

Sermon



Ruth 3:1-4; 4:13-17; Leviticus 25:25, 47-49; Deuteronomy 25:5-6

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We continue with the story of Ruth from the Bible. It is set in Israel in the time of the Judges about one generation after the conquest. In the last two weeks we have met this little family. They had left home, left the Promised Land because of a famine and moved to the neighbouring country of Moab on the opposite side of the Dead Sea in modern day Jordan.

There the husband, Elimelech, had died leaving his widow, Naomi and two sons. The sons married Moabite girls, then they too died. Naomi decided to return home and one of the daughters-in-law, Ruth, went with her, swearing to go stay with always, to become one of her people and worship her God.

The plight of a widow was unenviable; when they came to Naomi's home town of Bethlehem life was not easy. Ruth went out to glean food from other people's fields – that meant she collected the produce which had been missed by the harvesters. By God's good grace, she found herself in the field of a generous man, Boaz, who protected her and made sure there was plenty for her to collect.

Now Boaz is described as a man of standing in Chapter 2:1. He certainly was. A little checking shows that his grandfather Nahshon was the leader of the tribe of Judah through the wilderness and had led a force of 75,000 fighting men! Furthermore, Nahshon was brother-in-law to the High Priest Aaron. I think you could say he was well-connected and certainly a man of standing.

Kinsman-Redeemer

When Ruth told Naomi that she had been working in Boaz' fields and brought home so abundant a harvest, Naomi commented, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers."

This is crucial to the story - so what does she mean? A kinsman had responsibility for his wider family. In the Law, there are specific duties for relatives. We heard them in the readings earlier.

You may remember that I said a fortnight ago, that territories had been allocated to tribes in the Promised Land, and within tribes, clans and families had their portion. These were intended to be inalienable rights to that land, so that even if they sold it, there were avenues to restore the land to them again.

We heard these laid out in Leviticus 25:25-28. If someone had to sell land, then there was an obligation on his near relative, if possible to buy it and restore it to him. Here is the mention of the near relative who was to act as *go-el* redeemer. To redeem means to buy back or set free.

The second duty is found later in the same chapter in verses 47-49. It is redemption from servanthood. This related to another consequence of poverty: someone might become poor and sell himself as a servant. While the Law had a seven yearly forgiveness of debts another route to freedom was that a kinsman ("an uncle or a cousin or any blood-relative in his clan"¹) could redeem his relatives but paying the debt to free them. Here again it is this same word: *go-el* - redeemer.

So here are two responsibilities of relatives to redeem: where land was alienated from the ownership of their relative or where they became insolvent and sold themselves into servitude.

These conditions then would be in the mind of Naomi when she commented that Boaz was their kinsman redeemer.

Levirate marriage

There another bit of ancient custom which underpins this story – Levirate marriage. It was a very ancient custom which we know was practised in the time of the Patriarchs and was codified in the Law. Great importance was placed on two values - that a man's name and inheritance should not die out and that his widow should be provided for. The custom was that if a married man died without a child, then a brother had the duty of taking the widow as his wife so providing for the widow. The first son of their union, would be regarded as an inheritor of the dead man. In that way his name and inheritance would not die out. It seems that it was still practised in the time of Jesus, since some Sadducees used it as the basis for their question to Jesus citing an extreme example of seven brothers who all in turn married one woman according to this custom.

Enter the Redeemer

As we start Chapter 3, Naomi is thinking about a suitable marriage for Ruth so she would have a home and be provided for. She directs Ruth's attention to Boaz as a kinsman and tells Ruth what to do to make a claim of protection and marriage on him.

When Boaz is asleep guarding the pile of grain on the threshing floor, she lies at his feet. Boaz wakes in the night and is startled to find her there. She says, "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer."

The corner or edge of the garment represented the power and authority of the man. (We heard about it before with the woman with the issue of blood touching the tassels of Jesus' robe.) The expression is used in

¹ Leviticus 25:49

Ezekiel 16 where God spoke to Israel of how he had cared for them and made covenant with them like a marriage covenant. "I spread the corner (or wing) of my garment over you ... I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you and you became mine."²

She is asking to come under his protection, to marry and be provided for. Boaz is very pleased that she has sought him out even though he is significantly older than she is. It is interesting that his blessing of her when they met in chapter 2 is now to be fulfilled through him. He had said to her, "May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."³ That prayer is about to be fulfilled through him. She had sought refuge under the wings of the Almighty, but now she finds refuge under the wings of his garment.

Boaz promises to help with the responsibility of kinsman redeemer. However, he warned that there is another man who is a nearer relative and who has a prior right ahead of Boaz. Boaz is an honourable man and will do things properly.

Before dawn, he sends her home with a large amount of grain possibly about 40 kg, saying, "Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed." When Naomi sees this, she knows he will help. She had gone out to Moab full and returned empty. Now she is not to be empty-handed. I think it may well have been an earnest – a guarantee - of his promise of provision and help.

Who will act?

As Chapter 4 starts, Boaz has gone to the town gate where business is done. He looks out for the nearer kinsman and when he comes by asks him to sit. With ten elders present he explains to this man that there is land that needs to be redeemed for Naomi. She is about to sell it because she is poor. So a redeemer is needed to buy it back for her.

The man is interested but then Boaz points out that there is another action needed – Naomi and Ruth are widows without children. Naomi is past childbearing but Ruth is young and so a kinsman needs to take her as a wife and raise descendants for Elimelech and Mahlon.

Twice, Boaz refers to Ruth's Moabite origin here. Once would have been necessary to identify her, but was the second time emphasising that she was a Moabitess? Many Israelis would have hesitated to marry a Moabitess given their history and the prohibition on a Moabite man marrying a Jewess. It does not seem to concern Boaz. In the New Testament, we might be told why: it is in Matthew's genealogy of Christ. Boaz' father was Salmon who married Rahab from Jericho! So his mother was a Canaanite. But like Ruth, she had put her faith in Yahweh. She said to the spies, "Yahweh your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath."⁴ James wrote of her: "Rahab the prostitute [was] justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way."⁵ Perhaps the bigness of spirit in marrying Rahab trained their son, Boaz, to be able to believe good could come of his union with Ruth who had also embraced Yahweh.

Boaz' strategy works: the nearest kinsman wants out. He would not take the widow and the complication to his inheritance of his other children. Ironically, he is concerned about his inheritance and his name, yet in the account he is nameless. When he is introduced in verse 1, he is literally referred to as "so and so", whereas Boaz in his generosity of spirit became famous.

So the agreement is made in front of the town witnesses: 'So and so' renounces his claim on the land and Ruth in favour of Boaz who will "maintain the name of the dead with his property so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records."

The people respond blessing him. They say may his family be like the family of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah. Why did they refer to Perez, Tamar and Judah? Well obviously, Judah is the origin of the tribe of Judah, but I think there is more to it. This marriage of Boaz to Ruth was not strictly a Levirate marriage since Boaz

² Ezekiel 16:8

³ Ruth 2:12

⁴ Joshua 2:11

⁵ James 2:24-25

was not the brother of Mahlon. But it had the same intended outcome - to preserve the name and inheritance of the dead man. The reference to Judah and Tamar may be because it was an instance of Levirate marriage (albeit a rather complicated and messy event).

With the agreement made, Boaz married Ruth and they had a son who was called Obed. Now Naomi has descendants. She who was empty and bitter, is full and rejoices. And then we are told that Obed would be father to Jesse who was the father of David. So Boaz and Ruth become the great grandparents of David who would be king and the forebear of Christ.

Boaz has acted as *Go'el* - redeemer. He redeemed (that is paid the price to free) Naomi and Ruth from poverty, loss of land and inheritance. The women are provided for and protected. The land is kept in the family, the names of Elimelech and Mahlon will be remembered in their descent.

The same word *go'el* is used of God redeeming his people from the rule of Pharaoh. This story of Ruth and Boaz paints a picture of redemption as well. And both are facets of the whole meaning of redemption.

Last week, Helen said, "Boaz is a picture of Jesus our kinsman-redeemer and Ruth a picture of you and me, who are the ones who have come to take refuge under the wings of the Lord, the God of Israel."

The story of Boaz shows us aspects of the nature of Christ. Boaz was generous beyond the requirement of the Law. Bishop David Atkinson wrote, "Jesus makes explicit what is implicit in the narrative of Boaz, that love though never less than law, always goes beyond it for the sake of the other. ... The Law is guidance in loving and gives particular illustrations of the meaning of loving obedience in certain circumstances."⁶

The Old Testament Law provided the framework for social and financial redemption. Boaz gives flesh to the principle. The fullness of redemption is of course found in the Lord Jesus Christ. By his death he redeemed us from the bondage of sin and death, from spiritual poverty. Some people object to the metaphor of redemption, asking to whom the ransom would be paid. Back in the 1890s, Bishop Westcott wrote, "It cannot be said that God paid to the Egyptian oppressor any price for the redemption of his people. On the other hand, the idea of the exertion of a mighty force, the idea that the 'redemption' costs much is everywhere present. The force may be represented as divine might, or love, or self-sacrifice, which become finally identical."⁷

It is not so much the price paid to another as the cost to himself. And the cost to the Son of God was his very life.

The Lord be with you – the Lord bless you.

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⁶ David Atkinson, 1983, *BST: Ruth*, p108

⁷ Westcott B.F., 1892, *Hebrews*, p296