is a connection between the ordinary events of life and the work of God in history. Serving a widowed mother-in-law, gleaning in a field, falling in love, having a baby—for the believer these things are not random, chance events, but are all connected to eternity. They are part of something so much bigger than we can see at the time.^{iv}

Even the painful experiences of life are part of a cosmic mosaic that God is painting to display the greatness of his power and wisdom. The individual pieces of glass in a mosaic are not all pretty; in fact, some are pretty jagged. But when we step back and look at the whole, we see a

pattern. When someday we are allowed to step back even further, i.e. when we enter God's presence, I have no doubt that pattern will appear beautiful, even perfect.

i. Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, 242.

ii. Steve Zeisler, Peninsula Bible Church, #4547, 3.

iii. Permit me a brief excursion here. There's a sense in which the Law tries to redeem the inheritance but not the person, just as the nearer-kinsman tried to do. At first it responds, "Yes! I will redeem," and it makes some feeble attempts to help us clean up our act. There are entire religions based upon good works. Many adherents of such religions are among the most successful at establishing a worldly inheritance, i.e. a reputation as a fine upstanding citizen. But what about the person? Nothing is done for him—he's still the same old sinner, and like the proverbial pig that has been washed, he eventually returns to the mud. Eventually the Law has to admit, "I cannot redeem."

iv. Piper, 121.