

“Boaz, Man of Wisdom”

Ruth 4:1-12

December 7, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

Ruth has spoken for the last time in this book (3:17), and the scene shifts in chapter 4 to Boaz. He needs to act because of the unwelcome information that was revealed in the previous chapter. There is a kinsman-redeemer who is in line before Boaz to redeem Naomi by marrying Ruth. As readers of this story, our sympathies lie with Boaz, and we want Ruth to marry him and not this unnamed kinsman. The narrator has cultivated this desire in the readers, no doubt, to communicate that Ruth and Boaz have the same desire.

Two obstacles surface that stand in the way of a marriage between Ruth and Boaz. The first is the excellent character of Ruth. As Boaz pointed out in the previous chapter, the whole town had come to know that Ruth was a “worthy woman” (3:11). Why wouldn’t this kinsman want to marry such an excellent woman as Ruth? The second obstacle is the integrity of Boaz. If he could just be a little less scrupulous about this and let his heart lead the way, he could overlook this matter of the closer kinsman and go ahead and marry her. That would undoubtedly be the counsel given him in our day. “Follow your heart,” we are told. If you love someone, then don’t let anything stand in the way of pursuing your heart’s desire, not even God’s law. But Boaz will not compromise when it comes to obeying God’s law. He reveals himself in this passage to be a true man of wisdom. I notice at least three qualities of his wisdom.

I. Shrewdness

There is on the part of some a misconception about wisdom, that it requires the passive acceptance of whatever happens. Boaz doesn’t take such a passive stance. What he does instead is to act shrewdly in his negotiations with the nearer-kinsman. It may be true that this other man has a prior claim to redeem Naomi, but there is no reason that Boaz can’t negotiate this deal as shrewdly and aggressively as possible, short of deception.

A little background is necessary if we are to appreciate his shrewdness. Land could not be permanently sold in Israel, because in the Year of Jubilee every fifty years, all land had to be returned to its original family ownership. So land was essentially rented for whatever time remained until the next Year of Jubilee. If a family encountered some financial hardship, they could “sell” their land, but the “buyer” would only be able to use it until the next Jubilee. It is likely that Elimelech and Naomi had sold their land in this way prior to their

move to Moab. Naomi was now returning to Israel, but she had sold her land previously to someone else. The kinsman-redeemer was the clan member who, in such cases, had the responsibility to “redeem” the property sold in this manner and return it to the original owners, even before the Jubilee Year. He would redeem the land by paying off whoever had bought the land originally from Elimelech and Naomi before they headed to Moab.

Boaz is determined to conclude this deal as soon as possible. He starts by going to the city gate. There are two reasons for this. First, this other kinsman would have to pass through this gate as he left his home inside Bethlehem and travelled to his fields. Second, the gate was the place where negotiations and business deals were conducted. Written contracts were not generally employed for deals like this. Instead, verbal agreements were made in the presence of witnesses. So Boaz gathers both the witnesses and the kinsman in order to negotiate and conclude this deal.

The shrewdness of Boaz can be seen in the order in which he brings up the two matters of the land and marriage to Ruth. We might expect him to mention Ruth first, because marriage to her was the theme of chapter 3. Instead, he brings up the land first. The kinsman knows all about the return of Naomi, as did the whole town. He jumps at the chance to redeem the land and return it to Naomi. Why? He knows that Naomi has no husband and no sons, and that she is too old to have any more children. When a family had no male heirs, the land they had owned went to the nearest clan member upon the death of the widow of the last man owning the land. So this kinsman realizes that in redeeming the land he is going to have to take care of Naomi. He is willing to do that because he calculates that the land will pass to him upon her death, since she has no male heirs and no way of getting any so far as he knows. Though the text doesn't say so, it is clear that part of this negotiation included the price the kinsman would pay for this land. Boaz undoubtedly negotiated as high a price as possible, and the kinsman was willing to pay it with the prospect of acquiring such valuable property.

Only after reaching agreement about the land does Boaz bring up the matter of Ruth. This was a shrewd maneuver on his part. Had he brought Ruth up first, the price for the land would certainly have been much less, because of the likelihood of Ruth having a male heir to whom this land would pass. But now that he has negotiated a higher price, the kinsman can't very well go back on the price they have already agreed that he would pay. He would have lost face in doing so, because the negotiations had taken place before all these witnesses. Prior to knowing that Ruth was part of the deal, he was feeling very good. He was looking like the hero by redeeming this property for Naomi, but also able to benefit substantially from it himself. If his desire to save face prevents him from re-negotiating a lower price, in his mind he is left with no choice but to back down. He does so with a lame excuse that to redeem the

land would impair his own inheritance. If it wouldn't have done so before Ruth was brought into the picture, why would it do so after she becomes part of the deal? Boaz has accurately sized up the heart of this kinsman and has shrewdly negotiated this deal so that Boaz ends up being able to redeem the land and marry Ruth. In the process, he has also saved Ruth from a potential husband who is interested only in the increase of his own wealth. Boaz is doing what Jesus would say later to his disciples. **“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves”** (Matt. 10:16). There is nothing spiritual about naïvete.

II. Godly Values

Boaz is wise because he values that which is godly. To help us see this, the narrator provides a contrast to Boaz in this kinsman. It is significant that the kinsman is never named. The narrator even draws attention to his anonymity by the way Boaz addresses him in verse 1. The word translated “friend” in the ESV is viewed by most commentators as a pejorative term that they translate “So-and-So.” It is the author’s way of subtly drawing attention to the fact that he is not an honorable man. He will not have a place in the advancement of God’s kingdom, and so his name is permanently lost.

Interestingly, both Boaz and Mr. So-and-So walked away from this deal happy. Mr. So-and-So was happy because he was able to preserve his precious money. In spite of the fact that Boaz ended this day with far less money than he had when the day started, he too walked away happy. It is clear that these two had different values. For Mr. So-and-So, the highest value was money and wealth. Everything took a back seat to that. At first, he wanted this deal because he saw it as a way of increasing his wealth. Then when Ruth became part of it, he was against it because he saw the deal now as decreasing his wealth. His highest end, that which had greatest value to him, was money.

How about Boaz? What did he value? This story is often read as if it is primarily a romance in which Boaz was just smitten with Ruth and would do anything to have her as his wife. Marriage to Ruth, by this reading, was his highest value. I don’t agree. While it is clear that Boaz was drawn to Ruth and wanted to marry her, the highest value for him, the value that attracted him to Ruth in the first place, was his love for God. It was because he loved God and God’s word that he was willing to take this step. He knew of God’s redeeming of Israel from Egypt, and he knew that he was now called to respond to God’s redemption by helping to redeem another who was in a desperate situation. It was his love for God that was his highest end.

In his book about suffering, Tim Keller tells about two actors who were part of his church in New York. Both were invited to audition for the same role, and

it would have been the biggest role they would ever have been given. Though both were professing Christians, one of the two put all his emotional and spiritual hopes into having a successful acting career. It was clear that his highest end was his acting, not God. The other had learned through some earlier disappointments in his life that his main goal in life was to please and honor the God who had saved him. Neither man got the part. The first man was devastated and suffered a time of depression and drug abuse. The second man was sad and grieved the loss, but he was fine not long after that. His conclusion was, "I guess I was wrong. Looks like I can please and honor God better in some other career" (p. 308). Do you see the difference? It was a difference in values. Boaz was like that second man, valuing love for God above all else.

This is what Jesus was talking about in one of the shortest parables in the Bible. **"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field"** (Matt. 13:44). Your treasure is simply that thing for which you would sell everything else to have. It is the highest end and value. For Boaz it was love for God and for God's people. For Mr. So-and-So, God and his people were simply a means to get what he wanted. How can we learn to value God first? Only by seeing that God has sold everything in order to gain us. That brings us to our next point.

III. Hope

When the witnesses see what Boaz has done, it leads them to break forth in this blessing about the future. They see Boaz's hope, and it fills them with hope. Hope is simply a confident outlook on the future, and Christian hope bases that bright outlook not on some naïve optimism but on God's gracious promises. Notice that the blessing of the witnesses is that Ruth might be **"like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel"** (v. 11). You may remember that Rachel and Leah were Jacob's wives who had a bitter rivalry between them for who could give Jacob more children, a contest won easily not by the beloved wife, Rachel, but by the ignored Leah. Such is God's grace that he built up Israel through the evil of envy.

Boaz was of the tribe of Judah and his clan descended from one of Judah's sons named Perez. The story of Perez's birth was even more unsavory than the story of Rachel and Leah. Judah took a wife for his firstborn son named Tamar, a woman who was likely a Canaanite. When that son died childless, Judah's second son Onan, was told to have relations with Tamar in order to raise up a child for his deceased brother. He wickedly refused to do so by spilling his semen on the ground. Because of his wickedness, he died as a result of God's direct judgment upon him. Judah's third son, Shelah, was too young to

perform this function, but Judah promised that once he became of age, Tamar would become his wife. But Judah reneged on his promise, leaving Tamar a childless, poor and abandoned widow. So she disguises herself as a prostitute and has relations with Judah himself, without Judah knowing who she is. When she gets pregnant, Judah orders her to be burned to death. But he had given her a personal item as a pledge to pay her for her services, and she names the father of the baby by producing that personal item. He pronounces her more righteous than he, and she later gives birth to twins named Perez and Zerah. Yet it was through these scandalous events that eventually a Boaz was born. This blessing is full of the grace of God, a God who brings about his good purposes through sin and suffering.

This blessing reminds me of a sermon preached by the 18th century American preacher Jonathan Edwards when he was only 18 years old. It is the earliest manuscript we have of one of Edwards' sermons. It is entitled "Christian Happiness," and he makes three simple points. For Christians, (1) their 'bad things' will work out for good. We have certainly seen that in Ruth, haven't we? Many bad things happen in this book, but through it there is a conversion of a Moabite woman and the repentance of Naomi, who learns to trust in God instead of taking matters into her own hands. Edwards' second point about happiness is that for Christians, (2) their 'good things'—adoption into God's family, justification in his sight, union with him—cannot be taken away. We have seen that too in this story. Ruth returns with Naomi to Israel and seeks refuge under the wings of God. Boaz is brought into her life by this God to provide good things for her, including children and citizenship among God's people. Nothing will be able to take these things away. Finally, Edwards says that for the Christian, (3) their best things—life in heaven, new heavens and the new earth, resurrection—are yet to come. We'll see more of that next week as we read of the children born of this union between Ruth and Boaz. We can have a bright outlook on the future because these things are true of us.

CONCLUSION:

These verses remind us that there is a choice before us all. We can choose the path of wisdom that Boaz took or the path of foolishness and anonymity chosen by Mr. So-and-So. What does it look like to choose wisdom? True wisdom is to see in Jesus the great treasure and to consider everything else as having lesser value. We choose wisdom by choosing Jesus. We treasure Jesus like Ruth and Naomi learned to treasure Boaz. Like Boaz, Jesus has paid a price to have us as his. But unlike Boaz, he paid it all, giving his life to rescue us from a misery far greater than the poverty and suffering faced by Ruth and Naomi. Jesus has rescued us from the judgment earned by our sinful rebellion. He did so guided by love.