

“A Redemption Story”
Ruth 4:13-22
December 14, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

The story of Ruth and Naomi comes to an end with the passage before us today. Ruth and Boaz get married and have a son who becomes Naomi’s redeemer, saving her from the desperate emptiness she complained of after the tragedies that befell her. It is significant that this son, named Obed, is said to be Naomi’s “redeemer.” When we consider this story as a whole, it turns out to be a story of redemption.

Have you ever noticed how stories can release the emotional impact contained in words? If I say the word “faithful,” we all know what that word means. But knowing the definition of a word is very different from feeling the impact of a word. So if I tell you the story of B. B. Warfield as an illustration of faithful love, you feel something that the mere definition could never supply. B. B. Warfield was a well-known Presbyterian theologian at Princeton Seminary in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In August, 1876, he married Annie Pierce Kinkead. They seemed to have everything going for them. Both came from wealthy families, allowing them to afford a lengthy European honeymoon. One day on their honeymoon, they went out for a hike in the mountains of Germany when a violent thunderstorm arose quickly. Annie was struck by lightning, which left her permanently paralyzed. For the next 39 years, until her death in 1915, B. B. Warfield cared for his wife. He was never able to travel from his home because of his desire to care for his wife. After hearing such a story, we not only learn better what faithfulness is, but we also feel something of its beauty.

Redemption is the same. We all know what it means, but perhaps we have lost something of the emotional side of redemption. Have you lost the joy of your redemption? The story of Ruth helps us recapture some of that. As we come to the conclusion of this story today, let’s look back over the whole thing in an attempt to feel the beauty and wonder of our own redemption. I note four qualities of redemption in this story.

I. A Hopeless Condition

To redeem someone means to rescue them from some desperate condition from which they could not deliver themselves. The lifeguard rescues the drowning child, the fireman the person trapped in a burning building, or the policeman the kidnap victim. Back in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther and Erasmus had a disagreement about the nature of salvation. Erasmus said God

helped us like a parent helps a toddler learn to walk. Luther said it was more like a caterpillar in a ring of fire, with the only deliverance coming from above.

Naomi's deliverance was more like Luther's caterpillar in a ring of fire. When she immigrated to Moab at the beginning of the book, she was running from trust in God, taking matters into her own hands when a famine came upon the land, instead of trusting in God and staying in the land God had told his people to stay in. She remained in Moab for ten years, making it clear that she would not have returned to Israel had it not been for the tragic deaths of her husband and two sons. Then when she returned, she was still in something of a hopeless situation. She was completely without resources, having no money, no husband, no son and no land. In our day, she would be like someone having no money, no job, and no way of getting either money or a job. Unless someone came to her aid, she would be in serious trouble.

That's the way it is with our salvation. In our sin, we are like Naomi taking matters into her own hands. We always run our lives into a ditch when we do that. She felt the desperation of her situation when she returned to Bethlehem as a different person. Her troubles had changed her from Naomi, which means pleasant, to Mara, which means bitter. She was so depressed that she couldn't even accompany Ruth on her gleaning expedition. All she could do was sit in her despair.

Part of being redeemed is to come to the end of yourself, to be like the caterpillar in the ring of fire, noticing that you are surrounded by fire. Our self-reliance is so strong that we never really look up to God until we find ourselves encircled by flames. It is only when we realize the hopelessness of our situation that we look in hope to God. Have you ever felt the hopelessness of your life apart from God? When I'm walking with the Lord, I feel it every day. It doesn't bring despair any longer, but joy because it drives me into the powerful and loving arms of my rescuer, Jesus. Our redemption always starts with just this kind of coming to the end of ourselves.

II. A Determined God

One of the curious things about the story of Ruth is the fact that God stays behind the scenes. There are no miracles in this story, only normal everyday kind of events. God is described as taking some action only twice in the story. At the beginning, we read that he **“had visited his people and given them food”** (1:6). And then at the end he acts again in the life of Ruth, when we read that **“the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son”** (4:13). But it becomes clear that God is also guiding every small detail between these two actions of his at the open and close of the book. He guides Ruth to the field of Boaz. He keeps Naomi's foolish scheme to get Boaz and Ruth together from

taking a disastrous turn. He clears away the obstacle of the closer kinsman by the shrewd wisdom of Boaz. God is in the middle both of the big areas and the smallest details. He is completely in charge of all things, guiding them to his appointed ends of the conversion of a young Moabite woman and the return of the wayward Naomi from trusting herself to once again trusting God.

There are many similarities between the way we see God working out his redemptive purposes in the book of Ruth and the way he works them out today. Remember that the historical setting of Ruth is the period of the judges (1:1), a dark time in Israel when everyone did what was right in their own eyes instead of doing what was right in God's eyes. That sounds familiar, doesn't it? Remember too that God seems more likely to work today in this behind-the-scenes manner instead of through the open display of his power as in the miracles during the days of Moses, Elijah and Jesus. There is one more similarity that is very important to recognize. Just as God worked out his good purposes for Naomi through the love of Ruth and the generosity of Boaz, so he does in our day as well.

The love of Ruth is remarkable throughout this story. It begins with her determination to join herself to Naomi and to Naomi's God and people. Ruth did this in spite of the fact that Naomi became so self-absorbed in her bitterness that she ignored Ruth. When they first returned to Bethlehem, Naomi lamented that she returned empty, while the whole time Ruth was standing right beside her. And when it came time to find some food, it was left to Ruth to go gleaning because Naomi was too depressed to leave the house. She was willing to marry an older man, a marriage that was almost certainly likely to leave her a widow once again, and likely for a significant period of time. But her greatest act of love is the one seen in these last few verses when she gave up her son to Naomi. Though Ruth had been previously married, she had no children from her first husband, Naomi's son. So this was Ruth's firstborn son, given up that Naomi might have a son to redeem her. This son would redeem Naomi by inheriting her deceased husband's land and by providing for her during her elderly years. The women take the son to Naomi and she **"took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse"** (4:16). Whether that means that she literally nursed him through some re-lactation procedure or more figuratively that she just cared for him, the commentaries agree that the clear implication is that Naomi raised this boy, not Ruth. That interpretation is confirmed by the extraordinary fact that Ruth and Boaz don't name their son. **"The women of the neighborhood gave him a name"** (4:17). This is the only case in the entire Old Testament of someone other than a parent naming a child. So Obed lived with his grandmother, not with Ruth and Boaz. Any of you women who have had children can appreciate what it would mean to give up your son to be raised by another.

At Christmas, we remember that God knows what this feels like as well. He gave up his son, not into the hands of a loving grandmother, but into the hands of an angry mob and cruel soldiers. The name “Obed” means “servant,” and Jesus is the ultimate Obed, the servant who came that we might be redeemed. God stopped at nothing in his determination to rescue us, not even the loss of his own son.

III. A Transformed Life

This story shows us that when God redeems us, he doesn't just rescue us from a bad past, but he also transforms our present lives. I see that in two ways in this story. First, God changed the bitterness and despair of Naomi's life and gave her a new assignment, the raising of Obed. Do you remember how Naomi complained to God about the bitterness of her life, saying that she had left Israel full but is returning empty? Interestingly, God never gives her an explanation for the tragedy of losing a husband and both sons. What he gives her instead is a new assignment. I think God often does that. There is the godly woman who has a strong desire to be married, but who is never given a husband by God. An explanation from God never comes, but there is always some new assignment. And if the assignment is received with eager faith, there is great joy in it.

A second transformation can be seen in this story, and it is the transformed status from being an outsider to that of being an insider, seen especially in the life of Ruth. When Ruth came to Israel with her mother-in-law, she was simply a Moabite woman accompanying a poor Israelite woman whose life had taken a tragic turn. Anyone who has been the new kid at school knows what this feels like. You're an outsider, and it is not a pleasant experience. I would imagine most of us have had experiences like that. When I was in fourth grade, our family moved from Arkansas to Indianapolis, and it didn't take long for the kids in our neighborhood and at school to pick up on the fact that we spoke the English language with a bit of a different accent. Most were kind, but some took the opportunity to mock us. I learned a new word a couple of weeks ago when our kids were in town for Thanksgiving—“FOMO.” It's an acronym for “Fear Of Missing Out.” The true fear in this, however, is not just missing out on some fun, but a fear of being seen as an outsider.

Ruth must have felt the pain of her outsider status at the beginning. But as the story progresses, she assumes more of an insider status. Eventually, she marries the leading citizen of the town and has a baby. She has become a true Israelite in every way. When she and Naomi first arrive in Bethlehem, she's ignored even by her mother-in-law. But by the end of the story she is being recognized by the women of the town as being more significant to Naomi **“than seven sons”** (4:15). That's an extraordinary statement, because sons were far

more valued in this culture than daughters. To say a daughter was more valuable than even one son would be extraordinary, much less seven.

Her exalted status doesn't end with her marriage to Boaz and her delivering of a son. In a shocking ending to the story, we learn that Obed **“was the father of Jesse, the father of David”** (4:17). Ruth has become the quintessential insider, becoming a significant part of Israel's royal family, a dynasty that would never end. This is part of our redemption too. We are now insiders. John speaks of this in his first epistle. Speaking of Jesus, he says, **“That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ”** (1:3). Through Jesus, we become insiders among the people of God and with the very Trinity itself.

IV. A Bright Future

Through Obed, Ruth and Naomi become part of Israelite royalty. But it is something that happens in the future, and something of which they were completely unaware. There are significant present benefits to our redemption, but the greatest benefits are still in the future. Just as it would have been unimaginable that a young Moabite woman would become great-grandmother to Israel's great King David, so our future is beyond anything we can think or imagine.

By faith, this bright future breaks into our present lives. It is important to recognize that no one in this story was aware of what is revealed to us here at the end, that Obed would be King David's grandfather. What's more, everything that all the characters do in this story fits in the category of normal, even mundane activity. They work in the fields, they marry and they have children. But in faith, they also love and give. And it is through this loving and giving in the mundane part of life that they unknowingly go about building the kingdom of God. In a dark time in Israel's history, the period of the judges, normal people like Ruth, Naomi and Boaz simply stayed faithful to God and his ways. As a result, the history of the world was forever changed, though all of these characters died clueless about this. There is more at stake in the seemingly small and mundane parts of your life than you know.

CONCLUSION:

The concluding application from the book of Ruth is to trust the redeeming love of God and love like him. We have seen throughout this story that the heart of love is death. In order to love anyone, we must die to self. God has loved us and died for us. Let us trust him and follow him.