

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

The Lineage of the King – (Ruth Chapters 3 & 4) This week we conclude our journey through the book of Ruth as well as our exploration of the period “before the king”. We do so with a happy ending. The hope that was expressed early on in the book of Joshua with the conquest of the land, is again renewed after a dark night of a downward spiral. We have witnessed a tale nostalgic of the period of the patriarchs, with a member outside of the covenant community, Ruth, a Moabitess, being called to leave the land of her nativity and seek refuge and rest under the protection of the covenant. We saw last week how acceptance among the covenant community was granted initially by Naomi, then continued by Boaz. However, we will see this acceptance formalized this week when we explore in depth the nature of the kinsman redeemer and his activity that was critical in integrating this stranger into the covenant of God. From their union would spring a new line, an answer to the spirit of the age: a king! From this king would come the King of Kings who would be able to reverse the curse not only for a stranger seeking comfort within the covenantal promises of YHVH, but the curse brought about by the sins of all his people. He would reverse this curse by becoming a curse for us so that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). Through the act of one kinsman redeemer (Boaz) the possibility of the true Kinsman Redeemer (Christ) is made possible. The climax of this story in the greater context of the story of scripture truly is the lineage of the king.

Part One: Rest in the House of the Covenant – The theme of rest, particularly for the widows of Naomi’s two sons is one that occurs throughout the book of Ruth. In the first chapter (1:9) we see that Naomi blesses both daughters-in-law by declaring, “...*The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!*” This blessing addresses not only material provision, but also a rest that would come about through child-bearing. One is reminded of the blessing that God gave to Eve in the garden shortly after pronouncing the curse of the fall, “...*I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring: he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). The apostle Paul associates some redemptive rest with this blessing when he states, “...*Yet she (the woman) shall be saved through child-bearing...*” (1 Timothy 2:15). This should not be understood to mean that women who give birth to children are “saved” in the evangelical sense of the word any more than women who do not or cannot are not. I believe it is intended to convey the redemptive blessing of rest that was referenced in Genesis and again in Ruth.

Exactly how this rest works, I am uncertain. It is a true statement that rest from the uncertainty of depending on public support in your old age, something unthinkable for parents of living children in the ancient near east, is referenced here, but there seems to be a bit more implied (at least by the apostle Paul) in the text. Can it be that the joy of having a husband, a spouse, and the fruit of their union, i.e. children is indeed a characteristic of rest pursuant to the divine covenant? Even if we are unable to fully understand this, I believe it is indeed so. Do not think of man as we are now, subject to the effects of the

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fall and therefore capable of pursuing a life of celibacy or barrenness if God so wills it, think rather of life as it was intended to be in God's original creative order. The injunction, "...*It is not good that the man (or woman) should be alone...*" (Genesis 2:18) is just as relevant after the fall as before the fall, albeit the nature of the fall has made the call to singleness (and barrenness) a possibility. What may well be lacking from our ability to fully understand Naomi's blessing as well as Paul's statement is a biblical theology of marriage.

Nonetheless, the blessing of Naomi was fulfilled in the life of Ruth through the marriage of Boaz witnessed in the text before us. Naomi felt it her responsibility to seek rest for Ruth so that things might be well with her. This statement is not motivated by her own desire to be looked after nor by a desire to see her deceased husband's inheritance preserved. We know this because she does not refer to Boaz in 3:2 as *גִּבּוֹר אֲנִי*, but as *אֲנִי אֶתְּנֶנּוּ* (simply our kinsman). Of course, she is aware that he has a role to play in their lives as demonstrated by her instructions that immediately follow this statement. What is telling, is that when Boaz marries Ruth, and performs the job of a kinsman redeemer, he does not name the first son after the deceased. Instead, the women of the town name the boy a name that sticks for perpetuity. Thus, what is being preserved is not a restored identity, but a new identity all together. Ruth does indeed find rest in the house of a husband, but not simply a husband, a redeemer. This redeemer bequeaths to her by virtue of the dead, and at the expense of his own inheritance, a new identity.

Part Two: The Price of Redemption – The story reaches a climatic level in the events that transpire throughout the third chapter. Here we witness the bravery of Ruth, and the generosity or *hesed* of Boaz. Naomi instructs Ruth that Boaz is winnowing barley and will be in the threshing floor making merry. She then tells Ruth, "*Wash therefore, and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then, go and uncover his feet, and lie down, and he will tell you what to do*" (3:3-4). This may not seem like a risky endeavor to us because we have the luxury of reading the rest of the story and knowing the outcome. Ruth, however, did not have the same luxury. She was obeying the instructions of her mother-in-law and hoping that God's providential care would once again become evident. I

In essence, Ruth's actions were demonstrating to Boaz that she, being a foreigner, was uncovered in Israel and her deceased husband's inheritance lay unclaimed. The association between these two is inseparable. One could not claim the inheritance without also claiming Ruth's hand in marriage. She had left the covering (or protection) of her father's house and the land of her nativity, and was seeking refuge in the covenant community of Israel. She had been accepted by Naomi, and somewhat by Boaz (at least as a servant), but had not been embraced by the people of the covenant under whose protection she was seeking to live. Uncovering someone's feet was an intimate action that would either be insulting to Boaz (if he chose to deny Ruth's right to the inheritance of her husband), or loving and gracious (if he chose to extend membership in Israel to this Moabitess). One noteworthy point is that Naomi simply instructed Ruth to do the above, and said Boaz would then tell her what to do one way or the other. However, when the events play out, it is actually Ruth who offers instruction to Boaz, again indicating that she was a woman of initiative in whose heart the Holy Spirit was undeniably working.

When Boaz awakens to see a lady lying at his feet he asks in surprise, "*Who are you?*" Ruth's reply to Boaz is remarkable. She states, "*I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer*" (3:9). Note Ruth's expression. This phrase is translated by some as, "skirt" or "cloak",

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but the Hebrew word here used, כנף means quite literally, *wing*. To translate the word as such, though one's cloak or skirt could arguably be called one's wing, is to miss the meaning associated with the earlier statement Boaz made to Ruth when he met her gleaning in his field. You will recall that Boaz blesses Ruth by stating, *"The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord. The God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"* (2:12) Whether Ruth used the word for *wing* in the threshing floor to remind Boaz of his earlier statement or quite by accident, it is clear the meaning of her request. She realizes that her acceptance into the people of God cannot be made certain unless he, a redeemer, covers her with his wing. The association between God and Boaz is here made clear, the protection of the former is delivered through the provision of the latter. This is the answer to the question posed by Deuteronomy 23:3. The curse of enjoined on Ruth by virtue of her birth outside the covenant community, and within the enemies of Israel can be reversed through the merciful care and protection of a redeemer.

Boaz's response leaves the reader relieved, yet waiting. He informs her that he is indeed a redeemer, but there is a redeemer who is yet nearer and has the first right of refusal. He invites Ruth to remain with him that evening, and in the morning, if the nearer kinsman will redeem her, then he will absolve his duty and allow the redemption by the other to occur. It is helpful here to elaborate a bit on the role of a kinsman redeemer the nature of the position in ancient family law. At the heart of redemption was property, God's property that he had given covenantally to his people for their faithful stewarding. God instructs his people in Leviticus 25:23-28, *"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land. If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, let him calculate the years since he sold and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property. But if he has not sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of the jubilee."*

We see in the above passage a very critical statement. God told Israel that the land cannot be sold because it does not belong to them. God tells his people that they are a stranger and a sojourner with him. This is interesting in light of the covenantal relationship between God and his people *if* one understands the "land" promise of the covenant to be limited to the area of land originally given to Israel at the time of conquest. What is further supported by scripture is that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof (Psalms 24:1). This means that all of creation is his, and his plan has always been to redeem *as far as the curse is found*. In this sense, the divine covenant makes God's people, not owners of the land, but stewards of the land. We are tasked with taking care of what God has given, and what ultimately belongs to him and him alone.

If the land allotted to a member of the covenant community had to be sold due to poverty (as is the case with Naomi or rather with Elimelech since his sons – the only rightful heirs of the title of stewardship – are dead), then the impoverished person or a near kinsman could redeem the land and prevent it from being absorbed into another's inheritance. This is how the redemption of Ruth takes place, in the context of selling land (4:3). What makes Boaz's willingness to purchase the land from Naomi so significant is the fact that he had no living heir; therefore, his inheritance would be absorbed into that of Elimelech's or rather Elimelech's inheritance and his would become one and the same. There is no indication from the text that he and Ruth ever had children other than Obed, the ancestor of David.

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Such a detail becomes a trivial if not insignificant part of the story from the author's point of view. We see here what appears to be the reckless casting aside of one's own prospect of producing an heir for the sake of adopting another man's son. Such abandonment is reminiscent of Romans 8:32, the account of God giving us his only Son so that we might have access to the inheritance of glory.

The nearer kinsman Boaz referenced in his midnight conversation with Ruth was delighted to purchase the land from Naomi and redeem it until he heard that he would have to purchase Ruth as well and raise up an inheritance for the deceased (4:4-5). Thus, Boaz became the redeemer next in line for making the redemption, an act he seems more than happy to perform for both Naomi as well as Ruth. The next of kin owes a duty, a duty that the first in line was unable or unwilling to fulfill. Boaz therefore agrees to marry Ruth and purchases the land from Naomi providing for her as well.

Since we have already drawn the comparison between the kinsman redeemer of the book of Ruth and Christ, it is expedient that a couple of other points should be noted. First, the absorbed inheritance of Boaz and Elimelech solves the riddle of Ruth's entry into the people of God and the temple of YHVH even though she was forbidden to do so until the tenth generation. She in essence took on a new identity. When Boaz threw his cloak over her she found protection under his wings, and took on his worthiness to access the community and temple of God. As Christians, Christ has done the same for us. He has clothed us in his righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21) and given us a new identity (2 Corinthians 5:17) along with a new inheritance (Romans 8:17).

Likewise, Christ is our kinsman. Hebrews 2:17 informs us regarding Christ, *"Therefore, he has to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful; and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of his people."* In other words, Christ had to become our kinsman in order to be a qualified redeemer.

The purchase price of redemption for Boaz was a dissolution of the boundaries between himself and the dead. His property was combined with that of Elimelech, Chilion, and Mahlon and Obed, his son, would inherit it all. This is not such a bad way for the story to end. No doubt, Naomi could look back over the incident, with sorrow and inexpressible joy knowing that God's faithful hand was in all of it, the bad and the good alike. Ruth 4:16 states, *"Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse."* We do not know Naomi's age, but it is noteworthy that she became a nurse to her grandson. Whether she served the role in proxy or truly nursed the boy is not disclosed. What is disclosed is that the child was her means of redemption, her end was far better than her beginning. Thankfully she never changed her name to Mara. It would have been inappropriate in light of the bigger plan of God.

Part Three: A King is Coming – The book of Ruth ends with a climactic breath taker. This woman named *pleasant* (Naomi) who married a man whose *God was king* (Elimelech) but died in a time of famine was restored to the *house of bread* (Bethlehem) and given a son of redemption. With the closing of the book of Ruth we are left to wonder at the awe-inspiring work of God. From the womb of a Moabite woman, and the loins of a kinsman redeemer would come the king, the one who would lead the people of God as a sheep does a shepherd (Psalms 69:70-71). He would usher in a new era in Israel, the era of the kings. He would also be the mediator of a new covenant, a progressive revelation of God's redemptive historical work among his people. The last few verses of the book of Ruth traces for us the lineage of the king from the patriarch, Abraham, to the time of David. We get the sense that through David, God is doing something unique, and it is all made possible because of his providential work in the lives of Naomi, Boaz and Ruth, ancestors to the king.