



A Man on a Mission

Ruth 4:1-12

People love to see a hero go out with resolve to complete their mission. Eyes filled with purpose. Walk brimming with determination. Stories, books, and movies often get near the end and have set up a clear path for the hero. He or she knows what they must do, and now it's just time to act. Ruth is one such story. Boaz did what he could to provide for Ruth, but for whatever reason hadn't gone any further than being gracious and helping Ruth when she gleaned. But when Ruth made known that she wanted Boaz to redeem her, something inside him woke up. He told her he would take care of it in the morning, and the next time we see him he is marching into the gate to solve this problem once and for all.

The first 12 verses of chapter four are a fascinating scene in the life of Bethlehem. We get a glimpse of courtroom drama:¹ Boaz jumping through the necessary legal hoops to secure Ruth as his bride. But why does the author of Ruth give us so much detail about this scene? A simple sentence or two could have told us all we need to know: *"And Boaz went and met with the kinsman redeemer. And the kinsman redeemer did not wish to redeem Ruth and Naomi, because he did not want to mar his inheritance... So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife"* But the author doesn't quickly gloss over this meeting. In fact, he spends a lot of time detailing the conversation, which means that whoever wrote Ruth thought this episode was important and wanted us to see this go down.

In a sense, the main problem for Ruth and Naomi has been solved. Ruth will have a husband, either Boaz or the redeemer, and she and Naomi will be cared for. But it mattered for the author that it be Boaz and not the kinsman, because the author wants us to see the character of Boaz, especially as contrasted with the kinsman. In chapter one, we saw Ruth contrasted with Orpah. Orpah wasn't a villain, but she wasn't a hero. She did what was expected of her until Naomi made it clear she didn't have to come along, at which point Orpah went home. In this chapter, we see Boaz contrasted with another figure simply called "the kinsman"² who, like Orpah, simply behaves as most people would by putting the concern of his own inheritance first. But in doing so the author is highlighting the noble character of Boaz.

¹ The city gate was considered the place of business in ancient Israel. It was here that people would go to settle disputes and conduct business such as we see in Ruth. It would be like our courthouse and city capitol building rolled up into one.

² "Kinsman" is a translation of the Hebrew *go'el*, a word used of a close relative that includes the idea of "redeemer." It is related to the word verb "redeem" (*ga'al*) used throughout the passage as well as the noun used in verse 6 "my right [redemption]" (*ge'ulah*). Elsewhere in the KJV it is translated as redeemer (Job 19:25; Proverbs

In what ways have we already seen the character of Boaz?

What would the story of Ruth have been like if Boaz had been like everyone else around him?

As we study this lesson we will focus on the character of Boaz. In the process we will see someone who is dedicated to Ruth and seeks to do everything in his power to win her. Two applications will flow from this example. First, Boaz is an encouraging illustration of how godly people act. Boaz's integrity, determination, and wisdom should be an example for us of how to live for God and take care of others. Secondly, Boaz paints a beautiful picture of Christ in these verses. His pursuit of Ruth, the Gentile bride, in many ways pictures Christ's pursuit of His Gentile bride, the church.³

In what ways have we seen Boaz demonstrate God's heart for His people already?

Boaz initiates the redemption (4:1-2)

Boaz acts immediately (Ruth 3:13, 18; 4:1).

"If a man says he's going to do something, he's going to do it. There's no need to remind him every six months." The stereotype of the husband with a long honey-do list that he keeps avoiding whenever possible is funny but often all too true. It can be easy for men (and women) to put off what needs to be done because it is hard or inconvenient. Boaz realizes the seriousness of this matter and makes it a point to deal with the situation immediately. Boaz told Ruth he was going to address it in the morning, Naomi assured Ruth Boaz would take care of the situation, and basically as soon as Ruth left Boaz starts marching into town.

Why do we sometimes put off the responsibilities God has given us?

How can we avoid procrastinating regarding things that matter to God and others?

Boaz acts decisively (Ruth 4:1-2).

Boaz's actions in the first few verses are very deliberate and determined. They begin with Boaz "just happening" to come across the kinsman. He then instructs him to sit, and he does. Boaz then rounds up 10 elders (rulers) of the village, and tells them to sit, and they do. Again, we don't need all these details.

23:11). For these reasons, thinking of the kinsman as a "redeemer" is helpful, although he ultimately does not redeem the land or Ruth and so it makes sense to think of him as a kinsman rather than a redeemer.

³ Recent hermeneutics (the study of studying the Bible) has tended to shy away from what is called "typology" (i.e., Old Testament persons, institutions, and events that foreshadow the gospel in some way) unless it is clearly taught in the New Testament. Since the New Testament never paints Jesus as a "new Boaz" many resist seeing Boaz as a type [a picture] of Christ. Although different opinions exist on the matter, this study will seek to follow the example of the New Testament writers in seeing Christ in the Old Testament and take a cautious typological view of this book, seeing Boaz as a picture of Christ pursuing His people. If nothing else, Paul makes clear in Ephesians 5 that marriage is a picture of Christ and the church, and thus anytime we see a dedicated, faithful man pursuing a woman honorably it should draw our mind to Christ and what He has done for us.

The author could have summed this material up much more succinctly. But he wants us to see Boaz as deliberately preparing this meeting as quickly and efficiently as possible.

In what ways can Boaz be an example for believers today?

In what ways does Boaz immediacy and decisiveness remind us of Jesus?

Boaz fights for the redemption (4:3-8)

Boaz gives his first explanation (4:3-4)

The whole discussion starts off in a fairly straightforward manner. Boaz lets the kinsman know that Naomi is seeking to sell some of her land and he wants to know if the kinsman is interested. He lets him and the rest of the elders know that the kinsman has the first option to buy, but if he does not want to buy then Boaz would be interested. At this point, Ruth is not brought into the picture. It seems to be a simple case of purchasing a piece of land, and the kinsman looks at the purchase and decides that it would probably be in his best interest to buy. So he says very simply, "Sure, I'll buy it."

Boaz gives his second explanation (4:5)

After the kinsman agrees to purchase the land, Boaz raises the stakes by reminding the nearer kinsman of his responsibility to marry Ruth and produce an heir. In Israelite culture, when a man died and had no sons, it was the duty of his brother to marry the widow and produce an heir (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). If there was no brother, that duty would fall to the next nearest relative. The child that was produced would then carry on the lineage of the original family. This procedure was called "Levirate marriage."

Boaz's complication here is challenging to translate⁴ and there are further questions about how all of this worked legally.⁵ But overall his strategy is clear: The kinsman wants to buy the land, but Boaz reminds him that Ruth is still around and of child-bearing age, and as the one closest enough to buy the land the kinsman is also the one who should perform the duty of levirate and marry Ruth to produce an heir. This changes the picture drastically. If there is an heir to inherit the land who is considered of Elimelech's line,

⁴ The italicized "*it*" in the KJV means that what is supposed to be bought is left unstated. Some think that it is Ruth herself who is "bought" in the sense of "acquire." Further complicating matters is the fact that in the Hebrew, the text literally reads "I will buy from Ruth..." rather than "you will buy from Ruth..." The Masoretes thought this was wrong, and so they copied the text in front of them ("I will buy from Ruth") but included a note to read it as "you will buy from Ruth." The KJV and all major modern translations agree with the Masoretes on this point and understand Boaz as instructing the kinsman to buy, either the land or Ruth, apparently with the understanding that in either case when he buys the land he will also marry Ruth and seek to provide an heir through her to inherit the land on behalf of Elimelech.

⁵ As we will see, the legal questions come from the fact that there seem to be two laws combined here that elsewhere we don't see combined in the law itself: levirate marriage and redemption. Redemption deals with what to do if someone near you has their land sold off or needs to sell it off to survive, and levirate marriage deals with what happens when a family runs out of men to pass on the inheritance. Whether these laws were combined previously in Israelite law or whether Boaz simply understood that this family needed both duties performed and honor demanded that whoever buy the field also raise up an heir, in either case no one argues that the two should be split apart.

then the kinsman's other children, if he had any, would not end up inheriting the land. Not only that, the kinsman will need to take care of both Ruth and Naomi now, which would mean two more mouths to feed. Suddenly this sweet deal is seeming less sweet. The question now becomes will the kinsman still want the field if it means sacrifice instead of profit?

Boaz here is an example of careful wisdom, or what the book of Proverbs might call "subtilty" or "prudence" (Proverbs 1:4) It's clear that he has thought through this situation carefully and worked through the best way to go about appealing to the kinsman.

Why do you think Boaz was so careful in the way he explained this situation?

In what ways do we see an example of the wisdom of Christ in the gospel plan?

The kinsman surrenders his claim (4:6-8)

Once Boaz raises the stakes and combines marrying Ruth and the land, the kinsman gets really nervous and backs out. If you pay close attention to what he says, you'll notice that he goes from saying very little to repeating himself, almost as if he's tripping over himself to get out of a bad deal. "I can't redeem it for myself! That would hurt my inheritance! You redeem it, I can't redeem it." In Hebrew he goes from a very short 2 word answer ("I redeem") to a 17 word answer. His reason is that doing so would hurt his inheritance.

We're not entirely sure in what way it would hurt his inheritance. It's possible that he had other children, and that if he married Ruth and produced an heir that heir would get some of his property, too, and would mean less for his kids. It's possible that he simply didn't want to have to pay for the land, and feeding Ruth and Naomi, only for the field to revert back to Elimelech's line. Maybe he was afraid of marrying a Moabite and producing an heir through her, thinking that would mar his family line (it is interesting that for the first time in the story, Boaz calls Ruth a Moabite). In any case, the kinsman was ready to purchase the field when it helped him, but quickly backed out when it would hurt him and possibly take away from others in his family.

How should we evaluate the kinsman here? Did he do something wrong by refusing to marry Ruth?

How are people today like this kinsman?

In what ways are the kinsman and Orpah similar? In what ways are Boaz and Ruth similar when contrasted with the kinsman and Orpah?

Both Boaz and the kinsman seem eager to seal these deal with an unusual but common custom, each one perfectly happy with the outcome. This section shows us that Boaz did everything by the book so that his acquiring of Ruth was above board. He didn't cheat or deceive everyone, and the "court" approved of his actions and stood as witnesses.

Boaz celebrates the redemption (4:9-12)

Boaz confirms his redemption (4:9-10).

Now Boaz turns the crowd and makes a speech. He proudly declares that he will acquire all of Elimelech's land, and that above that, he will also purchase (or perhaps better, "acquire") Ruth the Moabitess. Boaz has not called Ruth a Moabitess all book, but he does so twice in this chapter. The first seems to be at least a partial attempt to dissuade the kinsman from wanting to marry Ruth (4:5). The second time appears to be Boaz proudly proclaiming that he will be marrying Ruth knowing full well who she is and where she is from (Ruth 4:10).

Remember, the Moabites were not well looked upon in Scripture. To be called a "Moabite" would likely have been almost an insult, and yet all throughout the book of Ruth the author wants us to remember where Ruth comes from by calling her a Moabite (1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21). Interestingly, this is the last time Ruth is called a Moabite. While the rest of Judah couldn't quite get past Ruth's background, Boaz proudly declared that he was marrying Ruth the Moabite.

In what ways do we tend to stereotype people today? How can we learn from Boaz to see people as God sees them?

How does Boaz here reflect the character of Christ and His pride over His bride?

The elders celebrate Boaz's redemption (4:11-12).

Boaz's actions are honorable, and those around him can see that character shining through and find it worth celebrating. They wrap up this story by connecting the story of Ruth and Boaz with the stories of Rachel and Leah and with Judah and Tamar. This is a huge honor for Ruth, who as an outsider is now being set beside the great Matriarchs of Israel. The connection between Judah and Tamar is interesting, as there are several curious parallels and some pretty stark differences between the two.

In what ways is the story of Boaz and Ruth like that of Judah and Tamar? In what ways are they different?

Finally, the men of the city wish that the Lord himself bless with Boaz with children by Ruth. If Boaz is an older man without children,⁶ and if Ruth was barren for 10 years while married to Mahlon, the question remains as to whether or not this marriage will result in children. The solution is up to God. The elders recognize both Ruth and Boaz have acted worthily, but ultimately it is the Lord who builds a house (cf Psalm 127:1).

⁶ One question that sometimes comes up in the study of Ruth is whether Boaz had other wives and children. After all, Boaz appears to be an older man based on his comments in 3:10-11; and older, wealthy men were rarely single for very long in ancient times. Although the book of Ruth never definitively answers this question, the comments in 4:12 indicate that he did not have other children. The elders bless Boaz and pray that the Lord give Boaz seed (offspring) from *this young woman*. In other words, Ruth's child will be Boaz's child. The most natural reading of this is that Boaz has no other children, for if he did then Ruth's children would be seen as Mahlon's children and not Boaz's. But if Boaz had no children, then Ruth's children would carry on the line of both men.

In what other ways has God been active in this story, suggesting that this final issue will be answered by God?

Ruth is a short book but a powerful story. It gives us vivid characters, a twisting, turning plot, and a happy ending. But there are important lessons for us about God's dealing with disobedient children; about honor, integrity, and faithfulness; and about the kindness of God that should flow through us. In our final lesson, we will read the conclusion to this story and take some time to review the key lessons.