

OF HUMAN INTEREST

Ruth 4:11-18

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Before she appeared on the television program *Britain's Got Talent* in April of 2009, few people knew or were even interested in knowing the person Susan Boyle. Boyle's initial appearance on the talent show fired up public imagination when her modest stage introduction left the live audience, viewers, and judges alike unprepared for the power and expression of her mezzo-soprano voice. She sang "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Miserables*. Before she had finished the song's opening phrase, a standing ovation for Boyle had erupted.^{[5][6]} She received an unbelievable international media and internet response. Within nine days of the audition, videos of Boyle had been watched over 100 million times.^[7] She eventually finished in second place on the show.

Susan was raised in Scotland by a father who was a hardworking miner and a mother who was a shorthand typist. Her mother was forty-five when Susan was born as the youngest of four children. As a result of a difficult delivery, Susan was raised thinking that she had been briefly deprived of oxygen during birth, resulting in a learning disability. However, she did not learn until four years after her appearance on *Britain's Got Talent* that she had been misdiagnosed and had Asperger's Syndrome with an above average IQ.^[28]

Susan speaks of her early childhood when she was bullied^{[24][29]} and nicknamed "Susie Simple."^[30] After leaving school with few qualifications,^[24] she was employed for the only time in her life, for six months, as a trainee cook in a kitchen. She took part in other government training programs. Her main experience as a singer came from singing in her local Catholic church. When her father died in the 1990s and her other siblings had left home, Susan dedicated herself to caring for her aging mother, who died two years before the TV appearance. Susan has never married.

After her performance on TV, her life took an unexpected trajectory, including several movies, one of which is her life story in which she played herself, entitled *I Dreamed a Dream: The Susan Boyle Story*. Her story is gripping and worthy of your research on the internet.

Human interest stories such as Susan Boyle's draw our attention, as is witnessed by 100 million reviews of her performance on the internet within nine days. It matters not whether the story is about a hero or just a regular person. Stories about the real lives of people fascinate us. This is why reality TV has been such a big hit.

Our fascination with real life stories is one reason why the book of **Ruth** is one of the most popular books among readers of the Bible. Your love for real life stories explains why so many of you have told me how much you have enjoyed our study of this book. It's the story of an average everyday woman's loss and recovery. It's the story of Naomi, a woman who had to go on living with the early loss of her husband for ten years and then suffer the loss of her only two children, her sons. For her at that time, life was bleak. She was without a protector or provider. She had no hope of children who could care for her in her old age. She was destitute. By the time we come to the close of the first chapter, she had all but given up on God, because she believed He had abandoned her.

However when we come to **chapter 4**, Naomi has hope. She has seen some remarkable signs that God had been at work in her life, even in her hardship and loss.

As we return to **Ruth 4**, our hero Boaz has gone to court to win the right to be the Kinsman Redeemer for Naomi and Ruth, which he achieved. With the mandatory ten elders of the town present, along with many other citizens standing by as witnesses, Boaz declared to all of them in **verse 9**:

You are witnesses today that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. ¹⁰Moreover, I have acquired Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, to be my wife in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance, so that the name of the deceased will

**not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his birth place;
you are witnesses today.**

Now we pick up our final study of **Ruth** by looking at the conclusion of Boaz's day in court. This court scene, which took place at the city gate, closes in the next two verses with the community's response to Boaz's twice repeated challenge that they be witnesses to his declaration. Their reaction was one of complete approval accompanied by the warmest optimistic blessings any prospective groom could hope to have. The next two verses make up a three-part blessing. Each of these share one thing in common: the theme of fertility. And the reason for this is the whole purpose behind Boaz procuring his right to be the Kinsman Redeemer. He was doing all of this to help his deceased relative Elimelech carry on the family name.

Let's look at it together.

¹¹All the people who were in the court and the elders said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem. ¹²Moreover, may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman."

The first blessing we find in the first half of **verse 11**. It is extraordinary, because they prayed that Yahweh would grant this Moabite woman a place among the matriarchs of Israel, Rachel and Leah. These two wives, together with Jacob as their husband, bore twelve sons that would eventually become the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Leah was the mother who bore the son Judah, for whom the tribe of Judah is named, which is also mentioned in **verse 12**. The city in which they lived, Bethlehem, belonged to the tribe of Judah.

The idiom to “build a house” refers to establishing a family or to being fertile. The purpose for this Levirate marriage was, indeed, to produce a heritage through Ruth. The invocation of the people was for Yahweh to make this possible.

The second blessing has two parts to it. The first line is, “**May you achieve wealth,**” and the second is, “**And become famous.**” On the surface in English, it appears that this is a request for Boaz to become wealthy and have notoriety. But that is not what this Hebrew blessing is all about.

In Hebrew, the first line, “**May you achieve wealth,**” has an assortment of meanings: to act valiantly, to perform honorably, to show great strength, or to make wealth. With the context of this marriage and Boaz’s being older than Ruth, these meanings taken together are probably best understood as, “May God prosper you in your role as a husband.” In other words, if Ruth were fertile, hopefully Boaz would find himself to be prolifically fertile as well. For if Boaz could not produce children, all his effort to become the Kinsman Redeemer would be in vain.

The second line of this blessing, to be famous, in Hebrew carries with it the idea of a person’s positive reputation being lived out through the lives of his descendants long after he was dead. The ancients believed that when a person’s name was never mentioned after his death, he ceased to exist (**Isaiah 14:20**).¹

So, putting both lines together, may you achieve wealth and fame doesn’t have so much to do with having wealth or notoriety as it does with being fertile to produce descendants that share his integrity, or carry with them his integrity.

The third blessing is given in **verse 12**. “**May your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah.**” The point of comparison here is between Ruth and Tamar, not between the women’s characters or the manner in which they conceived children. (Tamar’s was the result of incestuous deception.) But the purpose of the comparison is to highlight the shared

¹ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 723). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

results of their Levirate marriages. Through Tamar, whose husband had died childless, Judah fathered Perez,⁶⁶ who spawned a host of clans, including the clan to which Boaz belonged. Now Judah, though dead, stays alive in the hearts of Israelis through his descendants. Likewise, these witnesses pray for Boaz, that through this widow Ruth he would have a son and be likewise remembered long after he was gone. Again, the theme of productive fertility was behind this blessing.

With **verse 13**, we reach the climax of our story, which really is more the story of Naomi than it is of Ruth. The scene changes from the city gate to the home of Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi, at least nine months later.² We read, **“So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.”**

Notice the progression in Ruth’s social stature. She began as a foreigner in **2:10**. Upon meeting Boaz, she moved up to being treated as the lowest of his servants in **2:13**. Then she graduated from that level in **3:9** to being called his **“maidservant.”** Finally, she completed her trajectory to being called his **“wife.”**

Interestingly, Ruth is not called a mother here, although she obviously was one. In fact, the glory of her giving birth is rightly given to the Lord. **“And the LORD enabled her to conceive,”** or more literally in the Hebrew, **“The LORD gave her conception.”** It’s not that Ruth didn’t deserve the title of mother, but it is the narrator’s purpose to complete the story about the life of the woman with whom the story began, Naomi, who finally got to be a grandmother.

Another reason that God was given the glory for the birth of the baby is that it is the narrator’s purpose to illustrate the hand of God at work in a woman’s life. Previously, God had closed Ruth’s womb. For ten years she and Mahlon, her first husband, could never bear a child. But now, following the prayer of blessing by the women in the town in **verses 11-12**, she bore a son.

Friends, I know that some in our country believe that when it comes to

² Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 725). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

pregnancy, it is a woman's right to choose whether or not to keep the child, because it is hers. But Scripture illustrates for us that pregnancy is not a right or a choice or a privilege; it is a gift from God. As such, the moment that child is conceived it belongs to God, because ultimately, God has given it life. He or she is a fully human gift from God, created in his image.

That's why when women have abortions and men encourage or demand that they do so, afterwards, sometimes years later, as much as they would like to suppress the truth, deep in their souls they know they have done something wrong. Their hearts are so weighed down with regret and guilt for having rejected their precious gift from God.

And it is why only God is able to forgive both a man and woman who have allowed such a decision to be made. If you are a man or a woman who has been party to an abortion and want to find help to work through these issues, please talk with me. There is compassionate help ready and willing to walk you through your situation. For now, I will tell you that help comes through seeking out Jesus as your Savior. Only through Him can you find God's forgiveness and freedom from the guilt and shame that accompanies an abortion. Only through Christ can you find the hope that comes with being given a second chance.

When the women of Bethlehem who knew of Naomi's crisis of faith as declared by Naomi in **chapter 1** heard of the birth of the son to Boaz and Ruth, they responded with a spontaneous outburst of praise to Yahweh. As well, they prayed a blessing over Naomi. We read:

¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. ¹⁵May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age [literally, "the sustainer of your grey hair"], for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."

To really appreciate this blessing, we must see it in light of the backdrop of Naomi's painful and bitter complaint about God in **1:20-21**. So let's quickly reread her words.

²⁰She [Naomi] said to them [the women of Bethlehem], "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

Now, with this verse up on our screen, let's read again **4:14-15**.

¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. ¹⁵May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age, for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."

In the beginning, Naomi had bitterly accused God of emptying her life by robbing her of her husband and her two sons. But now the women consoled her; she may have lost her two sons, but she has gained a daughter-in-law. And what a daughter-in-law Ruth was! She was better for Naomi than seven sons. The reference to "**seven sons**" is conventional, reflecting the ancient Israelite view that the ideal family consisted of seven sons. All Bethlehem knew that Ruth was a noble woman, according to **3:11**, but these women placed her value above seven sons. What extraordinary compensation for the

two sons Naomi had lost!

Here is something else that is noteworthy in these verses. These women are not as concerned about the restoration of Elimelech's land to the family or raising up a name for Mahlon as they are interested in the well-being of this widow.³ Their praising God has little to do with the land, but rather that Naomi's life has been redeemed. Her needs have been met or "restored" because of God's gift of a redeemer.

There is some discussion as to who the redeemer is that Yahweh has sent to Naomi. Some say it must refer to Boaz; others say it refers to Naomi's grandson. After examining the passage closely and reading all of the arguments on both sides, I find that both sides have good reason to their points of view. I'll leave you to decide for yourself.

For now, I lean to this redeemer referring to Naomi's grandson. I see in these women's blessing their recognition of the significance the boy plays in Naomi's present disposition--that she is filled with joy, rather than bitterness. In addition, because Boaz is an older man who will probably die before Naomi, the grandson will be the one who will care for old gray-haired Naomi in the future.

Naomi's story finally comes to a close in **verses 16-17**. She went from being childless to being a nanny to her grandson, Obed. **"¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap and became his nurse. ¹⁷The neighbor women gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi!' So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David."**

Naomi's response to the birth of Boaz's son and to the blessing of the women is described in three simple verbs: She took the child, placed him in her lap or held him close to her breast, and became his nanny.

The last statement concerning the naming of the boy does not mean that neither Ruth nor Boaz had a say in the naming of the child. Such a notion would be ludicrous. This event, similar to a baby dedication, involved the

³ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 727). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

women affirming the name given to the child by his mother or father--a female chorus, if you will, who represented the community, celebrating his birth and declaring its significance.⁴

The last five verses of this book are an epilogue to our story. They spell out for us the genealogy of the royal line of King David.

¹⁸Now these are the generations of Perez: to Perez was born Hezron, ¹⁹and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, ²⁰and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, ²¹and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed, ²²and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David.

Perez was the son of Judah and Tamar from **Genesis 38** and was born under evil circumstances which were not his fault. Why the writer chose to begin Boaz lineage with Perez, I am not sure, other than to say that even David's and the Messiah's lineage is not without its skeletons in the family closet.

As it concerns Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, this epilogue demonstrates that their story did not end with the birth of Obed. It simply signals a significant turn in the history of this family and the history of Israel, down a course that led directly to King David and eventually to the Messiah, the final King of Israel.⁵

As we wrap up our series on **Ruth**, let's take a moment to stand back and highlight some observations from the book as a whole that we can profit from.

As we have said all along through our study of this book, both **Judges** and **Ruth** take place during the same time period in Israel's history known as the Judges. These two books stand in stark contrast in that **Judges** portrays the

⁴ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 730–731). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁵ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 736). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

ugly truth and practices of a nation who had, in general, totally turned their backs upon God. As the last key verse reminds us, “**Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.**”

But **Ruth** reveals hope and a bright spot during this era, when a remnant of this generation, in the midst of their confusion, repents and seeks after God. They had this very godly former pagan woman, Ruth, and a godly Kinsman Redeemer, Boaz, as examples. Hence, my first observation from this book is that **Ruth** reveals a bright spot of faith on a landscape of spiritual darkness during the period of the Judges.

It is a testimony that no matter how bad our culture becomes, turns against God, and persecutes Christians, God doesn't abandon those who seek Him.

This observation leads to a practical lesson we should never forget as we live amongst an equally evil generation. The lesson is that even though the majority may ignore God, He will always bless those few who seek Him. There will always be liars, cheaters, and pseudo religious people who will use others to get their own way. There will be arrogant people who, in the short run, may appear to be getting away with evil. But by the end of their lives, they will find no sense of satisfaction, and if they have not sought out Jesus Christ, will face their eternal just desserts.

On the other hand, those who continue to faithfully submit to and seek to serve Jesus will find satisfaction in life, regardless of difficult circumstances. And when they face Jesus in eternity, they will receive eternal rewards, measured out in direct proportion to their faithful service to Him.

Here is one final observation about the contrast between the two books, **Judges** and **Ruth**. The last verse of **Judges** states, “**There was no king in Israel,**” a statement repeated several times throughout the book. **Ruth**, on the other hand, closes by setting the stage for the coming rule of Israel by kings. It demonstrates that while Israel did all they could to ignore God and to suppress the truth that they knew about Him, God never gave up on Israel. God continued to work, even within their rebellion, to raise up King David, whose family line would eventually lead to Israel's Messiah, Jesus. Hence, we learn that even in the midst of evil days, God is still at work behind the scenes to accomplish His purposes.

Theologians call this manner of God's working the Providence of God. Let's highlight a couple specifics of the Providence of God in action in the book of **Ruth**. For the royal line of David to be preserved, meaning that the line that was predicted to produce the Messiah, Jesus, would indeed become a reality, two conditions had to be met. If either of the following conditions were not met, we would not have had the royal line of David.

The first condition was that the man who was to be the Kinsman Redeemer had to be a God-fearing, gracious man and not a self-serving man, who would be willing to accept and care for a Moabite woman. If Boaz had turned out to be an ungracious rogue, a racist shooing off aliens, and so preoccupied with self that he would ignore the plight of orphans and widows, Ruth would never have been redeemed.

The second that was necessary for the royal line of David to be preserved was that the Kinsman Redeemer would have to come from the clan of Elimelech, in order for him to hold the legal right to be the Kinsman Redeemer.

My point is this: if both of these elements, being God-fearing and being from the same clan, were not true of the Kinsman Redeemer, then Ruth would not have been redeemed.

To be even more clear, if Boaz, at whose field Ruth just happened to have arrived, was gracious but had come from outside Elimelech's clan, he could not have functioned as a Kinsman Redeemer. Conversely, if he had been of Elimelech's clan but was like the other close relative and not God-fearing, gracious, and generous, he would not have married or redeemed Ruth, and there would not have been an Obed, Jesse, or King David.

Hence, the divine agenda to redeem Ruth was fulfilled, because in God's Providence, Ruth happened upon a stranger's field to glean, of whom both of these elements were present. Boaz was both generous and willing, and he was from the clan of Elimelech. God was at work!

So should you ever feel down on yourself or your situation and wonder, "Where is God? Does He care?" Take one of many lessons from **Ruth**: God is there and is always at work. His has plans for you that you may not

understand. But in the midst of difficulty, if you can remember the cross, which portrays God's/Jesus' ultimate blend of justice, love, and mercy, then knowing this about His character should enable you to trust Him, even when other discouraging voices may tell you, "You are alone fool! God doesn't care."

If you are struggling with your present circumstances that appear hopeless, come back to **Ruth**, and spend some time with Naomi. Let her life, her human interest story, give you hope that your life counts too. In the midst of her great crisis, God met her needs, and He will meet yours. From the pages of this book, her life will tell you that He knows what you are going through. Never give up on God or believe that He is not for you. For He is for you, and He has wonderful plans for your life. And when your life is over, having walked with God, I would enjoy sitting down with you and hearing your own human interest story of how God, in the end, proved His faithfulness to you.