

Ruth 4

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Only 12-years-old, and in a moment one Ethiopian girl's world turned into a nightmare. Seven vicious men abducted the pre-teen to force her into marriage. The men held the girl for seven days, beating her repeatedly, until she would break and consent to marriage. She was trapped.

Such incidents are common in Ethiopia, as men band together to abduct young girls to secure a bride. The girls are typically beaten into submission and raped. In this instance, there was not a human being within earshot to hear the cries of this girl. But her cries were heard. Rescuers came.

The unlikely redeemers were majestic Ethiopian lions. Famous for their large black manes, these lions are the national symbol of Ethiopia. In response to the girl's cries for help, three large lions leapt from the brush and chased her captors away. Now freed from one terror, she faced another. Alone, unarmed, blooded from her beating, she whimpered in fear of the lions.¹

But what happened next is truly incredible, but more of that later...

Have you ever felt trapped, bound by life's circumstances, in need of rescue only to find the deliverance held more terror than the bondage? We speak of jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire, but far too often the scary truth is that we may find our hope far more terrifying than our reality.

This is what we see through the book of Ruth.

They escape famine in Bethlehem only to find death in Moab. They marry wives to propagate the line, to have kids who will care for them, carry on the family name only to remain barren. When they return home, not all is suddenly easy. They must rely on the kindness of others for their day to day needs, but the future is still uncertain. Even when a redeemer comes along, when Boaz is able to make it all fine, he admits that he may not be their redeemer. There is another to whom they may have to seek help and he may or may not be the answer they need.

Listen to the final chapter of this story to hear where redemption's release is found. READ

As we saw last week, time was running out for Ruth. With the harvest season coming to a close, she had grain in the barn, but no husband in bed. While such a conundrum may not be serious to us, this meant life or death, for the loss of the family was a loss of hope for the future. Ruth was trapped.

Naomi's plan for Ruth, as unconventional and risky as it sounds, points to the need for deliverance.

While the townsfolk winnow grain and enjoy the party, Ruth shows up for the festivities in her finest fiesta fashion. She does not corner Boaz; she just makes herself noticed, at least at first. As Boaz drifts off to sleep, she cuddles under the covers at his feet...all to make it clear as to what she wants...him.

She is looking not for passion, but protection, not a fling, but faithfulness so that the Elimelech's line does not die out. As Boaz points out, she could have had a number of fine young men, but she wants not just romance, but redemption. She wants him to redeem her.

There is a small problem. He is not first in line to redeem her. There is another, but he will not rest until the situation is resolved. This brings us to what happens the next morning.

Boaz goes up to the gate, leaving the pile of grain on the threshing floor, he heads back into town to the gate and waits for a certain someone to come by.

Again the writer acts surprised, for God's providential hand is still at work. The redeemer, the nearest of kin to Naomi and Ruth just happens to walk by. Boaz calls him over, using an interesting appellation. The ESV has *friend* but the Hebrew is oddly non-specific, a series of rhyming words known as a farrago, a tool to avoid saying the name, a *yada-yada* address that leaves the identify of this redeemer lost to time.

Mr. So-in-So sits down and Boaz calls ten elders of the city to join them. What is about to take place is a legal proceeding, a transaction that will settle this matter so that Ruth will know who her redeemer will be who will release her from her bondage. Boaz then begins the ordeal.

Boaz recounts events this man would have known quite well, given Bethlehem was a small town and people who are so closely related would know the comings and goings. Naomi needs to do some business regarding her deceased husband's land.

Without going into great detail of early Iron Age land deals, Leviticus 25 gives the background to this procedure. Despite the use of the terms *sell* and *buy*, land was not so much owned by the Jews, but was bestowed by God and entrusted to families. As stewards, it was to be kept in the clan and passed down from one generation to another. They could transfer the property to the closest family member, whose duty it was to oversee the land and protect those now destitute family members.

The unnamed redeemer agrees to take over the land. Boaz makes it clear that if this relative won't take it, he will. But the family member agrees to fulfill his duty and tend to the land.

But then the next shoe (sandal) drops. He needs to tend not just to the land, but some of the extra baggage that comes along with it, namely a bitter old woman, and a foreign woman of questionable morals. But his duty is not just to make sure they get three squares a day, but do his best to make babies, who will perpetuate the line of Elimelech.

Boaz moves from a tantalizing offer of lake front property to taking on a whole set of problems as he moves from Leviticus 25 which deals with redeeming dirt, to Deuteronomy 25, dealing with redeeming the dead.

Deuteronomy 25 refers to a custom, in which a man marries, but dies childless. His surviving brother is to take the woman, have kids and the first-born is to maintain the line of his dead uncle. This and my love of lobster are reasons enough to be glad I'm born is side of the cross.

What does the no-name relative do? He drops his claim. The cost is too much. Taking on the land could be profitable; taking on two widows is too dangerous. If he fathers a son by Ruth, then that boy gets a portion of his legacy. There may be other concerns, as well, such as the questionable ancestry of this forbidden woman and the possible loss of his own line.

Then what takes place requires explaining by the author to his audience some generations later. To seal the deal, so that Boaz is the redeemer of the land and of the family line, the sandal comes off. The nameless relative hands over his sandal as evidence before the witnesses and the guarantee of the done deal.

Boaz turns to the elders, announcing that he has acquired the rights to redeem the land and Ruth, so that the name of the dead, Elimelech and Mahlon, will not be forgotten.

Now we begin to see the reason for the author, who goes to great pains to recall names through this book and again in the final verses of this chapter, that all this was done so that Mahlon will not be forgotten...but all the while, the redeemer who had first rights to all this is never named. He is now forgotten.

To this, all the people who had gathered to witness this event erupt in praise, uttering three prayers on behalf of Boaz and Ruth.

First, they give Ruth a place of honor among the matriarchs of Israel, may she be as fertile as Rachel and Leah, two of the wives of Jacob.

Next, they invoke his integrity, using the term we saw in 2:1 and 3:11, wanting to see his name continue on in Ephrathah and Bethlehem.

This brings us to the third request which introduces some old skeletons, the house of Perez, from which Elimelech and Boaz are descended.

Boaz is being obedient where his ancestors were not. Tamar, in Genesis 38, was the Canaanite wife to Judah's firstborn, Er. Er was wicked, had no children and then died. Judah told his second born, Onan to fulfill the Levirate duties and take Tamar and raise kids in the place of Er. Onan knew this would mean his dead brother Er would still be firstborn and not him, so he neglected his duty and he died. Judah told Tamar to wait until the third child would be old enough to marry her and she did, but Judah had no intentions of giving him to her, for fear that he would die as well.

What happened next makes Jerry Springer look tame. Tamar took off the widow's garments, got dressed like a prostitute, waited for Judah, her father-in-law to walk by, noticed her, made her an offer of fling for the price of a goat, she accepted a token of a signet ring, a cord and a staff until the goat arrived. They did the deed and he left.

When word gets out three months later that his widowed daughter-in-law is pregnant, he calls for her to be burned. She produces the evidence as to the identity of the father (before paternity tests), he acknowledges his sin. She eventually gives birth to twins, the first one begins to come out, they tie a cord on his arm to know who is first born, but he retreats back into the womb, and number two becomes number one and that is Perez. Whew. And you thought your family had drama.

Why is this important? Because their family history has not been one of protecting the widowed foreign woman. Boaz stands out, he goes beyond duty to ensure safety of others at all costs. He not only fulfills the law, he goes further than what is required.

With the legal requirements met, Boaz gets the girl, they marry and God gives them a son. End of story... not at all. Notice what's next. Ruth fades to the background and so does Boaz as we begin to see who the redeemer really is in the story. There is a twist you would not expect. The credits aren't going to roll yet.

The women now erupt in praise as they speak to Naomi.

They praise God who has not left you without a redeemer...that wonderful son-in-law, Boaz? May his name be renowned in Israel. His name won't be forgotten like Mr. So-in-So. He will restore your life; he will nourish you in when your hair is grey. Who is this? It is Ruth's baby

The women say more, in v17 it is they who name the child, the son given to Ruth? No Naomi.

They named him Obed, which comes from the word *to serve*, but unlike the fuller, Obadiah, we are not clear if it means to serve Naomi or serve God. But this child is not the end of the story, for the author has more information, he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

So who is the redeemer in the story and who is in need of redemption?

All along we think of poor Ruth in need of a husband and see Boaz as the obvious answer to her problems...and yet, the women of the town are all excited for Naomi as they see promise in this baby, born in Bethlehem, born in the line of David. How does little baby Obed redeem Naomi, restore her life, be a nourisher in her old age? He will be used of God in the line of David.

Is this just some sweet love story, showing us how we should set aside bitterness in the face of a better tomorrow? Does it tell us to look past the ethnic divisions and see the goodness of other people? Is it a prescription on snagging a man? Is it how to grab land and lose a sandal?

As interesting as those items may be, the story is about how our redeemer releases us, how we face traps and snares in life, but we have confidence that there is one who will purchase us, set us free, protect us...and his name is Jesus.

We see two simple lessons from Ruth on redemption. Redemption releases us from...to; it releases us from the Law and to Love.

Just as Boaz released Naomi from her legal redeemer, from a man who could fulfill the Law, but was incapable to doing what was necessary, so also Christ, our redeemer releases us from the law's demands. The law demands perfection, we give only failure.

This is what we read earlier in Romans 3:20, doing the works of the law will never make us right before God. All the law does is to show what we already know, we cannot, and we will not do what is right. It gives us the knowledge of sin.

I believe Mr. So-in-So knew about the land, knew about Naomi and his duty to her.

For whatever reason, he, like the Law, did not, would not give her life.

In much the same way, Paul in Galatians 3:10 tells us that to rely on the law to redeem us will only put us under a curse. Instead Christ redeemed us by taking on the law's requirements. Boaz willingly, not out of duty, but out of love, took on the rights and responsibilities as the redeemer. He willingly put his own line in jeopardy to ensure Naomi and Ruth's heritage. How much more did Christ do for us.

What happens when you reject Christ's redemption, his release of you from the Law's demands? We see the picture of this in Naomi. I see it now in many of your lives – bitterness.

You retreat to the law for protection, for acquittal. You want, you demand, God be fair with you, to cease his case against you...but you get no rest. You were a good spouse, but God did not uphold His end of the bargain, your marriage dissolved. You raised your kids reasonably well, but still their choices baffle you. You've worked hard, you've sought to live a moral life, but for what end? You feel so empty...the Law never satisfies.

Why did God cause me to be so empty? Why has he taken happiness from me again and again? Bitterness comes when we imagine that our lives are up to us, that there is a simple rule of equity: *I keep my nose clean and God rewards me*. When life's unfair realities hit us...bitterness lodges in our throats. Bitterness hits good people, good people who don't accept that Christ redeems us from the bitter requirements of law keeping.

There is one who will restore your life, who will nourish you. Christ's redemption not only releases you from the law, it releases you to love. There is born to you a redeemer, who loves you and releases you to love others. Not by force or obligation, but of whom Paul speaks in Romans 3:21ff.

When we are declared just, when God sets us free he does so because His Son paid the price we owed. That is a gift. God's wrath poured out on Christ that is grace. That is love.

What is the effect on you, that redemption has released you from the law? You are now released to love. Like Naomi, the bitterness is driven away by God's grace.

Galatians 4 describes what happens in redemption...how we are released from the law into love. In 4:5 we are told that Christ redeems us so that we might be adopted as sons, so that we might cry out to our Father with that language of family affection: Abba, Father.

Naomi could at last rest in the fact that redemption was coming.

It was seen in Boaz, it was experienced in Obed...but the author leaves the door open, for her redemption was still a ways off in the line of David. She looked forward to one whom God would anoint, who would release her to love, to see how much Ruth really did love her and how she could hold that small baby as a token of God's love.

Now that the Law's demands have been met in your glorious Boaz, Jesus Christ, as the bitterness gives way to knowing that your acceptance, your happiness is not guaranteed by your keeping the law, but by Christ's finished work...are you able to find release to love?

Your redemption, your release from the Law means you are now free. In Galatians 5 we are called to live in light of that, so that Paul says, in verse 13, this freedom, this redemption is not your ticket to do as you please, but to love others, serve them instead of demanding they serve you.

The degree to which you are willing to love, to serve is just one important evidence that you grasp your redemption in Christ. That you know you are set from the law, to love others. But that is a scary life. But it is the life of freedom.

That is the freedom experienced by that young Ethiopian girl. She thought she traded one terror for another, but her rescuers formed a protective perimeter around her. A half-day later, when the police arrived, the guardian lions simply stood up and walked away. Sgt. Wondimu Wedajo said, "They stood guard until we found her, and then they just left her like a gift and went back into the forest."

Among the explanations for the lions' unusual behavior, one wildlife expert suggested the girl's whimpering could have sounded like a lion cub. For whatever reason, the predator served as protector. The carnivore became a sentinel. "Everyone...thinks this is some kind of miracle," Wondimu commented.

This 12-year-old girl was helpless, powerless to change her horrific circumstances. Her deliverance had to come from a power greater than, and outside of, herself. In the same way, we are powerless to save ourselves from sin and death. Our only hope is in Christ, the Lion of Judah,² from the clan of Perez, through Boaz and Obed, through David, to his Son who for all eternity will sit on the throne of David.

¹ Anthony Mitchell, "Lions Rescue, Guard Beaten Ethiopian Girl," Yahoo News (6-21-05); "Lions Free Kidnapped Girl," CNN.com (6-21-05)

² Ibid.