

What do you do when you've got a wife and two kids to support and you just can't afford to take care of them? Well intentioned people might tell you, "Just trust God!" But what does it look like when the credit card is adding up, bills are getting harder and harder to pay, housing is becoming unaffordable, and the economy has been turned upside down because of destruction?

For many people today, trusting God sounds very lovely but impractical. They've got bills to pay. They've got a family to feed. They've got to find a job and just make ends meet. And if there's anything that 2021 should teach us, most of us have lived with minimal impacts from the disruption that has thrown much of the world back into deep poverty and despair.

While great strides had been made through globalization to lift people out of poverty, the impact of Covid has turned our world upside down. Globalization is out. Nationalism is in. The wealthy are getting wealthier. The haves have access to vaccines and access to online work; the have-nots lost their jobs, their health care is tenuous, and their access to vaccines is limited. Talking about trusting God sounds like it's impractical. But what people need is to know how profound God's redeeming work is.

The book of Ruth is about a man whose wife and two kids are in this kind of situation. Trusting God just didn't seem practical. But God's redemption is incredibly practical, and the book of Ruth helps us to see how God's redemptive work is far more profound than we could imagine. So what does redemption look like?

### **Return to the Lord**

As the book of Ruth begins, we meet the family of Elimelech. He, along with his wife Naomi and two sons, Chilion and Mahlon, leave Bethlehem because of a famine. Setting out, they go to the land of Moab, the place of their enemies. We are told that this story is during the time of the judges, a time where everyone is doing their own thing: worshipping idols, hiring their own priests for personal religion, and forgetting God.

The results of people forgetting God have been devastating: Elimelech and his family have to leave Bethlehem, the house of bread, because there is no bread. The curses of Deuteronomy have come upon Israel. To survive, Elimelech, whose name means "My God is King" abandons the Lord his king, leaving his good land and going to the land of his enemies.

The Moabites had been a thorn in Israel's side for generations. They had originated as a people from an incestuous relationship from Lot (Gen. 19) and they were notorious idol worshippers (Numb. 25:1-5). The Moabites had tried to curse Israel (Deut. 23:3-6) and had oppressed Israel (Judg. 3:12, 30). So Elimelech's move to Moab is more than a search for bread – he has forgotten God as his King, and dies in Moab.

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May 9, 2021

But things are no better in Moab. His sons do not follow the Lord and they marry Moabite women. And in due course, Mr. Mahlon (or Mr. Sickly) and Mr. Chilion (Mr. Wasting Away) die, leaving their mother and Moabite wives as widows, helpless and alone.

And in a moment of reckoning, Elimelech's wife, Naomi, comes to her senses. She's been like a prodigal, and having lost everything realizes that it would be better to go back to the house of bread. But all of her sweetness and pleasantness has left her – hardships have made her hard and bitter. She can't be called "Naomi the pleasant" any longer; she is "Mara the bitter." She's felt God's hand is against her (1:13, 20).

Yet in her bitterness, the verb that comes up repeatedly in this chapter is "to go back." The reasons Naomi goes back are practical – she hears that there is bread again in the house of bread. She doesn't want her daughter-in-laws to be impacted by her decision, so she tells them that she can't give them husbands and care for them. Her one daughter-in-law turns back to her people and her gods; but Ruth makes a profound statement:

"But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you" (1:16-17).

The reasons people come back to the Lord are often mixed and confusing. They may have suffered great loss and be looking for God to fill a need. People may realize how much they have wandered. Or it may be out of sheer practicality. But the Lord knows how to draw people to himself. And what is remarkable is how a woman like Ruth can leave her people, her gods, and her land, and turn to the Lord in a time of need. Ruth is a devoted woman, a woman of loyalty and character, and she is a widow, a sojourner, a stranger, now orphaned from her homeland.

But God looks out for the widow and orphan, the sojourner and the stranger. And he calls his people to do the same, because God is a redeeming God, a God who rescues his people out of all their troubles.

### **Seek and Find the Kindness of the Lord**

As chapter 2 opens, what we find is that there is bread again in the house of bread. And a noble and good man, Boaz, a relative of Elimelech's, is harvesting. When Ruth just "happens" (v. 3) to stumble into Boaz's field, he's not like other men. He doesn't know Ruth, but he knows how to respect women. He wants his workers to look out for her. He wants them to protect her and make sure her value as a woman is upheld.

Ruth and Naomi are looking for grace (or “favour”); and what they find is surprising grace. What seemed like a ‘chance’ encounter is actually an act of divine providence: while Ruth and Naomi are seeking kindness, what has found them has been the God of providence. Boaz hears of Ruth’s noble character – she’s a Proverbs 31 woman par excellence – and he sees that she has abandoned everything. He can’t help but say to her that he desires the Lord’s wing to cover her (2:12).

And following the commands of the Lord, Boaz goes beyond what the law requires. He doesn’t merely allow Ruth to pick from the edges of the field; he instructs the workers to leave extra. Here he shows extraordinary kindness – to a woman from an enemy people, Boaz showers a kindness that looks a lot like what the Lord does: he showers his lovingkindness on people who are his enemies.

When Ruth reports this news to Naomi, her bitterness suddenly departs. She sees the kindness of the Lord! Boaz is an extended family member, and according to the OT laws, an extended family member could choose to help out another who had lost their land because of debt. Leviticus 25:25 allowed a family member to redeem their land. And the second act of kindness that the law permitted was to care for a widow who had no children. In Deuteronomy 25:5-10, the law said that if a man died without children, a close family member could marry the widow, care for her, and provide children to ensure that she would not be left without any social security. In this way, the OT law was abundantly generous. It showered kindness on the widow and the orphan, the sojourner and the stranger.

But faith is required! Naomi came up with a plan; Ruth carried it out. Since Boaz was spending long days in the harvest and threshing by night, Ruth would go down to where Boaz was sleeping. As Boaz slept, Ruth lay down by his feet. When Boaz stirred, wondering who was there, Ruth said, “I am your servant Ruth. Spread your garment over me, since you are my redeemer.” In other words, Ruth was saying, “Would you marry me?” She was proposing! She was taking the initiative of faith! And just as Boaz had prayed that Ruth would find shelter under the wings of the Lord, Boaz now understands that he is the means of that blessing. To put Ruth under his garment is to cover her with his wing; to marry her, to fulfill the law, and to show her the lovingkindness of the Lord.

God’s lovingkindness abounds; it often takes faith to see it. In the midst of hard days, God’s kindness is evident

### **Be Redeemed and Be Redeeming**

But there was one issue that Boaz had to deal with: a closer relative than he could help out Ruth and Naomi, but he hadn’t. So at the city business district, Boaz met this man to talk with him. Full of respect and honour, Boaz asked the man if he had heard that the Elimelech farm was up for sale, and he could purchase it. “Oh yes! It’ll be a great piece of land! I’ll make some

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good money from it!” the man replied. But Boaz wanted to make sure the man understood that there would be some responsibilities that came with the farm: “If you buy it, you realize you need to support the two widows. You can’t just have the blessings without the responsibilities!”

When the man realized that this would be too costly for him, he willingly let Boaz take the farm and responsibilities. With a shake of a sandal like a contract being signed, Boaz willingly took purchased the farm that had been neglected for a decade, and he took Ruth as his wife.

And here is what redemption does: Redemption pays the price for another so that their burdens are lifted and they are cared for. The OT law was intended to display love for God and for neighbour, and Boaz willingly paid the price to redeem his relative, to marry a widow, to welcome a stranger, to make a destitute woman his delight.

And all of this is intended to help us...

### **See the Glory of Christ**

As the story ends, what we see is a beautiful picture of redemption. Boaz acted as a family redeemer, a blood-relative of someone in need, willing and able to pay the price. In lovingkindness, he not only welcomed Ruth to Bethlehem, but he showered her with favour and grace, showing lovingkindness beyond what the law required.

But this story ends with a twist. While Elimelech, a man whose name meant “My God is King” acted like God wasn’t his king, that did not stop God from being king over his people. As Ruth gives birth to a child, we are told that they had a son, whose name was Obed. And Obed was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, Israel’s greatest king. And from this line would come another descendant of Bethlehem, a greater king – your king and my king.

Another man would come from Bethlehem, a man whose honour has never been surpassed. Born to the human family, God came in Christ the King, identifying as a part of the human race to pay the price, he redeemed us. Peter tells us that “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pe. 1:18-19a).

And what Ruth experienced is what every widow and orphan, every sojourner and stranger needs: grace. There is grace for the Moabite who returns to the Lord. There is grace for the rebel who has walked away from God. There is lovingkindness for all who seek the Lord. And it is found in Jesus Christ.

What looked like a story of bitter suffering for Naomi turned out to be part of God’s redeeming plan for the world. A bitter providence – hardship, sufferings, and trials – were not wasted. And what looked like a man just doing a little good by going beyond what the law required, Boaz

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showed the world that it is acts of simple faith that God loves to use to display his glory. And in a greater act of redemption, Christ went beyond what the law required, giving us his very life to redeem us from all of our sin and death.

But Christ's redemption doesn't stop. He uses people like Boaz, and he uses people like you and me. He calls us as men to respect women, honour them, treat them as those who are full of dignity as the image bearers of God. He calls us to defend the widow and orphan, the sojourner and stranger. Because as we work for the good of those who suffer around us, we display the redemption of Christ. We regard no one according to their gender or economic status or race; we regard people as people made in the image of God, needing to see that there is a favour for them. And as we show that favour and grace, we pray that they would hear our words connected to our actions showing that redemption is for everyone, for Christ is our Redeemer, our Saviour, and our King.