

God's hidden hand at work

Ruth 4

A Faithful Redeemer

Introduction

Love changes everything... it may sound rather soppy and sentimental. And sadly, in the experience of many it's not really true. What happened to the hippy dream of love changing the world? No for many love is a fickle thing – it's quickly found and easily lost – it may change things for a while, may change how people live. Certainly human love at its best ought to do that.

The kind of love we've seen in this book of Ruth over the last few Sunday evenings does change things. Ruth and Boaz both show their loving kindness to Naomi and it changes things. It provides hope for the hopeless and Naomi changes from a woman of bitterness to a woman full of joy. Love changes things – certainly how we live. But how we die? Well that's harder to grasp – how can love really do that?

I don't think Andrew Lloyd Webber has the answer, but the book of Ruth does. This is a book first and foremost about the loving kindness of God, a love that's often expressed through the action of his people. But ultimately expressed in his Son. It's a love that does change both how we live but amazingly how we die too. Changing our life not only in this world but in the world to come. This love is all about redemption. And the purpose of redemption is to change people for eternity, not simply for a lifetime. We'll see that fleshed out as we look first at...

1. A Faithful Redeemer (4:1-13)

All's gone well so far hasn't it? Ruth and Boaz have met, she's proposed and he's accepted. End of story. Not quite. Just have a look back to 3:12 where Boaz says, "*although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I.*" The KR had both the privilege and the responsibility of buying the land from a member of the family to save them from debt and keep the land in the family. And for the last couple of chapters Boaz has looked just the man for the job, but now we discover there's someone else at the head of the queue.

So chapter 4 finds us at the gate with Boaz, the city elders and this new kinsman redeemer. Verse 3

'Boaz said to the KR, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it do so. But if you will not, tell me, so that I will know. For no-one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.."

new KR sees a chance to expand his estate at little cost to himself – all he has to do is feed and provide for Naomi. Or so he thinks. But Boaz is a canny negotiator - he's deliberately left Ruth out of the equation so far. Under the laws of Levirate marriage in Deuteronomy 25 the KR had other responsibilities too. Verse 5

'Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess (1st mention), you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.' Well that changes everything for the KR. It's now a case of looking after not one but two widows. What's more he'd have to start a new family with Ruth and any land he gained would one day go to her children. He'd be worse off than before. So, verse 6, *"I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself..."*

Not for the first time we see that the cost of covenant love and faithfulness is too high a price for some to pay. It was too costly for Orpah to stay with Naomi her Mother-in-law so she went back to Moab. We could hardly blame her. It's too costly for this KR – and we can hardly blame him. But loving kindness often is costly, Boaz and Ruth both new that. It acts in love and counts the cost later. Is that your instinctive reaction? To act in love and then deal with the cost? Or are you someone who counts the cost before wondering if you can love like that? Someone in the Small Group asks for help, are you the one who's hand is in the air to help, or the one who finds that by the time you've calculated you could do it, someone else has volunteered? I know which I am all too often.

So the deal is done and a sandal is handed over from the KR to Boaz – it's a way of saying, the land is yours – you're free to walk on it. The elders bear witness and utter their blessing. You can see it in v.11

"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 Jerusalem..." In other words Boaz may the family that comes from you and Ruth be as great as the nation of Israel itself – and may you be famous because of it. It would take many generations, long after the lifetime of Boaz and Ruth, to see that blessing fulfilled – but it was and in the most astonishing way as we'll see.

So the episode ends with the birth of a son in v.13 and truly love has changed everything hasn't it? Remember the start of the story? Two penniless, husbandless, foodless and hopeless women in a foreign land and under the threat of starvation. And now what a transformation. Love has changed everything – yes the loving kindness of God's people to one another, but above all the incredible love of God for his people. He has provided for all their needs and done so much more than they could ask or imagine. It is a beautiful and incredible picture of what happens when someone takes refuge under the wings of the LORD God.

On Friday one of the church family got a job after 6 months out of work. As we were having lunch he explained how it had come about. He'd been going up to town to see a recruitment consultant and bumped into another member of the church family who had missed his train

thing led to another and he's got a job he didn't know about or even apply for. And it all began with a missed train.

He knows whose hand it's been and as he spoke I found myself saying, 'yes, that's the God of Ruth – that's our Father.' Looking after one whose come to take shelter under his wings. Of course that's not to say that God is the cosmic recruitment consultant – ultimately he is working out a far more incredible plan for us which we'll see in a minute. But it's a great reminder of his control over everything. We may not see it as we look forward into the future, but it's unmistakable as we look back even to the events of yesterday.

However bleak the circumstances, however humanly impossible, however despair inducing this God transforms the lives of all who take refuge in him. Naomi and Ruth - he met all their needs. How did he do it? By providing a redeemer. Boaz, a faithful redeemer, he pays a price, he claims his own and he builds a new family. And they all lived happily ever after. Well in some ways it is the end of the story, but in another way it's just the opening of a new chapter for God's people. You see, Boaz, the faithful redeemer points us forward to a future redeemer. And that's our second point...

2. A Future Redeemer (4:14-22)

Why is the story of Ruth here? It's a vital question and it's not simply to show us a beautiful love story or the effect of loving kindness among God's people. Neither is it simply a picture of redemption that points us to a future redeemer, though it does do all those things. It's here because it paves the way for that future redeemer. Just look where this episode leads... Verse 16

'Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the Father of David.'

I don't know what you think of family trees – some people love them, others are bored silly by them. But sometimes they reveal interesting things. One of my mother's family revealed that someone on the last Christianity Explored course was my third cousin once removed – how weird's that! When we read family trees in the Bible we often skip over them don't we. But do that with this one in Ruth and we'll miss the whole point of the story.

What this one shows us is that the union of Ruth and Boaz will produce King David. Put yourself in the shoes of the godly remnant during the time of the Judges and how do things look to you? Everything is going from bad to worse and God seems to have given up on you. But what does this story show at one of the bleakest times in Israel's history? God hasn't given up. At the very time when there is no king and anarchy reigns, God is working to produce for himself a king after his own heart.

Imagine the godly Israelite in Israel a few hundred years later reading this story as he finds himself exiled in a foreign land... it reminds you that God didn't give up – even in the

However bleak life may seem there's always hope with a God like that. A God who has both the power and the inclination to work for his people's good. But David, great King that he was, wasn't the end of the Ruth story either. Turn over to Matthew 1 and to another family tree. And here is the only place where Ruth is mentioned in the whole of the NT. There she is in v.5. Now we see the real significance of the story as the tree is traced from Abraham, to whom God made all those amazing promises all the way through Ruth, Boaz and David to Jesus in whom all the promises are fulfilled. Ruth and Boaz were just one link in the chain and every link is vital to get us to Jesus. Break any link and there's no Jesus.

Look at what God had to do to bring Ruth and Boaz together, to clear all the obstacles to their union – God has let us see just one little part of this great process in detail. So imagine what else he had to do – the people he had to introduce, the obstacles he had to remove – it blows your mind. What kind of God do we have! One who will control all of history to provide you and me with a redeemer – and that is loving kindness that I struggle to take in.

There are just four women mentioned in Matthew 1 – glance down and you'll see them – Rachel, Ruth, Bathsheeba and Mary. They're quite a quartet. A foreign prostitute, a Moabitess (enemies of God's people), an unfaithful wife and an unmarried pregnant woman. We wouldn't have done it that way! Looking at the world we often don't see God's hand at work, we don't recognise his control over events. He doesn't work as we'd expect him to or through the people we might choose. But then he never has done has he?

Yet we can see where everything he does is heading – to Jesus. To bring him into the world, to bring people to know him, to make people more like him and one day to present us to him. Jesus, my redeemer. He became our kinsman by becoming a man in order that he might become our kinsman redeemer. Listen to Galatians 4:4-5

'When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.'

Remember what Boaz did as Redeemer, he paid a price, he claimed his own, he built a family. And that's just what Jesus our redeemer did, which is amazing given the cost to him. He might have looked at the cost of loving kindness and like Orpah or the other KR turned from it – he was tempted to do that in the garden as he saw that it would cost him everything. But he didn't turn from it – and because he didn't he has freed me from my sin and the just punishment I deserved.

'There is a redeemer, Jesus God's own Son, precious Lamb of God Messiah, Holy One...'

He has claimed me as his own, he has brought me into his family just as he's brought you, and you and you – he's building it member by member. God brought these two, Boaz and Ruth, together hundreds of years ago so that in Jesus he might bring us together with him. He has not left us helpless and hopeless but by his love he has changed everything – he has changed how we live and he has changed how we will die. He wants us to see exactly what

Conclusion

Well it's time to draw things to a close as we end this little series in Ruth. It's a book that has shown us wonderfully the CONTROL of God – working away in all things, often unseen and unnoticed but accomplishing his purposes in his people, through his Son. And in a world every bit as unsettled and unstable as the time of the Judges that gives you and me great confidence. Nothing is beyond his control or out of his reach.

It's a book which has shown us his CONSTANCY... God never abandons his people. He may discipline us, rebuke us, allow us to suffer but he will never abandon us. And to people who often seem to stumble in our faith and turn from him, there's great comfort in knowing his constancy.

But above all it's a book which has shown us his COMPASSION... His compassion for his people, willing to display his loving kindness even when it cost him the death of his own son to do so. Willing to do that not only for his people, Jews like Boaz and Naomi, but for his enemies like Ruth the Moabitess. And in seeing that loving kindness, receiving it from him, being brought into his family there is great security.

As Naomi held the baby in her arms the women said to her, "Praise the LORD who has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer." How much more do our hearts leap for joy as we say "praise the LORD who has not left us without the LORD Jesus."