

Emptied and Filled

Sermons from Ruth

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Emptied and Embittered (Ruth 1)

We can accurately say of Naomi's life, "When it rains, it pours." Ruth is a key figure in the Book of Ruth through whom God brings salvation, but the narrative focuses more on the misery and subsequent restoration of Naomi. But what is God's purpose in focusing on Naomi's misery and restoration? Like most Biblical narratives, the Holy Spirit inspired this account to do more than retell history, but he does not explicitly tell us what his purposes are. But, when we carefully read between the lines and observe how the Holy Spirit crafts each scene, we can discover the Holy Spirit's "unstated," yet intended messages (Block, 604-605).

This book in specific uses Naomi's trials to tell how God providentially restored pleasantness and life to a woman who was emptied and embittered by famine, faithless decisions, and death. As John Piper says, this book is "for people who wonder where God is when there are no dreams, visions, or prophets," and "for people who wonder where God is when one tragedy after another attacks their faith." This book is also for people "who wonder whether a life of integrity in tough times is worth it," and "for people who can't imagine that anything great could ever come of their ordinary lives of faith." Personally, I want to share this book with you because it's picture of God's providence through kind people has refreshed me in anxious times. As we read **Ruth 1**, put yourself in Naomi's shoes and feel her emptiness and bitterness.

Naomi's Emptiness (1:1-5)

Three pieces of information in verse 1 set the context for the Book of Ruth. First, this took place in the days of the judges. This is the period between Israel settling the land of Canaan and the time of the kings. The days of the judges were wicked times. **Judges 21:25** says, "*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" Because of this, the second piece of information makes sense - there was a famine in the land. Moses told Israel in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 that God would strike Israel with many punishments, including famine, when they refused to obey God. Combine this with Naomi's statements at the end of chapter one and the fact that the famine was nonexistent 40 miles away in Moab, and it is safe to assume this famine was from God. The third piece of information tells us that this narrative focuses on a family from the small, insignificant town of Bethlehem. Bethlehem means "The House of Bread." The irony is evident. When we forget the Lord and do what is right in our own eyes, we will find even the house of bread to be empty.

This is only the start of Naomi's pain. Moses told Israel that curses like famine would only continue while Israel refused to repent. Instead of leading his family to repentance, Elimelech moved his family to sojourn in Moab. The sequence of famine striking the promised land and a man moving his family to sojourn in a foreign land without God's consent may be familiar to you. After God Abraham told to go to Canaan, Abraham similarly moved his family from Canaan in a famine. After moving to Moab, the two sons disobeyed the Law by marrying Moabite women. The text is probably giving God's judgment of these decisions when it declares that Elimelech died after moving and that the two sons died childless ten years later. Naomi lived in wicked Israel, famine struck her, her husband moved her from God's land to Moab, her husband died, her sons married foreign women and died childless ten years later. For Naomi, every time you think it can't get worse, it gets worse.

But Naomi is not to blame. It is doubtful that faith motivated Elimelech to move his family to Moab and that faith motivated his sons to marry Moabite women. These decisions most likely

led them to their deaths. But it is easy to criticize Elimelech when we sit in air-conditioning with our bellies filled and three months of food in the pantry. Consider what it would be like to have no food in your pantry or grocery store. You and your family are hungry. What do you do? Our daily difficulties are different, but I hope putting ourselves in Elimelech's shoes helps us see how easy it is to primarily let anxiety, not God's promises, drive our decisions.

Jesus teaches us the correct perspective in **Matthew 6:31-33**. *"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ... But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."* It is not wrong to take economics into account, but we put ourselves in deeper trouble when anxiety over economics primarily drives our decisions. When we seek the kingdom of God and righteousness first, Christ guarantees that what we wear and eat tomorrow will be taken care of. The proof is in this account: when Naomi returned to Bethlehem, her people were still alive. God preserved them through the famine and eventually visited his people with more food. Elimelech and his sons only brought death to themselves and misery to Naomi when they put economics and marriage before faith in God's Law. Fortunately, this account was not written to merely correct us for our faithless decisions; rather, the weight of the rest of this account is meant to show us how God can bring life and pleasantness to the bitterest of situations and attitudes.

Naomi's Bitterness (1:6-22)

Consider Naomi's bitterness in this account. Naomi heard that YHWH had visited his people and given them food, so Naomi arose and started returning to Judah with her two daughters-in-law. But Naomi turned to Ruth and Orpah and said, "Return to your mother's homes. May YHWH deal kindly with you just as you have been kind to the dead and with me. May YHWH give you rest in a husband's home." This incited a deluge of crying. The two girls, who are bereft of their husbands, insisted, "No, we will return with you to your people."

But Naomi's thoughts started overwhelming her. She was on this same road with her husband and sons ten years earlier. They hoped to find life in Moab. Now, her husband and her two sons were dead. So, she pushed back. "Turn back. Why would you go with me? Do I have sons in my womb that can be your husbands? Turn back. I am too old to have a husband, and even if I had a husband tonight, would you wait for my sons to grow up? No my bitterness is too much for you. The hand of YHWH has gone out against me." Naomi also speaks bitterly in **verses 20-21** when she returns to Bethlehem. She tells the people to no longer call her "Naomi" ("pleasant") but "Mara" ("bitter") because God has dealt bitterly with her.

Naomi's harsh reality revealed her belief that YHWH was her problem. God's hand was heavy upon her, but she became an embittered old woman who blamed God for everything. Nowhere does she acknowledge Elimelech's or her sons' faithless decisions. She sounds similar to Job (cf. Job 6:4; 27:2). After Orpah leaves, her attitude only worsens when she tells Ruth that Orpah has returned to her gods and that Ruth should follow her. Naomi goes from wishing YHWH's blessing upon her daughters-in-law to telling Ruth to return to her gods. Naomi is so embittered that she does not even somberly ask, "Where is God?" She knows where God is. He is busying himself with ruining her life and you should stay away.

Naomi is bitter and this is wrong, but who can blame her? Tragedy after tragedy wrecked her just as Job was wrecked. Like Job, this isn't Naomi's fault. But how can we avoid bitterness like Naomi's? The Holy Spirit helps us by crafting this account to point us to Naomi's classic

mistake of distorting reality. Naomi says in **verse 21**, *“I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.”* Naomi is bitter because her vision of reality is distorted. Let’s learn from this.

1. **When we are bitter, we often exaggerate how good the past was.** Naomi says she went away full, but this is false. Elimelech took Naomi and the family down to Moab because there was a famine. They left because they felt like they were empty! Naomi’s bitter speech reminds us to not exaggerate how good the past was. **Ecclesiastes 7:10** says, *“Do not say, “Why were the old days better than these?” For it is not wise to ask such questions.”* When we think the past was far better, we should think again. It is a blessing that God helps us forget our past pain, but it is not wise to exaggerate the goodness of the past.
2. **When we are bitter, we often exaggerate how bad the present is.** Naomi says God brought her back empty, but the subsequent narration in **verse 22** contradicts her. Naomi has missed God’s work in the storm. She is alive. Her people are alive. God visited them with food. It’s the beginning of the barley harvest. Most significant, God brought Ruth back with Naomi. Naomi has hit tough times, but God has not brought her back empty. When we think we are empty, let’s think twice because we have undoubtedly missed someone who is God’s blessing to us. It is on Ruth that we will spend the rest of our time.

Ruth’s Faithfulness (1:16-18)

When Naomi is all alone, at her lowest point, and has nothing to offer Ruth, but Ruth makes an amazing commitment in **verses 16-17**. Ruth has a family in Moab; yet, Ruth leaves her family and makes Naomi her family. Ruth can find a husband in Moab, but Ruth commits to Naomi who can give her no husband. Naomi has urged Ruth to go back to her people, but Ruth chooses to leave her people for Naomi’s foreign people. Ruth knows YHWH has judged Naomi’s family and nation, but Ruth makes YHWH her God. When Ruth leaves Moab, she is leaving any promise of a husband and children. She is leaving everything she knows: her family, people, land, and gods. As if this were not enough, Ruth adds in verse 17 that where Naomi dies and is buried, Ruth will die and be buried. This goes beyond marriage vows. Ruth is not simply committing her life to Naomi, Naomi’s people, Naomi’s land, and Naomi’s God as long as Naomi is alive. Ruth yokes herself so permanently to becoming apart of Naomi’s life that she will remain in foreign Bethlehem after Naomi dies. She will not return to Moab.

You may think, “How unnecessary! You have so much to look forward to elsewhere, Ruth! Why yoke yourself to this empty, bitter woman?” But when we think of how much pain Naomi is in, we can praise God and learn from Ruth’s faithfulness and selfless loyalty to this woman. Ruth is such a contrast in this chapter. When famine struck, Elimelech moved his family from God’s land and God’s people, Naomi instructed Ruth to return to her gods, and all Israel did what was right in their own eyes. Yet, in the darkest of days, Ruth faithfully loves Naomi by committing to Naomi’s people, land, and God. Ruth may have been a Moabite and a child of Lot, but she is true Israel and a child of Abraham. Without reading Leviticus 19:18, Ruth loves her neighbor as herself and is justified by faith. As **Romans 2:13–15** says, *“It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts...”*

Conclusion

1. When tragedy after tragedy hits us, let’s remember that allowing anxiety over economics drive our decisions will only bring more pain upon us and those around us.

2. When we become bitter over our situation, we should count our blessings again, because bitterness makes us exaggerate how good the past was and how bad the present is.
3. When our family and neighbors suffer, we can be a blessing from God when we are selflessly loyal toward them. In Christ, God is calling us from all nations to let him write the work of his law on our hearts. When darkness surrounds our neighbors, let us be loyal and loving. Let us trust God, take our neighbor's hand, and lead them into the unknown future God has prepared. We won't have all the answers, but we can be living examples to our hurting neighbors of how the Lord always provides.

Comforted and Satisfied (Ruth 2)

Naomi was bitter. She felt God had emptied her. Naomi's husband moved the family hoping to find provision in Moab. Now, ten years later, Naomi's husband and two sons were dead. Except for her daughter-in-law Ruth, Naomi returned to Bethlehem alone. Even the people of Bethlehem could see Naomi's misery. Was there any reason to put hope in pleasantness from God's hand when he had testified against Naomi like this? Such is the situation many of God's people find themselves in from time to time. We push on through difficulty in hopes of better days, but tragedy after tragedy strikes us and leaves us feeling lost. Is there any reason to hope in God again while we sit at the bottom? Logically, we know God can do anything, so we say "yes." However, this knowledge does not always help us hope in God because we think he has to work nothing short of a miracle to help us. We think, "How else could he deliver us?" While we shouldn't rule out the miraculous, Ruth 2 helps us with this struggle by quietly pointing us to God's subtle work through his people in a dark, wicked time. Naomi felt empty and alone, but notice how God comforts and satisfies Naomi and Ruth as we read **Ruth 2**.

Ruth's Humility and Labor

To see why we should hope in God again, we must first notice the emphasis on the worthiness of Ruth and Boaz. Naomi is despondent, but in verse 2 Ruth states that she will attempt to glean in the field of the one who graciously allows her. After Ruth gains permission to glean, the foreman makes it clear in verse 7 that she works hard. When she finishes gleaning, verses 17-18 tell us that she beat out what she gleaned and carried the equivalent of 30-50 pounds of barley into town. Ruth is a young, widowed foreigner in a wicked land. Ruth had every excuse to sit inside - afraid and hoping Naomi would provide. But Ruth took initiative, worked hard, and muscled through the day to provide food. Verse 23 even says Ruth worked like this until the end of the barley and wheat harvests - for 6-7 weeks.

And yet, though Ruth takes initiative and works with strength and endurance, her words in verses 2 and 7 show her humility. God's law commanded Israel to leave the edges of their field and any missed sheaves for those who were foreigners, widows, or fatherless (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:19-22). This practice did not lead Ruth to presume upon anyone's generosity. She says, "*Please let me glean...*" Further, when Boaz speaks kindly to her and tells her how he has heard of her kindness to Naomi, Ruth is nothing but humble and grateful in verses 10 and 13.

The Holy Spirit gives us a living example of a worthy woman through Ruth. Ruth has an uncommon balance of character. She takes initiative, she works hard, displays surprising strength, and never expects a handout; yet, she is humble, grateful, and generous to her mother-in-law. This balance of strength and humility is rare. Many gracious, thankful, and humble women are often afraid to take initiative, be strong, and work through difficulty. On the other hand, many self-starting, bold, strong, and hard-working women can often be self-satisfied, arrogant, and judgmental toward others.

Few would fault Ruth for missing this balance. It had to be difficult, but the benefit to Naomi was great. Women, when you work hard for your family, take initiative to help the weak, muscle through difficult problems, and yet simultaneously cloth yourself with meekness, humility, gratefulness, and trust in God, it matters. Keep doing what you do. Grow in it. In a world filled with women who are either spineless or brutish, take encouragement from the example of Ruth and other women here who embody this worthy, righteous character. Ruth is

not perfect and you will not be perfect, but when you strive by faith for this character, you can be a breath of fresh air and a blessing from God to the hurting. God sees the the humble, hard work you do for others when no one is looking.

Boaz's Kindness and Generosity

Boaz also displays admirable character here. Before we even see Boaz, the Holy Spirit makes sure we know in verse 1 that Boaz is a worthy, prominent man of character. The way Boaz and his workers greet each other in verse 3 may seem minor, but the Spirit included this for a reason. This tells us that Boaz is kind toward his workers and that Boaz is a man who trusts in the Lord. Boaz also shows great kindness to Ruth and to Naomi by extension. When Boaz speaks to Ruth in verses 8-12, he is gentle and actually takes responsibility for her safety. Boaz tells his young men to not harass Ruth and tells her to drink the water the *men* have drawn. Verses 14-16 are especially impressive. Boaz not only eats with his workers, verse 14 makes sure we know that Boaz himself served Ruth the roasted grain. Furthermore, the Law only commanded land owners to leave the edges of the field and any sheaves accidentally missed for the poor. Yet, in the spirit of loving his neighbor as himself (Lev. 19:18), Boaz goes beyond the Law and tells his workers pull sheaves from the bundles for Ruth to glean.

Since the Book of Judges precedes the Book of Ruth and since Ruth 1:1 says these were the days of the judges, Boaz's kindness to Ruth should come as a shock. **Judges 21:25** says, "*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" How are young, foreign women without husbands normally treated in godless nations like Israel? The end of the Book of Judges shows us that not even Israelites sojourning in their own cities were safe. Women were raped, treated as property, and snatched from their families. Naomi's statement in Ruth 2:22 about Ruth needing to go out with Boaz's young women so she is not assaulted in another field reminds us that Boaz's kindness and generosity is not normal. There was hardly anyone in Israel who would stop Boaz or care if he took advantage of Ruth and refused to let her glean, or allowed her to be mistreated by others. Boaz's generosity is also impressive when we remember that the famine has only started to end (1:6). What normally happens when people are blessed with provision after experiencing lack for a long time? People normally hoard it and fearfully excuse themselves from generosity. "We would be presuming God's generosity to let her glean here." But Boaz gives more than the Law commands.

Remember, Boaz gains nothing from this. He has no "romantic" or hidden agendas. It is sad how our perversely sexualized culture makes it hard to imagine this. A man can simply be kind and generous to a young woman - not because he wants to get in bed with her - but because he knows God is watching and it is the right thing to do.

Boaz was not a perfect man, but he also is an excellent example of biblical manhood. Being the men God designed us to be is not determined by whether we speak with a gruff voice, carry a gun, or get the pretty girl. John Piper put it well when he said that the character of a man is not simply determined by where he is on Sunday. To see the character of a man, we need to ask the questions religious people often forget. "How does he greet his workers?" "How does he treat foreigners?" "How does he treat the poor who ask him for help?" "Will he share his table and serve food to the least of people?" "How does he treat a woman when nobody cares how they are treated?" The text and the character of Boaz imply excellent questions for us to ask about ourselves. Even if no one around us cares, it matters how we speak to those under our authority. It matters how we treat the widow, the fatherless, the

foreigner, and young women. We can be a breath of fresh air to those who are hurting. Let us conduct ourselves as godly men so we do not fear answering questions about our character!

Yahweh's Protection and Kindness

Boaz and Naomi show us that Ruth and Boaz are only a supporting cast behind the main character of this scene - the LORD. Notice **verse 12**. When Ruth wants to know why Boaz is being so kind to her, he tells her that he has been told of all she has done for her mother-in-law before saying, *"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!"* Boaz recognizes here that he is simply the Lord's instrument of repaying Ruth for what she has done for Naomi. When Ruth came to Israel and to Boaz's field, she was taking refuge under the wings of Yahweh. This focus is later emphasized by Naomi in **verse 20** when she says of Boaz, *"May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!"* For someone who has been reading this book too quickly, this may sound odd. Naomi is praising God for his kindness, yet this scene may seem to be about Ruth's hard work, Boaz's kindness, and a lot of barley.

The text gave us an early clue that someone greater than Ruth and Boaz is at work here. After Naomi declared that God brought her back empty at the end of chapter 1, the narrator tells us that she actually returned with Ruth at the beginning of barley harvest. Then verse 1 of chapter 2 alerts us to another important detail: Naomi also had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man whose name is Boaz. As Naomi later reminds us (2:20), close relatives were "redeemers." Leviticus 25 instructs redeemers to help their poor family in a variety of ways. After telling us of Boaz's existence and importance, the narrator alerts us to a "phenomenon" in **verses 3-4**. Ruth *"happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem."* The Hebrew literally says, "and her chance chanced her upon" Boaz's field (Block, 653). Some balk at this interpretation, but this is a significant statement which is meant to point us beyond mere fate to the subtle work of God. Read this from the perspective of someone who knows King David's great-grandparents are Ruth and Boaz and the love story that results between these two. When the narrator alerts us to Boaz's significance and says Ruth "happened" upon Boaz's field, the narrator is saying, "wink, wink" and "see what God is doing!"

Ruth could have "happened" upon many fields. She could have happened onto the field of a godly person who was not a redeemer. She could have happened on a redeemer's field who was not godly. Yet, she "happens" upon the field of the one man who is both a redeemer and a godly man who is willing to do something about this family's misfortune. Both Boaz and Naomi recognize that this is no chance encounter and they give glory to Yahweh as the one "repaying" Ruth and "not forsaking" Naomi and her family. **Proverbs 16:9** hints at how God does his work. *"The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps."* Naomi was bitter and felt as though she was completely empty; yet, God in his subtle providence worked so that at the end of this chapter she and Ruth were both comforted and satisfied.

As Boaz says in **verse 12**, this is what happens when we take refuge under the wings of Yahweh. when we trust the Lord and take refuge under his wings, we will find the Lord "chancing" our steps towards his generous provision. Let us not miss that his provision very often comes through his humble, hard-working, kind, generous, faithful people.

Conclusion

1. When there are no miracles in sight, God's subtle providence gives us plenty of reason to hope in God when we feel like we have lost everyone and everything. This is because, even in the most wicked of times, God has preserved a faithful remnant. Elijah had to be reminded of this in his dark days and Paul reminds us of this as well (1 Kings 19:18; Romans 11:4). We ought not confuse hoping in "Moab" in the past with the results of hoping in God. When we hope in God, he can work through his people in ways we never see coming. We simply do not know how God is directing our path towards future provision and comfort. We may not even see how he worked until ten or fifty years later. Give glory to him then.

2. When no one is living righteously and when it seems that people are completely helpless, still make sacrifices big and small for the fatherless, foreigners, and widows. Though it seems like no one is looking, God sees. Though it seems like it will do no good, let God work out the big picture in his providence. Even if we simply share our table with someone, we do not know the good God can bring from these things.

When we feel like we are at the bottom, let's hope in God to comfort and satisfy us. When we see others who are hurting, let's be extensions of God's hand to comfort and satisfy them.

Pray, Plan, Execute, Wait (Ruth 3)

Naomi had taken blow after blow to her faith. Her husband died and her two sons died childless. Naomi bitterly thought God had emptied her and left her with no hope for sweeter days. But Naomi soon discovered through Ruth's loyalty and Boaz's generosity that God had not forsaken her. However, life was still not restored where there was death. God blessed Naomi and Ruth in this harvest, but what about next year? Could Ruth glean forever? What will happen to Ruth when Naomi dies? The future is difficult for Christians to think about. We know the future is in God's hands, but there are always uncertainties. How will God provide in the future? Where will we work and live? What will happen to our family when we die? God teaches us to work and prepare for the future, but he also teaches us to wait on him and to not trust in riches or our own strength. What do people of faith do when faced with an uncertain future? Pray? Wait? Plan? Work? The results God brings from Naomi and Ruth's approach can help us find a godly balance. Notice what they do in **Ruth 3**.

Planning and Executing

Naomi rhetorically asks Ruth, "*Should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?*" Naomi's hope has been renewed. Naomi had no plans for Ruth before, but Naomi now sees that the Lord "*has not forsaken the living or the dead!*" But this conviction does not blind Naomi to their uncertainty. Naomi is an old widow and Ruth is a widow in a foreign land. Therefore, Naomi devises a plan to encourage Boaz to marry Ruth. In the end, God is praised as the one who provided for these women (4:13-14). We can learn from God's work through this risky plan.

1. Righteous plans are motivated by prayer/faith, not fear/anxiety. Initially, we may think Naomi and Ruth are relying on their own strength and wisdom just as Elimelech did. But these women are a contrast to Elimelech. The motivation behind Elimelech's decision did not seem to be faith, but fear. Instead of repenting and trusting God to provide in the land he promised them, Elimelech concocted a plan to move due to his anxiety about the future. This is not the case with Naomi and Ruth. Naomi saw Ruth's lack a couple months before in chapter 1 and she gave it to the Lord - she prayed that God would bless her daughters-in-law with husbands. Now, Ruth has "happened" into Boaz's life and Naomi sees that this is from the Lord (2:20). Naomi's plan and Ruth's execution here is evidence of their hope that God could be fulfilling their prayer through Boaz. Like Elimelech, Naomi and Ruth see the uncertain future; however, these women are acting with faith and hope in the Lord.

The differences between faith-motivated plans and fear-motivated plans are often subtle and can seem insignificant, but the results are tremendously different. Elimelech's way ended in the grave, but Naomi and Ruth's way resulted in the restoration of life. Plans are not wrong. But when we are running about frantically planning for the future and solving problems, what is in our hearts? It is so important to maturely and honestly judge the motives behind the plans we make. When we are faced with life decisions and uncertainty, are we planning and acting because we have prayed and we trust the Lord, or because we are afraid and anxious?

2. Faith carefully plans/executes, but is not immobilized by risk/fear. Naomi and Ruth did not know if Boaz was God's answer to Naomi's prayer, but it was up to them to find out. It is not surprising that Boaz had not tried to marry Ruth already. Boaz was young enough to winnow barley and sleep on the floor¹, but he was old enough to call Ruth his "daughter." He did not expect her to marry an older man (3:10). Furthermore, Mahlon's death was recent

(1:4-6) and Ruth probably wore a widow's garment (cf. Tamar in Genesis 38), so it would be inappropriate for Boaz to interrupt Ruth's mourning. Therefore, Naomi tells Ruth to approach Boaz herself. This is bold and risky for a poor foreign widow. It is one thing to glean in Boaz's fields, it is another to ask him to marry you! If others overheard Ruth's request, she could embarrass Boaz. If Ruth goes to Boaz alone at night, he might think she is promiscuous. If the plan goes wrong, these women could potentially be disallowed from gleaning anywhere.

Boaz was winnowing barley that night, so Naomi tells Ruth to approach Boaz at the threshing floor in a way that gives the best chance for success, but avoids sending the wrong message. If Ruth normally wore a widow's garment, Naomi may be instructing Ruth to show Boaz that she is done mourning over Mahlon - wash up, anoint yourself, and put on normal clothes (cf. David in 2 Samuel 12:20). Once Boaz lies down, Ruth is to uncover his feet. "He will tell you what to do." Imagine how unnerving it would be to actually do this. Ruth walked all the way out to Boaz's threshing floor at night and then - with other men sleeping nearby - sneaked up to Boaz, uncovered his feet, and laid down. When Boaz woke up, it didn't go quite as Naomi said. Boaz turned over, saw a woman laying at his feet, and said, "*Who are you?*" But Ruth dared to ask. "*I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.*"

This is a big request. In chapter 2 Boaz said Ruth had taken refuge under the wings of the Lord. Now, Ruth asks Boaz to spread his wings over her. You may have a footnote or translation which says "spread the corner of your garment over your servant." There is a double-meaning here. Young men, if the girl next to you at a football game asks for your coat, there is usually a double-meaning. God's words to Jerusalem in **Ezekiel 16:8** illustrate this. "*You were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine.*" Ruth is taking a big risk with this request. "Boaz, will you marry and provide for me?"

Recognize that there is an easy way for Ruth to find a husband without risking humiliation and loss of provision. Much like Elimelech, going to Moab is easier. Ruth can tell Naomi she is crazy, pack her bags, return to Moab, and let a man approach her there. Or, Ruth can tell Naomi that they need to wait on the Lord, say another prayer, and go to bed. The carefully planned risk Naomi and Ruth take here should challenge us - do we have the faith of these women?² I am not saying we inherently have faith if we act and take risks. However, since when did "waiting on the Lord" mean that we pray in our closets and then crumble on the floor paralyzed by fear? Trusting in the Lord does not mean we refuse to take initiative, plan, and execute plans. Time and again Scripture shows us that the faithful bow in prayer and then rise to plan and execute because they are not too afraid to trust the Lord.

3. Righteous plans are motivated by selfless/loyal love, not selfish materialism. Lest we think all careful plans and risks are righteous, the text shows us how Naomi and Ruth did this because of their selfless, loyal love for each other. Notice who Naomi is focused on in verse 1. Naomi will benefit from her plan, but Naomi's plan has little to do with herself. Naomi says nothing about Boaz redeeming her family's land or about perpetuating the name of her dead son. Naomi is thinking about Ruth's well-being, just as she has been doing since chapter 1.

Boaz's response to Ruth in verse 10 reveals Ruth's heart. Boaz asks God's blessing upon Ruth for this kindness which is greater than her first kindness. Boaz is not praising Ruth for some kindness *to him*, but for her kindness toward Naomi. The NET, NLT, and NRSV all helpfully translate *beved* as "devotion" or "loyalty" instead of as "kindness." In 2:11-12, Boaz said Ruth's

first act of devotion was when she left her family and land for the sake of her mother-in-law. Naomi made this plan for Ruth's benefit, but Ruth came to Boaz for Naomi's benefit. Ruth could have gone after young men and married for love (poor) or for status (rich)³. Instead, Ruth came to the one who can redeem Naomi's land, give Naomi grandchildren, and perpetuate her son's name. This is not to say that Ruth would not love Boaz or benefit here, but this was not the reason she came to Boaz. She did it because she was loyal to Naomi.

God is showing us the heart of true Israel and the kind of plans and risks God blesses. The Book of Judges is filled with people planning and risking in selfishness. God is not teaching us to have faith to take risks to glorify our name, follow our passion, or get rich. God loves the one who chooses to look ahead to the future with faith in God and love for fellow man. God loves working through those who, despite all their fear over everything that can go wrong, carefully devise ways to love other people and trust God to overcome the risks. Many in Hebrews 11 prefigure the faith of Christ, and so does Ruth. Who left their father and home, and, despite the response they might receive, risked everything - giving their life away for another and saying, "I will be with you always"? Ruth and - more perfectly - Jesus. Let us look to Jesus and take bold risks because we trust God and love others.

Accept the Unexpected and Patiently Wait in Hope (3:12-18)

However, for Naomi and Ruth, there was an unexpected hiccup. There is a redeemer nearer than Boaz. Ruth may not have chosen Boaz for love, but she certainly would have preferred someone she knows! This serves as a good reminder that when we see uncertainty in the futures of others and we - trusting God - plan, sacrifice, and take risks, we will probably encounter obstacles. These obstacles could cause the outcome to be delayed or cause provision to come in a different way than we planned or wanted. However, obstacles can be a blessing because they show us whether we have been truly acting out of faith. Why would obstacles cause us to be overcome by doubt and fear if we are motivated by faith?

But Boaz gave Naomi and Ruth hope in this obstacle. For concern over what would happen, one can imagine nobody slept that night. But, before Ruth left in the morning, Boaz gave her six measures of barley so she did not go back to her mother-in-law empty-handed. When Naomi hears this, she says, *"Wait... the man will not rest but will settle the matter today."* Naomi and Ruth took a big risk by coming to Boaz and he knew "someone else has first dibs" was not what they wanted to hear. The barley was not simply a meal, it was a pledge of Boaz's word: Boaz will go to the other man and, if he is not willing, Boaz will redeem Ruth. When obstacles outside our control come, persevere in faith. Give God the obstacles and wait on him in hope. We can wait in hope because he has pledged loyalty to us. The Father has created us, supplied our needs, sent his Son to die for us, and given us his Spirit - he will not abandon us now!

Conclusion

This account challenges us to trust God like Naomi and Ruth. Fear is easy. The applications are endless because opportunities to take risks to obey God, love others, and provide for the future are everywhere. We can pray, plan, strategize, and then trust God as we try to make disciples of friends and family when they might laugh, or bring the gospel to an unreached part of the world when they might kill us, or start a Bible study when nobody may come, or reconcile with an enemy who might reject us, or go to a health professional for help with an illness when it might not work, or take a difficult job to provide for the family when we might fail, or sacrifice financially for others in need when the economy could tank, or get married

and have a bunch of babies when we aren't sure how God will provide, or even leave your parents to care for your hurting mother-in-law in a foreign land where there may be no job or husband. It is easy to make our fear seem like faith when we say, "I must wait on the Lord." It is easy to make a lack of love seem innocent when we say, "I must not test the Lord by risking so much." But truly waiting on the Lord usually means we do more than pray and sit down. Christians who are afraid only look at the costs and the risks. Let's pray about uncertainty and needs and then actually trust God. Plan, strategize, get up, and run into the danger relying on God to provide and bring success. Christ did it for us, let us do it for him and for his people.

¹Block, 693. ²Block, 688. ³Similar to Block, 693.

The LORD Secures Your Future (Ruth 4)

At the beginning of this book it seemed Naomi and Ruth would be ordinary people who lived painful lives of no consequence. If we weren't reading Scripture, we would expect them to keep walking down their pointless path into death. But, as John Piper has said, this is "a story for people who can't imagine that anything great could ever come of their ordinary lives of faith." Some days we look at the rest of our lives and the daily decisions and sacrifices of faith God asks us to make seem do-able and worth it. Other days, the constant endurance and sacrifices of faith are overwhelming. It does not feel worth it. What is the point of telling ourselves to keep on? "Keep on loving your neighbor as yourself. Keep on working hard for your family. Keep on sacrificing for others. Continue rejecting sin and choosing righteousness. Continue entrusting your cares to God." I feel like I have these days often in teaching and preaching. Some days it feels like everyone you teach falls away and that all this work will amount to nothing in the end. You can probably relate to this in similar or different ways.

If you have ever asked, "Does anything ever come of all this?" then the conclusion to this book is for you. It seemed impossible for anything but death to surround Naomi and Ruth when we first met them, but they will be blessed with life by the end of this scene. Boaz has been sacrificially loving lowly people when it seems to mean nothing in wicked times, but we will see how his ordinary life of faith still impacts the world today. By the end we should see very clearly that the Lord does marvelous things through the most hopeless of circumstances and that great things can come of our ordinary lives of faith. Read **Ruth 4** with me.

A Good Name Is Better Than Great Riches

Ruth asked Boaz to spread his wings over her, but Boaz said there is a nearer redeemer who has the first option. Boaz said he would go to the man in the morning, so Boaz went up to the gate of Bethlehem, sat down, and behold, as "chance" would have it, the redeemer came by. Boaz asked him to sit and he gathers 10 elders and asked them to sit. People often settled official business at the city gates. So, Boaz explained the situation.

How Boaz handles Naomi's and Ruth's situation is difficult to explain because there are three distinct prescriptions in the law of Moses regarding three unfortunate situations which apply to these women. Numbers 27:1-11, Leviticus 25:23-30, and Deuteronomy 25:5-10 all apply here. Numbers 27:1-11 prescribes that when Elimelech died without sons, daughters, or brothers, then his land must be transferred to his nearest relative. However, a purchase of land happening here in Ruth 4, which could mean Elimelech sold his land before moving to Moab. Since the land needs to be "redeemed," the land may be owned by a non-family member. Leviticus 25:23-30 instructs the nearest redeemer to buy the property back into the family if since Elimelech cannot do this himself. So, Boaz is probably saying, "Naomi cannot buy back the land, so she is transferring her right to the nearest kin." This could be a great deal. The lineage of Elimelech is practically dead, so the redeemer who buys this land absorbs this into his inheritance forever. So, the redeemer happily agreed to redeem it.

But what about the widows Elimelech and Mahlon left behind? Deuteronomy 25:5-10 prescribes that when a man dies without a son, his immediate brother must marry her and give her offspring to perpetuate the dead brother's name in Israel on his inheritance. Unfortunately, Ruth has been unable to bear children for 10 years, there are no immediate brothers, and there is no specific law instructing other males in the family to help because the

Law of Moses cannot contain prescriptions for every possible situation. Because of this, Boaz goes beyond the letter of the Law and declares that the one who redeems this property also acquires Ruth the Moabitess to perpetuate the name of the dead in Mahlon's inheritance. The letter of the law may not instruct the redeemer of the widow's land to do anything about her childless, widowed daughter-in-law, but isn't that covered in the spirit of the whole law? "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself,*" (**Leviticus 19:18**). It may have seemed like the coal of Elimelech was extinguished and that it was time to snatch up his land, but Boaz interjects: no, there is still hope for Elimelech's line through Mahlon's Moabite widow.

This does not sound as great to the nearest kinsmen. He says in **verse 6**, "*I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance.*" If he only redeems the land, his inheritance will be enlarged and the land will be passed down to his own children perpetually. There is speculation here, but if he also marries Ruth, his children through her would have rights to the land of Elimelech and potentially in his own inheritance - diminishing the part of his inheritance for other children he already had or hoped to have. This is not an economically advantageous decision for his family. God always provides, but it is easy to think of how there is only so much land to go around. "Some of our land will go to a child of this Moabitess? No." The nearer redeemer takes off his sandal, gives it to Boaz, and says, "Buy it yourself."

Despite the potential economical downfalls which have become apparent, Boaz cares for this foreign widow and treats her as family. Boaz knows Ruth is a worthy woman and he states his intentions before the elders and all the people. The people declare that they are witnesses and they ask the LORD's blessing upon Ruth, Boaz, and their resulting family.

Due to subtle clues in the text, I believe the blessing upon Boaz that he be "renowned in Bethlehem" is meant to stand out to us. Boaz, his son, his grandson, his great grandson David, and the Messiah in his lineage all do end up being renowned in Bethlehem, in Israel, and in the whole world. This stands out to me because someone here not only missed out on this honor, but also missed out on his name being recorded at all. You remember him, right? He is the one who took off his sandal off and who refused to redeem Ruth.

The Holy Spirit is very intentional in the way he ensures that this is the only way we can identify this redeemer. When Boaz greets the redeemer in verse 1, he would have known and certainly used this close relatives name, yet our author either does not record it - probably to ensure his name was forgotten. This is not apparent when we read it in English because most translations say, "*Turn aside, friend,*" or "*certain one,*" which may fail to actually capture the author's intent. In Hebrew, Boaz is recorded as saying, "*Turn aside, peloni almoni.*" To make a long story short, the words *peloni almoni* do not literally mean anything. They are a farrago like "Hocus pocus" or "jeepers creepers." *Peloni almoni* is used to keep something anonymous or to refer to an undisclosed thing. As the NET and the NJPS Bibles reflect, the author records Boaz as saying, "*Turn aside, Mr. So-and-so,*" or "*Turn aside, John Doe.*"

There are many nameless people in the Bible whose identity is not concealed so obviously, so why is this done here? Deuteronomy 25:10 may shed light on the reasoning. If a man refused to marry and give children to his son-less, widowed sister-in-law, the woman is supposed to pull off his sandal and spit in his face and his family will be forever known in Israel as "The house of him who had his sandal pulled off." Fortunately for him, this unwilling redeemer is not spat upon, but we literally only know him as a literary foil to Boaz. Unlike Boaz, *peloni almoni* is the one who was only willing to help his neighbor as long as it benefitted him. It was

not worth it to Mr. So-and-so to risk impairing his inheritance; but, this decision, caused John Doe to unknowingly miss his opportunity to impact the world forever and to be written in the most important genealogy ever penned. Note two lessons we can learn from this account.

1. Boaz understood something his anonymous relative did not: “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,” (Proverbs 22:1). The economical disadvantage did not seem worth it at the time, but it was more worth it than he could have ever imagined. Mr. So-and-so’s example has reminded me of how deceptively easy it is to ask the wrong questions when we are given difficult, sacrificial opportunities to love our neighbor. It is easy to only ask, “Will this be advantageous or not?” It is easy to only think like an accountant and ask, “What will this do for my bottom line?” Brothers and sisters, if that is what Boaz would have asked, he would have missed out on a great woman, a highly honored name, and a place in God’s kingdom. We are told by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 that God only asks us to give according to what we have, so the economics matter. However, the better question is, “Who is my neighbor?” and “How would Jesus have me love my neighbor?”

2. What we do for seemingly empty people because of our faith in God can have a greater-than-imagined impact. What Boaz did here seems amazing to us, and it seemed amazing to Ruth, Naomi, and the people of the town, but I guarantee that it did not shake the world at that time. The story was not printed and sent throughout the world and it did not seem important from a global perspective. But it was. It had a global impact. The seemingly small ways we can help people matter. Whether we adopt just one child, giving just one person a family, giving someone food, a place to stay, clothes, our time and words of encouragement - they can impact people, communities, the world, and future generations in ways we cannot possibly know today. Boaz would have never said, “The two greatest kings Israel has ever known - David and Jesus Christ - will result because of what I do today,” yet it was true. Will another Messiah result from our actions? No. But, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9, God is the one multiplies seed for sowing and who multiplies the harvest of our righteousness. The fruit God brings from our submission to his will is up to God. If nothing else, Christ will be seen, and God will be praised and glorified for what we do in his name - and that is sufficient.

Blessed Be the Lord

Verses 13-14 remind us that it is right to give God all glory. The Lord who opened Ruth’s womb and gave her conception and the Lord has been working behind the scenes all along to care for Naomi and Ruth, so he should be praised and honored for what happens here. As we consider the valley of the shadow of death Naomi was in and now look at the fullness and restoration of life God has given her her through Ruth, Boaz, and Obed, you may be wondering about your own situation. Let’s zoom out and consider a few lessons to remember when we walk through difficult valleys as Naomi did.

1. God is to be praised even though Ruth and Naomi did not get their old lives back. Naomi did not receive her husband or her sons back from the dead. Ruth did not receive her husband back from the dead. Neither of them were able to get back those ten difficult years. But God is still to be praised because he restores life and sweetness through another unexpected means. When we walk through dark times and we pray for help and we do not understand how it will come - be both realistic and optimistic. God can bless us with a complete reversal of our situation, but let us trust him and realize that he can bring so much life and sweetness to our souls through other means and other unexpected blessings.

2. God is to be praised because he blessed Naomi and Ruth *through* their suffering. This son would have never resulted and the future would have never been the same if it were not for this difficult trial. For some reason, God often brings sweetness through bitterness. I cried and praised God for Michael and Joanna's wisdom to see this in their own life recently. When they first moved to the United States, Joanna became pregnant, Michael and Joanna were filled with excitement, and then Joanna lost her child. They were devastated. But in their devastation, their hearts were opened to looking elsewhere for hope. The result was that when Michael McEuen met Michael and Joanna, they were hungry for the gospel and their lives have changed forever. Now, two years later, they do not have their first son back, but they have a new son, Lucas, that they would not give up for anything!

3. God's blessings that outwork from bitter circumstances can bring untold blessings to future generations. The blessing of Obed through the trial was a greater blessing than anyone ever anticipated. From a dead family and a barren womb, life came. From a mundane, insignificant place like Bethlehem, the two greatest kings ever to reign over Israel and the world were born - David the son of Jesse and Jesus Christ the Son of God. Our suffering will not result in the birth of the Messiah, but God can bring great blessings to future generations through our trial.

The book of Ruth teaches us in a marvelous way about the providence of God. We simply do not know what God can bring from the love we show other people. We simply do not know what God is doing for us and for future generations when our lives seem completely empty. Let us trust in and praise our great God!