



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

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And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.” (*NASB, Ruth 1:22b)

Whenever you get the discussion of harvest, it is always hope filled. So even though there is this emphasis on what has been, there’s this emphasis that maybe the story’s about to change. Maybe there’s hope that is kind of captured in this idea of harvest.

Chapter 2, Verse 1:

Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, “Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor.” And she said to her, “Go my daughter.” (Ruth 2:1-2)

So, they settle in, but they have to survive; they have to eat. And so, Ruth says to Naomi, “It’s harvest time; let me go glean in the field and let me see if I can bring back something in order for us to survive.” We have this brief mention of this relative named Boaz. We kind of get the idea that he’s going to be a player, but then its kind of moves back to Ruth and Naomi.

Now you have to understand that, in these ancient cultures, for Ruth to do what Ruth was going to do was very dangerous—very dangerous! As a matter of fact, there will be an emphasis in this text over and over and over again, that there was risk in this and the need for protection. To be a young woman out in the field unprotected was very risky. Add to that, it was during the time of the judges, which was very dark and evil and violent. Add to that, she was a foreigner and she was at high risk. There is a sense that she even indicates that she is going to have to find someone “in favor of me”, or I probably won’t come home. But they had no choice; they had to survive, so Naomi says, “Go!” — a remarkable, courageous step on the part of Ruth.

From Verse 3 on, I’m going to tell you the story for the sake of time. Basically, the way the Hebrew text reads, is that Ruth just so happened to come on to the field of Boaz, the relative, and Boaz just happened to come along at that moment. Basically, what you have, is a theme that goes throughout the book: where you have the sovereignty of God and the choices we make—and they both happen concurrently. It’s really saying that God is orchestrating that Ruth would be right in this place when Boaz would be in this place, so that he would take notice of her, and so he does. He sees her; he asks who she is, and he finds out, she’s the Moabitess that came back

with Naomi, and he determines to take care of her. So, he says to Ruth, “Don’t glean in any other field.” Basically, the way this worked, is in the Ancient Near East, after the servants went through and harvested the crop, the poor were allowed to come into the field, and go in behind them, and glean whatever the leftovers were, in order to survive on those. And, if you were a generous landowner, you actually left some behind on purpose, in order to feed the poor. So that is what Ruth is asking to do. That’s what’s happening.

Only, Boaz comes along and says to Ruth, “I don’t want you to leave my field. I only want you to glean in my field and I will protect you. I have already told my servants not to touch you.” Again, the fact that is in the text tells us that there was great risk, and he is determining to protect her, in order that something bad doesn’t happen.

In Verse 10 then, Ruth responds,

Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?”

I’m an outcast; I’m not one of you—again that emphasis. Boaz responds by saying, “I know who you are, and I know what you’ve done.” And then he rehearses how faithful she’s been to Naomi, how she’s been willing to give up her own life, in order to take care of her mother-in-law, and basically admires her as a woman of integrity and character, and on that basis, he wants to take care of her.

Verse 12:

“May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full of the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.”

Now that’s a really important line. Basically, he’s asking God to bless her, that she might come under God’s wing, that she might find her refuge under Yahweh, God. It’s an imagery of a bird giving refuge to the little birds.

She responds then in Verse 13:

“I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants.”

So again, she’s acknowledging, “I’m lower than your servants; I’m an outsider; I’m an outcast . . .and yet you’ve dealt kindly with me”. Her surprise, or shock, again, is a reflection of how most of the Hebrew people would have viewed her.

Well basically, the story goes on, and she goes home, and Naomi says, “How was your day?” and she says, “This is what happened today,” and Naomi is, of course, very responsive. And for the first time in this story, Naomi kind of perks up a little bit, like maybe there is some hope, and maybe we are going to survive, and she even affirms that it’s really great that Boaz did that, because it’s very dangerous out there, and maybe he’ll protect you. So, the story in Chapter 2 basically ends that way, and that takes us through the three months of harvest.

Then in Chapter 3, Verse 1, the harvest season is over, and it moves into the next phase. Naomi's been doing some thinking, and she realizes Boaz is actually a relative, and it's possible he could function as a kinsman redeemer. What she's going to ask of Boaz is very similar to what we talked about with Judah and Tamar—that possibly, as a relative, he would father a child by Ruth to keep the family line going. So she says to Ruth, “You know, honey, you need to take a bath; you need to put on your nicest dress; you need to fix your hair; you need to put on a little make-up; you need to put on some perfume and this is what you do. You go back and, when Boaz is sleeping, you pull back the covers at his feet, and you slip in there, and you just wait. And the rest is up to Boaz and God.” Now this would seem very weird to us, but it was a custom, and you can see by the way Boaz responds, that he knew what she was asking for. So, in obedience and really again at a great risk—there was a lot of risk in doing that because the man could basically do whatever he wanted to the girl—but Naomi and Ruth both trust the integrity of Boaz and are going to carry out the plan. And that's exactly what she does. She gets herself all fixed up; she goes into the night; she finds Boaz; she pulls back the cover and slips in at his feet.

We pick up the story then at Verse 9. He wakes up in the middle of the night and he says, “Whoa!”—that's loosely translated—(laughter) —Whoa...

“Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative.”

Now, once she said, “...spread your covering...,” same Hebrew word when Boaz prayed that she would find refuge under the wings of God, this is the same phrase. She is saying, “Maybe the answer to your prayer is that you yourself would be my place of refuge, that you would be that wing of protection.” Boaz knew immediately what she was asking for, and he affirms that she is a godly woman. Rather than going out and finding a younger man and having a life, he affirms that she is doing this on behalf of her family line, on behalf of Naomi, and he affirms her for being a woman of integrity and a woman of character. However, there is a little problem. “There is a kinsman who is a closer relative and he actually has first choice, and so I'm going to have to talk to him and we'll go from there.” In his wisdom, he says, “You know, before the sun comes up, you probably need to leave or people will talk, and then I'll be in contact.” So that's what happens. She slips out; she goes back home; she relays the story to Naomi, and she says, “Boaz will do the right thing,” and that's how Chapter 3 ends.

Chapter 4 then, Boaz finds the nearest relative, and has this discussion with him. He brings the city council together to be witnesses and he says, “Okay, here's the deal. Elimelech had a piece of ground; as the closest relative you have first right of redemption. Do you want it?” And the relative says, “Yes, that sounds like a good deal; I'll take it.” And Boaz says, “Oh, by the way, it comes with a little Moabite girl and you have to take her too.” Well, the relative kind of backs up and says, “As I think about this, that's probably not the best deal in town, and I choose not to.” Now his concern is that he would lose his inheritance. That is a very legitimate concern. Part of the reason that is in the text, is to help you understand how costly this was to Boaz. Basically, he would have to pay the purchase price for the land and with that would come Ruth.

If he fathered a son through Ruth, and of course, that was the whole point, that was his obligation. Then that son would technically be in the line of Elimelech and that land would automatically revert back to Elimelech and his line. So, in other words, he would put out the money and the land for Ruth, and then end up losing the land, so he would be out the money and the land, because it would go back to Elimelech's family. And he's saying, "That could bankrupt me," and that's very realistic. And so, he says, "You know I think I'm going to pass on the deal," which allows Boaz to come up and say, "Okay, then I'm going to redeem the land, and I'm going to redeem the Moabitess." They kind of go through this ceremony; they sign the deal and, at that end of that part of the discussion, the people give a blessing, and we pick it up in Verse 13.

So, Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. (Notice, finally she is not Ruth the Moabitess. Because of this redemption, she is now part of the family and actually part of a very wealthy, influential family. So now she is just Ruth.)

So, Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went into her. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. Then the woman said to Naomi, "Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May 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." (Vs. 13-15)

Quite a remarkable statement! These women say, "God has not abandoned you; God has given you a redeemer. You thought you came back empty; you actually came back with a remarkable daughter-in-law—a woman of courage, a woman of faith, a woman of integrity. She is actually better to you than seven sons." Now understanding the ancient culture and the value of sons over daughters, this is a remarkable statement—that they would actually say this Moabitess daughter-in-law is better to you than seven sons. The book ends then with this genealogy. I'm going to just read one; there are two of them here.

Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap and became his nurse. And the 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. (Vs. 16-17)

Ruth was a woman of courage; she was a woman of character; she was a woman of integrity; she was a woman who learned to understand and walk in obedience to the God of the Hebrew people. I wonder if Ruth, on that day that she said to Naomi, "I am essentially willing to give up any chance I have at life, in order to love you and take care of you, until the day that you die," I wonder if, in that moment, she could have possibly imagined that she would be the great grandmother of the greatest king in the history of the Hebrew people, and that she would actually be found in Matthew 1, in the genealogical line of Jesus the Messiah. Quite a remarkable story!

The story of Ruth is really the story of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. It would be unfair to say Ruth just lucked out; she just stumbled into this thing. As a matter of fact, the emphasis in the text over and over again is that Ruth was a woman of character. She was a woman of integrity. She was a woman of courage. She was a woman of faith, and her journey was basically one right decision after another. There is great emphasis on the fact, that what

caused Boaz to respond as he had responded, was because he had noticed her integrity; he had noticed her character; he had noticed what kind of woman she was, and that is what drew him to do what he did for her.

There is this beautiful picture of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. It was not Ruth's fault that she was a Moabite. It was not her fault that Elimelech and Naomi left the Land of Promise. It was not her fault that these people despised her. It was not her fault, but it did create an environment where her life was a mess, and it seemed there was no hope and no future. One right decision after another was the journey to experiencing God's blessing and a whole new life. When you think of yourself as a Christian, you may even think that you know you are on God's "B" team or "C" team at best, and that's just the way it is. But what if it doesn't have to be that way? Practically speaking, how do I move from this mess to position myself, in such a way that God could bless me? That God could use me? The answer is not complicated: it's one right decision at a time. It's easy to get overwhelmed by this, but what would it mean for you today to have the courage, to have the faith, to have the character, to make right decisions today? And then, what would it mean for you to make right decisions tomorrow, and then what would it mean for you to make right decisions the day after? One day at a time. How do you move from the mess into something different? The answer is: one right decision at a time. And it starts with the right decision to pursue the kinsman redeemer. Without that, there is no hope; there is no future. Boaz is this beautiful picture of Jesus. That is the reason why they are in the family line. It is this beautiful picture of: this is the Kinsman Redeemer—the One who became one of us, to become our kinsman, in order to become our Redeemer; to take all of the junk and all of the trash and all the garbage and all the stuff, and somehow, in the midst of that, redeem us to something more, to something that God can use to change the world.

The story of Boaz and Ruth is not a business transaction. It's a love story. It's about the romance of redemption. It's interesting how many commentators just don't want to go there. They make it sound like it's kind of a business deal. Think about the text. There was a reason why Naomi said, "You need to take a bath; you need to fix yourself up a little bit; you need to put on some perfume; you need to put on your nicest dress"—because this was romantic. It wasn't sexual, but it was romantic. Boaz wasn't a machine. He was a red-blooded Hebrew man, and I'm guessing that Ruth was an attractive young Moabitess as well. As a matter of fact, he even said, "You could have picked any of these younger guys, but to honor your family, you chose me." It's a romance. It's the story of a lover pursuing a lover, which is a picture of the romance of redemption. Jesus Christ is not some sort of religious thing. It's not some sort of a business transaction, where you get your ticket to Heaven. It's a beautiful love story. It's a story of one lover pursuing another—being willing to do whatever was necessary to pursue his lover and to have you as His wife now and forever—in order that He might redeem you, in order that He might give your life, in order that He might give you what you long for, and what you've dreamed of. But it starts with us humbly submitting ourselves at the feet of Jesus and saying, "I need a redeemer; I need help; I cannot do this myself." And so, we come to the feet of Jesus and we acknowledge, "I need a redeemer." And we believe, out of love, Jesus went to the cross; He died for our sins; He was buried and rose again and offers His love, offers His life and forgiveness as a gift of His grace to redeem us, to experience the life He always intended for us.

This beautiful picture of the kinsman redeemer is so beautiful, but so scandalous that, who knows? Who knows? God may actually want to use you to change the world.

Arnie: Bryan, Ruth is the true definition of an outsider to God's people, yet God actually chose her to be an ancestor to Jesus. That means a lot to me because I used to be an outsider too.

Bryan: Right. These stories reveal God's heart and give all of his hope. We were all outsiders apart from Jesus.

Cara: You talked about the romance of redemption, and I really, really liked that definition, because Jesus actually pursued me. He wooed me and I fell in love with Him. So, having Jesus in your life is so much more than a ticket to Heaven. It's actually a love relationship.

Bryan: Yeah, that's so true. It's beautiful. I mean, you can't miss the language that we are his bride. That's full of romance. To me, to think of salvation as a ticket to Heaven, is like thinking the point of getting married is to possess a marriage license. Kind of misses the point.

Arnie: Bryan, we see Ruth coming to Boaz in the middle of the night and laying at his feet. I can't think of a more uncomfortable custom. So, can you explain this? In this day and age, how does this relate?

Bryan: Yeah. So, it is again, very odd to us, so much in these stories. It's just so foreign to our way of thinking, and people tend to want to make this so sexual. It's not really what it was. It was about honoring the family line. That's why these customs existed. Ruth was making herself available then, in a way in that culture that was very respectful, and Boaz was willing to follow up, but first had to go through the closest relative to determine if it was his place or not.

Cara: Well, laying at his feet - throughout Ruth's story, we hear her being totally humble; she is humble to her mother-in-law and humble to Boaz, and really, to God.

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. She's such an impressive woman, a selfless, humble woman. She made the choices she made really at great personal cost and at great personal risk.

Arnie: So, there's really a lot of people like Ruth and they can't help the fact that their lives are a mess. All they need is a little kindness and that's a perfect opportunity for us as Christ followers to step in.

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. So, Ruth is that story that reminds us that there's a lot of people in difficult circumstances through no choices of their own. And it's a reminder that everybody has a story. And often, hearing people's stories brings a lot of perspective and compassion toward people. I'm always wondering what people's story is behind their behavior.

Cara: Christmas is coming up. A lot of people find themselves having a hard time being joyful, because of the circumstances they're facing right now. But Ruth gives us this really beautiful example of trusting God for one decision at a time, and one step at a time. God honors that.

Bryan: Yeah, He sure does. So, Christmas is hard for many people for lots of different reasons. But again, isn't that the point? Life is painful and hope is found in the Savior of the world. I like to tell people, you can wish all day long that your story was different, but it's not different. So, what does it look like to be faithful today?