

There Is a Redeemer

Series on the book of Ruth

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Bible Text: Ruth 3

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Do take your Bible and turn to the book of Ruth. Find Judges and it's right after that, before the book of Samuel. It's relatively easy to find but you can miss it. There's only about 4 pages involved in the whole book and if you are visiting this evening, it's a nightmare for you. You are coming into the middle of a series which means it's like coming in at episode 4, no episode 10 of 24 where all the action has been going on, the characters are well established. You've come in and you are flying blind. What are you going to do? So here's a synopsis for you, okay? Listen very carefully. Listen very, very carefully because I'm going to test you on it as you leave this evening and I can be at random doors asking questions, okay? Boy meets girl. Boy marries girl. Boy and girl move to foreign country. In the foreign country, boy and girl have 2 boys. Boys grow up, they marry 2 girls. Boy dies leaving the girl with her 2 boys and their wives. The 2 boys die leaving the girl with 2 daughters-in-law. This is not a horror movie, by the way. Girl and 2 daughters-in-law decide that they must go back home where they came from. Daughter-in-law number 1 decides she's not going back with her and stays in the foreign country. Daughter-in-law number 2 comes back with her to their own country which happens to be Judah. And when we find them, girl is living in the hometown which is called Bethlehem and her daughter-in-law has taken into her own hands to try and make ends meet for her, go out and do some work. The only work that was available was to work in the fields gathering some barley and some oats and whatever was lying around, bring it home and cook it for dinner.

So that's the story so far and it's a love story. It is pure and simple a love story. It's a human love story but behind it there is an even bigger love story as we'll see and as we've been seeing and that is the story of the greatest love affair of all, the love of God for his creatures, for poor, fallen and lost people. This chapter we read this evening begins with the girl, the beginning of our story, Naomi, by now she's an older woman and she's a mother-in-law which is not the best kind of title to have but there you are. It's one of the things that comes along with the territory. She's a mother-in-law which means she's a potential nightmare but this one is quite good. She is a reasonable mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law loves her. They got on very well so she can't be too bad. Naomi is speaking and Naomi is expressing her heart for her daughter-in-law who is called Ruth. There in verse 1, we find what's on her mind, what's on her heart for her daughter-in-law. They have been so much together. They have been through the loss of a husband on the

part of Naomi. A husband on the part of Ruth. They have left Ruth's native land and Ruth has come to this new land where she is quite different from everybody else. She comes with baggage as we'll see and they have been through a lot together and what Naomi wants for Ruth, in spite of all they'd been through is, she says there in verse 1, "Should I not seek rest for you? I want rest for you." That word "rest" is a big high powered word in Hebrew. It means "to find security." It means "to be established." It means "to get settled." It means "to feel confident." It means "to find perfect peace, rest." "Shouldn't I hope that you would find in your life instead of all this turmoil and loss and grief, that you would find rest?"

Interestingly, the great, great, great, great, great, great grandson of Naomi and Ruth, her great, great, great, great grandson said this, using the very language that Naomi uses here, "All of you that labor and are heavy-laden, come to me and I will give you rest." Stability. Peace. Being established. Getting settled. Feeling confident. That kind of rest. People want that. People still want that today. People look in all the wrong places, looking for certain pleasures to do that or certain things to do that or certain knowledge to do that or achieving certain goals to do that or establishing certain relationships to do that. People still look for that kind of rest today, real peace and rest. Of course, the Bible's big answer to that question is: where we find real peace and rest is in a relationship with God. In the Heidelberg Catechism it is summarized like this, "What is your only comfort in life and death?" And the answer is, "That I'm not my own but belong body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."

Well, Naomi wants her daughter-in-law to find rest and her solution to that problem is found in what she says in verse 2 about something that has been happening on the fields of Judah outside Bethlehem. As Ruth has gone out day after day after day, now for about 3 months by this stage, every day going out there, following the people who are harvesting as was the custom in Judaism, the harvesters have left bits of the edge of the fields and the poor and the stranger have followed behind the harvesters and picked up what they could, taken it home in order to survive in order to eat. That's what Ruth has been doing and from day one, she found herself on the fields belonging to a particular person, a very significant person as the story unfolds. His name is Boaz and Boaz is wealthy. Boaz is older. Boaz is a bit, shall we say, challenged when it comes to knowing what to do with women. It's not an uncommon problem. Can I say that? And the older men get, the harder they find to deal with women so let me just throw that out there. In fact, I suggested last week that you go and see girlie movies just to get into the mood and try and understand the incomprehensible. Anyway, I was kidding. Just kidding honestly because I know you can throw things as well.

Naomi's solution to the problem of Ruth finding rest is in Boaz because they have found out something about Boaz and she tells us what it is in verse 2, "Our relative." Boaz is a relative and as we'll see, that puts him in the potential position where he can actually help them and he can help them by doing something in particular. He can help them by being able to redeem Ruth. Now, I'm going to define these words in a moment but I'm just throwing those words out that are used. Those two words are key words in understanding what is going on. What excites Naomi is that Boaz is a potential redeemer and that has

very practical implications for their survival and for Ruth's ultimate earthly happiness as well as eternal happiness. We're told 3 things about this potential redeemer. First of all, there is a redeemer who is qualified to redeem, who is worthy to redeem and who is determined to redeem.

Let's look at those. First of all, this man Boaz is a redeemer who is qualified to redeem. Look back, if you will, to the previous chapter, to verse 20 of chapter 2 where Naomi says, "What's going on here? This man. This man you accidentally came across when you were out on the fields, this man who noticed you and who is asking about you before you were introduced, this man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers." Not only is Boaz interested, not only is he a gentleman, not only has he shared his picnic lunch with her as we've learned already in the story, but technically, at least as far as Naomi sees, technically, he is in a position to help them. Now, this word, "relative" we understand but the word that's used in the Hebrew is different from our word "relative" though it has that connotation and the word "redeemer," those words are not words we use in everyday language. We're describing something here which belongs to another culture and to an ancient custom and we're used to, I think, today much more than our grandparents were, we're used to dealing with diverse cultures. We are introduced to them on the television screen. We learn about people living in different cultures. Increasingly, America is becoming multicultural. It's not the kind of monocultural way it was, say in the 1940s or 50s. It has changed dramatically over the last couple of decades, 2 or 3 decades. So that change, I think, has given us the mental tools that we need to understand cultural customs such as are being described here in the book of Ruth.

Two words then, the word "relative" here in Latin is the word "levere" and in Hebrew "goel." And I need to put them in their context and the context is that God's people in the Old Testament times were a nation state, not a church as we are but a nation state under God. They were a theocracy. They were not a democracy but a theocracy. Yahweh, the Lord, was the King and their covenant Lord and Yahweh had called Israel and had given them the land. He had taken them out of Egypt. He had paid an expenditure of great power in order to bring them out of Egypt, bring them across the Red Sea, preserve them for 40 years in the desert and bring them along to the River Jordan and open the Jordan so they could cross into this Promised Land. He had called it a good land, the land flowing with milk and honey. It was like another Eden, another garden of God. When they came into the land, God gave to absolutely every one of his people a plot of land. Every Israelite family had a plot of land in the Promised Land. And they had that land not as freeholders but as leaseholders. That land belonged to God but he had given it to them as a gift so they were not allowed to sell it as they pleased because the land belonged to each family as a mark of God's intention to give to all of his people an inheritance. Part of the land would be there's forever in their family line. It was part of God's blessing.

Now, that's where these two words kick in. For the word for "relative" has to do with the duties of a next-of-kin because when God called out these people, he called them into a family relationship with himself and with one another so that if a man died who had been married, died without having children, the name of that dead man was to be perpetuated through his widow's remarriage with someone in the family: a brother or a cousin or

whatever. And any children that they had would be regarded as children of the dead man. He would have a child on behalf of the dead man so an Israelite woman was not allowed to marry outside of the family of the clan or the tribe or the nation in order that the name and therefore the inheritance of the man continued in that family. The reason given is this, let me read it to you. The reason given is this "that the man's name may not be blotted out of Israel." So the inheritance was preserved.

The word for "redeemer" is an addition to that. Not only is the person qualified because they are a next-of-kin but a redeemer is someone who has the potential to buy the freedom either of a person or to buy back property that's been lost as a result of some effort in the past or some error in the past. I'm going to read 2 passages from the book of Leviticus that address these 2 ideas and just to give you an idea of what's going on here. Let me read this, "If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem," buy back, "what his brother has sold. If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, let him calculate the years since he sold it and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property." So the buying back of the land, that was something provided for in the law of God and, in fact, "But if he does not have sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until," 50 years, until the 50th year, "the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property." The property will come back to the family that first had it. God was concerned, you see, for this idea of an inheritance in the land, the Promised Land.

We also read of the redemption, not only of property but also of a person. "If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you or to a member of the stranger's clan, then after he is sold he may be redeemed." You can buy him back. "One of his brothers may redeem him, or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him." In other words, buy him back out of slavery. Now, why was it so important to have this in the law? That the land and people were so important to God that Yahweh, the Lord God who had expended such effort to bring Israel out of Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land, was so concerned that his people remain free and remain in the land that he had given to them? Well, the answer is that he had entered into a covenant with them. He had a relationship with them. God had established a relationship and the reason given is given in Leviticus 26:12, "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." He doesn't want them to be lost. He doesn't want to lose the land. He doesn't want them to be lost from the land. It's part and parcel of their relationship with God.

So that's the background to the language that Naomi uses and having explained what that means, I want us now to get back to the story. Three months have passed, 3 months where everything seems to have been put on hold in the story. Every day Ruth has gone to work. Every day Ruth has followed behind the harvesters as they have been harvesting and no doubt Boaz has been doing what we've already found him doing in the story, he's been having a word to his young men to make sure they drop things wherever Ruth is.

He's already done that. We've been told that in the story. "Make sure, you know, you just let some stuff drop out and you pull out some. Make sure you get some of the good stuff. Just kind of drop it to the side so she can see it. You know, don't put it somewhere where it will be obscure. Make sure that she gets as much as she needs." This has been going on now for 3 months. Three months.

Maybe there have been other little incidents of sharing his picnic lunch with her. We saw that happening but all that's, we're not told what's going on in those 3 months except that every day she's been going out every day and she's been harvesting behind the harvesters and there are a whole sort of questions that are going on in our heads. Will Boaz every wake up? You want to go and slap him. "What are you going to do about this, Boaz? You like her. You know, are you going to make any...are you going to ask her out? What are you going to do? I mean, you're making provision for her. You're caring for her. You're showing attention to her. You've said some nice things to her. Are you going to do anything about this, Boaz?" That's the kind of questions that I would want to ask anybody I saw doing that. A warning, you young men, right now, don't monkey around. Don't waste your time. Don't waste their time. Get on with the job. "Boaz, when are you going to wake up? When are you going to wake up?"

Maybe it was and I think there are suggestions, aren't there, in the text there, did you notice that as John was reading it to us earlier, I think perhaps he just felt, "Maybe I'm too old for her." Maybe he felt a bit insecure. He was getting long in the tooth. He's about 35 or something. You know, really old. Or whatever it was. And he really feels he's over the hill and she wouldn't look at him. You notice that he thanks her. Later on he thanks her, "I'm glad you didn't look at the young men whether they were rich or poor. I'm glad you didn't look at them. You looked at me. That's a great honor that you did me." He's really quite pleased about that we see later on in the passage we read. Did you notice that? Were you listening? No, okay.

Anyway, Naomi says about this man, "Look, he's a redeemer." He has the potential to help them out. The question is: will he do it? He's not under obligation to do it. He could do it. He's in the position to do it but will he do it? So he's qualified to redeem and it's that qualification that drives a strategy that Naomi comes up with in this story. It's a risky strategy but she believes in God and believing in God, you notice, doesn't mean she sits back, folds her arms and says, "Well, if God's in it, it will happen. If it's God's will." You know these people that are so superspiritual, "Well, if it's God's will, it will happen. We won't do anything. We won't kind of make any moves but if God's in it, it will work out." They're still waiting there for God's will to work out. Naomi wasn't one of those people. She's like, "I do trust God. I trust that God has..." Here we have this amazing circumstance that she went to the first field she went to was Boaz's field. "He is qualified to help us. Will he help us? We don't know. We'll never know until we try and find out whether he'll help us," and she comes up with this bright idea as to how to do it.

Then we move into the second thing. This man is a redeemer who is worthy to redeem. The word "worthy" is the key word, I think, in this whole section as we shall see. It's the time at the end of the harvest for the threshing to take place. The separation of the grain

from the sheaves. Threshingfloors are very significant in the Bible, by the way. Very often they are a place of testing. They are a place of decision. They can even be a place of judgment. Solomon's temple was built on a threshingfloor, the threshingfloor of Ornan. In 2 Chronicles 3:1, we are told that was where God finally decisively dealt with David, tested him, sifted him. The language, Jesus uses that language when he talks about Simon Peter being sifted like wheat, threshed like wheat. God had put him through that, that threshing process.

The final judgment even in the Bible is described as a threshing, a separation of the wheat and the chaff so it's a place of judgment and here in the fields of Bethlehem, Boaz and Ruth, both of them, are tested. Are tested. And you can see there is a deliberate ambiguity in the approach that Naomi takes and sets up for Ruth. From a storytelling point of view, it's heightening the tension. What will Boaz do? How will Boaz respond? Here's her idea: "I want you to go and have a bath. I want you to put all the ointments and perfume on. I want you to paint your nails. Put on your best robe and I want you to go out there just before the sun sets and see where he lies down to sleep." What is going on here? What is this strategy? This is the strategy she comes up with. Now, Naomi's motives are the highest motives, they are the best. You look at the end of chapter 2 and you'll see how excited she is by the prospect that this man could help her out of her plight but she also sees the need to do a little bit of helping hand here. She is a romantic at heart. She can't help but see that this may very well be what God has worked out for them. She wants to see if this is the opportunity they've been waiting for. Supposing they just let it slip by and nobody knew anything? Would it mean that at the end of the day these 2 people would grow old not knowing one another when that's been God's plan?

I mean, you can see the way she is thinking and this is how she's thinking: suppose he does like her? Every indication is that he likes her but does he know that she likes him? I mean, he's older. She's younger. In that society if you're younger you don't go up to an older person and ask them out or whatever. He's the landowner, she's not even an employee. She's lower than an employee. He's a man of respectability in the community. She is a Moabitess. Moabitess' did not have a good name. The Moabites led Israel into sin. The Moabites were despised. It was a social faux pas to be seen with a Moabite and imagine dating a Moabitess? I mean, that would have been really looked down on within Jewish society. So, how would he know? Ruth just couldn't go up to him and say, "Excuse me, I don't know if you're interested in me or not and I don't know if you're interested in getting married or not, but I just wanted you to know that if you ever were or are, I'm free and I'm interested too." I mean, you just don't do that, do you? I mean, really? Seriously? It might work and you may want to try that but don't be disappointed if it doesn't work just out the way you hope. I really honestly think Naomi had been reading too many of the wrong kind of novels when she was down by the beach.

So she comes up and she devises this strategy and it begins with Ruth's preparation for the meeting. There's nothing wrong, by the way, with being all dressed up and putting a little powder on, perfume on as she does and dowdiness does not equal godliness but if you like that, that's fine. Ruth, herself, she has the purest of motives and she has the purest of motives if you look at verse 9, you'll see that. Eventually she does get to speak

to him and she says, "I'm Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant for you are a redeemer," and she uses the very same word that she used in chapter 2 by Boaz when he's talking to her initially in that initial conversation about the God of Israel. He says to her, talking about her conversion to the God of Israel, "The Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel under whose wings you have come to take refuge." She uses the same words to him and what she's suggesting to him is, "Maybe the God of Israel who has taken me under his wings will use you as a human instrument in providing me with earthly security that is a reflection of his heavenly security." Now, I think that's a quite...you notice that Ruth comes up with that. Naomi doesn't tell her to say that. Ruth, herself, is showing herself as this story develops as a woman who has been listening carefully to the law of God and has absorbed the law of God and knows what the law of God requires and loves the law of God and the word of God and is prepared to use it. She understands it. She knows it. She loves it and she uses it.

So she comes with pure motives. Naomi, in her rush to push the door of opportunity, actually puts both Boaz and Ruth at risk. I mean, he is a man. He may be older than her but he's still a man and all the temptations of a hot-blooded man confronted with a young girl in the middle of the night, all perfumed up and tucked up there at his feet. All of that, you know, there was a potential problem there. Then there are the comical aspects to the story. What does Ruth do? She makes her way to the threshingfloor. It's late at night. It's in the Middle East. They are not near any cities. There is no ambient lighting. When it's dark there, it's really dark there. You can't see your hand in front of your face. That's why Naomi says to her, "Make sure you know specifically where he lies down and how you're going to get there once it gets dark."

So that's what she does. She hangs out. The darkness falls. Everybody is snoring their heads off. It's been a long day and she sneaks up and she lies down by his feet and she uncovers his feet. You say, "What is the uncovering of the feet thing?" Well, if you think about it: do you know something, in the Middle East at night, even though it's hot during the day, at night the temperature drops dramatically. It really gets cold in the Middle East at night. So what's the best way to get his attention? Shake him? Make a noise and wake up everybody? You don't want that to happen. No, no, no, no. You may need this strategy sometime. Just lift up the rug off his feet. His feet will get colder and colder and colder and that's what happens because he wakes up with a start. Did you notice at midnight, this is one of the greatest understatements in the entire Bible. "At midnight, the man was startled." He woke up with his feet cold and turned over and behold. This word "behold" is a, "Ah-ha!" word, "and behold a woman lay at his feet!" I mean, "What?" What are the chances of that happening out in the fields of Bethlehem in the middle of the night? You wake up and there's this chick and you can smell her before you see her. She's got her perfume on. I mean, really. It's absolutely hilarious. It's one of those hilarious, you can imagine the sheer shock. It's a wonder he didn't die of a heart attack.

I don't know but what an amazing story. It got his attention. Of course, it got his attention and you have to admit she's got guts. This is a culture in which women didn't propose to men. Younger people didn't propose to an older person. A worker didn't propose to a field owner. She was acting counterculturally. Her motives were pure and the strategy held

risks. What would Boaz do? Well, he realizes immediately that she is a woman of worth. He doesn't fop her off. He doesn't dismiss her audacity. He recognizes her worth. Look at verse 11, "All the gate of the people know that you are a woman of worth." That's a word, by the way, people use of him. He is a worthy man. Now he's saying that those 3 months or so that she's been in the field, everybody is talking about her. They know her story. They know her conversion to Judaism for Moabitism. They know the kind of person she is and already people are talking about her and are saying about this woman who had given up everything in order to stick by her mother-in-law through thick and thin and leave her own home and her own gods and her own land in order to be with her mother-in-law and care for her mother-in-law and be out every day in the fields gathering up grain so that she could cook and feed and care for her mother-in-law. Everybody was saying about this woman that she was a worthy woman. In the story this is so important because what we're discovering in the story is that she perfectly mirrors Boaz. He is worthy. She is worthy. Here are 2 worthy people. Here are 2 godly people who share in a similar passion for the things of God. She uses his own language, the language of being under the wings of God. She translates that to him, what that might look like. Being under the wings of God may in the providence of God involve him in taking her under his wings. Doing the godly thing for her in caring for her.

The threshingfloor demonstrates the character of both these people. She has not crept up to him in the darkness of the night to seduce him for a one night stand. He will not take advantage of the opportunity lying at his feet but rather immediately sees that she is a woman of worth and before their little interaction is over, the future is already being set up. That takes us to the third point: he is a redeemer who is determined to redeem. Will he get involved? Will he help? Or will he turn her away? You need to reverse this 10 to 15. It's the middle of the night. The stars are shining in the sky. Somewhere in the background, Bing Crosby is singing, "Moonlight becomes you. It goes with your hair. You certainly know the right things to wear. And if I say I love you, I want you to know, it's not just because there's moonlight, although moonlight becomes you so." There is something like that going on in the background. Kidding.

But there it is, it is a romantic moment and he says, "Yes, I can do this but there is a legal problem which I have to clear up first. But if I can clear it up, as the Lord lives, I will redeem you. Stay here until the morning." He covers her up and then just before it's daylight, "Go back home," and then he gives her that great big token of his love. He says, "Show me that skirt you've got on there," and he puts into it 80 pounds of grain. This girl, by the way, could carry weights. She was a hunk and she could carry 80 pounds of grain home. No longer was Naomi going to be empty. Here was plenty provision for them. In fact, when she sees her, you know, technically what it says in the Hebrew, when Naomi sees Ruth when she comes in, she looks at her and she says, "Who are you? Who are you?" The whole of her face was transformed. She was in love. She was transformed by in-loveness. Something had happened that had eased the burden, that had taken away the clouds of grief that had been on her heart and her mind and at that moment that she walks through the door carrying her 80 pounds worth of grain, her mother-in-law looks at her and says, "Who are you? What has happened? Tell me what's going on." God has been at work providing a redeemer.

"There has been a redeemer," said Naomi, "who is qualified and who is worthy and who is determined to redeem." In fact she says right at the very end of the thing, listen, "This man will not rest until he settles the matter. He'll do everything that needs to be done." Naomi says, "I'm just sure this man is going to make sure this happens." And you know, as we come to this great chapter, it is about a romance but it's also about the romance of redemption on the bigger scale, isn't it? Because the great, great, great, great, great grandson of Boaz and Ruth is going to be the redeemer of God's elect, one who is qualified to redeem. Why was Boaz qualified? He was a relative. He was one of the next-of-kin. Why is Jesus qualified to help us? Because he has taken on our humanity. He is our brother. He has taken on flesh and blood because the children of flesh and blood, it was necessary that he should take on flesh and blood. Taking our humanity so that he qualified to be our Redeemer, a relative close to us, able, qualified to redeem and worthy to redeem. Worthy just as Boaz was worthy in that there is nothing in his life, there is no element of his life that is unworthy in any sense. In a position to help and worthy to help and determined to redeem. In the desert, tempted by the devil, determined that he will not take any other route than what he had to do to redeem his people. Throughout his life, tempted to let the crowds make him a King. He wouldn't let them. He had to do what was necessary to redeem his people. Tempted in the garden to turn away from what lay before him, the cross and its shame and pain but refusing that. Taking the cup of suffering. Why? Because he was determined to deal with the legal matter that needed dealt with that he might redeem you and me and buy us out of our slavery to sin and return to us the inheritance that God had promised to all of his people, an inheritance that isn't a big of real estate in Palestine but is this whole world. That is our inheritance. "The meek shall inherit the earth." Jesus died not only to buy you out of slavery and give you your freedom but he died and rose again in order that he might give you your inheritance with the saints in light. There is a Redeemer, Jesus, God's own Son, precious Lamb of God, Messiah, the Holy One.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that in the enormous fun and laughter and lessons of this story is captured the elements of the salvation that their story, the story of Ruth and Boaz, was leading towards and pointing forward to. As they went through, we just tried to put ourselves into their shoes or in Boaz's case not in his shoes but as we look back into that experience, we think of what was going on in their heads. Just 2 people, ordinary people, not thinking that anything that was going on there would have any significance beyond them, how they felt for one another, what might happen in the future and in the ordinariness of their lives, a union was to take place which we benefit from today because our Redeemer was to be the fruit of that union. Our Redeemer, who saves us from our own sin and who brings us into the glorious freedom of the children of God, our Redeemer came into the world with those as his antecedents and is not ashamed to have them included in his genealogy, not ashamed to admit, as it were, right at the very beginning, the frontispiece of the Gospel, that his great, great grandmother was a Moabite stranger. And we thank you that because he welcomed her, he welcomes all of us here whatever our background, whatever our baggage. He welcomes us into his

family by his grace. Lord, tonight will you help us to sense and to know that we are welcome by the Lord Jesus. We pray in his strong name. Amen.