

For the Love of God

The Mystery of Mercy

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THE MYSTERY OF MERCY

Ruth

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, open with me to Ruth 1. Ten years ago yesterday, I flew home from preaching at a conference in New Mexico. When I arrived home to Heather in New Orleans, I started unpacking my things, and not long thereafter I received a call from my younger brother, Adam, in Atlanta, where my parents lived.

His voice was shaking, and he said, "David, it's Dad...you need to pray for Dad." All my attention was suddenly fixed on this stammering voice on the other end of the phone. Apart from Heather, my dad was my best friend and biggest fan...and my mind was racing as Adam continued talking. "David, I don't know what's wrong. The ambulance is here, and the doctors are putting him on the stretcher. I don't know what's going on. You just need to pray."

I said I would, Adam hung up the phone, and immediately, I fell to my knees...and I cried out to God with deeper intensity and greater urgency than I had ever prayed for anything before. Tears streaming from my eyes, I pleaded with God for my dad's life. As far as we knew, he was in the best health he had been in for years. So not knowing or understanding what was going on, I begged God to heal whatever was wrong in my dad. The next half hour felt like half a day as I waited, just praying with the phone in my hand.

Finally, it rang, and this time it was my older brother, Steve, on the other end of the line. He was at the hospital, and I can still hear the sound of his voice. He said, "David." "Yes. How's Dad?" And after a long pause, my strong big brother spoke with a soft, trembling cry, and said, "He's dead."

I wept uncontrollably.

Steve explained to me that while Dad was lying on the couch that night, he all of a sudden started gasping for breath, and by the time the ambulance arrived just a few minutes later, he had died of a severe heart attack.

Yesterday, my whole family was together, and we spent time looking at pictures and reliving memories, and it was so much fun...but can I be honest with you? I really miss my dad. And I really wish he was here. And I know I'm not alone. I know I'm standing in a room surrounded by people who really wish someone in your life was still there.

And you know, we talk all the time around here about the sovereignty of God in all things. And I am convinced that the sovereignty of God is a rock solid foundation to stand on in all things. But it does make you wonder, sometimes, doesn't it, why God ordains some of the things He ordains?

The providence of God is often perplexing. And His mercy sure seems mysterious sometimes. The 18th century hymn written by William Cowper, who came to know Christ in an insane asylum. He suffered with bouts of depression all his life. But when he came to

Christ, he discovered that amidst dark days, when faced with storm clouds of trial and difficulty, God takes those same clouds and uses them to rain down showers of mercy and grace. He penned a hymn called "*God Moves in a Mysterious Way*," and in it he wrote:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs
And works his sovereign will.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.
Judge not the lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.
His purpose will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.
Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain:
God is his own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.*

Is that true? Are storm clouds of trial, difficulty, hurt, pain, and grief that we dread really filled with mercy that will break with blessings on our head? Behind God's frowning providence on earth, is there really a smiling face in heaven? And how can we know that the bud, which tastes so bitter, will blossom sweet as flower?

I know that so many of you in the past, or maybe even today, have walked or are walking through storm clouds of trial and difficulty, hurt and pain, maybe grief, and you have asked or are asking questions about what God is doing in your life...wondering *why* He has done *what* He has done, or *why* He is doing *what* He is doing.

And even if you're not walking through storm clouds at this moment, such clouds likely lie ahead somewhere, maybe soon, in your life. So how are we to understand the perplexing providence of God? And how are we to trust God, let alone worship God, when His mercy seems so mysterious, when His ways seem so bewildering? These are some of the questions lying behind one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture: the book of Ruth.

I know I have preached on this book before – it was back in 2009 – 5 years ago – but I just don't think it's a coincidence that we would come to this book this week at the same time I as your pastor am freshly processing through grief and pain in my personal life...so I just can't help but to come back to Ruth today.

So if you were here 5 years ago, or even if you were here at an adoption conference we hosted not long ago when I returned to this book, some of this narrative will sound familiar. But I just can't help coming today to this story of how a sovereign God weaves together

every detail of the lives of a woman named Naomi, her daughter-in-law named Ruth, and a man named Boaz to show that even amidst pain, God provides, that even amidst loss, God is love, and that even amidst real questions in the middle of honest hurt, God cares for His people and He gives them hope.

So today, I want to invite you to journey with me (maybe *back* with me) into this story. And *journey* is the right word. I want to lead us to read it, particularly the first 2 chapters, slowly and deliberately together.

And I want to pause as I did 5 years ago along the way to point out various elements of the story...some that are obvious, and others that are not so obvious because we don't have the benefit of hearing this story read in its original language. The author (and we're not sure exactly who it is, but we know that the author) is a brilliant storyteller, using literary figures and features throughout the story to draw the reader's attention to particular details.

So we'll move slowly on a journey through the story. You may make notes along the way as we walk through chapter 1, and then, when we get to chapter 2, I want to show you four simple characteristics of a redeemer in the book of Ruth (a significant concept we'll be introduced to in that chapter). And in the process, my prayer is that we would realize this isn't just a story about Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Instead, it's a story very similar to ours. It's a story about how God weaves together the details of our lives to show us His love and His mercy, even in the middle of pain and difficulty.

So let's start with Ruth 1:1. Now keep in mind – this is only one of two books in the Bible named after a woman (the other is Esther), and this is the *only* book in the Old Testament named after a non-Jew. With that background, let's read verse 1. *"In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons"* (Ruth 1:1).

Ok, let's pause there, and note the setting of the story. When it comes to time, Ruth follows the books of Joshua and Judges, which we've read over these past weeks. In the book of Joshua, the people of God entered into the land that God had promised them for centuries. Yet the book of Judges tells us how when they entered that land, they turned from God, time and time again—it's such a hard book to read, isn't it? The depravity of man is on display. And the last verse of the book of Judges sums up the setting of the people of Israel in the book of Ruth. Judges 21:25 says, *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* These were dark days as the people of God were engrossed in their sin, looking to no king to lead them, including God. This was a time where everyone did what he or she wanted.

So that's the time, now notice the place. The place where the story begins is Bethlehem, a name that means "the house of bread," but the problem was: there was no bread. There was famine in the land—a reality that, by God's grace, most of us in this room know little about. Sure, we get hungry, and we may even say, "I'm starving...or I'm famished," but we have no idea what we are saying. And we hardly have any idea of what it means to be literally without food as hundreds of millions of people around the world are, wondering if they will live, or if their children will live. Let's pray particularly for 50,000 Yazidi people stranded without food and water on a mountaintop near Sinjar, Iraq today, forced to flee their homes due to Islamic persecution.

Now this time and place leads a Jewish man to leave his homeland for a foreign land in search of food for his family, so he goes to Moab. Now Moab is not just a foreign land geographically, but also spiritually and historically. Remember...the Moabites began in

Genesis 19 when Lot had an incestuous relationship with his daughter. Consequently, this was an outcast people. In the book of Numbers, when the people of God sought to pass through Moab, they faced resistance. The women of Moab seduced Jewish men into sexual immorality, which resulted in 24,000 Israelites dying. The Moabites were an idolatrous people. And in Deuteronomy 23, God declared that no Moabite could enter the assembly of the Lord, down to the 10th generation. Needless to say, for a Jewish man to go to Moab was shameful, to say the least.

Now verse 2 says, *"The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there."* A side note here – Elimelech means "God is king." So think about it – in a time where the judges ruled and there was no king, we have a clear picture from the beginning of the story that God indeed is king. Yet the next few verses introduce tragedy into the heart of the story.

And as I mentioned earlier, the language here in the Hebrew has sort of a staccato (or clipped) style – it's terse, it's quick, almost unfeeling. We don't have details, we don't have emotion, just cold, hard, blunt, heavy facts. Verses 3-5, *"But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband."* There it is – in a matter of three verses, you have ten years of torrential tragedy, and just like that, the family of four Israelites is down to one.

First, Elimelech, the leader of the family who brought them to this strange land, dies, and Naomi is left a widow in Moab raising two sons. These two sons marry Moabite women – keep in mind the history here. Moabite women – the ones who seduced Israelite men into idolatry and immorality. Moabite women – who are not even allowed into the assembly of the Lord. And then, after ten years, Naomi's sons, Mahlon and Chilion both die.

If you can only imagine – we're not sure if they died at the same time, or one soon after the other – but talk about unexpected tragedy...a tragedy that is only heightened by the fact that Naomi is now left not only without her husband and her sons and finds herself with two Moabite women, but none of them has any heir to carry on their family.

And this is the curse of all curses. In the ancient Near East, particularly in Israel, there was no greater tragedy than for a family to cease to exist. And this sets up the ultimate problem of the book – because Naomi's family now teeters on extinction. To emphasize this, when you get to verse 5, you'll notice the author doesn't mention Naomi's name. The Bible says, *"The woman was left without her two sons and her husband."* Naomi has now virtually lost her identity. She's an aged widow with two barren daughters-in-law from Moab. She has no hope, no security, no home, no future, nothing. We must feel the weight of this in order to feel the wonder of verse 6.

At a time when a suffering woman and her two foreign daughters-in-law find themselves with no provision, no security, no home, no future, with nothing, in utter hopelessness, verse 6 says, *"Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food."*

This is the first time the Lord is mentioned in the story. Yahweh. Yahweh had visited His people with aid, and He had restored Bethlehem to the "house of bread" it was intended to

be. This is one of those verses that has figurative alliteration that just jumps off the page in the backdrop of the dark verses that precede it.

So verse 7 says, *"So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah."* Now on her way, listen to what Naomi says to her daughters-in-law. Keep in mind, this is the first dialogue we have seen in the book, and some of the most important facets of the book of Ruth are revealed in dialogue. And up until this point, over ten years have passed, people have died, barrenness and hopelessness have sunk in, but nobody has said a word in the story. Until you get to verse 8, and Naomi says in verses 8-9, *"But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!'" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept."*

Now this is more than a "Goodbye and God bless you." Naomi thanks them for their kindness to her. You can only imagine what these three women have now been through together. Ruth and Orpah, leaving their own people to marry Israelite men, now set apart from other Moabites, living in years of barrenness, both of them, with no children, only to see their husbands die. They had lived, struggled, cried, mourned together for years, and Naomi turns to bless them and to free them up from any responsibility they felt they had toward her. Naomi says, "You deserve better – you deserve husbands and a family – not to be stuck with me – an aged widow with nothing."

You can imagine the emotion when the rest of verses 9-10 say, *"Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.'"* They wept together. As Naomi speaks, loud weeping emerges among the three of them as they consider not being together. As a sign of continued kindness to Naomi, they say, "No, we will go with you." And Naomi basically builds an argument for why they should go back.

Listen to her reasoning in verses 11-13 because it's pretty solid,

But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me."

If they stay in Moab, they can find another husband, have a family, and live happily ever after. On the other hand, if they come with Naomi, they will have nothing.

Now we've got to understand the background for why Naomi mentions the fact that she has no more sons, because the book of Deuteronomy provided for situations like this. If there was a childless widow, the brother of the husband would take the wife under his care and provide for her in his family. So if Naomi had other sons, they could provide for Orpah and Ruth. But Naomi is saying that she has no more sons – she doesn't even have a husband – and even if she did and were to have another son that day, Orpah and Ruth could never wait long enough to be cared for by her son.

Naomi is saying to them, "Just as there is no hope for me, there will be no hope for you if you come with me." And it's even heightened in that last sentence when she says to them,

"Obviously, the Lord's hand is against me," and the implication is, "If you stay with me, the Lord's hand will be against you, as well." Why would you want to go with Naomi?

You know...to be honest, when I have read this before, I have thought this was somewhat rude of Naomi – does she not want them? But the reality at this point is that Naomi's words are a reflection of kindness. She is saying, "Stay here, have a husband, and don't tie up your lot with mine."

So what was the effect of the speech? Verse 14, *"Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her."* They weep again. Then Orpah goes, but Ruth stays. Not just stays...she clings. It's the same word that's used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the marriage bond when a wife leaves her family to cleave, to cling to her husband.

In the middle of the tears, Naomi says in 1:15, *"See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."* And now the stage is set for one of the most memorable speeches in all of Scripture—beauty, courage, commitment, devotion, love all wrapped up into one.

Listen to what Ruth says in verses 16-17, *"Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."* Wow.

You know, I find it interesting that these words are often used in wedding vows. Now they're a pretty incredible picture of commitment, and if you used them in your wedding, then...that's great...but the reality is, this is a daughter-in-law speaking to a mother-in-law. Let me tell you what I don't often see at weddings – speaking to future in-laws like this! Ha!

The language is simple, yet profound. The audience can almost imagine Ruth loosening her embrace on Naomi, looking directly into her eyes, and saying, "Don't try to talk me out of this. I am committed to you. As your God is my witness, I am committed to you, and He will judge me if I break this commitment." And in a single moment, Ruth forsakes everything – her homeland, her people, her gods, her religion, her safety, her future, her destiny, her everything – to go with Naomi.

And this was not just for this life – there was an intimate connection in Near Eastern thought that where you were buried and among what people you were buried had an effect on your afterlife, and Ruth said, "I will be buried with you, with your people, under your God." This was the ultimate commitment, not just to Naomi, but to Naomi's God. Her words are so strong, so poignant, that they silence Naomi, and we don't hear another word until we arrive in Bethlehem.

Verse 19, *"So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem."* The silence on the road to Bethlehem serves to show the profound nature of what Ruth said, but it also sets the stage for a somewhat awkward entrance into Bethlehem. You can only imagine what is going through Naomi's mind as she re-approaches the city that years before her husband had turned their family's back on. They had left the Promised Land and had retreated into a pagan land, and now she was returning – not just without her husband and sons, but with a Moabite woman.

Look again at verse 19, *"And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, 'Is this Naomi?'"* The word is out, and the town is shocked – could this be Naomi? Now Naomi's name means "pleasant," so listen to what happens as soon as they ask, "Is this the pleasant one?"

Naomi responds in verses 20-21, *"Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"*

How's that for a greeting after 10 years away? You go up eagerly to this woman you've missed, and you say, "Hey, you're back, Naomi". All of a sudden, she looks at you and says, "Naomi (Pleasant)? Nothing could be further from the truth. My name is bitter." I left full, with everything I loved, everything that was most important to me, and I have come back with nothing.

Based on these last words from Naomi in Chapter 1, our impression of her may not be too positive...but we need to be careful not to be too hard. Just think about all that she has been through: the death of her husband, the marriage of her sons to foreign wives, the death of her sons, no heir in her family. She has experienced blow after blow and tragedy after tragedy, and she is hurting.

And don't miss this: in it all, the writer has not indicated any sin at all in Naomi's life that has led her to this point. She had followed her husband's leadership, cared for her sons and daughters-in-law. Obviously, she's not perfect, but somewhat similar to Job, this is a picture of seemingly unwarranted, mysterious suffering that evokes the question, "Why?"

I love the honesty of what we see in Scripture, for there is no flippant faith here. This is wrestling, struggling, fighting faith, and Naomi's words here at the end of Chapter 1, referring to herself as Mara, are tough, but they're honest.

Do you ever feel this way? Do you ever feel like the providence of God has been hard on you? Do you every feel like the weight of your circumstances are too heavy to bear? This is a woman with honest hurt that I'm guessing many people in this room can identify with this morning...if we're honest.

And not just Naomi's perspective, but imagine this scene from Ruth's shoes. Naomi is standing there in front of a group of people, you are standing by her side, and she says to them, "Look at me...I have come back with nothing...the Almighty has brought only calamity upon me." And all of a sudden, the women of the town who are listening now look over at you. And you look down. *You* are a living picture of the Lord's affliction. *You* are a living picture of the misfortune the Almighty brings.

And when you get to verse 22, the writer says, *"So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab."* Did you notice that? The writer doesn't just say Ruth returned with Naomi, but "Ruth the Moabite," and here at the close of the chapter, the writer highlights a tension that will mark the rest of the book as a Moabite woman finds herself in the middle of a strange place according to God's sovereign providence.

Oh, in both Naomi and Ruth's life, just think about how their story touches on so many other stories represented around this room. For there are times when we may be tempted to think that God is far from us... When we are surrounded by famine, longing for something

that we do not have. When everything seems foreign...maybe we find ourselves in a particular place physically, emotionally, relationally, or spiritually...and we're not quite sure how we got there...and we certainly never planned to be there. When death strikes, and the pain just won't seem to go away...maybe it was a short time ago, or maybe a long time ago...maybe it was expected, or maybe it was totally unexpected. When despair sinks in...when we're not sure we really want to go on in our current circumstances, and we feel like there's no way out. Amidst barrenness... Amidst loneliness... In our grief...when we hurt and we cry and we wrestle...and... In our shame...when the things we struggle with we may not be proud of...or when we struggle with things that others don't understand, and may even look down upon.

In all these things (and my aim is not to be depressing, but to be real), we begin to ask the question, "Is God really near in all this?" And this is what I love about how the first chapter ends – look at the close of verse 22, "*And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*"

The chapter ends with a note of hope in a harvest God that has begun...and Naomi has no idea what lies ahead in those harvest fields. For she has come back saying, "I am empty," but she has no idea that standing next to her, in the person of Ruth, is the fullness of God. She has no idea that God is about to weave together the story of all stories to show His gracious and unfathomable blessing toward her.

And don't miss this, brother or sister in Christ: in moments of despair when God may seem farthest from you, He may actually be setting the stage for the greatest demonstration of His faithfulness to you. Amidst your sorrow, God may actually be plotting for your satisfaction. For all throughout the history of His people, God often ordains sorrowful tragedy to set the stage for surprising triumph.

You know, I mentioned that I preached through this book 5 years ago...and at that time, Heather and I were in the process of adopting what we thought would be a child from Nepal.

Most of you know our story, but for the sake of friends who are visiting with us today, Heather and I struggled through infertility for about 5 years, through which God led us to adopt our first son, Caleb, from Kazakhstan, only to come home two weeks later and find that Heather was pregnant, leading to the birth of our second son, Joshua, nine months later.

But even with the awareness that we could apparently have children biologically, we also knew that we wanted to adopt again...so we began that process from Nepal...and we prayed night and day for two years for a child in Nepal...but after those two years, Nepal shut down for adoption...which left us wondering why God had led us down what we thought was a dead end road. Again, perplexing providence, providence that redirected us to start an adoption process from China...where over a year later we had the privilege of adopting our little girl.

And as soon as we heard her story, in light of our story, we knew exactly what we would name her...and it all went back to this story. We knew that we were going to name her *Mara Ruth*. Mara...not because we figured she'd be a bitter little baby...and thankfully she's not...but because from the first moments of her life, she seemed to have tragedy written all over her. Abandoned in a brown paper box and left on the streets outside an orphanage.

Even for Heather and me, after those years of infertility, we at one point seemed to have barrenness written all over us. But just as Naomi had no idea how God would use Ruth to turn her story of sorrowful tragedy into surprising triumph, our daughter, my wife, and I had no idea how God was weaving together our stories according to his sovereign design. For God would take this abandoned girl and make her into an adopted daughter...and at the same time he would take a barren woman and make her into a blessed mother.

Oh, I want to be careful here...I realize that not every story of infertility turns out this way...and for that matter, not every story of sorrow leads to immediate satisfaction...but I do know this, brother or sister in Christ...I know that our Father in heaven always knows what He is doing on earth...and we can trust Him.

So Naomi and Ruth come to Bethlehem with two basic needs: they need food, and they need family. So look with me at what happens next, Ruth 2:1, *"Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz."* Enter Boaz. Two key facts about him: One, he is from the clan, or family, of Elimelech—Naomi's husband who has died. And second, he is a "worthy man," a reference both to Boaz's wealth and his character. So that's his introduction, now onto the action.

Ruth 2:2, *"And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor.' And she said to her, 'Go, my daughter.'"*— You see, God had set up a way for Israel to care for the poor and provide for them at harvest time. God instructed landowners and harvesters to leave grain in the corners of their fields and along the way here and there to provide for those who either had no land or had no food. It wasn't much that they could have, but it was certainly better than nothing.

So with her mother-in-law's permission, Ruth set out to find a field and collect a bit of grain at the mercy of a landowner who might let a Moabite woman work in his field. And this is where it gets good!

Ruth 2:3, *"So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech."* Ha! Don't you just love that? "It just so happened she came to Boaz's field!" – The language here is intentional and dramatic as the author takes pains to point out that this is no accident! And then he reminds us, as if we've forgotten, that Boaz is from the clan of Elimelech. Oh, don't miss the truth here, brothers and sisters: Nothing happens by accident. There is a sovereign God who is at work behind all the "accidental details" of your life. Nothing in your life happens by accident. Everything happens by appointment. Again, I can't explain everything, but know this brother or sister in Christ: no matter what is happening in your life or my life, the God of the universe is always (always!) working behind the scenes for the good of His people and the glory of His name. Which leads right to verse 4.

Ruth 2:4a, *"And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem."* *"Behold, Boaz"* – Boaz just happens to walk up at that time! Men, ever sit in a sappy movie with your wife, and things that happen are so unrealistic, and I think, "This is absurd! This never happens..." And you start to say something, and you look over at the wife with tears in her eyes, just engrossed in the romance story. And you think, "What? Are you buying this???" This is the deal, with God's universe, the drama is always planned, and always happens in His perfect timing. So watch.

Ruth 2:4b, *"And he said to the reapers, 'The LORD be with you!' And they answered, 'The LORD bless you.'"* Boaz is the knight in shining armor blessing everybody left and right.

Ruth 2:5, *"Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, 'Whose young woman is this?'"* I love it! *"Whose young woman is that?"* In other words, "Check her out!" The Foreman replies, *"She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.'" So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest"* (Ruth 2:6-7). In other words, "This woman from Moab has no husband, and no one to care or provide for her."

And this sets the stage for first mark of a redeemer. Now this is a term we'll actually be introduced to in verse 20 of this chapter, but let me go ahead and start using it here, and I'll explain the actual term more there. So the first mark of a redeemer in the book of Ruth is that the redeemer seeks the needy as His family.

The Redeemer Seeks The Needy As His Family

So Boaz sets out, walks past all the other workers to Ruth. Ruth 2:8, *"Then Boaz said to Ruth, 'Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women.'" How's that for an Old Testament pick-up line? Ok, so maybe not the most romantic, but actually pretty incredible when you think about it. He addresses her with a term of endearment ("my daughter"). And he says, "You stay here."* Then, second mark of a redeemer is that the redeemer saves the needy from harm.

The Redeemer Saves The Needy From Harm

Ruth 2:9 *"Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn."* It was apparently not uncommon to have been mistreated, especially as a foreigner. Boaz says, "You will be safe in my field." Look how Ruth responds, *"Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, 'Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner'"* (Ruth 2:10)? She was overwhelmed by favor far beyond what she deserved. This sets up the response from Boaz that is so majestic and poetic in the original language of the Old Testament.

Ruth 2:11-12, but Boaz answered her, *"All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. 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!"* "This is why you are experiencing blessing, because you have taken refuge under the wings of the Lord God."

Ruth's response is beautiful, she says, *"Then she said, 'I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants'"* (Ruth 2:13). Basically, Ruth saying, "I'm on lowest rung social ladder, and you have comforted my heart; you have spoken to my soul."

And Boaz is left speechless, until verse 14, *"And at mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.' So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over"* (Ruth 2:14). That's the closest thing we have in the Old Testament to a first date. A nice romantic meal over roasted grain – But more than just a meal. The symbolism is shocking! This is Boaz serving Ruth at his table. Boaz, the lord of the harvest, goes to a Moabite woman and says, "Come, eat at my table." See it—the third characteristic of a redeemer is that the redeemer serves the needy at His table.

The Redeemer Serves The Needy At His Table

At the beginning of this chapter, Ruth has no food. Now she's enjoying a meal with the lord of the harvest. A Moabite woman! And it only gets better! Verse 15,

"When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, 'Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.' So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley" (Ruth 2:15-17).

Just to give you a little background there—a little perspective—an Ephah is about ½ to 2/3 a bushel. I'll give you a little more background. That is 30-50 pounds of barley. Just to put that into even better perspective—the average ration for a male worker was 1-2 pounds per day. She just gathered 30-50 pounds. That's at least a half a month's wages in one day!

This is how you know Ruth works out, verse 18, *"And she took it up and went into the city"* (Ruth 2:18). Ha, she's buff! Ruth comes back with 30-50 pounds, and *"Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied"* (Ruth 2:18). (I love that. While she was eating at the "Barley Grill" there, she was stuffing her pockets with more food.)

Now she comes back with all this grain, with all this bread, and Naomi is giddy to say the least! Listen to verse 19, *"And her mother-in-law said to her, 'Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you'"* (Ruth 2:19). Did you notice how she repeated herself there? It's intentional. The narrator is showing how words are almost tumbling out of her mouth. She can't get her thoughts straight. This is one happy mother-in-law.

And the question is, "What man did you meet?" Now here's the beauty. We know who she met, and we know the significance of who she met, and who's field she's been working in. But Ruth doesn't know the significance for all we know, and Naomi obviously doesn't know. And in Ruth's response, notice how the narrator intentionally waits until the last word of Ruth's reply so that it's almost like we as the audience are just looking at Naomi's face, and we cannot wait to see her reaction when she hears this name.

Ruth responds casually, *"So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, 'The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz'"* (Ruth 2:19b). Naomi goes nuts! Verse 20, and Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, *"May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, 'The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers'"* (Ruth 2:20).

Now a little bit of background here—God had set up in His law (back in Leviticus) a way for a kinsman of the same clan to provide for family who found themselves destitute or in desperate circumstances. And one of the ways they could provide for someone in their family or clan was to redeem their property – basically, to purchase or buy back whatever belonged to, say, a husband who had died – and to bring that property – whatever it was – back into the family – along with providing for the members of that family. He would literally bring them into his family.

Now basically, in order to redeem—to purchase, to lay claim to something, and to care for someone—three factors were necessary. One had to have the right to redeem. So there was a family line here, it was a chain, and you had to be next in line. Second, one had to have the resources to redeem in order to be able to purchase. And, third, one had to have the

resolve to redeem—be willing to purchase. You could have the right and resources, but if you didn't want to redeem, then it wasn't going to happen. If you had the resolve, but not the right and the resources, then it wasn't going to happen. So you had to have all three in order to redeem.

So in verse 21, *"Ruth the Moabite said, 'Besides, he said to me, "You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest"' (Ruth 2:21).*

And Naomi, the quintessential mother-in-law, starts plotting. Verse 21, she said to Ruth, *"It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted." So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law" (Ruth 2:22-23).*

So at the beginning of this chapter, you have Ruth and Naomi with no food and no family. By the end of this chapter, you have Ruth and Naomi with abundant food and the hope of family. In chapter 3, Ruth continues to work in Boaz's field, but Boaz is not moving very fast in this thing, which leads to a somewhat shady scene on threshing floor in chapter 3. And there we find out that there's another kinsman who is closer in line in Naomi's family that has the right to redeem before Boaz does.

So, in chapter 4, Boaz goes to this man who has the right to redeem Naomi and Ruth, but this man eventually, though he has the right and resources, lacks the resolve to redeem. Which then sets the stage in chapter 4 for Boaz to do this work of redemption, which leads to the 4th mark redeemer, which is that the redeemer showers the needy with His grace.

The Redeemer Showers The Needy With His Grace

Boaz has the right, Boaz has the resources, and Boaz has the resolve, so chapter 4, verse 13 says,

"So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.' Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed" (Ruth 4:13-17).

Do you know what "Obed" means? "Obed" means worship. So here is Naomi, once a bitter woman, now sitting blessed with her grandson whose name means worship. And you'd think that would be where the story ends, but it doesn't. Instead, it gets better.

The book of Ruth is like a movie in which you've watched the final scene come to a close, you've seen the screen go dark, and you think it's over until that same screen lights back up with a postscript describing what happened in subsequent days.

The book of Ruth contains what must be one of the most powerful postscripts to the end of any story, for the narrator writes concerning Ruth and Boaz's son, *"They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David" (Ruth 4:17).*

To Jewish men and women who first heard this story, this postscript was nothing short of jaw-dropping. God just used a Moabite woman in an otherwise hopeless Israelite family to

bring about the most famous King of Old Testament Israel. And then the book ends with a genealogy – ten generations – symbolic when you think about ten years of death and barrenness in Moab – and even when you think about Israelite law that said no Moabite should be welcomed into the assembly down to the tenth generation – the book ends with ten generations from Perez all the way to King David. And the story doesn't even end there.

Go with me to Matthew 1. This is where we begin to realize that this is not just a story of redemption at a point in Israel's history. This is a story within a story. This is a *good* story that points to a much *grander* story.

For listen to how the pages of the New Testament begin—the introduction to Jesus—“*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham*” (Matt. 1:1). Then he gives all these names and you get down to verse five and you see “*Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by...*” who? Ruth. “*Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king*” (Matt. 1:5-6)—exactly what we have read about. Then you get down to verse 16 and you see, “*Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ*” (Matt. 1:16).

This all begs the question, what in the world is a Moabite woman doing in the line that leads to the Son God? Why is she included in this family line? And the answer is: the same reason any one of our names might be included *from* this family line. Not because we deserved to be there, have earned our way there, but because of the mysterious mercy of God.

Oh, for all those who are in Christ, see it: we are Ruth. We are the needy, wandering/working in the field with nothing in us to draw the Lord of the Harvest to us. In fact, all the factors are against us. We are outcasts—outsiders—sinners desperately in need of favor. And the good news of the gospel is that there is a Redeemer who has sought us as His family, who has come to us and pursued us as sons and daughters. He has crossed all kinds of lines and made a beeline for you. Ephesians 1 says that “*he chose us in him before the foundation of the world*” to redeem you through the blood of Christ.

Has sought us as His family. He has saved us from harm. He has drawn us to Himself. He has nestled you and me under the shadow of His wings, such that even when the storm rages around us and difficulties befall us, God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help trouble.

He has served us at His table—Brothers and sisters, the Lord of the Harvest has invited you to His table. He has seated you there, but not only seated, but He has served you there! He has stooped to shock you with His love. He has spoken to your heart, and satisfied your soul in a way that He has said that you have no need to go to any other fields, you will experience all the satisfaction you need in my field.

And He showers us with His grace. Jesus is our Redeemer. Does He have the right to redeem us? Absolutely, He is a nearer kinsman, like us in every way, yet with out sin. Does He have the resources to redeem us? Absolutely! He is Son of the living God, with all authority over death, sin, suffering, and the grave—He came telling the waves to be still, telling the sick to be healed, telling the blind to see, lame to walk, demons to flee, and dead to rise—without question He has the resources to redeem.

But does He have the resolve? Praise God! Jesus has the resolve to redeem. He did not take up a cross because He *had* to, but because He *desired* obedience to His Father and the salvation of our souls. And He has gone and paid the price. He has endured the wrath that

you and I are due. He has taken the punishment of our sin upon Himself so that we might be redeemed.

Now, non-Christian friend, I am totally convinced that our sovereign God has brought you here right now to hear this good news. He loves you, and He does not want to leave you in your sin. He wants to save you from your sin, and all of its payment and all of its punishment. He loves you so much that He has sent His Son to pay the price for sin. And so I invite you to receive His love right now. Would you trust the love of God for you? Would you trust what Jesus has done as your Redeemer to reconcile you to Himself, and to change your life, and your future forever?

And then, Christian brother or sister, know this: no matter what happens in your life, you have a Redeemer who loves you, who shelters you under the shadow of His wings, and He is committed to satisfying you in His field and at His table. Behind a frowning providence, there *is* a smiling face. These clouds surrounding you that you so much dread *are* big with mercy and they will break in blessings on your head.

And those blessings may not be evident today, and they may not be evident tomorrow, but there is coming a day when all the trials and all the trouble and all the pain and all the hurt and all the tears and all the grief will be no more. The old will be gone. The new will have come.

Oh, brother or sister in Christ, look forward...look forward to the massive postscript that *will* appear on the screen of Heaven as all the stories are told of the ways God used perplexing pain and mysterious means to prove His matchless mercy on behalf of the people He loves. This is the hope on to which we hold. This is the hope in which we rest. Jesus has redeemed us. He has conquered sin and death and the grave. He has said, "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, even though he dies, he will live." And if that's the case, you and I have nothing and no one to fear in any storm clouds of this life.

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