



REDEMPTION

Ruth 4:13-22

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I would like to begin by addressing the deep anxiety many of us feel regarding president-elect Donald Trump. I won't be talking about Hillary Clinton, not because I think she would have made a great president—I don't—but because time is short, the election is over, and we need to talk about what will be rather than what might have been.

Since Tuesday we've been talking, reading, thinking and *hopefully* praying about our new future with Donald Trump. For many of us, it has been a frightening and stressful time. As I see it, here's why:

1. *Tuesday's Surprise.* September 11, 2001 is one of those days everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing when they heard the shocking news. I expect that last Tuesday (Nov 8) also will become one of those days. We'll always remember it because of the shocking turn of events that evening. We watched with astonishment as what we had been led to believe was our inevitable future dissolved and a very unexpected future took its place. That alone—Tuesday's surprising turn of events—is enough to put everyone on edge.
2. *Donald Trump's Volatility.* It's not merely Tuesday's unexpected outcome that's causing anxiety. Many of us are afraid because of Donald Trump's sheer unpredictability. He's never held elected office before. Who knows what he will do as president? The uncertainty that surrounds his every word and action is like gasoline on the fires of our anxieties.
3. *Donald Trump's Track Record.* What's even more frightening than what we don't know is what we *do* know about Mr. Trump. He's been in the media spotlight for a very long time. We may not have his tax returns, but we do have extensive archives of his disregard, aggression and malice towards ex-wives, opponents, contractors, women, the poor, etc. If past words and actions are at all indicators of where we might be heading, then we have good reason to be afraid, especially immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and women.
4. *Guilt By Association.* Nevertheless, even what we know about Mr. Trump isn't what I fear most. What I find most perplexing and disturbing is not him *per se*, but how closely the church is associated with him. Everyone knows the massive support and endorsements he received from those who identify as evangelical Christians. Regardless of how we feel about him or how we voted, our tribe played a huge role in electing him to power. Consequently my greatest fear is that the damage is already done. The jury may still be out on President Trump, but it feels increasingly like a verdict has been reached with regard to us as Christians: *we* are deemed unsafe for immigrants, Muslims, people of color and women.

Clearly, a lot is at stake for us, for the people we care about, for the church and for the world!

All is not lost, of course. The risen Lord Jesus is still King and he remains on the throne. Nothing comes to pass without his permission. Christ is making all things new. He will have the victory over everything that is broken in our world.

Because we follow the risen Christ, we mustn't write off Mr. Trump, nor should we jettison the church. God commands us to pray for Mr. Trump and for all persons in high positions (1 Tim 2:2). I urge you to do this every day for the next four years. Perhaps God will answer our prayers by pouring out wisdom, mercy and grace on our new president. He could yet surprise us by serving our nation well. Likewise, we must pray for Christ to purify and strengthen his church here in our land.

It's also time for us to reengage and work for the good of these institutions that we truly care so much about. As much as I would like to quit and move somewhere far away, this is not the time to run. For those who can do so, please consider finding work in the Trump administration. Help him do the right thing as long as you're able. If he's determined to do evil, then gum up the works for as long as you can. For those who aren't able to do so, you must be supporters and encouragers for those who can. And for all of us, we must work towards the reform and rehabilitation of the church in this country. There's so much work to be done. God has raised us up for such a time as this.

God has also given us his Word to guide us. With this message, we will come to the end of the book of Ruth. This delightful book is just the right story at just the right time, because it speaks to our current anxieties and addresses. Who would have anticipated that it speaks to some of the most vital theological questions of the day? Questions like:

- Does God hate immigrants? Should they be afraid of him or us? How should wealthy, powerful men treat them?
- What about women? Is God good for women? And how should wealthy, powerful men treat them?
- And what about government? Does God even care about good government and the rule of law? Does he care about who our rulers are and how they behave?

We've seen in past weeks that Ruth is a beautiful story of friendship and family. Hopefully what we'll see in this lesson is that Ruth also has a lot to say in answer to these pressing questions.

FAME IS FLEETING, BUT REDEEMERS ARE REMEMBERED

One of the low points of the 2016 presidential campaign was the “Access Hollywood” recording of Mr. Trump bragging about the liberties he could take with women in light of his celebrity status. “Access Hollywood,” is a startlingly ironic name if you think about it. A show that gives viewers “access” to the stars recorded one particular celebrity bragging about his unbounded “access” to women. Now that the same celebrity has accessed the White House, the message is clear: if you’re a superstar, you can take whatever you want, even the presidency.

The story of Ruth is set in the time of the judges, after the exodus from Egypt, but before the rise of the united monarchy. It was a wild, chaotic era, when “there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 14:3, 7; 17:6; 21:25). During the period of the judges, the celebrities of the day—wealthy and powerful men—took whatever they wanted while people on the margins suffered—particularly women and immigrants. It was, in many respects, a lot like today.

In Ruth 4, we meet a wealthy and powerful celebrity in the village of Bethlehem. Ruth 4:1 says, “Boaz had gone up to the city gate and sat down. And look! The redeemer of whom Boaz had spoken came by. So Boaz said, ‘Turn aside and sit down here פְּלוֹנֵי אֱלֹמֵנִי (*pelony almony*)’” The English Standard Version of the Bible translates *pelony almony* as “friend,” but that doesn’t really capture the meaning. *Pelony almony* is a Hebrew expression used to describe a name that is known to the people in the story, but one that the narrator prefers not to mention to the reader.¹

Recently my kids asked me who I took to my high school prom. It wasn’t my wife, since I wouldn’t meet her for another seven years. It was someone else. So I told my kids the other girl’s name, but then for their sakes I immediately regretted doing so. What I should have told them instead was that I took *pelony almony* to the prom. You know the girl I’m talking about: nobody special.

The man Boaz invited to sit with him at the city gate was indeed very, very special back in the day. He may not have been as lewd as Mr. Trump on “Access Hollywood,” but he was wealthy and powerful and everyone in the village would have known his name. We, however, don’t know his name. Our narrator calls him *pelony almony*—nobody special. Today his name is utterly forgotten while the name of the redeemer lives on.

All throughout the Bible we find the same kind of intentional silence regarding powerful celebrities who used their wealth and power for selfish ends. In the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11, for example, some very important *pelony almonys* gathered in a very important place to make a name for themselves. We aren’t told any of their names nor are we told where they built the tower. All their details are long forgotten, while the name of the Lord lives on. In Luke 18, another *pelony almony*—a ruler—asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life, but he went away sad because he didn’t want to part with his wealth. Today he remains nameless while the name of Jesus lives on. There are many other examples. The point is what we already know: fame is fleeting, but redeemers are remembered. The “big deals” of today will be forgotten soon enough.

¹ L. Daniel Hawk, *Ruth*. Apollos Old Testament Commentary Series. InterVarsity Press, 2015.

If you want to leave a lasting legacy rather than a fleeting impression, you'll have to do it another way, by becoming a servant and a redeemer. That's one of the most important messages of the book of Ruth.

THE NAME OF THE REDEEMER

Let's take a moment to rewind and summarize the story leading up to chapter 4. Chapter one introduced us to six main characters by *name*: #1. Elimelech, #2. Naomi (Heb. "Sweetie"), and their two sons, #3. Mahlon & #4. Chilion. A famine had left them starving in Bethlehem, so they fled east to Moab, a land of bread, but also a land of idolatry, incest and seduction. Mahlon & Chilion married two Moabite women named #5. Ruth and #6. Orpah. All 3 men died, the 3 women remained, no children were born. For those keeping count—especially Hebrews listening to the narrative—the story is missing another character. We've only heard six names, not seven. Six is so incomplete and so unlucky. Shouldn't there be a seventh name?

Naomi, the only remaining Hebrew, heard that the Lord visited his people and restored bread to Bethlehem. So she headed for home, telling her daughters-in-law to remain behind with their people and their god. Orpah agreed but Ruth refused. Ruth boldly covenanted to be Naomi's friend and to follow Naomi's God—the God Naomi blamed for making her life sour instead of sweet. Back in Bethlehem, when the village women greeted Naomi, she replied, "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty," even though her loyal friend Ruth was standing right there. Nevertheless, Ruth kept her covenant promise to Naomi and went out in search of food.

Of all the places where Ruth could have gone, she just happened upon the field of a relative of her father-in-law, a man who was wealthy and powerful, yet who was also a man of integrity, kindness and generosity. He was a good steward over the land God had given him, so he had plenty of grain to share. What was his name? He was... #7. Boaz!

Even though Ruth was an immigrant and a woman, Boaz treated her with dignity and respect. In a time when women like Ruth were in genuine danger of being assaulted in the fields of Bethlehem, Boaz called her "my daughter" and protected her.

It came to pass that there was a great harvest festival, and after Boaz had feasted and drunk his fill and fallen asleep, Ruth put on her best cloak and perfume and secretly crept up to Boaz, just as an infamous ancestor of Ruth's had done many generations earlier. In the latter case, the woman seduced her father, Lot, who filled her belly with his seed. Lot's daughter became pregnant with a son, who went on to become the father of the Moabites. From that time on the Moabites were known for incest and seduction. Ruth, however, sought redemption through Boaz. She offered herself to him as both a potential marriage partner and a business partner through whom he could steward Naomi's land. Boaz did not sleep with his "daughter" that night, but he did fill her belly with seed. He was so happy with Ruth's proposal that he poured six scoops of barley into her cloak. It was a sign that with God's help, Boaz and Ruth would be fruitful and multiply together. This brings us back to Ruth 4.

Only one obstacle stood in the way of Ruth's marriage to Boaz. A closer relative than Boaz— Mr. *Pelony Almony*—had the right of first refusal for redeeming Elimelech's estate. When Boaz offered him the land, *Pelony Almony* agreed to buy it. But when *Pelony Almony* learned that there were strings attached, like caring for a widow and perpetuating the name of his kinsman, *Pelony Almony* immediately backed out. What originally had struck him as a good deal suddenly wasn't a good deal any more. He saw his profits being gobbled up by charity work. So he backed out and faded away. Now the only name we have for him is "nobody special." In the meantime, the next kinsman down the line agreed to be the redeemer—to purchase Naomi's land, to care for her, and to make Ruth his wife. His name is Boaz. He will be remembered for all time.

REDEEMERS BEGET REDEEMERS

Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. Ruth 4:13.

If there had been any doubt about what Boaz and Ruth did or did not do on the threshing floor (Ruth 3) before they were married, Ruth 4:13 clears things up. Boaz did not "go in to her" until after they were wed. Once they were married, then he filled her belly with a different kind of seed. Nevertheless, the verse makes clear that it wasn't Boaz who gave Ruth conception—it was the Lord. We have heard no reports in the story of the Lord's activity since Ruth 1:6, when he visited his people in Bethlehem. Of course, the Lord was very active behind the scenes, providentially arranging all the details leading up to Ruth's marriage to Boaz. All of God's providential, non-explicit activity was just as miraculous as when he enabled Ruth to conceive. But the narrator makes this particular act of God explicit in order to highlight God's blessing on the redeemer's family line. God did something special for Boaz and Ruth, but not for them alone. He blessed them in order to be a blessing for others. That's why there's now special emphasis on the redeemer's son.

The women of the village speak again in 4:14. These are the same women who greeted Naomi in 1:19 when she returned from Moab.

"Can this be Sweetie?" they asked.

Naomi replied, "Don't call me Sweetie. Call me Sour instead, because God has made things very bitter for me. I went away full, and the Lord brought me back empty. Why call me Sweetie? The Lord has laid me low, and God has brought calamity to me. Ruth 1:19-21.

It must have taken some time for them to get up the courage or to know what to say to Naomi again! But now, after Naomi's complete reversal of fortune, it's clearly time for the village women to speak again. They say:

"Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel!" Ruth 4:14.

The women recognize a happy ending when they see it, so they praise the Lord for his amazing grace. Take special note of their blessing: “May his name be renowned among God’s people”—unlike *pelony almony*, nobody special. The women know that there’s no lasting fame in celebrity. Only the name of a servant and a redeemer will live on. But if that’s the case, why don’t the village women go ahead and say his name? They are talking about Boaz, aren’t they?

“He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age.” Ruth 4:15a

Their words certainly make us think of Boaz. After all, he’s a wealthy and powerful man who’s unlike other wealth and powerful men. He’s safe for women and immigrants. He cares for the vulnerable, people like the widow Naomi. From the moment she returned to Bethlehem, he has been providing her with grain, restoring her life and nourishing her old age. That’s what he does, because he’s the redeemer. He’s one of a kind, isn’t he? There’s nobody else like him, is there? Yet why won’t the village women say his name?

*“Your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is worth more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.”
Ruth 4:15b*

Ruth has given birth to him!?! Could that be right? Are they still talking about the ‘redeemer’ or about his son?

Yes. That’s the point. The apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree, or at least it shouldn’t. We have every reason to expect that the son of Boaz will be like his father. Being born to a Hebrew father and a converted Gentile mother, he should grow up to have the same compassionate and generous heart as his dad, Boaz, who was also born to a Hebrew father and a converted Gentile mother, namely Rahab of Jericho. God’s design and intent is not for Boaz to be a rare, one-of-a-kind romantic hero. When we read him in this way we do a great disservice to the book of Ruth. God rather intends for men like Boaz to be commonplace. Boaz is indeed a model redeemer, but hopefully one of many in a long line of such men. Long after Boaz is gone, his son hopefully will still be generously caring for his grandmother and and mother.

The women’s highest compliment, nevertheless, is reserved for Ruth. She is the one whom they say is worth more than seven sons. Why? Because her covenant friendship with Naomi has accomplished more than what many sons could have done. That’s why this has always been known as the book of Ruth rather than Boaz. Boaz is important. He was a kind and generous man who did the right thing when the Lord called him to do it. May all of us do likewise. Ruth, nevertheless, is more important. She is even more extraordinary than Boaz, because she gave up everything in order to follow the Lord and be a covenant friend to Naomi.

When I say that Ruth gave up everything, I mean everything:

Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” Ruth 4:16-17a

First Ruth lay down her life for her friend—a friend who remained sour and ungrateful in spite of Ruth’s gift. Then when God enabled Ruth to conceive, and she was blessed with a son, Ruth gave

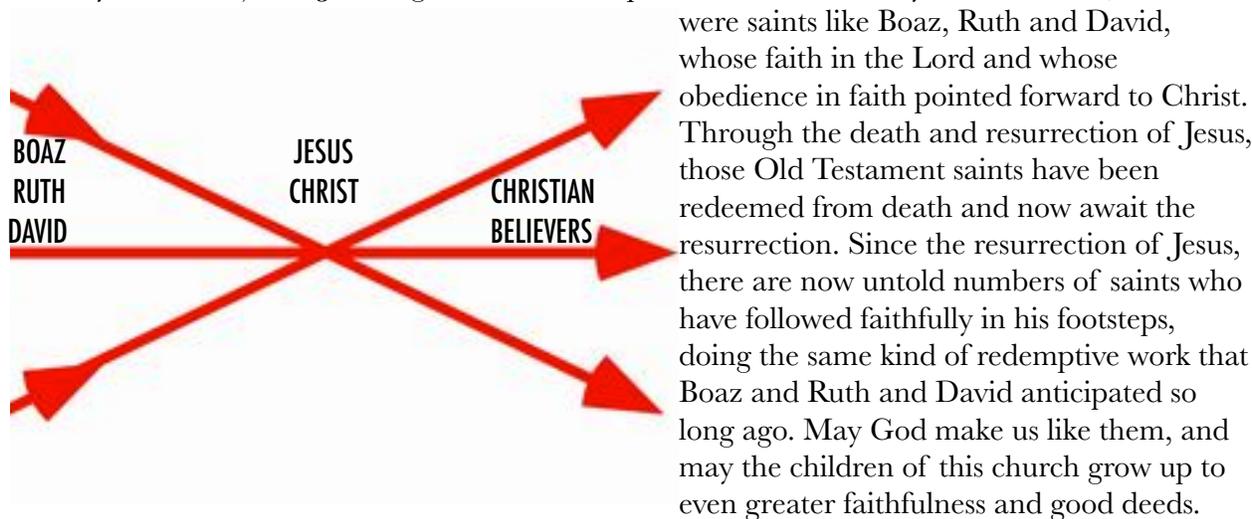
even her only son so that sour, empty old Naomi might be redeemed. (How many of us who are married would do the same for our mothers-in-law?) Ruth is a beautiful picture to us of the sacrificial, saving love of God.

Continuing in 4:17, after so much narrative tension we finally learn the boy's name as well as his son and his grandson. He is Obed, which means "One who serves." It's the perfect name for a boy who will grow up with wealth and power. What is he to do with it? He must be a redeemer who serves. We're not told whether he lives up to his name or not. All we're told, as the story draws to a conclusion, is that he had a son named Jesse, and a grandson named David. And now a lot of loose ends begin to come together.

Who was David? David was the 8th son of Jesse. Samuel passed over David's seven older brothers to anoint David as king, making him like his great-grandmother Ruth, who was greater than 7 sons. David became the king who brought the entire nation together, and finally brought an end to the chaos and oppression that had taken place during the time of the Judges. He conquered the Philistines and established the rule of law throughout the land, making it a safer place for everyone, including immigrants and women. David was also a flawed redeemer, who sometimes mistreated women like Bathsheba and immigrants like her husband, Uriah. Yet even through the tragedy of David's relationship with Bathsheba came the blessing of a son through whom the line of the redeemer would continue all the way down to the Messiah.

Who is the Messiah? He is Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of God. He came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. He is the great redeemer, who shed his own blood in order to purchase us back from slavery to sin and death. He is the mighty king, who now rules over all the earth and is making all things new. No one is wealthier or more powerful than Jesus. No one is kinder or more compassionate than Jesus. No one loves immigrants, Muslims, people of color, people of no color, men and women more than the Lord Jesus Christ. No one except the devil need be afraid of him.

As Christians, we read the story of Ruth in light of the story of Jesus, for whom the great Boaz is merely a shadow of things to come. One way to think of this is in terms of a focal point (or a sideways letter 'X') with Jesus right at the center point of human history. Before Christ, there



CAN YOU HEAR THE REDEEMER CALLING?

As we conclude this study of the book of Ruth, can you hear Christ our Redeemer calling us to follow him, both in terms of faith and in terms of obedience? We are his ambassadors to the world, and his message needs to be heard more than ever. Jesus' message to the world includes several important take-aways from the book of Ruth:

1. Because Jesus loves immigrants, they need not be afraid of him or his church. The book of Ruth tells the story of God's redemption of an immigrant from Israel's dangerous enemy Moab. Through Ruth's redemption comes the hope of the redemption for her entire people. Her story overturns the shame of their origins and paves the way for Gentiles like her to come to faith in the Lord.

Ruth 4 ends with a genealogy in vv 18-22, extending from Judah's son Perez all the way down to King David. At least three of the names mentioned in this genealogy are offspring of intermarriage between Hebrews and foreigners. Intermarriage was forbidden in the Old Testament because it led to apostasy, but immigrant converts were perfectly acceptable marriage partners. Converts tend to strengthen the faithful rather than lead them astray. So part of the beauty of the closing genealogy in Ruth is that it stands as a reminder of how many people in the lineage of David (and of Jesus) were not of Jewish ancestry but were nevertheless welcomed into the family of faith. A major emphasis of the New Testament is the inclusion of Gentiles as well as Jews within the church. To make this clear, the New Testament begins in Matthew 1 with a genealogy that is filled with Gentile converts. These genealogies drive home to us God's intent to fill his church with people of every tribe and tongue and nation.

As ambassadors of the Lord Jesus, we love all our neighbors as Christ has taught us without exception or caveat. We love our neighbors, regardless of immigration status or political party or criminal history or sexual practices. We love them, full stop. If we are redeemers like Jesus, then we will be safe to people on the margins, and they won't be afraid of us.

2. Because Jesus loves women, they also need not be afraid of him or his church. Again, in the genealogy at the end of Ruth, and even more so in the genealogy of Jesus, we find examples of women who were vulnerable and mistreated and are now regarded with great honor. Just as Ruth's righteous and holy union with Boaz redeems the story of her incestuous ancestry, so also in these genealogies we find the redemption of other women's stories, including Leah the ugly sister, Tamar the dishonored widow, Rahab the prostitute, and Bathsheba the adulteress. All of these dirty, terrible stories are redeemed and made part of the fabric of redemption as they lead to the birth of the Messiah. When Jesus is born to Mary, the teenage virgin, it's as if God is saying to women, "Behold, I am making all things new for you, too." Jesus comes to bring justice and healing for men and women alike. If we are redeemers like Jesus, then the church will be safe for women too.

3. Because Jesus cares about good government, the church does too. The book of Ruth tells the back story for a long-awaited king who will set everything to rights. In Ruth, we zoom in on the suffering and hardship of one particular family who, by the end of the story, experience God's redemption. Yet even though God blessed Naomi, Ruth and Boaz greatly, nothing changed

politically. It was still the period of the judges, when wealthy and powerful men took whatever they wanted while the people on the margins suffered. Redemption for the nation was generations yet to come. In fact, good things did begin to happen under David and Solomon, but only with the coming of Jesus does God's kingdom finally take root.

Today we live in between the times: Christ has died, Christ is risen, you are here, and Christ will come again. As we await Christ's return, we still experience the struggle for justice and peace. Like Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, we experience God's blessings in the midst of a world in which most everyone does what is right in their own eyes. As Jesus' people, we are called to live righteous and redemptive lives, loving our neighbors in the present, and in hopes that the generations to come might see with their eyes what we can only see by faith.

John Newton was a slave trader who came to faith in Jesus, repented personally of his role in the slave trade, and became a pastor in England. He took a costly and courageous stand, but almost nobody followed him, and slavery continued for many years. Nevertheless, his Gospel witness played a significant role in shaping the political ambitions of a young MP named William Wilberforce, who went on to be the man of the hour in the fight for justice long after Newton had died. Newton may have failed in the eyes of the world, but his faithfulness and obedience had a lasting impact, and his name will be remembered as a redeemer in a long line of redeemers.

Christ is King. As his loyal subjects, let us pray and labor for the good of our country, regardless of whether we are loved or hated. We mustn't grow weary of doing well. Pray for Mr. Trump and all persons in high positions. And pray for the Kingdom Come, when everyone will find shelter under the wings of our Redeemer, and the church will be his spotless bride.