

A Happy Ending and New Beginnings

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[0 : 00] Now, we're coming to our reading, and we're coming to our final study in the book of Ruth, and you'll find it on page 224, chapter 4. Now, it's some weeks since we studied the book.

We studied chapters 1 to 3 on a number of Sunday evenings last month. I'm not going to pretend for one moment that everyone remembers what was said then. But just to put this chapter in context, can I just give a very brief summary of what's been happening so we'll understand the chapter better.

The book begins with famine, and a woman called Naomi and her husband Elimelech go to the land of Moab with her sons to escape from the famine. They're not long there when tragedy strikes, and all three men, her husband and her two sons, are dead.

And Naomi returns to Bethlehem accompanied by her daughter-in-law, Ruth. But they've still got problems. They still don't have their inheritance.

Naomi goes out to work in the fields of a man called Boaz. It's obvious both of them fall in love. And Boaz is going to do what's called redeem the inheritance. In other words, buy out Naomi.

[1 : 14] And he's also going to marry Ruth. But there is a snag, because there is someone else who is closer, a closer relation.

And this is how chapter 4 opens. And the redeeming here is, as I say, is about who will buy out Naomi and her inheritance.

So let's read the book of Ruth, chapter 4, verse 1. 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 says, 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 her relative Elimelech.

[2 : 11] 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 says, the day you buy the fields 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 says, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption for yourself, for I cannot redeem it. Now this is the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging.

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 brought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Cillian and Malon.

[3 : 25] That's Naomi's sons. I have brought, and Ruth the Moabite, the wife to Malon, I have brought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that among his brothers and from the gate of his native place.

You are witnesses this day. And all the people said, 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. May your house be like the house of Peres, whom Tamar bore to Judah because of the offspring the Lord will give you by this young woman.

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. Went into her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the woman 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.

[4 : 45] Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the woman 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 Peres. Peres fathered Hezron. Hezron fathered Ram. Ram fathered Aminadab.

Aminadab fathered Nachson. Nachson fathered Salmon. Salmon fathered Boaz. Boaz fathered Obed. Obed fathered Jesse. And Jesse fathered David.

In case you think that's enough names, I'd like you now to turn over to Matthew chapter 1. And we'll read the first six verses. That's on page 807. Matthew chapter 1.

We read this on our first study in Ruth, and I want to read it again, just to put this story in its widest context. Matthew chapter 1. We read verses 1 to 6.

[5 : 40] The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Peres and Zerah by Tamar, and Peres the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram.

Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nachson, and Nachson the father of Solomon, and Solomon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David the king.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to us. Now, could we please have our Bibles open at page 224, the last chapter of Ruth, and we'll have a moment of prayer.

Come now with prayer and contemplation. See how in Scripture Christ is known. It's our desire this morning, our Father.

We want to see the Lord Christ himself. And so I pray we'll take my human words, use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

[7 : 04] And so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen. Now, our world is full of love stories.

An appropriate opening to us in Valentine's Day sermon, possibly. And I hope, I hope all you, those of you in relationships have remembered what the day is.

Anyway, that's as may be. There are tragic stories like Romeo and Juliet. There are wonderful, happy endings like this story.

And that's the first point I want to make. This story is a love story. We've looked at that over the last few weeks, and we've seen how the author is showing to us the humanity of this couple, Ruth and Boaz.

They're not super spiritual. They're not living in some rarefied atmosphere. They're ordinary people who gradually fall in love with each other and want to spend their lives together.

[8 : 12] And that's so important. The Bible is a human book. When God made us in his image, when he made us as humans, his object is to remake us into his image, into the image of Christ.

His object is not to make us into disembodied spirits. His object is to make us into redeemed people, redeemed humanity, our bodies like Christ's glorious body.

So this is a love story, a human love story, the dawning, the dawning of love between Ruth and Boaz. And of course, like all good stories, it has suspense.

And there is still suspense as this chapter opens. And just one other point I want to make in that connection. We all have choices to make in our lives, sometimes big choices, sometimes choices relating to relationships and other things.

Now, I want to say this because I'm sure it's true that even when we get it wrong, God still works his purpose out. That's where the providence of God is so important.

[9 : 19] If you feel you've made a mess of things, do you really doubt that your father in heaven doesn't have the wit and the wisdom and the care to get you back on the path he wants you to?

I'm not talking about deliberately going against his will, although even then he works it out. Remember the words of Joseph, God meant it for good. That's the first thing. It's a human story.

It's about our lives. But secondly, it's a gospel story. The last word of the book is David, and it's pointing to the reign of the great king and beyond that to the reign of his greater son.

Jesus will reign where'er the son does his successive journeys run. The little story of Boaz and Ruth. Your little stories and my little story are caught up in this big story.

And this big story that will culminate, as the book of Revelation tells us, in the marriage of the Lamb. The Bible, which begins the marriage in Eden, points to the time when God will bring all his people together as a bride for his son.

[10 : 26] That's why I've called today's sermon a happy ending and new beginnings. The happy ending is for Boaz and Ruth. The new beginnings also are for them as they start a new family.

But the new beginnings go well beyond their time, right up to our time, and beyond our time until the kingdom comes. Well, let's look then at this chapter.

It develops in three movements. Verses 1 to 12, I'm going to call Love's Labour's Won, as opposed to Love's Labour's Lost. Shakespeare almost certainly did write a play called Love's Labour's Won, but it's disappeared.

Anyway, this is about love triumphing. Love's Labour's come to a happy conclusion. Now, Boaz has agreed to buy out Naomi and Ruth.

In old Israel, relatives were expected to help their family who fell into poverty. And they were called redeemers, the redeemer who redeemed the land, redeemed the family, and bought them out.

[11 : 33] But a problem has arisen. And the problem is that while Boaz is very closely related to Naomi, he's not the closest relative.

And this man has to be consulted. Of course, as the story, in the human story, this is a real problem. A last-minute hitch. What if Boaz and Ruth aren't able to marry after all?

So what about this unnamed nearer redeemer? Now, if you remember, the last two chapters of the book have taken place in private. The threshing floor at night in chapter 3.

And the wheat fields in chapter 2. Just a small number of people. This is in the gate. The gate is where business was transacted.

Where the marketplace, the place where all the transactions were carried out. The place where decisions were made. And once again, Boaz takes the initiative.

[12 : 34] Boaz had gone to the gate and sat down there. And as he goes to the gate and sits down, that shows he has business to transact. He's taking the initiative. And behold, the redeemer.

This word behold is, it's an old word. And it's, there isn't really a modern English word that captures. It's meaning something like, who do you think should pass by but the redeemer?

Now, you see what's happening here. Boaz is taking the initiative. Boaz didn't know how this was going to work out.

Ruth didn't know how it was going to work out. And you can imagine the tension and the suspense. God's unseen hand at work. This man is not named. Now, that is very significant in a story which places so much emphasis on names.

After all, the story is to end with a list of names. The names of the individuals have been emphasized throughout. Because this man is purely interested in a financial transaction.

[13 : 37] Verse 4. Boaz says, I thought he would tell you, buy in the presence of those sitting here in the presence of the elders. And he said, I will redeem it.

Purely financial transaction. But when he learns that Ruth is part of the package, he immediately withdraws. This is great, of course, for Ruth and Boaz.

Because the story could have come to a rather unhappy ending. You see, the important point here is this. Neither man had to marry Ruth.

Neither Boaz nor this unnamed man had to marry Ruth. Boaz wanted to marry Ruth for the best of all possible reasons he loved her. This man was not interested in this except financial transaction.

You see, love is never a matter of economics. Love is never a matter of simply finance. And one of the beauties of this story is that it is a love story.

[14 : 37] Boaz, as we've seen, has been enormously generous. He's given a great deal of wheat to Ruth and to her mother-in-law. But for this man, he passes out of the story because he isn't interested.

The Song of Songs says love is stronger than death. For this man, love wasn't stronger than money. And love triumphs. And no doubt Ruth and he breathe a huge sigh of relief.

But I think this man is introduced to show the contrast and to point out to us how easy it is to be dominated by purely monetary, purely practical considerations.

I'm not saying we should be silly. All I'm saying is that love doesn't work that way. Love cannot be bought. As the Song of Songs says, it cannot be bought for the gold of Ophir, which is, of course, the kind of most valuable commodity of that day.

So, the love story, we breathe a sigh of relief. Because when you read this story, you get so caught up with it. And you want them to marry.

[15 : 49] You want to hear the wedding bells ringing. You want this story to work out, don't you? But this story is also linked with the bigger story of God's grace.

In verse 11. Then all the people were at the gate and the elders said, we are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming to your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel.

Taking, of course, back to the story of Jacob and Laban. A story in Genesis 29 and 30. A story of how Jacob himself had cheated by his uncle Laban to marry Leah the elder and wait for Rachel.

But the point about that is that as a human story, it's not particularly edifying. Nevertheless, it shows God's grace at work. God's grace is not going to be set aside by either Jacob's cheating or Laban's cheating.

Nor is God's grace going to be, God's grace is not going to be derailed by our faults and failures. It doesn't mean, it doesn't mean an excuse for our faults and failures.

[17 : 00] It does mean, even with our faults and failures, the story of salvation is going to be fulfilled. It's not going to be derailed. And even more so, read later on the very sordid story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38.

And Judah comes out in an extremely bad light there. Judah there, as he thinks with his hormones and behaves in a totally shameless way. And yet, Tamar, Tamar's offspring by Judah, you may have noticed, occurs in Matthew 1 as well.

This is all bound up in the big story. The story of salvation. The story of the Christ himself. Jesus Christ, who takes the most ordinary, the most unsatisfactory of people and makes them fit for his kingdom.

As Paul say, where sin abounds, grace abounds even more. Not that we're not responsible for our action. That's been a whole part of Ruth, isn't it?

That we are responsible for our actions. But God ultimately overrules them. God is greater and will work out his purpose. Whenever our hearts condemn us, as the Apostle John said, God is greater than our hearts.

[18 : 25] And he knows all things. Love's labor is one here in this story of Ruth, in this story of Boaz, and indeed in these earlier stories. And you'll notice how, of course, Ruth is being linked once again with the people of promise.

You may remember back in chapter 1, the words she used when she wanted to leave her own land were exactly the words God used to Abraham. Leave your family.

Leave your home. And strike out into the unknown. So, Ruth takes her place in this wonderful story of salvation. Just as you and I take our place in that wonderful story.

Not because we're wonderful, but because God is a wonderful God. So, that's the first part of the story. Now, the second part of the story, verses 13 to 17, we have a birth and a blessing.

The story is almost over. And verse 13, once again, sums up the blend of providence and human activity. Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife.

[19 : 30] This is how verse 13 passes over almost a year and culminates in this birth. We know so already in Ruth, sometimes the action slows down. Like on the night on the threshing floor in chapter 3 or the sunny day in the wheat fields in chapter 2.

But here we rush over a year and the child is born. Who is the true redeemer who gives the blessing? The Lord himself. The Lord gave her conception and she bore a son.

Now, we have to be sensitive about all this. Children are a blessing. But since we live in a fallen world, there are problems as well.

I mean, remember in Genesis 3, in pain, you will bear children. Faring, of course, to the pain of childbirth, but also to the pain that children can cause.

So in this fallen world, it doesn't always work out this way. We have to be sensitive and sympathetic. And we must not talk as if every blessing promised in the book were ours by right.

[20 : 44] That is the so-called prosperity gospel, which is a wicked and soul-destroying thing. It's no gospel at all. Well, if you really follow the Lord, your bank balance will always be full.

Your children will be a great credit to you. They'll be beautiful. They'll also be intelligent. All the rest of it. You'll never have any worries. That is a wicked way to talk. Because God hasn't promised absolutely.

God often gives these things. But remember, all these promises ultimately point forward to the world to come, when there'll be no more curse. Now, it's a peculiar little story, this here, isn't it?

Almost as if Naomi has adopted the child. As if Granny is going to be looking after the child rather than the parents. I think that's to misunderstand the dynamics of the story.

The dynamics of the story begin with Naomi in bitterness. And God's grace has brought blessing instead of barrenness and bitterness. Back in chapter 1, remember Naomi has said, chapter 1, verse 20, Naomi said, Do not call me Naomi.

[22 : 09] Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. That's one bookend of the story. In this other bookend, there is blessing instead of barrenness and bitterness.

Because this child is the promise of the future. It's not that Boaz and Ruth abandoned their responsibility. I don't think that for one minute. Rather, the story is moving ahead to the next stage.

And in Matthew 1, it is Ruth and Boaz who are mentioned as the parent. And the blessing there is all of God. I don't think we think often enough about blessing.

How blessed we are. I think if we appreciated blessing more, it would save us from two things. It would save us from total discouragement.

When things go wrong. And it would save us from complacency. And thinking too much of ourselves. When things go right. Blessing.

[23 : 15] This is the great gift of the gospel. And the child is called Obed. Which means servant. With all its rich associations. They named him Obed.

Verse 17. He was the father of Jesse. The father of David. And notice in verse 14.

May his name be renowned. May his name be famous in Israel. No one could possibly have anticipated how this is going to be fulfilled beyond all expectations.

May his name be famous in Israel. Because he is in the genealogy and the ancestry of the most famous name of all. The name of Jesus.

And that's what this story is pointing to. So you see the human story of Ruth and Boaz ends in marriage. Ends in wedding bells.

[24 : 11] Ends in a celebration. Ends in a child who is going to carry on the line. Now let's go on to part 3.

Verses 18 to 22. I'm going to call since I mentioned Romeo and Juliet. What's in a name? Because these are not just names.

These are names with a purpose. These are names which carry on the great story. Which no one on earth has ever read. In which every chapter is better than the one before.

In some ways you might well feel. This is a bit of an anticlimax. Why end an exciting story on this note? These are the generations of Perez.

Perez fathers. Or if you still read the authorized version. Perez begat. Anyway. Why end in this way? I want to make two points.

[25 : 10] First of all. The ordinary as well as the great. Get their place in the sun. Obed himself. What do we know about him? Or earlier names like Aminadab.

Nachson and so on. What do we know about them? We know nothing about them at all. What do we know about the millions of God's people throughout the centuries?

Most of them. Most of them known in their own day. And then forgotten. It's like in some ways walking through a graveyard. And seeing the names there.

Most of them long, long forgotten. And there's this sense of waste almost. Until we realize that these names are not forgotten.

Now none of us have our names in the Bible. Now I know some of you may be called Ruth or David or something. But you know what I mean. None of us have our personal names in the Bible.

[26 : 10] But more important than that is names written in heaven. Jesus said don't rejoice because the spirits obey you. Rejoice because your names are written in heaven.

And surely that is the greatest blessing of all. Your names may not be in the annals of fame. They may not be inscribed on statutes or on the famous people whom we know about.

So that's the thing. The ordinary people matter. The Bible is full of ordinary people who matter at key points. In 2 Kings 5, a little girl who told the general Naaman's wife about the prophet Elijah.

Led to the curing of his leprosy. The Paul's nephew who rescued him from being murdered. In Acts chapter 25 or 26. Didn't even know that Paul had a sister at that point.

But you see all these ordinary people. And who knows? On the last day. Who knows? All these unnoticed things. The unnoticed acts of kindness.

[27 : 11] The kind words spoken. The things done in the name of the Lord. For the glory of the Lord. And for the good of others. These will all be remembered.

They will not be forgotten. So ordinary names as well as great. But the second point surely is David. The great name. The faithful, the flawed but faithful king.

Obed fathered Jesse and Jesse fathered David. And David is going to be the next big name in the story. Very important in his own right.

Unifying the kingdom. Destroying the Philistine threat. And the standard to which all other kings would have to live up to. He did not walk or he did walk in the ways of his father David.

And pointing of course more even more so to his greater son. The world's ransom. Blessed Mary's son. Pointing to Jesus himself. The king who reigns forever.

[28 : 16] So you see these little verses there. These names matter. And they matter particularly because of the last name David.

And even more so because of his greater son. And that's where we come into the story. See Ruth is not just a beautiful love story from a vanished world.

Although it is that. It's not simply a cleverly crafted narrative. With a compelling plot and fascinating characters. Although it's that as well. It's part of the great story of God the lover.

Who searches far and wide. And I've called this here as a wideness in God's mercy. Who welcomes the outsiders. Who cares for the poor and the humble.

And in the details of our lives. And all their messiness. And all their complicatedness. That is the God in whom we trust. That is the God who has come to us in David's greater son.

[29 : 19] Rested be his name. Amen. Let's pray. Father. Father. Father. We thank you for this book of Ruth.

For its humanity. For its coming in touch with our own personal lives. Our own emotions. Our own faults and failings. Our own hopes and fears.

And we thank you even more. For how it points to the greater story. Great David's greater son. The one who will one day reign. And in whose kingdom.

There will be love. And joy. And peace. Now remain faith. Hope. And love. These three. But the greatest of these. Is love.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.