

## **“Mourning to Dancing”**

**Ruth 2:18-23**

**November 2, 2014**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Most of this second chapter describes the events of just one day. It was quite a day for Naomi. She began the day depressed and bitter. She could barely muster the strength even to speak to Ruth when Ruth announced her plans to go gleaning that day, much less go gleaning with her. Though the story follows Ruth on this day and not Naomi, it is not hard to imagine Naomi's misery during this long day. Given the fact that Ruth made a point of bringing to Naomi her lunch leftovers, it is likely that she had nothing to eat all day. Having elected to stay home, she probably had little to do. It would also have been a very long day at home by herself, since the activities assigned to Ruth would likely have required about a sixteen hour day for her. And then there was the added misery for Naomi of her anxiety about Ruth's safety. It is clear from the text that Ruth was in danger as an unattached woman gleaner. As darkness descended upon Naomi waiting at home for Ruth's return, I wouldn't be surprised if her imagination ran wild and she convinced herself that Ruth had been abused and murdered during her efforts at gleaning. After all, Naomi had lost everyone else close to her. She would be a prime candidate for Satan's lies that she was just poison to everyone who got close to her.

So it must have been with considerable relief that Naomi finally heard the sound of Ruth's arrival and then saw her familiar figure in the doorway. Ruth was obviously tired, but she had a smile on her face. She was laboring under the load of her shawl that was filled to overflowing with an ephah's worth (about 29 pounds) of threshed barley. As she set it down and Naomi marveled at it, she too began to smile. This was the first good thing that had happened to her in quite a while. Her joy is seen in her rapid-fire questions to Ruth, asking the same question twice. **“Where did you glean today? And where have you worked?”** And then, before giving Ruth a chance to answer, she realizes that the only way Ruth could have brought home almost a month's worth of gleaning in just one day would be to receive notice by some benefactor. So Naomi continues with a blessing upon the man who has taken notice of her.

In only one day, Naomi's mourning had turned to dancing. That's a phrase from Psalm 30, where David says of God, **“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness”** (v. 11). This is the pattern of death and resurrection that we have seen before, the pattern we have referred to as the hockey stick pattern. I notice three factors in Naomi's journey from mourning to dancing, and they are the same three God still uses today to turn our mourning into dancing.

## I. The *Hesed* Love of Ruth and Boaz

*Hesed* is the Hebrew word for love or kindness, a word that combines the ideas of faithfulness and love. God is the one who is supremely characterized by *hesed* love, but it is also to be a mark of godly people who trust him. Both Ruth and Boaz exhibit this kind of love, and it is through this love that Naomi's suffering is relieved and her mourning is turned to dancing. I notice at least three qualities of this kind of love in Ruth and Boaz.

*Hesed* love not only starts love projects, it finishes them. Ruth not only started in her faithful love for Naomi, but she finished as well. It is not difficult to start a love project. We become aware of some need and our heart goes out to those in need, and we want to do something about it. Some stop right there, thinking that feeling compassion is the same as being compassionate. But when it comes to actually doing something, it would be too disruptive to one's schedule. Admitting that you don't want to be inconvenienced by someone else's need produces too much guilt, so you simply tell yourself that you will act at some point in the future when you get a chance to do so. The chance never comes, and eventually the need is forgotten. Others might do a little better and actually get started in doing something, only to discover that the needy person is also a sinner. They were prepared to help the noble needy, but not the sinful needy. This is just too messy a project. It becomes like the whack-a-mole game in which you see one problem, whack it as best you can, only to see another spring up. Ruth must have been tempted to give up on Naomi. It is not easy to love a depressed, bitter person, and that's what Naomi was. Her depression had caused her to be able to do nothing more than sit at home by herself. Ruth doesn't scold her. She doesn't give her a pep talk. She just loves the mess that Naomi was, not really knowing what the outcome would be. I know this needs to be balanced with our need to avoid becoming enablers of the sins of others, but it is easy at times to use "tough love" to give us permission to give up on people before we should.

A second quality of *hesed* love is that it owns the problem and need of another, rather than merely giving some token gift to make you feel better. We can see this feature of love in the biblical role of the kinsman-redeemer, introduced in today's passage. Naomi informs Ruth that Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer of theirs. The Hebrew word for this is *goel*. A *goel* was a male member of the clan who rescued another clan member, usually a woman, who had fallen on hard times. For example, if a clan member came upon hard economic times that forced them to sell either their property or some family members into slavery, the *goel* would step up to redeem those family members by paying their debt. It is as if the problem had occurred to the *goel* himself. In other words, he makes the problem of a relative his own problem. Paul Miller says it

like this: “A *goel* doesn’t just write a check, but lets the weight of the problem come on him or her.”

That brings us to the third quality of *hesed* love, a quality that springs from the second one. Since it owns the problem, it takes initiative to address the needs of the one loved, rather than waiting to be asked. We take such initiative with our own needs. I for one don’t wait for someone to ask me to eat a meal. I take initiative to meet that need when it arises. Ruth took initiative with Naomi when it came to providing her with a meal. She had food leftover from lunch and took steps to take it to Naomi without being asked. Boaz is a continual picture of this. He puts himself in Ruth’s place and meets the needs he knows she has, including her social needs arising from her outsider status as a Moabite woman, her emotional needs for security and safety while she worked, and her physical and financial needs, not only for this day but for the longer-term future. He was never asked to do any of this, but took initiative. A member of our church made the observation this week that our church has an abundance of people willing to meet needs and serve when asked to do so, but a shortage of people who will take ownership and provide leadership in the meeting of these needs. That’s just another way of saying that we don’t have enough Ruths and Boazs characterized by *hesed* love.

## II. The Sovereignty and Suffering of God

The hand of God was clearly at work to bring Naomi to this place of rejoicing. We have noted before how we see the sovereignty of God at work. When we use the word “sovereignty,” we mean that God has absolute power over all events. There is nothing in the universe, no matter how small, that lies outside his control. God responds to Naomi’s bitter complaint about her life not with an explanation, but with quiet control to position things for her ultimate good. So the author says, tongue-in-cheek, that Ruth “happened to come” to the field belonging to Boaz (2:3). God was directing her steps to that precise field, although not in a way that violated her will. The Bible is full of language that speaks of God’s sovereign control over all things. Proverbs 16:33 says, **“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”** The well-known Romans 8:28 promises that for God’s children, **“All things work together for good.”** God is sovereign even over sin, though he is holy and innocent of any wrongdoing himself. So Joseph told his brothers, **“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive”** (Gen. 50:20).

So we see the sovereign hand of God at work in this chapter. But an all-powerful God can terrify us, unless we know that he is for us. We see that he is in his willingness to suffer for us. We see that in our current chapter in the fact that the kinsman-redeemer, the *goel*, is a picture of Jesus. Jesus is the

fulfillment of the kinsman-redeemer. As we've already seen, the *goel* makes our problem his own problem. That's exactly what Jesus has done for us. Jesus made our sin problem his own, as he took the weight of our sin upon himself and suffered its consequences.

We don't see the full extent of God's willingness to suffer on our behalf until the cross. The Scottish preacher of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, helps us consider the greatness of Jesus' sufferings on the cross.

He was without any comforts of God—no feeling that God loved him—no feeling that God pitied him—no feeling that God supported him. God was his sun before—now that sun became all darkness... He was without God—he was as if he had no God. All that God had been to him before was taken from him now. He was Godless—deprived of his God. He had the feeling of the condemned, when the Judge says, "Depart from me, ye cursed... who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power." He felt that God said the same to him.

Ah! This is the hell that Christ suffered. The ocean of Christ's sufferings is unfathomable... He was forsaken in the [place] of sinner. If you close with him, as your surety, you will never be forsaken... "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" [The answer?] For *me*—for *me*. The ocean of Christ's sufferings is unfathomable.

When we suffer and mourn, as Naomi had suffered and mourned, and when we want to know the reason, the answer the Bible gives is the sufferings of God on our behalf. **"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8). Even before the suffering is relieved, we can rejoice in the truth that God is for us, not against us. This is our great comfort. Naomi struggled throughout her life to believe that God was for her. That's why she left the Promised Land for Moab in the first place. A famine arose and she doubted that God was really for her. Do you know that God is for you? How can you know that? There is only one way. Take refuge under the cross of Christ just as Ruth took refuge under the wings of God. Know that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

These two truths of God's sovereignty and his suffering give great comfort to those who mourn. God is both all-powerful and all-loving. He uses his power to act in our best interests. That means that what he brings into our lives is exactly what you would ask for if you knew what God knew. We can trust God.

### **III. The Resurrection Power of God**

There are hints of resurrection in this passage. The last sentence of the chapter reads, **"And she lived with her mother-in-law"** (2:23). Why state the obvious? Because it highlights what she didn't have, a husband. Just as

chapter one concluded with a tease about a hopeful future, so this chapter does as well. It is a clue that there will be a husband for Ruth in the future. As good as it was that they now had their economic needs met, there was more to come.

There is a sense in which it is always the case for Christians that there is more to come. No matter how good things may be in the present, it will get better in the future. I don't mean to suggest by this that there won't be real suffering and loss in our future. There very well may be. Rather, I mean that in the big picture for those who are in Christ, there is such a bright future for us that it will eclipse the sufferings of the present. As Paul said it, **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us"** (Ro. 8:18). Peter van Inwagen writes, "this present darkness, 'the age of evil,' will eventually be remembered as a brief flicker at the beginning of human history." In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis writes that "Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn... agony into a glory." Tolkien, in *The Return of the King*, envisions a time when "everything sad is going to come untrue."

## **CONCLUSION:**

A woman I met a number of years ago, Andi, tells her story in Tim Keller's latest book, a book about suffering. She tells of the night she knew she had to take her wedding ring off, thirty years after putting it on. All through the divorce proceedings, she had kept it on in hopes that God would bring about the miracle for which she had prayed, the restoration of her marriage. But it didn't happen, despite her pleading with God to do so. Through studying and praying through the promises of God, she was strengthened in her faith, so that on the night when she took off her ring, she was overwhelmed with the love of God for her. As she slipped the ring off, she prayed, "Now I want to give you the devotion I thought I would be giving to an earthly husband. You alone are worthy of my whole heart's trust, and it's yours for the rest of my life." As she got into bed, she had the thought that she should get another ring to remind her of this vow. The next morning, she met with a group of women for prayer. It was their custom to begin with a time of silence, and during that time, a woman came over to her, knelt and said, "I feel like the Lord wants you to have this ring. He wants you to know that you are his beloved, and he is betrothing himself to you for the rest of your life. He will be your protector and provider. He will never leave you or forsake you. He will be with you forever." Andi had wanted a ring to remind her of her commitment to the Lord, but got instead one that reminds her of his commitment to her. That is the only thing ultimately that will turn our mourning into dancing.