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Bread of Life Baptist Church

Ruth 3 - 4

Under the Wings of the Redeemer

One pet peeve of mine has always been the person who picks up a new book, and before reading it, immediately turns to the last page and reads it first, to figure out whether or not this story will have a good, happy ending, before they commit the time to reading it; if it's a good ending, they'll read it, but if it's a bad, sad, or unsatisfactory ending, they won't read it. Now, part of me cringes and goes crazy over someone doing that. It makes me wanna say, "What are you doing!?! You're ruining the story for yourself!" A large part of what makes a good story so enjoyable, entertaining, and exciting, is that it draws you in and keeps you asking, "What's going to happen next?" You follow the ups and downs, the thrills and concerns, the hopes, disappointments, and joys of the characters. You start to make your own predictions for how it will be resolved. There are those climactic moments where you're left on the edge of your seat, biting your nails, hoping that everything turns out alright. But if you already know the ending, if you already know what happens, then it takes the edge off. It spoils the story and takes away a lot of the fun. When you don't know what's going to happen or how the story will end, it keeps the story much more exciting and engaging. But it also brings along a risk with it; after all, not all stories have a happy ending. When you get invested in the characters and hope so badly for the story to end well, it can be very disappointing when things suddenly take a drastic turn. When you're invested in a good story, it makes you long for a good, satisfying conclusion! And so, another part of me actually understands and sympathizes with the person that picks up a new book and reads the last page first: if you're going to invest in a new book, it makes sense to make sure the ending will be worth it.

We all yearn for a happy ending, for a satisfying conclusion - if not in books and movies, at the very least, we all yearn for a happy ending to *our* own personal stories, in our lives and the lives of those we know and love. Our hopes and dreams, excitements and expectations, anxieties and fears, sorrows and joys all ebb and flow along the course of the stories of our lives and the lives of those around us. But the problem is, we can't skip to the ending; we can't skip to the last page and read it first, to take the edge off and lessen our anxiety and worry. It just doesn't work that way. And sadly, as we all know too well, not all stories end in a "happily ever after." So is

there any way for us to have genuine hope and look forward to a “happily ever after” for ourselves, for a good, happy, satisfying ending in our own stories? The biblical, gospel answer to that question is: *yes*, you can have that good ending to look forward to because God writes your story, and He has already written a gloriously good ending for all who are redeemed in Christ through faith.

We see this illustrated for us beautifully and profoundly in the Book of Ruth. Part of what makes this so sweet and endearing is that it has such a beautiful, joyful, satisfying ending, which we come to in our text today. So in order to best understand and appreciate the climax and conclusion of this story, let’s briefly review what’s happened so far. Just a few weeks ago, we ended the book of Judges - the book right before Ruth - and Judges did not end happily at all! It ended by showing us a horrifying, morally depraved, spiritually dark landscape in Israel, with things just getting worse and worse, ending on the refrain, “In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). The ending was bleak, but decisive, meant to show us the dark road of sin and unbelief and exactly where it leads. But then, the book of Ruth shines like a bright light against that dark backdrop. It began in the dark days of the Judges, in chapter 1, with the tragic circumstances of Naomi’s life: we met her in a foreign, pagan land, fleeing the poverty of famine, and bereaved of her husband and two sons. She returned back home to Bethlehem, yet was sorrowful, felt empty and hopeless, even bitter and blaming God. And yet, this story has shown us very plainly and clearly, that God had not abandoned her! God was with her, working out his gracious providence behind the scenes in the story of her life. We see this first and foremost in Ruth, her extraordinary daughter-in-law, who stuck by Naomi’s side, showing steadfast loyalty, faithfulness, and loving kindness to her (the Hebrew word *hesed*, reflecting God’s own loving kindness). Ruth converted from Paganism to worshipping Yawhweh, identifying with the Lord and His people. Yes, they were poor, vulnerable widows, yes, Ruth was even a sojourner in a foreign land; yet she sought refuge under the wings of the Lord! Then, in chapter 2, God’s gracious providence was on full display, as He brought protection and provision for Ruth and Naomi through the kindness of Boaz! Already, at this point in our story, things have taken a much more joyful turn. Chapter 2 ended on a cliffhanger, but a very hopeful, optimistic one: after Boaz had shown such generosity and kindness to Ruth, Naomi then reveals that Boaz is also a *kinsman-redeemer*, raising our hopes and expectations for even greater things to come!

And so we come to the climactic moment, in chapter 3 and 4, before our story the story is resolved: the story of Ruth and Naomi comes to a very happy, sweet, satisfying conclusion, ending with redemption, blessing, a marriage, the birth of a special baby, and satisfying joy. It's a sweet story with a sweet ending. But the best thing about this story is that it isn't just about God's providence and redemption in the story of Ruth - ultimately, it's about God's plan of redemption culminating in Jesus Christ, our redeemer.

So let's pick back up where we left off a couple of weeks ago, beginning with chapter 3...

I. Seeking Redemption through Acts of Faith (3:1-18)

Chapter 3 begins with Naomi coming up with a plan: "Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her [Ruth], 'My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor'" (vv.1-2). Naomi cares for Ruth, and she feels responsibility to help Ruth find the "rest" of marriage and all the blessings and benefits it would bring. And she has an eligible candidate in mind: Boaz, the very man who has proven generous and of noble character, the man who has shown such kindness to Ruth as she has continued to glean from his fields for several weeks now, all throughout the harvest season. And best of all - he's a relative, one of their kinsman-redeemers! If Boaz married Ruth, he would be able to redeem their family land and inheritance, and perpetuate the family line, both of which were a very big deal for Israel, part of God's Law. Remember the covenant God made with Abraham, the father of Israel? God promised Abraham 1. Land - specifically, the promised land of Canaan; and 2. Offspring - specifically, turning Abraham's descendants into a nation, a covenant people of God, through whom the promised offspring, the Messiah, Jesus, would come to bring the blessing of righteousness to all the earth - to everyone who had faith in God's promises, like Abraham did. In other words, at this point in the Bible's storyline, *land* and *offspring* are a big deal. And so the Mosaic Law creates the category of kinsman-redeemers who are able to keep a family line going if the husband dies without offspring, and to keep the land inheritance inside the same family clan (and therefore, tribe). So if Ruth marries Boaz, not only will it secure personal protection and provision for her, but it will also redeem Naomi, the family name, and the family inheritance.

So Naomi has a guy in mind, and she also sees opportunity. Boaz is “winnowing barley” that night “at the threshing floor.” A threshing floor would have been a flat, outdoor place outside of town, possibly out in the fields; at the end of harvesting their grain, they would crush it, then take a pitchfork and throw it up in the air, so that the wind would carry away the lighter chaff and husk and allow the heavier barley grain to fall back down. The reason they’re doing it at night is probably because the evening breezes made their job easier.¹ Furthermore, after threshing the grain in the evening, they would typically stay with it overnight, having dinner and sleeping there, since it’s outside of town and to make sure no people or animals make off with it.

So, Naomi comes up with a plan. She gives Ruth detailed instructions in vv.3-4: “Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” In other words, Naomi, this older widow, is telling Ruth, a young, single woman, to wash up, anoint herself with some perfume oil, and put on a different cloak - all of which would ensure Ruth appears as attractive as possible, making sure she’s clean, smells nice, looks presentable - and then she’s to go down to the threshing floor, outside of town at night (in the immoral, lawless days of the Judges, lest we forget), stay out of sight, and then, after Boaz has finished a long day’s work, finished dinner, had some wine, and then gone to sleep, then she’s supposed to sneak up, in the pitch black dark, uncover his lower limbs, lie down nearby, and then do whatever the man says. Now, it doesn’t take much imagination for us to see how this could all go horribly wrong, right? This is certainly not advice that we would ever give someone today! So what are we supposed to make of this? What’s going on here?

There’s actually a bit of disagreement as to how to interpret this part of the passage. Many solid, biblical, evangelical preachers and theologians disagree at this point. Some commentators say that what Naomi commands here is explicitly immoral, and there are several reasons why. First off, it was common at that time for prostitutes to go down to the threshing floor at night, when the men were sleeping and it was pitch black outside. Secondly, “feet” in Hebrew can be a euphemism for reproductive organs; and third, the verb “to lie down” in Hebrew can often be used as a euphemism for intercourse. But as bad as the situation may look, I don’t think that’s what’s going on here. Those with a more positive interpretation point out that

¹ Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, p.682.

the verbs “to lie down” and “uncover” do not always have sexual connotations, and that the particular word used for “feet” here isn’t the one used as a euphemism, but instead can just mean feet, or possibly legs and lower limbs. But the most important piece of the puzzle is how Boaz responds to Ruth in v.10; Boaz has been presented as a godly, noble man, and he responds to Ruth’s actions by blessing her in the name of God and saying that she, too, is godly and virtuous, a “worthy woman.” So I don’t think we’re supposed to view this as a scheme of immoral seduction.²

So what is going on, then? I think the best way to understand what’s going on here is to see this as Naomi telling Ruth to no longer identify as a widow, signal to Boaz that she is eligible and ready to move on with her life, and even to propose to Boaz in marriage. The first set of instructions are for Ruth to “wash” herself, anoint herself with perfume oil, and then put on a “robe” or “cloak.” These are the exact same things we see David doing in 2 Samuel 12:20; he has been mourning the death of his son, then signals that he is done mourning by washing himself, anointing himself with perfume oil, and putting on the same kind of robe, or cloak, that Ruth does (exact same word). And it seems very probable that Ruth had probably still been wearing the robes of widowhood, still signaling that she was mourning her husband’s death. And this would certainly help explain why Boaz had not shown any interest or taken initiative in pursuing Ruth in marriage. So it seems Naomi is saying, “It’s time to end your mourning, time to take off the robes of widowhood, and move on.” And since Ruth’s late husband is Naomi’s late son, we certainly can’t accuse her of being callous here. She’s urging Ruth to signal to Boaz that she’s eligible.³

But it’s still undeniable that the way she’s to go about it is provocative and risky; her showing up in the middle of the night is bold, running the risk of the situation turning sinful, or of Ruth getting hurt, or of Boaz misunderstanding or mistaking her for a prostitute, ending any potential relationship with this upright man. Yet Ruth, who is presented as a worthy woman of faith, agrees and goes through with the plan! Why is that? I think it’s to show us, first off, just how much she valued redemption for herself, Naomi, and the family heritage - and, consequently, how much she valued doing things according to God’s Law; and secondly, I think it underscores that Ruth is willing to go about it in this risky way because she is trusting in the

² David Block, *Judges, Ruth*, pp.685-686.

³ David Block, *Judges, Ruth*, p.684.

providence of God, who has clearly led her to Boaz, who “just so happened” to show kindness and generosity to her, and who “just so happened” to be a kinsman redeemer. I think we’re supposed to see this as an act of obedient faith on Ruth’s part.

So she goes through with the plan, in vv.6-8, and in the middle of the night, Boaz shivers (probably cold because his legs have been uncovered), and behold, he sees a woman at his feet! And here we are, in the darkness and quiet of midnight, at a climactic, pivotal moment in our story; we’re meant to be on the edges of our seat here, asking, “How is Boaz going to respond to her?” “He said,” in v.9, ““Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over me, for you are a redeemer.”” This wasn’t part of Naomi’s plan - Ruth adds this bit - but it is a profoundly significant verse, loaded with nuance. First off, the phrase “spread your wings over me” was a common cultural idiom for marriage. The word for “wings” here can also refer to the edges of a garment, and it was part of a marriage ritual where the groom would place a garment both himself and the bride, signifying their union. So this is nothing less than a bold marriage proposal! But it’s also more. This language also refers back to chapter 2, v.12, where Boaz prayed a blessing on Ruth from “the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” So Ruth is basically asking Boaz to be the answer to his own prayers - to continue to be the vessel of God’s refuge, provision, and blessing to her. She’s saying that this, too, is part of her seeking refuge from God, through Boaz - because, as she reminds him, he is a kinsman redeemer! She makes it clear that she is not promiscuous in this, but is seeking out redemption for herself and her family as prescribed in the Mosaic Law.

So how does Boaz respond to this bold proposal? He replies, in v.10, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether rich or poor.” He blesses Ruth, praising this as a “kindness” even greater than her “first” kindness that she showed in her loyalty to Naomi! Instead of going after young men, being driven by fleshly desires, she instead is seeking *redemption* according to the Lord’s Word. Boaz is recognizing this as an act of obedient faith in Ruth, calling her a “worthy woman” (v.11). So, Boaz promises to make sure she will be redeemed - but there’s one problem. There’s another redeemer closer in the line than Boaz is. So Boaz says he will settle the matter first thing in the morning; if the other redeemer will marry her, fine, if not, Boaz himself will redeem her. And he shows his good intentions by letting her

stay, but making sure her reputation is kept sound and no one thing sinful happened, and then sends her home, not “empty-handed” but overflowing with food.

Now, Ruth’s actions in this scene are definitely not ones that we should encourage or imitate for dating. But there is something for us to learn from Ruth here (and Boaz as well). Regardless of whether or not the plan was wise, it certainly shows that Ruth so valued redemption and so trusted in the Lord’s providence that she was willing to step out in faith, even when it was very risky for her to do so! And let us not forget - Ruth is a *Moabite*, not a native Israelite; she was a pagan who recently converted to Israel and to Yahweh! The determination she shows here - to be loyal to Naomi, to seek marriage and redemption in a godly way, according to God’s Law - it’s nothing less than remarkable! It’s a sign of obedient faith. It’s a reminder that we, too, should trust the Lord by walking in obedient faith, even when it is risky and costly. So ask yourself: in what areas of your life right now do you need to trust the Lord more? What situations face you right now - at home, at work, in private, in relationships - where you need to take a stand for the truth of God’s Word, to walk in obedient faith to God? Let us trust the Lord by walking in faith and obedience to His Word, no matter the risk or cost to ourselves! When we do so, we’re putting our faith into action, picking up our cross and following Christ! Such moments show just how much (or little) we trust God’s providence and value the redemption He offers us in Christ through faith.

And as the story continues, it reminds us *why* we can do so: it reminds us that God secures redemption for us as His people. We see this in our second and final point...

II. Redemption Secured for God’s People (4:1-22)

Chapter 4 picks up the story the very next morning. And sure enough, Boaz doesn’t rest until he settles the matter with Ruth that very day. In vv.1-6, we see him working things out with the other redeemer, that’s in line before him. He went up the town gates, and “behold,” the redeemer he was looking for coincidentally - no, we know, *providentially* - happened to come by. Boaz asks him to wait, then gets all the elders of town to come and witness this negotiation between them, to make sure everything is legit and official. Boaz tells this nameless redeemer that Naomi is back, and that she is “selling” the land of Elimelech, and the redeemer is first in line to buy it, but if he doesn’t want it, Boaz does. Now, the word “sell” is a bit misleading for us; real estate did not work the same way back then. In Israel, land was allotted by *inheritance* to specific tribes, clans, and families. You couldn’t sell and buy land very easily. Since Elimelech

died and Naomi lived, without any heirs, the land could be redeemed from her - and this would have been an enticing deal, because more land is valuable. So the redeemer agrees. And every romantic heart in the room cries out, “Wait, that’s not fair! *Boaz* is supposed to be the redeemer, so he can marry Ruth!” Ruth doesn’t know this guy, he could be terrible; but we know Boaz is a very good, honorable, trustworthy guy! And redeeming the land goes hand in hand with marrying Ruth! But here we see the craftiness of Boaz - he had left that part out, intentionally. But now he lets the redeemer know, in v.5, that to redeem the land inheritance, he has to marry Ruth, “in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.” This refers to levirate marriage, where if a man died childless, the brother, or nearest eligible kin, would marry the widow, in order to raise up offspring, perpetuate his name, and maintain the inheritance. But not the redeemer immediately backs out - he can’t marry Ruth, lest it mess up his own inheritance. And so, he passes the right of redemption to Boaz.

In vv.7-12, we see this being officiated. Boaz and the nameless kinsman swap sandals. Now, this doesn't make any sense to us, but thankfully, it didn't make sense to the original audience, either, since this book was written many years later, and the customs had changed in Israel, so the narrator explains it, in v.7: “Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging.” And then the elders bear official witness of this transaction, making Boaz the official redeemer, in v.9. And this is hugely significant for two reasons: first, it means Boaz redeems Elimech’s estate; he will receive and maintain the inheritance, and also care and provide for Naomi, Elimelech’s widow. That’s what the “bought from the hand of Naomi” bit implies. And secondly, as redeemer, he will marry Ruth, pledging to raise up offspring that will perpetuate the family name and receive the inherited estate of Elimelech one day. The scene concludes with the elders blessing his marriage with Ruth.

And then, like all great stories, it concludes with a “happily ever after” montage in vv.13-17. You can almost hear the soft, happy music playing in the background as the camera turns to the wedding day, as Ruth and Boaz get married, and then, as the montage speeds on, Ruth, the formerly barren widow, now a newlywed, gives birth to a baby boy! And then the baby is set on Naomi’s lap, and the women praise God for blessing Naomi, in verse 14: “Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher in your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than ten sons, has

given birth to him.” Our story has come full circle. At the beginning, Naomi was bitter against God and felt like her life was *empty*. But now, she is full! God has not abandoned her - He has been graciously working out all things for her good, all along, according to His sovereign purposes! God has brought redemption, fullness, joy, and blessing to this little family! What a sweet, beautiful, happy ending, isn't it?

But it gets better: this isn't just good news for this family; the story doesn't end there. It's like when you go to the movies and the story ends, but then right when you think it's over, there's another scene - there's more to the story. V.17 tells us, “They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.” And then, vv.18-22 zoom out and show us a genealogy, tracing the line from Perez, the son of Judah, to Boaz, Obed, Jesse, and then David - the great king of Israel! This shows that the story of Ruth isn't just a sweet story about God's providence for this family - it impacts the entire nation of Israel! God was providentially preserving the line of David, the King, by providentially working in Ruth's life, the grandmother of David! But even more than this: it connects the story of Ruth to the larger story of the Bible, of God's overall plan of redemption for His people! You see, David serves as a type, a picture, of a *greater king*, a promised descendant of David, who would come - the Messiah, the promised offspring of Abraham, great David's greater Son! Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer! This is why the gospel of Matthew starts off with one big genealogy, tracing out the line from Abraham to Jesus, making sure to tell us Ruth (and Rahab, Boaz's mother!) was included in Jesus's family tree! It shows us that this story is part of the rich tapestry of God's plan of redemption being worked out, through the scriptures, culminating in the life and work of Jesus Christ!

All along the way, God brought about His plan through extraordinary means of providence, using the exceptional cases of foreign, pagan women who have been grafted into the people of God - like Rahab, and now Ruth - showing the incredible grace of God for the nations! All along, God works out this story of redemption through the miraculous cases of barren women, like Sarah, Rebecca, and now Ruth, and eventually, most incredibly, through the virgin Mary, who miraculously gives birth to Jesus, here in this same town of Bethlehem! It all leads up to the climactic moment: Christ, the Messianic King, secures *redemption* for His people by His blood, through his sacrificial death on the cross! Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again so that *we* can be redeemed from our sins, grafted into God's family, to be His eternally blessed people! And it's by no coincidence that the story of the Bible -

and if you're a believer, the end of *our* story one day - concludes with the happy ending of a wedding, where Christ will His beloved Bride, the Church, all those redeemed by His blood, and we will enter into the happily ever after of eternal rest with Him - eternal protection and provision of righteousness and eternal life!

That's the glorious happy ending of the Bible's story - the glorious happy ending that the gospel offers us, if we will repent of our sins and turn to faith in Christ! Just like pagan Ruth, who converted and found refuge and redemption under the Lord's wings, so we, too, no matter our backgrounds or baggage or the sins and sorrows we bear, we too can rest in the refuge and redemption of the gospel, trusting that God has secured our eternal redemption purely by His grace and by the blood of Jesus Christ on our behalf!

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us rejoice and rest in the glorious redemption we have in Christ! Let us fix our eyes on the glorious happy ending that *will be ours* in Christ, that He has already secured for us! And if our happy ending of eternal life is already secure, then how much more so can we trust in God to providentially guide and care for us in this life, preserving us along the way? Let us fix our eyes on Christ and boldly follow Him in obedient faith, trusting Him no matter what the circumstances of our life may look like.

And if you're not a Christian this morning, I want you to know that this glorious redemption, this happily ever after, it can be yours too! No matter your background, no matter what scars and sins and sorrows you bear, Christ's blood is sufficient to redeem you from all of it and more! Simply trust that Christ has secured redemption for you through His life, death, and resurrection, and He will redeem you! He will bring you into His family, part of His Church, His beloved Bride, and bring you into eternal, glorious rest! And the first step of obedient faith you can take is to make your faith public through baptism. If this describes you, or you have any questions, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.