

CHAPTER 9, THE FAITH OF A FOREIGN WOMAN**TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD'S GRACIOUS REDEMPTION EXTENDS TO ALL.**

The story of Israel's judges closes with a line that could just as well be the opening for the story of Ruth: *"In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit"* (Judges 21:25). God's chosen ones looked more like a reality show gone wrong than a holy beacon of hope. They had abandoned God's plan (again) and had become moral misfits and spiritual adulterers. The light had gone out on God's people. Then a foreigner stepped onto the stage and a candle of hope flickered once again.

The story of Ruth is a literary and redemptive gem that glimmers against a backdrop of blackness. In the opening scene, Naomi's family caravanned away from the Promised Land where famine had left them hungry for food and for hope. They settled in Moab where idol worship was the prevailing ritual and God seemed far away. Naomi's two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. The weddings were too quickly followed by funerals—three of them. Naomi's husband died first. Soon after, both of her sons died too. And all that was left was three widows, no children, and no prospects. The prospects were indeed grim.

Naomi heard the famine had lifted and decided to return to Bethlehem. She sent her daughters-in-law back to their homes where they might find new husbands. Ruth expressed her strong will and even stronger faith by refusing to leave. Her poetic declaration of loyalty and commitment offers the first sign of hope: *"Where you go, I will go; your people will be my people and your God my God"* (p. 122). The duo of widows made the journey back to the Land of Promise where the only hope was mere survival.

Once there, Ruth exercised a widow's right to gather the extra grain from the fields. Her field of choice just happened to be the farmstead of a godly man named Boaz. He also happened to be a family guardian who could carry on the heritage of Naomi's deceased husband and sons. He noticed Ruth from the start and admired the way she worked to provide for her aging mother-in-law. Boaz offered his help and protection; Ruth noticed him too.

Jewish law required a family guardian to redeem both a widow and her land to preserve the family line. So, as was the custom, Naomi told Ruth to offer herself in marriage to Boaz. He was delighted but also knew of a closer relative who had the right of first refusal. That man chose to forfeit Naomi's land since it also meant he would have to marry Ruth, which might threaten the inheritance he would pass along to his own children. Neither Boaz nor Ruth was disappointed by his choice since his refusal paved the way for Boaz to fulfill his role as a family guardian or "kinsman redeemer." Boaz gladly married Ruth and redeemed the family's land. God cheerfully restored Naomi and planted a family tree: Ruth and Boaz → Obed → Jesse → King David → Jesus.

There's no denying this story as a great romance. But even more, it brings us to a defining episode in the greatest love story ever told. Boaz's love for Ruth is a mirror image of the heart of God. Boaz steps in as a willing kinsman redeemer and foreshadows One who would step in as the Redeemer for all people. So, it turns out the even the "not so chosen" are chosen after all. God's plan will overwhelm every obstacle, overturn every injustice and overcome completely in the end. Soon, we'll see that God is writing a happily ever after for this story after all.

1. Meanings of Biblical names are always significant. Elimelek's name meant "my God is King." Naomi's name meant "my pleasantness," but later asked to be called Mara, meaning "bitterness." Ruth's name meant "friendship." Boaz's name meant "swift strength." Who best lived up to their names and who did not?
2. Look at Ruth and Boaz's interaction with Naomi. What can you learn about the challenges and benefits of caring for an aging parent? What challenges do you face with your parents?
3. The period of the Judges was marked by weak faith and irresponsible living, but this foreign woman gives hope. What specific examples of strong faith and responsible living can you find in the characters of Ruth and Boaz?
4. The story of Ruth demonstrates laws that God had given Israel to take care of marginalized people (Deuteronomy 25:5-10, Leviticus 25:25, Leviticus 19:9-10). What do these laws and customs reveal about the heart of God for the poor, the widow and the orphan? How could your group care for the less fortunate and thereby reflect the heart of God?
5. The word for *redeem* is used twenty times in this story, making it a key theme. What does it mean to be redeemed? How does Boaz's redeeming of Ruth compare to our redemption found in Christ?
6. What some people might call *coincidence* others call *divine providence*. What are some key examples of God's divine providence in this story?

Throughout the story of Ruth, we can see God working behind the scenes for the good of His faithful followers. Unlike some of our episodes in the past, this Lower Story episode lacks spectacular miracles and gripping gore. Instead, the story of Ruth reminds us that, more often than not, the gracious provision of God is to be found in the ordinary. God used the ordinary Boaz to express His extraordinary love for the “least among us,” the poor and the widow. Can you find God’s provision for you in His story?

I. The Kinsman Redeemer—God’s provision for the poor and the widow

- A. As God’s holy people, Israelites were to reflect the heart of God by trusting Him enough to act as His hands and heart toward the less fortunate within their community. Much of the Law was designed to provide opportunities for Israel to trust God, to be generous like God, to demonstrate the love and the justice of God. God’s means of taking care of the poor, the widow, and the orphan was through His people.
- B. The **levirate marriage** was one such custom. The term *levirate* means “husband’s brother.” It was employed when a man died without a son to inherit his land and carry on a family line. When those circumstances arose, the husband’s brother was responsible to take the widow as his wife and produce a first-born son who would bear the dead brother’s name. This son would be the rightful heir to his dead “father’s” estate and would carry on the deceased’s family name. The following children born to the union of the widow and her new husband would belong to the new husband and bear his name (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).
This custom was very important for the preservation of the land within the family, and for the protection and provision of the widow. Widows had very little means of providing for themselves, except through the benevolence written into the Law by God. A first-born son had the privilege of a double-portion of inheritance but also the responsibility of caring for his parents. The son born of the widow and the deceased husband’s brother was then the heir and could take care of his mother. He also kept the land in the family as he passed it on to his sons.
- C. Redemption of property was another responsibility of the kinsman redeemer. If someone became poor and was therefore compelled to sell off his or her land to survive, then a kinsman redeemer was obligated to buy it back, or redeem it, for the poor person. This was prescribed by God in Leviticus 25:25-27.
- D. For someone to qualify as a kinsman redeemer, J. Vernon McGee suggests at least 5 criteria had to be met:
 1. The redeemer had to be a **near kinsman** (relative) to the one redeemed.
 2. The redeemer had to be **willing to perform the work of redemption**.
 3. The redeemer had to **possess the ability to redeem**.
 4. The redeemer had to **be free himself**.
 5. The redeemer had to **pay the value or price of redemption**.
- E. Results of the redemption
 1. Redemption cost the redeemer and benefited the redeemed. The kinsman redeemer was called upon to give of his own resources to benefit others. This point cannot be stressed enough. He used his money to redeem property for someone else because he understood that all belonged to God anyway. He took on the responsibility of providing for a wife and gave of himself and his resources to raise a son to carry his dead relative’s name.

2. Therefore, the redeemer was acting in gracious, loyal lovingkindness toward the redeemed. The redeemer was acting like God!
3. The widow who was redeemed benefited from the protection and provision of her kinsman redeemer. She had very little hope or means to survive before her redemption.
4. The land that was redeemed remained within the clan as the promised inheritance from God.

II. Boaz the Kinsman Redeemer—God's provision for the poor and the widow

- A. **Boaz epitomized the kinsman redeemer.** He was clearly a faithful Israelite living in covenant obedience to God. His heart for the LORD was evidenced by his words, his deeds, and the response of other characters in this story.
- B. Boaz was a **near kinsman** to Naomi and Ruth. However, there was another relative who was closer. Boaz did not hesitate to accept Ruth's request for marriage, but he also did not circumvent the appropriate way to do so.
- C. Boaz was **willing to perform the work of redemption**, but the unnamed closer relative was not. He approached the relative at the city gate before the city elders, as was the custom. This unnamed relative had the right of first refusal. Although the nearer relative had the means to redeem Naomi's land, he apparently did not want Ruth as part of the deal. His rejection of Ruth and the land cleared the way for Boaz. That Boaz still wanted to serve as the kinsman redeemer without being obligated by law demonstrates even further his godliness.
- D. Boaz had the **ability**—the financial means—to be a kinsman redeemer. He was clearly a very successful businessman and farmer. He had servants who respected him.
- E. Boaz was **free** and therefore able to redeem. In other words, his land and his person were not under obligation to another. Israel had been through a very long drought period (at least the 10 years Naomi was in Moab). It was not uncommon to sell oneself as a slave due to poverty (Leviticus 25:39), but such was not the case for Boaz.
- F. Boaz did **pay the full price** of redemption; he redeemed Naomi's land, and he redeemed Ruth as a wife.

III. Boaz took seriously the responsibility to live obediently and faithfully to the covenant of the Law.

- A. His harvesters left grain to be gleaned by the poor, as prescribed in the Law. But Boaz went above the legal requirement and had them leave extra for Ruth, revealing his generous heart for the LORD.
- B. He remained sexually pure and honored Ruth when she uncovered his feet in the night. He preserved her reputation by sending her home before light.
- C. Boaz was a man of prayer, who spoke blessings over his workers and Ruth.
- D. He was also an answer to his own prayer! He said, "May you be richly rewarded by the LORD under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (p. 123). Later, Ruth asked of Boaz, "Spread the corner of your garment over me" (p. 125). There "corner" is the same word as "wing." She used the same poetic image as Boaz had used in his blessing over her.

IV. Jesus Our Kinsman Redeemer—God's provision for the poor in spirit

- A. Boaz and Ruth became the great-grandparents of King David, the servant of the Lord. They are noted by gospel writer Matthew, then, as being in the line of the Messiah (1:5).

- B. Jesus is our ultimate Kinsman Redeemer and meets all the criteria listed above. All human beings are helplessly enslaved to sin, under the dominion of the evil one, unless and until we are redeemed by the one and only Redeemer. Christ alone is God's provision!
 - 1. Jesus is a **near kinsman** to mankind because he is fully human. He is described as our brother who redeems us from the power of sin (Hebrews 2:14-17).
 - 2. Jesus was **willing to perform the work of redemption**. Jesus willingly laid down His life (John 10:18). He redeemed us from the curse of the Law (Galatians 3:13) so that we might receive the adoption as sons of God (Galatians 4:5). He redeemed us from sin and unrighteousness (Romans 5; Titus 2:12).
 - 3. Jesus alone **possessed the ability to redeem** because He was sinless, being fully God and fully man. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). "You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold...but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:17-18).
 - 4. Jesus **was free** because He fulfilled the Law (Matthew 5:17-18).
 - 5. Jesus **offered Himself as the price of redemption**. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).
- C. **The ultimate redemption of man cost God dearly**. He gave up His Son for the world (John 3:16). Jesus paid the price for the benefit for the redeemed who had nothing whatsoever to offer.
- D. **As Boaz took Ruth, Jesus took the Church as His bride**. (Ephesians 5:25, Revelation 19:7.) The Church is betrothed to Christ and is to be a pure virgin (2 Corinthians 11:2).
- E. **The redeemed receive eternal life!**

V. Applications and Implications

- A. If Jesus is my Redeemer, then I can know that I am provided for and protected. I should live differently in light of this truth—as a pure virgin bride.
- B. "Poor" outsiders can go boldly yet humbly to the Kinsman Redeemer asking for redemption from spiritual poverty.
- C. Genuine faith, like that of Boaz, is expressed in devotion, grace, and kindness toward others. Do I express my faith in tangible and practical ways? Does my faith have "shoes on?"
- D. Genuine faith, like that of Ruth, trusts God to always be working even when one does not see His hand.
- E. God's grace knows no limitations. He is available as the Kinsman Redeemer of all. Even a despised outsider is enveloped into God's community of faith. I should never dismiss someone as beyond the reach of God's grace.
- F. God is at work in the lives of the faithful even in the darkest of times. I should trust Him even in life's darkest times when I do not "see" or "feel" God.
- G. God still seeks people of faith and kindness through whom He will work His plans. My life should be marked by these traits toward others.
- H. God cares for the poor and the widow—the least in our society. I should align my heart to care about the less fortunate.
- I. I should look for God's provision as He works in the ordinary details of my life.
- J. God still provides a Kinsman Redeemer to all who will come under His wings.