

Ruth 4 — God is at work in messy families.

July 30, 2017

Welcome to the CrossWinds picnic. I affectionately call it the CrossWinds family reunion because this not just a time to enjoy food and fun but it is a great opportunity for us to build our friendships with people who are part of the CrossWinds family on the other campus. I encourage you to talk to people you don't know. Eat with people you don't know. Hear the story of how God is at work on their campus and in their lives.

For the last few weeks we are studying the book of Ruth. I kicked off the series and then took a vacation. I left Pastor Jordan responsible for teaching across both campuses for two weeks. He did a great job covering Ruth 2 and 3. He left me to bat clean up on the final chapter this morning.

Next week we begin a news series called *Afterlife: What does the Bible say about life after death?* The first message in the series is, "What happens one minute after you die?" I hope you can be there. I know some of you won't be able to make it because of the Bible conference or family vacation. That is OK. If you miss discovering what happens one minute after you die next week, when you die, you will discover everything you miss in the sermon.

Before we dive into the final chapter of the book of Ruth this morning, let me take a brief moment to get everyone up to speed on what happened so far in the book. Ruth is the story of a family in Israel that during a famine, ran away from not just the land of Israel, but the God of Israel. They ran to the country of Moab, which is a place far from God and the people of God. While there, Elimelech, the father of the family, died. Mahlon and Chilion, his sons, married

Moabite women, and then Elimilech's sons died. The book of Ruth is the story of Naomi, the mother of the family, coming home to Bethlehem without a husband and her sons. She was empty and alone.

But she was not totally alone. Returning with her was one of her daughters-in-law, a Moabite named Ruth. This is the story of Ruth and her faithful love to care for elderly, vulnerable mother-in-law, Naomi. It is also the story of Ruth leaving Chemosh, the God of Moab, and trusting in Yahweh, the God of Israel. Today, we would say Ruth became a Christian. Even though Ruth was following Yahweh and moved to Israel, her background was as a dreaded Moabite. Ruth knew that by following the God of Israel and moving to Israel she was probably giving up the chance to remarry and have children. No self-respecting Israelite man would want to marry a despicable Moabite woman. The book of Ruth is the story of how God providentially cared for Ruth and Naomi and how God still cares for people far from him when they turn him, even people that start out as far away from God as a Moabite named Ruth.

For the last two weeks, Pastor Jordan showed us God's loving providential care in action. When Ruth went to the fields to pick leftover grain that fell in the dirt after the harvesters passed through, she just happened to be picking up leftover grain in the field of a man named Boaz, who just happened to be single, who just happened to be a relative, who just happened to be well off enough to care for Naomi and Ruth, and who just happened to be a kinsman redeemer. A kinsman redeemer was a family member that could take care of Ruth and Naomi in their desperate time of poverty, plus he could marry Ruth and provide a son to

carry on Elimelech and Mahlon's family name. A son would be an heir to keep their land in the family.

Sometimes we call those kinds of fortuitous events luck. Ruth was lucky to be in Boaz' field. Luck is a pagan concept. It refers to random chance. The Bible is clear Christians do not use the term luck because luck doesn't exist. Nothing in this world is left to chance. According to Proverbs 16:33, God controls everything, even the rolling of dice. As Christians, when we see Ruth just happening to pick up leftover grain in the fields of a man named Boaz, who just happened to be in a perfect position to marry Ruth, redeem the land and provide an heir, we don't call that luck. That was God's hand of loving providential care in action.

During the harvest season, Ruth and Boaz developed a friendship and Boaz showed kindness to Ruth. After the harvest season, when Boaz was at the threshing floor, Ruth and Boaz were no longer crossing paths. Naomi schemed to get Ruth and Boaz together. She told her daughter-in-law to take a shower, style her hair, wear her best clothes then go to the threshing floor at night and uncover Boaz's feet.

Biblically, Boaz was the first guy in the Bible to get cold feet over a woman. At midnight Boaz awoke because his feet were cold. When he opened his eyes, there was Ruth at his feet. He was startled to see her and he said, "What do you want?" Ruth asked Boaz to spread his wings over her. Some translations say to spread his garment over her. That doesn't mean she wanted to get under the same covers and snuggle because she was cold. That is Hebrew euphemism. Ruth asked Boaz to take her under his protection. Ruth

asked Boaz to marry her. Since he was a kinsman redeemer he could have bought their land and married Ruth to provide to hopefully provide a son to carry on the family name so Elimelech and Mahlon's family line would continue.

Last week, we saw Boaz was much older than Ruth. He agreed to marry the much younger Ruth. There was a problem. There was a closer relative than Boaz who had the right and the responsibility to be a redeemer for Naomi and Ruth and to provide Ruth with a son.

What I love about Boaz is even though he liked Ruth — some older single men would jump at the opportunity to be marry a younger woman — he didn't just do what felt right at the moment. He didn't take the girl and run. He knew he needed to obey God's law. He needed to approach the closer relative and give him the challenge and the chance to take care of Naomi and Ruth like he should. Boaz wanted to honor God more than honor his hormones. This is important to notice. Boaz was an honorable man. That is a very important part of this story. It was only if Naomi and Ruth's closer relative refused to take care of his responsibility that Boaz, who was next in line, could legitimately step into the picture. This morning, we find out how the drama turned out.

Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, "Turn aside, friend; sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down. Then he said to the redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it and say, 'Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people.' If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you." And he said, "I will redeem it." Then Boaz said, "The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance." Then

the redeemer said, “I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.” Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it for yourself,” he drew off his sandal. Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.” Ruth 4:1–10 (ESV)

The first thing to notice is God’s providential hand was still in motion. As Ruth just happened to glean in the field of Boaz, the redeemer who was a closer relative than Boaz just happened to pass by the city gate when Boaz went there. Can you see God ordering circumstances?

There is something interesting happening in the Hebrew of the first verse. In the ESV Boaz said to the closer relative, “Turn aside, friend, sit down here.” The word *friend* is not in the Hebrew. Literally the Hebrew reads “Turn aside, *one whose name is concealed*.” You know how they fuzz out a license plate number in a photo on the Internet so someone’s identity is concealed? In the Hebrew, this guy’s name is literally fuzzed out of the text so his identity is concealed. This morning, rather than call him friend, let’s fuzz his name out of the text and call him Mr. So-’n-so. His identity was intentionally hidden. That is important to notice.

When Mr. So-’n-so learned Naomi was selling the land that belonged to Elimelech, he was very interested. Let me explain how this worked. Technically, Naomi in her poverty was not selling the family farm. She was selling the right to use the land of the family farm to a relative because you tried to keep things in the family. In the Year of Jubilee all land was returned to its original owners. If

there were 40 years to the Year of Jubilee, Mr. So-'n-so was renting the rights of the land for the next 40 years. Mr. So-'n-so thought he had a good deal. If he bought the right to use the land from Naomi, he would need to take care of Naomi, the elderly widow for a few years until she died. When the Year of Jubilee came around, since there were no living male relatives for him to return the land, the land would stay in his family's possession for perpetuity. It would be a costly purchase in the short term but it looked like the real estate deal of a lifetime that would give him and his family more fields to farm for generations to come. While he was salivating at the opportunity, Boaz told him the rest of the story.

If Mr. So-'n-so bought the land, Ruth came with it. She was still of child-bearing age. It would be his responsibility to not just care for one poverty-stricken woman but two. He also had the responsibility of marrying Ruth and helping her conceive a son. If she conceived a son, all the money Mr. So-'n-so paid for the land was instantly gone because through levirate marriage that son became the male heir that owned the land. In addition, the relative would need to pay for that boy's diapers, braces, car insurance, trombone lessons and college education. When Mr. So-'n-so realized this was not the real estate deal of a lifetime but rather he would use half of his 401K to buy the land and then lose a good portion of the money if a son was born to him and Ruth, he backed away from that deal faster than a hiker that stepped on a rattlesnake.

Here is where an interesting contract began. Mr So-'n-so was interested in helping poor Naomi only if buying the land increased his riches and his reputation. He didn't want to impair his inheritance. Once he realized buying the

land was going to cost him a lot of money he would never recoup and that buying the land forced him to marry a dreaded Moabite and have the social stigma that went with her, he wanted nothing to do with fulfilling his responsibility to Naomi and Ruth to be their redeemer because it detracted from his reputation and legacy.

In this story, whose name is fuzzed out so his name and legacy will never be remembered? Mr. So-'n-so — the very man who sought to preserve his name and legacy rather than come to the aide of Naomi and Ruth.

Many people ask about the romance between Boaz and Ruth. How much romance took place? The honest truth is there probably was not as much as many of us would like to see. For both of them the reason they wanted to marry was to solve a family crisis and provide a son to carry on Elimelech and Mahlon's family name and land.

Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.” Ruth 4:10 (ESV)

Boaz married Ruth not because she was young and attractive but because a kinsman redeemer needed to marry her to try and provide a son to carry on the name of Elimelech and Mahlon. Boaz knew marrying Ruth was extremely financially and socially costly but it was the right way to honor God by coming to the rescue of a family member in need and providing her with a child.

He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” Ruth 3:9 (ESV)

Ruth proposed marriage to Boaz not because he was young and virile. He was an older man, but he was a redeemer for the family that could provide her

with a legitimate child to carry on the family name via levirate marriage. Ruth proposed marriage to Boaz because he was an eligible male that could carry on the family name, not because she really liked older men. Boaz married Ruth not to give himself a great name but to selflessly help preserve her former husband's name. Boaz was willing to absorb serious financial loss for the sake of helping a family in crisis.

Here is what we often forget. God operates on a different kind of math. It is not the people who are trying to preserve their name, protect their finances and reputation that will be remembered in God's kingdom. It is those who are willing to sacrifice their name, their reputation and their finances for others, especially family members in need, who will be remembered. God is at work in the midst of messy families.

Here is the first challenge for us. We are all tempted to live like Mr. So-'n-so. We are tempted to size up what is best for us, to protect our best interests, to protect our reputations and protect our bank accounts. It is so easy to turn a cold shoulder and not get involved with a messy family in crisis, but there is no future for those who are devoted to playing it safe. *The people God uses as key players in his plan are not those committed to protecting their names but those who are committed to honoring God's name by coming to the rescue of people in need, especially family members.*

Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman." Ruth 4:11–12 (ESV)

What happens next is the townspeople see in the messy marriage of Boaz and Ruth that God is up to something special. They pray that God would take the unique marriage of young Moabite Ruth to old Israelite Boaz not for the purpose of love but both of them sacrificing themselves to provide an heir in the family line and that God would use their selfless desires to build up the house of Israel.

They mention two unique marriages in Israel's history where God was at work in ways no one ever expected. The first was Jacob's marriage to Rachel and Leah. If you were with us when we studied Genesis, you will remember this story. Jacob served Laban seven years so he could marry his daughter, beautiful Rachel. After seven years, on the wedding night, Laban switched Rachel, his beautiful daughter, with Leah, the ugly daughter. Remember Leah's name means "the cow." A woman called "the cow" looks pretty homely. Jacob had the surprise of his life when he woke up the next morning and found the wrong woman in bed! After Leah's bridal week, Laban agreed to give Jacob Rachel as an additional wife in exchange for another seven years of service to his father-in-law. Jacob ended up with the most messed up household. He found himself unexpectedly married to two sisters at the same time that spent their days manipulating and scheming against one another to see who could be Jacob's favorite woman of the day. That is one messed up marriage, yet God used the 12 children of that messed up marriage to begin the 12 tribes of Israel. If God can use a messy family like that to advance his kingdom and promises, the townspeople prayed God would also use this strange union of Ruth and Boaz for the purpose of producing a family heir to advance God's kingdom in a similar and unexpected

way. Remember Ruth and Boaz didn't marry primarily for love. They married to provide an heir to carry on the family name. What would God do with the son of their union? The townspeople were sure it would be something special.

The other unique relationship they mention is found in Genesis 38. It was the story of Judah. Judah was the rebellious son of Jacob. He ran away from home, lived with the Canaanites and married a Canaanite woman. Judah started life far from God. Judah and his wife had three sons. The oldest son, named Er, married a Canaanite woman named Tamar, but Er died. Following the levirate marriage custom, Judah's second son named Onan then married Tamar to provide her a son in his brother's name. Onan wanted all the fun of marriage but not the responsibility of having children in marriage so God struck him dead. Judah then began thinking Tamar was a black widow because the two sons that married her both died. Judah promised to give his third son, Shelah, in marriage to Tamar when he grew up but Judah reneged on the promise and we were left with a crisis.

In Genesis we learn our redeemer was coming through the bloodline of Judah but two of Judah's sons were dead and Shelah wasn't given in marriage to Tamar. The entire bloodline of Jesus hung in the balance. How would God move things move forward so there would be a child to carry on the family name?

Judah's wife died. Tamar ended up dressing like a prostitute and luring Judah into using her services. Judah ended up fathering his own grandchildren, twins named Perez and Zerah. God advanced his plan and the bloodline of Jesus through the unlikely relationship of Judah fathering his own grandchildren.

If God can use a messy marriage like Jacob, Leah and Rachel to advance his plan and God can use the strange conception of Judah fathering his own grandchildren to continue the family line from which Jesus came, everyone was confident God was up to something to advance his plan through the unlikely relationship of Ruth and Boaz who didn't marry primarily for romance but to make sure Elimelech's and Mahlon's blood line continues. This is exactly what happened.

Boaz and Ruth had a son named Obed, who had a son named Jesse, who had a son named David, who was the king that brought order to the nation in the time of the judges and who was the key figure in the bloodline of Jesus. Do you see how God works through messy families? He did it in the past and he will do it in the future. Some of God's best work of transforming ruin to restoration takes place when he is at work in messy marriages and unexpected conceptions.

In the darkest of times God is advancing his plan in the most unlikely of ways through the most unlikely of people for the good of his people and the fame of his name in this world, so we do not lose hope no matter how bad things look.

This morning you may have a really messed up family situation. You may feel hopeless like Naomi did at the beginning of this book. You need to know God is in charge. He is gracious to his children, even when we don't deserve it. He hears the cries of those who turn to him. In ways we never expect he is unfolding his plan for the good of his people and to make his name famous in this world. No matter how messed up your marriage, even a messed up marriage like Jacob, Rachel and Leah's, God is still at work for something good. No matter

how strange the conception of your children, like Perez and Zerah born to Judah and Tamar when Judah conceived his own grandchildren, God is still at work to change ruin to restoration in a messy family. No matter how strange your relationship, like a young Moabite women to an old Israelite man who married not for love of one another but to carry on the name of a deceased relative, God is working his good plan in the midst of it. Do not lose hope. In the midst of life's messiness, especially the messiness of the families and children, God has a good plan and he is especially working it out in the lives of those who honor and trust in him.

So 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. 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 of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David. Ruth 4:13–22 (ESV)

We tend to skip genealogies. They are like biblical Sominex. Rather than skip them, they show us that *God is using the lives of ordinary people to contribute to something much bigger than themselves*. God used the marriage of Boaz and Ruth to give birth to Obed, who gave birth to Jesse, who gave birth to David, who was the king God chose to bring order to Israel in the broken time of the judges.

Boaz and Ruth had no idea God brought them together so their self-sacrificial marriage would make them the great-grandparents of King David. Boaz and Ruth were ordinary people that had no idea that God brought them together so their story of transformation from ruin to restoration and a marriage not for passion but to honor God by marrying to solve a family crisis and provide an heir would become be become a book of the Bible for literally billions of people to read, learn from and follow. Boaz and Ruth had no idea that their story would encourage countless generations that followed in their footsteps to know how incredibly compassionate God is to people who turn to him when he can take an outsider like a Moabite named Ruth and use her as an important piece in his plan of redemption. All of us will learn from Ruth and her story that no matter how far from God we started, no matter how hopeless our situation looks, God's providential hand of redemption can take our lives from ruin to restoration when we turn to him.

If you are far from God today, turn to him. Trust in him and do not lose hope. The book of Ruth teaches us God is in complete control of our lives. He is providentially ordering our circumstances for our good and for his glory, especially when we cry out to him. God is at work in messy families and ordinary people who follow him.



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