

From Bitter to Sweet—the Story of Ruth
The Great Kinsman Redeemer!
Ruth 2:1-3:18
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Just as there are seasons of the year— Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, so there are seasons in life. Childhood, adulthood, perhaps marriage and busy family season, empty-nest, retirement, and so on. Or take the three seasons that made up the long life of Moses:

- The fiery passion of youth, from 0-40
- The quieter years of a shepherd, 40-80
- The mature years leading Israel, 80-120

As in nature and in life, so there are seasons of the soul. Naomi, from the book of Ruth, has just experienced a “season of bitterness”:

“Don’t call me Naomi (which means pleasant), call me “Mara” (which means bitter) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter” (1:20)

Remember? Ten years earlier Naomi had left Bethlehem with husband Elimelech and two sons Mahlon & Kilhion? Elimelech led the family to the hostile land of Moab because of a famine back in Bethlehem? During the decade that followed in that strange land, husband and two sons died, leaving three graves and three widows behind: “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty” - s season of bitterness!

And yet, since “Light shines on the righteous” (Psalm 97:11): if Naomi had sat down with quill and parchment - for this story is 3000 years old—she would have been able to count many blessings, not least the conversion of Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, and Ruth’s great love for her. A daughter-in-law like Ruth, say the women of Bethlehem, is better than seven sons! (4:15)

As we move to Ruth chapters 2 and 3, this morning, the light is dawning as Naomi’s life moves from a season of bitterness to a sweet season of great joy.

We’re going to retell the story of these two chapters, stopping along the way to comment, but I’d like you to listen out for what we’re told about Boaz, and ask yourself, who is Scripture pointing forward to here?

The Story

“Naomi had a relative on her husband’s side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz.” (2:1)

So Naomi and Ruth have just travelled back from Moab to Israel because they’ve heard that “the Lord had come to the aid of his people”—there was food back in Bethlehem now! And immediately

we're introduced to this Boaz, a man of considerable standing—influence, wealth, character—and who was related to Naomi through her dead husband Elimelek.

It turns out that Boaz was a kinsman-Redeemer. In the OT if a family fell upon hard times, someone who was close to the family, would stand in to help them. For example, if they had *sold their ancestral lands*, their farms, to pay off debtors, the Kinsman-Redeemer would buy those back for the family. Or if they had no *descendants* then the kinsman Redeemer would step in to help remedy the situation:

- “Kinsman”—he had to be a close relative
- “Redeemer”—buy back, but really to save the family from the plight they were in

Naomi and Ruth were in a perilous situation: they had no husbands to protect them and no sons to give them a future, their situation, according to the customs of the day, was desperate and hopeless.

Well as soon as the widowed pair arrive in Bethlehem, after greetings and introductions,

Ruth said to Naomi, “Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour.”

Remember Ruth is a complete outsider, a Moabitess, and while she knows and wants to go out and work to provide for herself and her mother-in-law to eat, she's vulnerable, and nervous, being a woman and a foreigner and hopes to find a friendly field. Watch how the Lord provides for the two of them:

PROVIDENCE 1— The OT law

She went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters.”

The OT granted dignity to the poor: instead of giving them free handouts, they could work to eat: farmers were encouraged to leave some of their crop in the field or vineyard for the poor to harvest and feed themselves:

“when you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev 19:9-10)

Politicians of all stripes would do well to consider the wisdom of these OT laws.

PROVIDENCE 2—the right field

With this provision in mind, off Ruth goes into what seems a random field, to gather the left behind grains. *“As it turned out, verse 3, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.”*

Look at how God graciously orders our lives!? “As it turned out” - Ruth “just happened” to chose what she thought was a random field, but the Lord led her to the right field: *“In their hearts people plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps.” (Proverbs 16:9)*

PROVIDENCE 3—Boaz shows up just then! “Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The Lord be with you!” “The Lord bless you!” they answered.

God is at work in all the small details of life. Boaz is a godly man, who greets his worker, not with a “Howdie” or “Hi” but with “The Lord be with you.”

Boaz is an attentive man because he notices this new person in his field:

“ Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, “Who does that young woman belong to?” The overseer replied, “She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.”

The foreman has clearly been impressed with Ruth’s politeness and hard work.

Boaz welcomes the outsider and protects them

“Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. 9 Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you.”

Boaz is a kind man:

“Whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled. At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” Boaz replied, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

Single girls, when you’re looking for a husband, pass by good looks, riches and popularity, and seek someone who will be kind to you. And husbands let us always be kind to our wives.

When you ask “what does godliness is a woman look like” Ruth gives a fair reply: godliness in a woman is made up of graces such as hard work, respectfulness, and dedication to her family. And when you ask what godliness looks like in a man Boaz gives a fair response: a godly man uses his strength to protect and provide for the weak.

Boaz speaks words of comfort: *"May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant -though I do not have the standing of one of your servants."*

Boaz raises her status: *At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar." When she sat down with the harvesters,..." (she's welcomed in!)*

Boaz is super-generous

"he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Let her gather among the sheaves and don't reprimand her. 16 Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her." So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah (about 22 litres of grains!) 18 She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough"

Naomi is amazed at this one-day haul!

Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said. "The Lord bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers." Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'" Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else's field you might be harmed." So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

We're not given all the details, but over the weeks of harvest, widow Ruth takes a liking to Boaz (who in all likelihood was a widower) even though he is older than she. And though Boaz may have taken a shine to Ruth, in his mind he has labelled Ruth as "unattainable" not only because he is a man of integrity—but because he assumes she will want to marry a younger man her own age.

Wise old Naomi knows that in order to jolt godly Boaz out of his "Ruth is unattainable" midset Ruth will have to use a little feminine charm:

One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash, put on perfume (Coco Mademoiselle?, Miss Dior?), and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet

and lie down. He will tell you what to do.” “I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered.

There was nothing untoward about this suggestion, it was an established well-understood tradition that if a woman asked a man to throw his garment over her, it was a proposal for marriage.

The book of Ruth, we should not in passing, teaches us that God is interested in every part of our lives, including love, romance and marriage. There are some Christians—called aesthetes—who think that the God is not interested in the “nitty gritty” or “mundane” aspects of daily lives. The person we marry, the place we met them and so on. The book of Ruth is a rebuttal of that error. God cares for every detail of our lives, down to the number of hairs on our head, which he has numbered, Jesus says, Matthew 10.

So Ruth went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man (was it cold feet?!); he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet! “Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman -redeemer of our family.” (That’s the marriage proposal) “The Lord bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor.

Boaz a man of impeccable integrity, protects Ruth and her reputation, look at what he does next:

And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. 12 Although it is true that I am a kinsman-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I (another kinsman-Redeemer who was first in line) 13 Stay here for the night (it would be dangerous for Ruth to be walking on her own at night—remember no street lights) and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your kinsman-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.” So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized (she must protect her honour against gossips) and he said, “No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor.” (Boaz must protect his reputation too).

Boaz is outstandingly generous because before she leaves at dawn,

He also said, “Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town. When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?” Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’” Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled

today.”

Jesus our Great Kinsman Redeemer

There are important lessons in these two chapters about character life and love, but no-one reading these two chapters can fail to see our salvation prefigured: for you and I are like Ruth and Naomi, and Boaz is a type of Christ.

We were in great need

Just as Ruth and Naomi were destitute with disaster looming, so you and were once “without God and without hope” in the world, “dead in our transgressions and our sins” , “by nature objects of God's wrath.” (Ephesians 2).

We were facing an empty life in this world and God's judgement in the next.

God sent a Kinsman Redeemer

But God who is rich in mercy, sent a Kinsman-Redeemer to rescue us from our plight. Like Boaz Jesus had be close to us, a kinsman, a real human being:

“He had to be made like them, fully human in every way, (Hebrews 2:17)

Like Boaz, but perfectly so, Jesus was upright and holy:

“Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens” (Hebrews 7:26)

Like Boaz, Jesus welcomed the outsider:

“You who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2)

But greater than Boaz, Jesus redeemed us with his very life:

“it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:18-19)

And greater than the generosity of Boaz,

*“From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another...”
(John 1:16)*

The story of Ruth and Boaz is also the story of the Church and the Lord Jesus Christ, our great Kinsman-Redeemer.

Can you say, today, may I ask you, that Jesus Christ is your Kinsman-Redeemer?

If the answer is “no” may you not only hear his call today, he says “come follow me,” but may you also be given the grace to respond in faith and obedience.

If the answer is “yes” then you too respond to him with faith and daily obedience, and worship:

*I will glory in my Redeemer
Whose priceless blood has ransomed me
Mine was the sin that drove the bitter nails
And hung Him on that judgment tree*