

# Sound Living

Ruth

Jerry Nelson

The story of Ruth holds honor, adventure, romance, tragedy and hope. God uses this story to teach us about:

- His providence (He is in control of even the smallest details of life)
- His honoring of faithfulness (Christianity is a life of faith lived out in actions) and
- His redemption of His people (God is always working to bring about the salvation of His people)

*Jerry Nelson has served as the senior pastor of Southern Gables Church (EFCA) since 1978. Expository preaching is his passion and practice. He holds undergraduate degrees from Moody Bible Institute and the University of Minnesota, a master's degree from Denver Seminary and an earned doctorate (D.Min.) from the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School along with an honorary doctorate (D.D.) from Trinity College and Seminary of India. He and his wife Barbara live in Lakewood, Colorado and have four children.*

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## Chapter One

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### An Introduction

When you read the Bible what do you expect to have happen? Don't you expect, when you read the Bible thoughtfully, that you will learn something or be reminded of something? When you read the Bible who do you expect to hear from? God, right? In other words anytime we go to the Bible, which we refer to as the "Word of God," we expect to hear from God—to learn from Him. Most of us recognize, however, that God didn't literally pick up a pen and write the words of the Bible. Instead, as the Apostle Peter tells us, "men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke or wrote from God."

We believe God is the one who inspired the authors of the books of the Bible, meaning God was behind what the authors thought and wrote and behind it to such an extent that **what** they wrote is what God wanted them to write. So when we read the human author's thoughts we are reading God's thoughts.

By saying it that way, I have already assumed something else about reading the Bible. When we read the Bible we not only expect to hear from God through the human authors, we also expect to understand what we hear from God—we expect God to communicate with us in thoughts that we can understand. The Bible therefore is not like some modern art where the beauty is in the eye of the beholder or where the meaning of the words is only what you need it or want it to mean. No, real people who were attempting to say something wrote the Bible by what they wrote. They wrote in sentences and paragraphs or in poems or stories but always in order to communicate

something intelligible—understandable.

Anytime we read the Bible, just as when we read a letter from someone or we read any other book, we read with the intent of hearing from the author what he or she intended to communicate. So we come to the Word of God to hear from God, to read what God wants us to know and do.

But how are we to understand what the Bible means? Most of us either have been or are in school. When we read a school textbook we expect that the author will give an introduction to the book and even an introduction to each chapter laying out what he plans to write about. Then, in each chapter, the author will spell out the major points one after another, building the case for what they are trying to convince us of. And then they will usually conclude with a summary of what they have just written. It is all very logical and orderly and relatively easily followed. When you are done, if the author was good and you read carefully, you could say in your words what the author has written and meant by his words.

***So we come to the Word of God to hear from God, to read what God wants us to know and do.***

But have you ever found yourself reading from other parts of the Bible and after reading a story or a parable wondering what it was supposed to mean? Maybe it was one of those parables of Jesus where the disciples didn't ask "What are you talking about" and neither Jesus nor the author, recording Jesus' words, bothers to directly explain what Jesus meant. Or maybe you have been reading in the Old Testament and you have read story after story about some king or another who leads an army or builds a city or

has trouble with his family and when you got done reading it, you wondered why that story was included in the Bible?

The story of Ruth, in the Old Testament, presents that same challenge:

- What are we supposed to learn when we read it?
- What was the author intending to teach by it?
- Why did the author tell the story and what did God intend to communicate by including it as part of the Revelation of God—the Word of God?

If you have ever read any of Aesop's fables or if you have read any of the modern collections of fables usually you will find the author or the editor making some comments either before or after the story that tells you what you are supposed to learn from it. For example do you remember the story of the little boy who cried "wolf" several different times, when there was no wolf? He soon found himself in real trouble and no one would believe him because he had exaggerated too often before. The moral of the story is that our credibility is a character trait worth protecting—it's not only nice to be known as truthful but it is essential to get along in life and it might even save our lives some day.

But the short story about Ruth doesn't give us the moral of the story all written out at the beginning or at the end of it. There are no author or editor's comments attached to teach the moral or tell the purpose. And when the purpose is not specified, it will do us no good to attempt to discover what the author was trying to say through a story in the same way we would a text book or one of Paul's letters. When we come to a story it won't be helpful to take each paragraph and ask what it alone means. We must hear the whole story and only with the whole story in mind can we then ask what the author is attempting to communicate. And so again, we come to the book of Ruth, the story of

Ruth. What did the author intend to teach his first readers from this story? That is the same as asking, What did God intend to teach them as a result of this story and what does He intend to teach us? When we read a story in the Scriptures, unless the author tells us the purpose, we must use the clues in the story to learn what the human author meant to communicate to the original audience. So what is God teaching us through the book of Ruth?

***Christianity is not just a doctrinal system, believed, it is a life of faith, lived out in faithful actions.***

In this series, I hope to show you, from the clues in the story itself, what the author intended his audience to learn. I will, in the next chapter, show you that one theme prominently illustrated by the story has to do with the providence of God, the actions of God in the lives of ordinary people—God is in control even in the most seemingly insignificant lives and in the smallest details. Do we believe God is in control even in the everyday details of our lives? And if He is, do we also hold Him responsible for the tragedies that come as well? One character in the story said *"The LORD afflicted me; the ALMIGHTY has brought misfortune upon me."* How far does this idea of God's providence go?

Another theme I will show you in Chapter Three is that loyal faithfulness or kindness, is a virtue that God rewards richly. Faith and works may be two different actions but they are inseparably bound together on the pages of Scripture. God honors faithfulness. Christianity is not just a doctrinal system, believed, it is a life of faith, lived out in faithful **actions**.



And in Chapter Four, we will learn from this story about God's redemption of His people—how God is always working to bring about the salvation of His people. In the last part of the 4th chapter of the story (4:16ff); the author gives us a major clue as to this reason why he wrote the book. One of the principle characters of the story was the great-grandfather of none other than King David. That's the last thing the author says in the story. Now look at the first chapter (verses 1 and 2) – I think it is very intentional that "Bethlehem" is mentioned specifically. To the story itself it seems that the family could have been from anywhere in Israel and it wouldn't have been important to mention from where, but the author knew exactly what he was doing. Bethlehem is the town from which King David would come—David, the King who would redeem Israel and bring the nation back to peace and prosperity by bringing them back to God. And so from the beginning of the book, King David is in mind as the author tells the story—a clue to a purpose for the story.

To begin, I will tell this story to you. This is one of the most delightful stories in the entire Bible. Great German and English poets of the past have called it the greatest short story ever written. One wrote that "no poet in the world has written a more beautiful short story." In fact this story could be made into a great movie or it could be an excellent television show. It has all the elements that make for a great story: tragedy, suspense, honor, love, clever scheming, with even a twist in the plot.

As I tell this story I want you to keep in mind the three themes I've already mentioned:

- God's providential care of His people.
- God's reward of loyal faithfulness and kindness.
- God's salvation of all of His people as illustrated by His salvation of a particular family.

And now the story of Ruth with a little commentary to help understand some things that may be culturally unique:

*In the days when the judges ruled, (a time of political and moral chaos in the country of Israel) there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, (about six miles South of Jerusalem) together with his wife and two sons went to live for a while in the country of Moab.*

***God's salvation of all of His people is  
illustrated by His salvation of a  
particular family.***

*The man's name was Elimilech, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites (a prominent family) from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimilech, Naomi's husband died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth.*

*After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people (back in Bethlehem) by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.*

*Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead (husbands) and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."*

*Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, "(No), we will go back with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me (to have more children) - even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons - would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!"*

*At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye but Ruth clung to her.*

*"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."*

*But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."*

*When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women (of the town) exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"*

*"Don't call me Naomi," (Naomi) told them. "Call me Mara (which means bitter) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full (with a husband and sons)*

*but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi (which means pleasant)? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."*

*So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth a Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.*

*Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the (family)-clan of Elimilech, a man of social importance, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." (She did this so they would have food to eat).*

*Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter."*

*So she went out and began to (pick up the grain that was dropped and left behind by) the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimilech. (Interesting isn't it that the author keeps mentioning these family connections?)*

*Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The Lord be with you!"*

*"The Lord bless you" they called back. (not your typical employer-employee relationship!)*

*Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?"*

*The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said (to us), 'please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning until now, except for a short rest in the shelter."*

*So 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 my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."*

*At this Ruth bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found favor 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 your 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."*

*"May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant - though I do not (even) have the standing of one of your servant girls."*

*At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come, over here. Have some bread and dip in the wine vinegar."*

*When she sat down with the harvesters, 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, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves (the piles of grain), don't*

*embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks of grain 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 (over a half bushel). 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 from lunch.*

*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." (Then) she added, "That man is our close relative: he is one of our kinsman-redeemers."*

(Now a "kinsman-redeemer" was a relative ("kin") who was responsible for helping poor relatives. The "redeemer" part was that they often had to buy back for the relative the land that a poor relative had sold to keep alive.)

*Then Ruth the Moabitess 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 his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed." So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat*

*harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.*

*One day Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on 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. 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." (Though this is a clever plan by Naomi she is not asking her daughter-in-law to do something immoral)*

*"I will do whatever you say", Ruth answered. So she 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, and he turned and discovered 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." (This was a proposal of marriage)*

*"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. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true that I am*

*near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. 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; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor." 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 put it 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."*

*Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down. Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. Then he said to the kinsman-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimilech. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so, But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.*

*"I will redeem it," he said.*

*Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi*



*and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property."*

*At this, the kinsman-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it." (Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel,) So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." and he removed his sandal.*

*Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimilech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to 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. Today you are witnesses!"*

*Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."*

*So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Than he went to her, and the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better to*

*you than seven sons, has given him birth."*

*Than Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

*This, then, is the family line of Perez:*

*Perez was the father of Hezron,  
Hezron the father of Ram,  
Ram the father of Amminadab,  
Amminadab the father of Nahshon,  
Nahshon the father of Salmon,  
Salmon the father of Boaz,  
Boaz the father of Obed,  
Obed the father of Jesse,  
and Jesse the father of David.*

## Chapter Two

### The Providence of God

Techama Tec, Jewish-American historian and author wrote in her book *When Light Pierced the Darkness* that of Poland's 3.5 million Jews less than 10% survived World War II and the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Over 3 million were slaughtered. It is said that many Jews became atheists as a result of the Holocaust. They couldn't reconcile the concept of the providence of God with the savagery they had witnessed. The Providence of God is the continuing work of God whereby He preserves what He has created and guides all history to fulfill His intended purposes.

Several years ago I received a fax from H.B. London with Focus on the Family. In it he laments the loss of a good friend and colleague in the ministry at Focus on the Family. Rob Gregory was 43 years of age, married and a father. London described how the people of Rob's church were praying, how the Focus on the Family employees were praying for four days, how they joined hands across the auditorium and prayed for Rob's recovery. But Rob died! How can God be called "good" when He causes or even permits the death of a 43-year-old husband and father who is working for the Kingdom of God?

Some of you have struggled with such questions! A woman drowns her two sons, a woman and her boyfriend are brutally stabbed outside her Los Angeles home, a government building is bombed and scores including infant children die, a civil war unleashes hatred in Srebrenicia in which thousands are slain for no reason other than that they are of a different ethnic or religious background. Wars,

the Holocaust, Pol Pot's "killing fields" of Cambodia/Kampuchea, daily atrocities committed here and abroad, and the terrible destruction of natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and typhoons, all combine to make many thinking people conclude there is no meaning, no order, only randomness to life—certainly no Providence of God, no Divine guiding hand, in fact, how can there be any God at all?

Not only have catastrophes left people doubting a God of Providence but so has some of modern science. One theologian wrote, "Natural science has been the bridge on which many have crossed over to unbelief...Now that nature has given up her secrets and man has seen through what used to be called supernatural, the world has been relieved of God."<sup>1</sup> Faced with inexplicable misery it has become ever more popular for people to proclaim that religion is nothing but a projection of human wishful thinking. Karl Marx described (religion) as a facade created by man to make an unbearable life bearable. Oppressed by miserable reality, man created in religion all sorts of illusions whereby he could escape his misery."<sup>2</sup> Freud explained religion as man groping for refuge in the midst of a cruel world. Man's gods were given the task of absorbing the shocks of nature and of redeeming man from his unhappy fate.<sup>3</sup> As I already said, even God's people have through the centuries struggled with these issues and entertained similar doubts.

And the Bible doesn't gloss over such questions! The Bible's authors freely admit their confusion, their wonderment at God's ways—ways that even include tragedy and pain. The Psalmist wrote, *"I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles, their bodies are healthy and strong...Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in*

*innocence - All day long I am plagued; I have been punished every morning.”(Psalm 73)*

Job cried out at one point that he wished he had been born dead. No, the Bible does not ask us to pretend the hard facts of life don't exist. No, the church must witness to who God truly is, hard edges and all. Either God is in control and we have the problem of reconciling that with destruction and suffering in the world or we have a God who is not in control in which case we have no God at all.

***Either God is in control and we have the problem of reconciling that with destruction and suffering in the world or we have a God who is not in control in which case we have no God at all.***

So the question becomes, Is He or is He not in control? Is God's providence truly guiding everything to His desired ends? Is God guiding every detail of today's history, of our lives?

## **What Ruth Teaches Us**

Read again of the plight of this woman named Naomi. Her husband and sons die leaving her destitute in a foreign country. With one daughter-in-law in tow she returns to Israel where her fortunes change. Her daughter in-law goes to work in the fields of a man who turns out to be a distant relative and one who can rescue Naomi from her subsistence living. With Naomi's planning and her daughter-in-law's attractiveness of character, the man, Boaz, is won over. And by his planning, Boaz is able to marry the widow Ruth and raise up a son who will care for Naomi in her old

age. And it turns out that the son is to be the great-grandfather of King David.

Though the tale ends in good storybook fashion, Naomi's initial problem is illustrative of the tragedies of many. And it again raises the age-old question, "How can I believe in the providence of God in the middle of a world of such suffering?"

***"How can I believe in the providence  
of God in the middle of a world of  
such suffering?"***

In the first five verses of the story we see Naomi's life devolve from a picture-perfect existence into destitution. The author gives us the tragic picture quickly with four elements:

- First he tells us that Naomi lived in the time of the Judges. If you would read the book that precedes this one you would get a picture of a country probably much like today's Bosnia, or Lebanon or Somalia. The country is in chaos, leadership is inept if not corrupt and in Israel most of the people have rebelled against God.
- Second, the author tells us there was a famine in the land. I can't imagine Naomi and her family left Israel until things were very bad—until they saw no hope for surviving if they stayed. They were already in trouble when they moved.
- Third, her husband dies and fourth, her sons.

We'd have to be very insensitive not to have some sympathy and compassion for this woman. Alone, destitute and in a foreign country with no welfare system, Naomi was in serious trouble. Why wouldn't she wonder, "Where is God?" Why wouldn't she be tempted to even assume there is no God? Is God in control or isn't He? And if He is

in control how does Naomi possibly explain her situation?

Who's the main character in this story? When you read the story more than once it becomes quite apparent that God is the main character. I said earlier that I believe one of the purposes the author intended for this book was to declare and demonstrate the providence of God. Only twice does the author specifically mention God's direct intervention but God's fingerprints are all over this story. I want you to follow, with me, the thread of the providence of God through this story.

## **Credit to God**

Naomi's predicament is stated quite succinctly in the first five verses of chapter 1 and it isn't until verse 6 that we get our first hint at Naomi's response to God in the midst of it. When Naomi heard that the Lord had come to the aid of His people by providing food for them, she prepared to return home. Not only the people who reported it to her but Naomi herself believes that "God had come to the aid of his people." She credits God with an end to the famine. She credits God with grace; God who came to His people's aid.

Is this just evidence of Naomi's superstition? Does she, like many of the nations around Israel, just give credit to the gods for what we now know is simply an end to the drought? By giving credit to God is Naomi just demonstrating her ignorance at where rain comes from? No! Even though Naomi didn't have a scientific explanation for how the rains worked (and incidentally, we don't have much better explanations today) she understood the difference between primary and secondary causes. And so regardless of what means, secondary causes, God used to end the famine she understood that God was ultimately,

the primary cause behind the relief. The Apostle Paul wrote the same thing: *"God has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."* (Acts 14:17)

***The Bible teaches that God did not simply create everything and set it loose to operate on its own but that God is constantly superintending, guiding, and continuing to hold it all together***

Naomi believed and the Bible teaches that God did not simply create everything and set it loose to operate on its own but that God is constantly superintending, guiding, and continuing to hold it all together. There is no self-sufficiency other than God. Nature is not self-contained and just rolling along; God is sustaining it actively and always. The Bible tells us of a God who has not begun and then abandoned His creation but a God who is here, who cares, who rules and provides. Now the author is not suggesting that God performed a "miracle" to end the famine but he is saying God ended it. God may use **means**, as we will see in a minute, but the author's point is that God is actively behind it all, sustaining what He has created. God's providence is demonstrated by His active preservation of His creation. Now that truth is demonstrated time and time again throughout this story but we must move on to another aspect of the providence of God taught here.

## **Prayer**



Look to verses 8 and 9:

*"Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.' Then she kissed them and they wept aloud."*

Here Naomi continues to demonstrate her belief in God's providence by praying to God, asking for His kindness. Here she prays asking God to bless her daughters-in-law. The very act of praying demonstrates a belief in the providence of God. When we pray what are we demonstrating?

- That we believe in a God who is there.
- That we believe praying makes a difference.
- That somehow God is moved by what we pray.

As we will see, Naomi had absolute confidence in the providence of God—that God was controlling everything and yet she prayed. Why? If we believe God is sovereign and nothing catches God by surprise and that in fact God not only knows everything that will happen but that God has planned everything that will happen, why do we pray? One, because communication is a natural result of relationship. When you are related to someone you talk to him or her. Naomi was in a talking relationship with her God. But secondly, Naomi prayed and we pray because we recognize that prayer is one of the means that God uses to accomplish His purposes. We like Naomi realize that not only our actions but also our prayers are ordained by God to bring about the results He desires. Therefore we pray.

## **Hold God Responsible**

Look with me at verses 20—21 of chapter 1. Here Naomi's response to her predicament is quite different than many of us would expect. Naomi is quite clear—she holds God responsible for what has happened.

*"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."*

Naomi casts blame on God! She doesn't assume for a minute that there is any other power in the universe greater than God, so in her mind God is ultimately responsible. Naomi is so convinced of the sovereignty and providence of God that she even attributes the bad things that have happened to her to God.

Today Evangelicals have a hard time with this. We are so busy today protecting God from Himself that we do mental gymnastics trying to account for a sovereign, loving God and the existence of evil in the world. We end up trying to justify God. Isn't it striking that neither Naomi nor the author reporting the story had any trouble with that? They affirm that God's providence is behind everything that happens in life—everything.

Do I mean that God is somehow responsible for earthquakes and floods and tornados? What does the author teach here? God is responsible for famines and the death of Naomi's husband and sons. (Now I have intentionally not dealt with the issue of the origin of sin in this sermon because there just isn't time but I do want to affirm what Naomi and the author of Ruth affirm—God is sovereignly controlling every experience of life.) Job witnessed to the same truth when he declared, *"The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed is the name of the*

Lord.”

## God’s Purposes

Look at 2:20:

*“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.”*

Here again Naomi praises God for His providence. But this time her praise is for God's providence in governing all

***Naomi praises God for His providence  
in governing all events to  
accomplish His purposes***

events to accomplish His purposes.

Earlier I said that God is not only actively sustaining His universe but that God is also governing everything so that it turns out exactly as He planned. That's what Naomi sees. To understand the impact of this we need to go back to chapter 2, verse 3. Ruth asked to go to work in the fields and Naomi said okay. Then the author in deliberate exaggeration tells us what happened: *“As it turned out,”* Ruth found herself in the field of Boaz. The author says it was by chance that Ruth showed up in Boaz's field. Our expected response to that is “Sure!” In fact, by saying it that way the author intends for us to know, just as the whole story makes clear, there was no “chance” involved at all—this is God at work.

So when we get to the end of the day at verse 19 when Ruth tells Naomi that she has been working in Boaz's fields,

Naomi exclaims with her confidence in God's providence: *"GOD has not stopped showing his kindness..."* God even directed the feet of Ruth to a certain field, God steered Boaz to the field that day, God had made certain that Boaz had heard the story about Ruth and Naomi, and on and on the providence of God was at work governing the events to bring about exactly what He wanted.

In fact, as I mentioned earlier, when we look at the whole

***What's the point? God is in control  
of every event and every person;  
God is governing in all history  
to the end He desires.***

story we see God's providence in governing the events of people so that His purposes are met. How does the book end? Chapter 4:16-22 makes a big point out of the outcome: David, the great king of Israel came through the line of Ruth and Boaz. How did the book begin? Elimilech whose name means "God is King" is from what city? Bethlehem! Elimilech ("God is king") dies but what man is born in Bethlehem? David, the one who reigned as King.

What's the point? God is in control of every event and every person; God is governing in all history to the end He desires.

## **God Working Through Us**

Look now at 3:1-3:

*"One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he*

*will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on 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.”*

Here we find Naomi planning how to get Ruth and Boaz together. And if we looked at the first part of chapter 4 we would find Boaz planning how to make certain the other relative doesn't get to marry Ruth so he can. Does this mean God controls some things and people control others? Or does it mean that by planning, Naomi and Boaz don't trust the providence of God? No! What the author shows us is that God often works His providence through us. The author shows us that God is clearly working but is using the means of human action to accomplish His purposes. Even in our actions God is at work, guiding, steering and governing to accomplish His desires.

## **Sin Can't Thwart God's Plans**

I want to show you one more illustration of the providence of God in this story, an illustration that will probably trouble some of you because it comes, in our limited thinking, dangerously close to making God the cause of sin. Yet so complete is the providence of God that He even works through sin to accomplish His purposes.

Toward the end of the story, (4:11-12) the people of Bethlehem are standing around congratulating Boaz on his soon-to-be-marriage to Ruth. In doing so they pronounce several blessings on him and one of them is at the end of verse 12: *"may your family be like that of Perez"* and then they add *"whom Tamar bore to Judah."* Now I have to believe that none of the words the author uses is superfluous—that is, that he knew exactly what he was doing when he described who he was talking about by not

only referring to the man's name but most specifically when he refers to the man's father and mother.

Some of you may remember that Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah (one of the twelve sons of Jacob) and when Judah sinned against Tamar by not giving her one of his sons, she pretended she was a prostitute and Judah had sex with her and the result was Perez. The providence of God is so certain that not even sin can stop the plans of God. In fact, God will even use sin to accomplish His purposes. Somehow this author could put God right in the middle of a sinful situation and demonstrate the providence of God without staining God's character at all. The providence of God is so pervasive that there is no place and no circumstance in which God is not guiding to achieve His purposes.

But let's conclude by going back to Naomi when she was still in Moab: her husband and sons had died and she was left destitute.

- Why did she not just curse God and die?
- Why didn't she jettison her faith in a God who cares for her?
- Why did she go on believing in the providence of God even in the midst of her tragic circumstances?

First of all because Naomi was not a Deist or an Agnostic. She knew God had not left His universe to fend for itself. She knew God was at work in everything. Secondly, Naomi didn't give up on God because she knew God was not a sentimentalist. Some in the past, and even some today want to make God into our personal errand boy. We want a God who is only love and never justice or wrath. Some today find it incomprehensible that God would do anything contrary to what they think is in their best interest. But Naomi knew that the God of the Bible is not a "gentle

philanthropist” but the God of judgment as well as grace, the God of wrath as well as mercy. She never expected that God was there just to make life comfortable for her. We often assume that God's providence has as its goal our comfort and pleasure. But the providence of God has most of all to do with accomplishing God's goals—goals that not so incidentally include our welfare. But notice it is our good not just our comfort that God aims to achieve.

***We often assume that God's providence has as its goal our comfort and pleasure. But the providence of God has most of all to do with accomplishing God's goals***

Why did Naomi not despair in her tragedy? Because, by God's grace, Naomi could live without understanding everything about how God works—she trusted him. G.C. Berkouwer wrote, “The struggle with doubt is the struggle against the protest of the autonomous man, who sees the limits which God (has placed on) human knowledge as an outrage against man's freedom and happiness. Through the sovereignty of God's grace this protest is withdrawn. And in the withdrawal of protest, worship is born.”<sup>4</sup> Naomi worshipped her God and trusted Him. Some might too quickly ask, “Well isn't that just fatalism?” No! Fatalism is blind, irrational chance. Naomi had faith and faith is not belief in blind chance but trust in the sovereign, living God who loves her.

Betsy Ten Boom of Holland was nearly dead in a German concentration camp during World War II and yet she spoke of her faith in the providence of God. One of the others in her “hell” hole held up her disfigured and broken hands and fingers and snarled “My name Maria Fratzcek, I was first violinist in the Warsaw symphony—did your God of love will

this?"

Betsy Ten Boom gave the final apologetic, one with which Naomi would have gladly concurred, "I don't know, I only wish you knew my God."

What Betsy was saying was that the only way to live without despair in a world of pain (or to live without the idolatry of self in a world of comfort) is to know the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ—the one who loved us and gave Himself for us. That God, Betsy, Naomi and I, by His grace, will follow to the end of the earth. I believe in the providence of God!

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, p. 20

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 21

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 22

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 275



## Chapter Three

### Faithfulness

***Editor's Note: The following sermon was delivered as a first-person monologue.***

Good morning! My name is Naomi, Elimilech's wife. I grew up in Bethlehem, Judah—that's a small town just South of Jerusalem, for those of you who don't know my country well. I'm here this morning because I'd like to tell you about a young friend of mine—a woman named Ruth. Her story is told in full in the Scriptures—in fact you'll probably want to look at it even as I tell you about her this morning. I don't intend to tell you the whole story—you probably know it anyway—but I do want to tell you what Ruth taught me about faithfulness.

Faithfulness. I suppose in your culture as in ours, faithfulness is in short supply. It seems that too many people live life for what they can get out of it rather than what they can invest in it. I get the feeling that even many marriages are ones of convenience; people only feel good about their marriage and desire to remain in it so long as it is meeting their needs. Actually, your word "faithfulness" is only a partial translation of the word that I have in mind. The word in my language is "hesed" - not "blessed" but "h," "hesed." There are actually several English words that begin to get at what this Hebrew word means:

- Undeserved favor, like grace,
- Loyal love,

Maybe the word "Kindness" comes close, and no, not motivated by some sense of pity but motivated by genuine love. "A loyal, loving kindness—faithfulness to another person!"

Well, back to my story. I said I want to tell you about Ruth and her faithfulness—her loyal, loving kindness to me. More than 15 years ago, my husband, my two sons and I moved away from Bethlehem to the neighboring country of Moab. There was a famine in our country and we knew we had to do something or we'd literally starve. It wasn't long after we moved that my husband died. If I thought things had been bad before, I was desperate then. Fortunately my two sons were able to work, as was I, and we made ends meet. Things began to look better when they both got married.

That's where Ruth comes in—my son Mahlon married her. Both my daughters-in-law are excellent women but as I came to find out, there was something special about Ruth. I said I was desperate when my husband died, but I must tell you I thought my world would come to an end when just ten years later both of my married sons died. By that time I had heard that the famine was over in Judah and realizing there was nothing holding me in Moab, I made plans to go home. Well, Ruth and Orpah, that's my other daughter-in-law, both said they wanted to go with me. I felt that was very thoughtful of them but I assumed that once we got under way they'd realize they needed to stay in their own country.

And when the day came to leave, I told them both how much I loved them and then I asked a blessing on them. That's the first time I used that word “hesed” - loyal kind faithfulness—which I told you about earlier. I asked God to show them “hesed” - kindness just like they had shown to me and to their husbands. Well, I don't think I really understood what that word meant until I experienced what Ruth did next.

I told them how illogical it was for them to go with me and I also told them rather frankly that I was what you might

call “bad luck.” Orpah, that’s my other daughter-in-law, did what I expected and hoped they would both do—she kissed me good-bye and went back to her parent’s home. But Ruth, and here’s the surprising part, though I begged her, Ruth wouldn’t leave. And with the words she spoke next I learned something about “faithfulness” - about loyal kindness. I learned that loving faithfulness, loyal kindness, is a decision! I’ll never forget her words: “Where you go I will go and where you stay I will stay.” What struck me was this was not just a decision to go to Judah but this was a decision of commitment to **me**. And I realized how serious she was when she invited God’s curse on herself if she ever left me. This woman had thought it through. And she had not only made a decision in her own mind but she declared it openly. By declaring it and putting her relationship with God on the line there was no turning back.

***Loyalty begins with a decision and a declaration: this decision and declaration grew out of love***

That’s where faithfulness starts, whether it is with God or with a spouse or with a friend. Loyalty begins with a decision and a declaration: I choose to treat you this way from this day forward. I was also struck with something else that day; this decision and declaration grew out of love. I don’t think I had ever before felt so loved as I did that day. Just like God’s love is unearned, so I felt Ruth’s love that day was unearned. There was no way I had deserved this—it was just raw love—a choice to love me. I want to love like that! I want to have that kind of loyal kindness—faithfulness to others.

When I realized Ruth was determined to go with me I stopped urging her to go home. And even though I

thoroughly appreciated her love and commitment to me, I wondered what kind of a burden on me this young woman would be. Now I had to not only worry about me but about her. But again, Ruth had something to teach me about faithfulness. No sooner had we gotten back to Bethlehem than Ruth asked if she could go to the fields and pick up the grain that had been left over. In our country when they cut down the grain they are supposed to leave some of the corners of the field and not take every stalk of grain but leave some of it for poor people to come and pick up to feed themselves. We call it "gleaning" - picking up the leftovers in the field and it is hard work. I'm no "spring chicken" and frankly that kind of work would have killed me. But Ruth went for me.

Faithfulness is not only a decision and a declaration but it is also hard work. When Ruth made the commitment to love me and be loyal to me, it meant "no matter what." I learned that faithfulness is not just "talk" but is love in action. That woman worked hard not just one day but also every day and she did it for me. I want to love like that. I want to love God and others that way.

***Faithfulness is not only a decision and a declaration but it is also hard work, it is love in action***

Ruth's faithfulness not only involved a decision and hard work but it also involved risk. I don't know if you've thought about it or not but even the fact that she left Moab and came back to Judah with me was a great risk for Ruth. Anyone could see that tragedy and suffering followed me wherever I went. Famine in my native country, death in my adopted country—why would anyone risk staying with me, but Ruth was willing because she was faithful. Not only that

but imagine a foreigner, especially a Moabitess, going into the fields to pick grain. Not many people in those days were concerned about the rights of foreigners. I was truthfully afraid she would be verbally if not physically abused, but Ruth was willing to risk herself because of her faithfulness to me. I want to love like that. I want to love God and others that way.

You probably already know that a distant relative named Boaz owned the field Ruth gleaned in that first day, unbeknownst to us. Ruth met Boaz that day. From what Ruth told me, he clearly took an interest in her. And as the days of harvest went on I began to have an interest in him. Did I mention that Boaz was a distant relative? That may not mean much to you but in my country, a male relative could make all the difference in the world. Both my husband and my sons were dead which meant that I had no one to pass the family property down to and no one to carry the family name along. As poor as we were and as old as I was, we were forced to sell the little property we had and with my death, would end the family of Elimilech.

What happened next taught me a huge lesson about faithfulness. I thought up a plan to get Ruth and Boaz together—you know, get Boaz to marry Ruth. Sure I was concerned for Ruth that she have a home but candidly I was just as concerned about me and my dead husband's property and name. So I made up this plan for Ruth to propose marriage to Boaz. Well when she showed up at his place of work in the middle of the night and proposed to him, he said something that made me realize another dimension of faithfulness. Faithfulness involves sacrifice. Here's what Boaz said to Ruth:

*"The Lord bless you. This kindness (there's that word "hesed" faithfulness - loyal loving kindness) you show for your mother-in-law is greater than that which you showed*

*earlier by coming here with her: You have not run after younger men, whether rich or poor."*

I'd missed it! Sure Boaz had money and security but he was a lot older than she was. Like any young woman Ruth surely must have had dreams about marrying a man more her own age—a man more attractive. But Boaz hit it right on the head; Ruth didn't have herself primarily in mind—she had me on her heart. By marrying Boaz it was not her family name that would be carried on, it was not her family property that would be protected but mine.

I then remembered the words she said to me before we ever came back to Judah:

*"Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. And where you will die I will die and there I will be buried."* That young woman, there that day, sacrificed her own future for mine. She gave up her family for mine, she gave up her gods for mine. My family and my God became hers. Ruth had committed herself to me! I want to love God and others like that!

One last thing Ruth taught me: the rewards of faithfulness. Back before the famine when my husband, sons and I were still living in Judah I think my concept of God was pretty shallow. Everything in my life was good. I just assumed that God is good; after all, look how things are going for my family and me. I had a pretty naive faith—one that was untested by much life. But when the famine hit and my husband and sons died, I was a different woman. Oh, I still believed in God but I think I pretty much thought of the providence of God as having to do only with those terrible things that happen in life, that God is somehow still controlling to His desired ends.

I'm afraid the joy was gone out of my life. Or maybe that I connected joy too closely with smooth sailing. In any case when things fell apart I found myself not only feeling miserable but acting miserably. Any faith I still had I thought of as just coping. I saw my relationship to God as largely one of hanging on. I was tempted to think of life as just one long hard experience and then you die. I was tempted to think of faith as just accepting the bad things that happen. I got to the place where I wasn't even expecting God's providence to include what was pleasant and enjoyable. I'm afraid that I thought of anyone who talked about joy in life as nothing more than naïve: they just haven't been there yet. They'll learn. But Ruth lived through the death of a husband and she still faced the future with anticipation—she still expected God to bless. She faced each day, eager to live it, anticipating the joy of the Lord.

***God's providence is not only hidden behind the clouds of suffering but His providence also shines through into much of life here and now***

What my experience with Ruth has taught me is that God rewards faithfulness. God's providence is not only hidden behind the clouds of suffering but His providence also shines through into much of life here and now. Yes, it is true that God's Kingdom will come in its fullness, unclouded by sin and tragedy but we can know much of the joy of the Lord now. God rewards faithfulness. I'm not talking about "health and wealth" kinds of rewards but I am talking about recognizing and receiving from the hand of the Lord all the good and perfect gifts that He bestows on us every day.

Back when we were still in Moab I prayed that God would show His kindness to Ruth by giving her a home. When Boaz first met Ruth, he was so impressed with her commitment to me—her faithfulness, her loyal kindness—that he prayed God would reward her. And I think you all know that is exactly what God did. My Ruth was given a home; she was married to Boaz. My Ruth was enabled by God to conceive and she had a baby boy. And God has given to me a son—a child who will carry the family name, a child who will inherit the family property, a child who will care for me in my old age. God is Good!

I want a relationship with my God that is like that—a relationship that **accepts** the pain He allows into my life but a relationship that also **expects**, and never ceases to look for the joys of life that God so freely gives every day. I don't want to succumb to a life of joyless perseverance—only hanging on until Jesus comes. I want to develop a life of joyful expectation and enjoyment of the goodness of God today.

“Hesed”—faithfulness, loyal loving kindness to others is what Ruth taught me; a loyal kindness, a faithfulness that is costly, risky, and hard work but is rewarded by our God. I want to be that kind of person!



## Chapter Four

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### **A Woman, A Family, A Nation, A World and Me**

Nationally syndicated film critic Michael Medved recently made a speech in which he described the pessimism that has pervaded the American culture. Children are particularly affected, he said. They are growing up in a culture that gives them little hope. Adolescents commit suicide at higher rates than ever before—why? Over and over again we hear kids lament there is no future. Marriage and family hold out little prospect because their experiences of marriage and family are painful—their parents divorced and their families are divided.

Our culture is so pessimistic that kids don't think anything will really change—jobs are scarce if available at all, incomes are down, the government is headed toward a financial crash leaving nothing for those who have supported it for years, the end of the cold war has simply resulted in more genocide and deprivation in many more places in the world. No future!

Even adults are affected. Many of them are afraid that they won't have enough money at retirement—not just for travel but even to keep their homes. Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are perceived as likely to fail—at least few feel they can depend on it. Many are afraid of the near future and uncertain about the distant future. With a growing secularism in our culture, fewer and fewer truly trust in the ideas of heaven, resurrection, and God.

One of the saddest things that can happen to a culture is when its people stop believing in a future. And one of the saddest things that can happen to individuals is when they

stop seeing a future for themselves. I remember reading some time back about a prison camp where the commander took the men out of the barracks and gave them instructions to dig a large pit on one side of the grounds. At first the men seemed to thrive on the activity and the apparent purposefulness of the task—they were accomplishing something. But no sooner would they finish digging the pit then the commander would dictate that they fill it in again. As this went on day after day, first digging a pit and then filling it back in, it became apparent to everyone that the work was purposeless. Not only did men begin to injure themselves to get out of the work but also the suicide rate in the prison camp went up dramatically. They had lost hope—life was meaningless.

***Without hope, without a future,  
people die emotionally, spiritually  
and even physically***

Men and women can't live long without a future. Without hope, without a future, people die emotionally, spiritually and even physically. Do you have a future? Obviously I don't mean do you think you will live a few more months or years. I'm asking if your life is tied to a future that positively shapes your present? Are you so certain of your future that you can emotionally withstand the pressures, the vagaries, and the disappointments of the present?

The great story found in Ruth is filled with suspense, intrigue, planning, romance and faithfulness. But why tell this story? Why is it in the Bible? If all Scripture is inspired by God and "*useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,*" what does this story teach? When I began this short series I suggested there are three

major themes taught by the story. The first two I have already addressed:

- The providence of God in every detail of life.
- The priority of faithfulness in relationships.

Now I want to address the third and last major theme and I think the primary theme, from the viewpoint of the author of the book. And “no” I’m not going to tell you just yet what that theme is; I want you to find it with me because this theme is the one that addresses the issues of hope and a future.

What makes this story so appealing? It is because what begins as tragedy turns into triumph, what began with sadness ends with joy, and what looks hopeless becomes fullness. Look at chapter 4 verse 17:

*“The women living there said, ‘Naomi has a son.’ And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”*

When you look at the names mentioned in this verse, what becomes obvious about the time of the writing of the book is that it was not written while Ruth was still alive. It was written either during or even following the time of King David. I think it is reasonable to assume the author is not just telling a good story—a well written “boy meets girl” love story; he has another purpose in mind. Just as God brought a kinsman-redeemer to save Naomi and Elimilech’s family name so God has brought King David to save the nation of Israel. It’s as if the author says, “look at what God did for Naomi!” And “look at what God did for the family name of Elimilech!” As certainly as God saved them so God will save the nation.

But there is more here than just an example of God saving people from a terrible situation. What the author has taken

great pains to point out is that God's means to accomplish the saving of these people is a person—a KINSMAN-REDEEMER. Look at chapter 2 verse 20. After Ruth returns to Naomi and reports that she has met Boaz and worked in his fields, Naomi says something that is the turning point of the whole story:

*"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."*

It is not just that Boaz is a good man and might help them. The author could have simply introduced Boaz to us as the one who would marry Ruth and save the family farm. But the author introduces him as a "kinsman-redeemer." In fact, for the next two chapters that description of Boaz stands as central to the whole story.

What is a "kinsman-redeemer"? Look in your Bible at Leviticus 25:23-25. The land God gave to the Israelites was divided up between the descendants of the 12 sons of Jacob, the 12 "tribes" we call them, just like we refer to Indian tribes or native tribes in other parts of the world today. Within each tribe the land was also divided up between the families. And each family was to retain that land—they were not supposed to sell it permanently to another family.

*"The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold." (Lev. 25:23-25)*

A “kinsman-redeemer” is so called because he is a relative (a kinsman) and he is responsible for buying back (redeeming) the land so it stays in the original family. In other places in the Old Testament we find that a “kinsman-redeemer” was also responsible for buying a poor relative out of slavery, or seeking justice if a relative had been killed or wronged.

***A “kinsman-redeemer” is so called because he is a relative (a kinsman) and he is responsible for buying back (redeeming) the land so it stays in the original family***

Now it seems to me that for a person to act as a “kinsman-redeemer” he has to have three things:

1. He has to be a relative of the person in trouble.
2. He has to have the ability to get the person out of trouble (buy the land or pay the back wages or whatever.)
3. He has to have the willingness to do so.

When we come back to Boaz in Ruth chapter 4 we find a man who has all three: the right relationship, the ability, and the willingness to help. And so the story ends pleasantly; Boaz buys Naomi’s land thus releasing her from poverty. But more importantly, Boaz marries Ruth and fathers a child thus giving Naomi a grandchild who would care for her in her old age.

*“The women said to Naomi: ‘Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.’”* (4:14-15a) How I can call this a “grandchild” I will explain in a minute. And so Naomi’s story

that began in tragedy ends in joy and security—she has a future and once again “hope” characterizes her life.

But it is not only Naomi that is cared for by Boaz’s actions as “kinsman-redeemer. Look at 4:9-10:

*“Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, ‘Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimilech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife, in order to 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. Today you are witnesses!’ ”*

Under Old Testament law the first child of a remarried widow became the legal heir to all the first husband’s property and also continued the first husband’s name in the community. When the author introduced us to Boaz back in 2:1 and again in 2:3, he notes twice for us, very deliberately, that Boaz is from the family-clan of Elimilech.

Now here in 4:9-10 we find out why that was so important. When Boaz fathers a child by Ruth, that child carries on the family name and property and place of Elimilech. By his relationship to Elimilech, and his ability to do something about it (buy the land and father a child), and his willingness to do so, Boaz rescues Elimilech’s family name and place from extinction. And so Elimilech’s story ends well also. What looked like the end of a family name turns out to be a beginning. A “Kinsman-redeemer” saves both Naomi’s life and the Elimlech family name.

But I want you again to look at 4:17-22. As I have already noted, the author is not just telling a story. He is wanting his readers to believe that as certainly as God saved Naomi and Elimilech’s family so God will save the nation of Israel.

And understand this: God will do so through a “kinsman-redeemer” - someone with the relationship, the ability and the will to do so. What point does the author make by adding these verses at the end of the story? That King David is the direct descendant of this marvelous intervention of God in the lives of Naomi and Elimilech. That David is the “kinsman-redeemer” that will save Israel.

Look at 4:11:

*"Then the elders and all those at the gate said, 'We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem.' "*

Here the Elders of the city are blessing Boaz and in doing so they are prophetic, I'm sure without knowing it. But the readers, later, would pick it up. The Elders pray that God will make Ruth like Rachel and Leah, the wives of Jacob, and mothers of the 12 clans, families, tribes of the nation of Israel. They are asking that from Ruth and Boaz would come a leader for Israel.

***David is the direct descendant of this marvelous intervention of God in the lives of Naomi and Elimilech***

Look at the last part of verse 14. Here the women of the town likewise unwittingly speak prophetically: *"Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel."*

Please notice it is the child that they are calling the “kinsman-redeemer” and that they are praying will become prominent in Israel. What the author’s first readers would understand is that truly through this child came the great “kinsman-redeemer,” David. And so this story is not only

about God's salvation of Naomi and Elimilech's family through a "kinsman-redeemer" but it is also the story of God's salvation of Israel through another "kinsman-redeemer" - David.

In a previous sermon I mentioned that Ruth lived during the time of the Judges. During that time from 1000 - 1400 years before Christ the nation of Israel was in frequent turmoil. They were a land that makes modern day Yugoslavia–Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia–seem peaceful. Truly the warfare, the bloodshed, and the brutality was frequent and that didn't count the times that enemies invaded and wreaked greater damage. The sweet smell of success under Moses' and then Joshua's leadership had turned sour. The period of the judges is a hopeless cycle of sin, foreign invasions and internecine warfare.

Look in your Bible at the next book, I Samuel, chapter 4. I think many of you know that the Ark of the Covenant, that box the Israelites carried with them throughout the trip from Egypt to Canaan, was symbolic of the very presence of God in their midst. In a very unique way, God chose to dwell in that Ark.

In I Sam. 4:10 we find that the Israelites' arc enemy, the Philistines, defeated the Israelites and captured the Ark of the Covenant. In verse 18, when Eli, the spiritual leader of Israel at that time, heard that the Ark had been taken, he fell backward off his chair and died. Eli's daughter-in-law at that point gave birth to a child and in verse 21 she names him Ichabod saying "the glory has departed from Israel." Eli, his daughter-in-law, and most of Israel had every right to despair that day; there was every appearance that God had finally had it with the nation of Israel. They had reason to believe that the future of Israel had just died. There was no hope for this nation. If they were on their own, they



were as good as finished.

But what does God do? God raises us a “kinsman-redeemer.” From where? Many of you know that after Eli’s death, Samuel became the spiritual leader of Israel. In I Samuel 16:1, the Lord came to Samuel and told him to go anoint the next king of Israel. To whom and where does God send Samuel? To Jesse in Bethlehem. What did the author of Ruth tell us is the name of Ruth’s and Boaz’s son? Obed. And who was Obed’s son? Jesse. And where did Boaz and Obed and Jesse live? In Bethlehem.

***The book of Ruth is not only a story about Naomi, about Elimilech’s family name but is also a story about the roots of Israel’s salvation—the origins of the kinsman-redeemer, David.***

And that day, Samuel, at God’s command, appointed the next king of Israel. He had the right relationship (he was a true kinsman), he had the ability by God’s grace, and he had the willingness. And David, by the power of the Spirit of God, redeemed the people of Israel from slavery and oppression from foreign invaders, he unified the tribes, he brought peace to Israel. Under David’s leadership the nation had hope, it had a future. And so the book of Ruth is not only a story about Naomi, about Elimilech’s family name but is also a story about the roots of Israel’s salvation—the origins of the kinsman-redeemer, David.

Early on in this sermon I asked you to find with me the third and primary theme of this book. Have you gotten it? In two words, the primary theme is “kinsman-redeemer.” Look in your Bible at Matthew 1. When we think about the

application of that primary theme to us we do not only have the perspective of the author of the book of Ruth written during the time of David, but we have the perspective of 1000 more years of history, actually 3000 more years. How does the chapter begin? *"A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham."*

Starting at verse 2, look at the names: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Perez. Look at verse 5: *"Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth."* Matthew is bringing this whole thing together.

Next we see Obed (that was Ruth's and Boaz's son), then Jesse and then David. But notice the family tree doesn't stop there. The names go on until we come to verse 16: *"Jacob, Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."* Just as Naomi needed a "kinsman-redeemer" to save her from poverty and death, and just as Elimilech's family needed a "kinsman-redeemer" to save it from extinction, and just as Israel needed a "kinsman-redeemer" to save it from annihilation, so, God said, this world, needs a "kinsman-redeemer" to save it from eternal destruction.

***The gospel writers make it clear to us that Jesus, God the Son, came to this earth as the ultimate "kinsman-redeemer."***

After the time of David when the nation of Israel again greatly sinned against God and degenerated into a third-rate power and finally succumbed to slavery again, God through the prophets spoke of Himself in the role of Israel's coming Kinsman-redeemer. And then the gospel writers make it clear to us that Jesus, God the Son, came to this

earth as the ultimate "kinsman-redeemer." In Luke 1:68, Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, proclaims of Jesus, while He was still in the womb of Mary, *"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people."* Jesus, the Son of God, the Kinsman-redeemer.

Turn next to look at Romans 3:23 and following. All the other "kinsman-redeemers" (Moses, Boaz, David) were but copies of the great original, the Lord Jesus, Himself. The Apostle Paul here in Romans 3 and many of the other New Testament writers speak to the same theme—Jesus was the only one with the relationship, the ability and the willingness to redeem people from their sin and its consequences. Here's the way Paul says it beginning in verse 23 with my paraphrase and commentary:

*"Everyone of us has sinned against God. We rightly deserve eternal death - we are helpless to save ourselves and hopeless - no future.*

*"But we are justified, we are made right with God, we are forgiven and brought back into right relationship with God, freely by his grace.*

*"God has done this by redeeming us through the 'kinsman-redeemer' Jesus Christ.*

*"God redeemed us, God bought us out of our slavery to sin and destruction by presenting Jesus as a sacrifice who would suffer God's wrath in our place. His blood was shed for us - His blood, his life was paid to redeem us."*

Look at the middle of verse 25:

*"God did this to demonstrate his justice - sin will be*

*punished! From Adam clear through the times of Abraham, Moses, David and Isaiah God did not pronounce the ultimate punishment on his people for their sins - he left those sins unpunished.*

*"He did that to demonstrate his justice at this present time by pouring out that punishment on Jesus. The punishment for sin is so terrible and so infinite that only the eternal, infinite, perfect Son of God could pay for sins. And now, because of what the Father-God has done through Christ we realize that God is just (He doesn't overlook sin; he does ultimately punish it) and that at the same time he can declare us not guilty because Christ has paid for our sin - if we have faith in him - if we trust in him and his death for us.*

*"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life, through what Jesus Christ our Lord has done."*

Naomi wasn't dead yet but she was in serious trouble. Elimilech's family name didn't have a prayer—he was dead and there were no sons. The nation of Israel was down for the count. This world in which we live is operating on borrowed time. And you and I do not have a chance if we are left on our own. All of us need a Kinsman-redeemer—someone who is one of us who will get us out of the eternal dilemma we are in.

In the early 1960's this country had settled into a malaise and John Kennedy brought the nation to its feet by giving them a future to look at. In 1992, Bill Clinton ran his campaign at least partly on a theme of "hope." He even used his hometown by that name to make the point. In 1996, Lamar Alexander, Republican presidential hopeful, said that in contrast to his Republican rivals he was the candidate of the future—a candidate of hope. But all those

offers of a future and hope, while important in a sense, are insignificant in the eternal scope of things. The only future that truly matters is the one that is guaranteed by a relationship with the eternal God. It is when you or I are related to the infinite Kinsman—redeemer, Jesus, that we have real hope, that we have a future.

Do you have a future? Obviously I don't mean do you think you will live a few more months or years. I'm asking if your life is tied to a future that positively shapes your present? Are you so certain of your future that you can emotionally withstand the pressures, the vagaries, and the disappointments of the present? Are you trusting in the Kinsman-redeemer, Jesus? Do you have a future? Does God-given, God-authorized hope characterize your life?





## For back cover

The story of Ruth holds honor, adventure, romance, tragedy and hope. God uses this story to teach us about:

- His providence (He is in control of even the smallest details of life)
- His honoring of faithfulness (Christianity is a life of faith lived out in actions) and
- His redemption of His people (God is always working to bring about the salvation of His people)