

FROM EMPTINESS TO FULNESS

The Book of Ruth is a delightful story that begs to be read out loud to group of older children. It wants to be heard in one sitting, start to finish. It has a “Once upon a time...” feel to it, except that it’s no fairy tale. The characters are real. The story happened just as it unfolds in the text.

We’re not accustomed to reading Books of the Bible straight through that way. We read in little pieces: a paragraph here, a chapter there. We absorb the literature of the Bible as disconnected collections of stories. As a result, we tend to miss the larger flow of the biblical narrative and the overarching themes of whole books. We see individual trees and bushes but overlook the larger forests.

Even to preach Ruth over four Sundays becomes problematic. We need the time to dig deeper into the nuances of the story. But we miss the surprise ending. It’s just another fact tagged on to the story.

If we could transport ourselves back to ancient Israel, perhaps during the time of David or Solomon, we would hear the Book of Ruth more vividly. For one thing, we wouldn’t have to keep asking ourselves, “I wonder why they did that?” We wouldn’t have to stop and explain about Moabites, famines, gleaning, kinsman-redeemers. We could just enjoy the story.

And in the final moments, if we were hearing the book for the first time, we would thrill for Naomi, this poor widow who had lost so much and suffered so greatly, who in the end holds a grandson who will bring her comfort in old age.

But when we heard the final words of 4:17, it would have been breathtaking. The whole story would have popped into focus as God’s sovereign purposes and *hesed*, his faithful love, were finally revealed: “The women living there said, ‘Naomi has a son.’ And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”

David was Israel’s greatest king. God would make a covenant with David assuring that his descendants would rule Israel in perpetuity. Messiah would come from David’s line. The Book of Ruth is part of the backstory to King David. It’s the story of how God reversed Naomi’s tragic loss, gave her a remarkable daughter-in-law, restored her fortunes, and in the process wove her story into his larger purposes for a redemptive, royal dynasty.

This morning we’re concluding our study of this charming little book. Turn with me to Ruth 4. Let’s remind ourselves of what’s just happened. In a daring, midnight encounter, Ruth the Moabite proposed to Boaz. She asked him to be her kinsman-redeemer, the near relative who would take her home as his wife and provide for her and Naomi.

Boaz showed himself to be an honorable man of integrity and *hesed*, loyal kindness and love. He agreed to the proposal. He will take Ruth to be his wife.

But there is a legal conflict. There is a relative closer to Naomi and Ruth who has a higher claim as kinsman-redeemer. He might choose to accept that role, and if he does, Boaz will have to step aside.

Here, once again, we’re left scratching our heads, wondering what’s going on. If Ruth and Boaz love each other and want to get married, what’s the problem?

The problem, as we saw last week, is that they lived in a different culture with vastly different values. Family came first. Family needs superceded personal desires. Families had

hierarchies that had to be reckoned with. And Boaz, this honorable man of unimpeachable integrity, submitted himself to the necessary legal processes.

Scene one of the final act of Ruth's drama takes place at the city gates. The city gates would have opened onto a small courtyard. The city gates were where the town's business got done. They were ancient Israel's equivalent of a downtown city center. That's where vendors would have set up shop and where city elders took care of official matters.

Boaz went there with business of his own. He sat down to wait for his relative to show up. And lo and behold, guess what? That very man showed up as if on cue. The NIV misses that nuance of providential coincidence.

Our writer doesn't name this nearer relative. The NIV has Boaz calling him 'my friend.' In his own language, the writer identifies him as *p^eloni almoni*. It's an idiom that means something like Mr. So-and-so. The man will remain anonymous, a so-in-so. The ancient Hebrew reader would have read that as a clue that maybe he's not worth mentioning.

Then Boaz rounded up a quorum of elders. When everyone was in place he stated his business. Naomi wanted to sell the family farm. In order to keep the land as property of the extended family, the kinsman-redeemer, *p^eloni almoni* had first rights at purchasing the land.

It must have been something of a letdown for Boaz to hear his relative agree to the purchase. But Boaz wasn't done. He adds a sticker: by buying the land, the kinsman-redeemer also acquires Ruth the Moabitess as his wife—which makes absolutely no sense to us.

Imagine buying a house and discovering in the fine print that if you bought the place, you had to marry the previous owner!

In that time, land and family were bound together. Perpetuating family on ancestral land was huge. We think a Century Farm is exceptional. In ancient Israel, it was a super-value!

By buying the land, the kinsman-redeemer would also have the obligation to marry Ruth and have children by her. If they had a son, this boy would be considered Elimelech's grandson who would eventually receive title to Elimelech's property. In the legal reckoning governing such transactions, Ruth's first son would be considered the heir of Elimelech and Mahlon.

This introduces a complication. It's one thing to increase your own holdings. It's another to buy land your heirs won't get to keep. You essentially diminish your bottom line to protect the family line and property of a relative. Look at v. 6: "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it."

P^eloni almoni, Mr So-and so, passed. He wasn't willing to invest his assets in something that would result in a loss to his own children. This is why he remains anonymous—*p^eloni almoni*. He's a so-in-so, unwilling to accept responsibility for his close relative. In ancient Hebrew culture, that would not have been perceived as an honorable decision.

Boaz leaped at the opportunity. And here, even our writer has to stop to explain a custom that by his time had already passed out of fashion. In the presence of the elders, the man took off his sandal and handed it to Boaz. It was a legal act symbolizing a transfer of rights. Look at verse eight.

In formal language, Boaz announced his claim to the property of Elimelech and his heirs. He also declared his intent to take Ruth as his wife. And note the response of the assembled elders: "Then the elders and all those at the gate said, 'We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez,

whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

The witnesses conclude the transaction with congratulations—three wish-blessings: fertility for Ruth [may her tribe increase], fame for Boaz and a widening sphere of influence for their children. *Mazel tov!*

Those wishes will come to pass, in ways far beyond anything any of them could have imagined.

So Ruth and Boaz got married, and guess what? The Lord enabled Ruth to conceive. This is one of two instances when God is mentioned as the direct cause of an action. In chapter one, Yahweh is said to have “...come to the aid of his people by providing food for them.” And here, Yahweh enables Ruth to conceive. Ruth who had been barren through ten years of marriage to Mahlon. The implication is that Ruth got pregnant on her honeymoon and in due course gave birth to a son.

Look again at v. 14-16.

The women who congratulate Naomi are the same ones who a year earlier had heard her lament when she returned to Bethlehem. Remember that? “Call me Mara [Bitter], because *Shaddai*, the Almighty, has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but Yahweh has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi [Pleasant]? Yahweh has afflicted me; *Shaddai* has brought misfortune upon me.”

They praise Yahweh, first because this grandchild will be Naomi’s kinsman-redeemer. He will be her near next of kin who will bring joy to her life and take care of her as she grows older.

They praise Yahweh and rejoice with Naomi over her incredibly good fortune in having a daughter-in-law like Ruth “...who is better to you than seven sons...” The ancient Hebrews considered seven to be the ideal number. Saying that Ruth was better than seven sons was higher praise than we understand today. Ruth had proved to be a remarkable young woman and an amazing blessing to Naomi.

Naomi held her grandson close. Ruth entrusted her with more than a grandmother’s role. Naomi would be something like the boy’s nanny. She would have a huge part in his upbringing. So much so that Naomi’s neighbor women announce: ‘Naomi has a son.’ and they named him Obed.

And then comes the zinger: “He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.” And if we had been kids in Israel listening to this story for the first time, at this revelation we would have jumped up and down with wide-eyed excitement: “Oh—OH!” It’s a good tale in its own right, but so much more is going on. God was working out his purposes.

Naomi, Ruth and Boaz would never know the outcomes of their family line. They were just thrilled to have this baby. Had we known them in Bethlehem, they would have been just ordinary people. They weren’t heroic in the ways we consider heroic. Boaz was a farmer. Naomi and Ruth were poor widows. Ruth and Boaz had a baby and everyone was happy for them. Happens all the time.

If they were remarkable for anything it was their character. These were faithful, loving, kind people. They worked hard and in every way showed themselves to be men and women of integrity. They were, in fact, the kind of individuals God hoped for when he chose Israel to be his special people.

And they never understood their role in the larger drama of God. They knew nothing about David, and they never dreamed that Ruth, the Moabitess, would enjoy honorable mention in the family tree of God’s promised Messiah, Jesus, as recorded by Matthew in his first Gospel.

These faithful people were regular folks whose story was wrapped up in God's *BIG* story in ways they never could have imagined.

Have you ever thought of your life story that way? Have you ever considered the possibility that God is weaving the events of your life, even the unimaginable losses, into a tapestry of unspeakable value and beauty? That outcomes will flow from your love and faithfulness as you follow Jesus that will echo through eternity, even though you may never have the slightest inkling of what may come to pass?

I wonder, as Naomi sat holding little Obed, how she reflected back on her life? The empty places in her heart left by the loss of her husband and her two sons never quite healed. Obed would win his own place in Naomi's heart but he could never take their place. Grief could still catch her off-guard and some questions would never be answered.

But Naomi was caught up in something grander than herself. She was a significant part of God's redemptive plan that would one day reach out to embrace the whole world.

She never knew that. Ruth and Boaz never understood the part they played. They just played their part. They were faithful men and women of honor and integrity who did right things.

In the same way, you and I may never be listed among the movers and shakers of this world. We may never be rich or powerful or famous. Our names may never show up in a Google search or a Wikipedia entry.

But God works from a different script. He has plans for us that demand only our faithfulness and availability, our integrity and obedience. Never underestimate the value of a simple life lived well for God's glory.

The Apostle Paul said that we look at things now like a poor reflection in a mirror. In Paul's day, mirrors were made of highly polished bronze. They worked, sort of. But there were always distortions. We see distorted images. God sees the whole big picture with absolute clarity.

Someday, Paul said, we shall see face to face. Now we know only partially; then we shall know fully (1 Cor. 13:12).

Boaz and Ruth, and Naomi have something to leave us. We aren't called to figure out life, but to live life with faith and faithfulness. We play the part we find ourselves in as Christ-followers who are growing to be like him. And we believe that God has larger purposes for our story that we neither know nor need to know. It is enough, as the old hymn says, to trust and obey, and to rest in God's unfailing love and faithfulness.

May you live lives of noble character, like Ruth and Boaz. May God find you loving and faithful in whatever circumstances you find yourselves. And at the end, when we stand before our Lord and receive praise from him; when we see what he has done with the obediences of our lives, may you see your story and its place in God's *BIG* story, and dance for joy!