

“Reversal to Restoration”

Then the women 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!” (Ruth 4:14-15).

A reversal occurs when things don't go according to our plans, and whether it's in our own family or in the families we're connected to through church, school, or work, all of our families share the humbling reality of reversal. While each story is distinct and different from another, every reversal brings struggles with sin, shame, and pain. Poor choices, unexpected illnesses, the loss of loved ones; these are common examples of the reversals that hit our lives. And today, in the story of Ruth, we are reminded that our stories of reversals relate well to the families that came before us. This weekend, Ruth's story reveals to us that we're not alone as we face reversals. But it's not just that Ruth faced reversals like we do. It's that Ruth's God, Naomi's God, and our God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – chose to know the reversals of this life personally, and He remains with us in our reversals right now. Let's listen to the story of reversal from Ruth 1...

This woman's name is Carol Salge. Some of you know Carol and, as you can tell from the clip, Carol is a lifelong member of Emmanuel. She grew up in a simple house behind the church on Rockhill Street and lived in this childhood home for most of her life. You can tell from her smile when she talks about Emmanuel that this has been a special place for her; but there's a mountain of meaning behind that simple smile.

Carol's mom was Doris, and as Carol said, Doris was a single woman who earned a living by working at General Electric. A single working woman in the 1950s was challenging enough, but the real reversal in Doris's life came in the form of an unplanned pregnancy. Not only did Doris struggle with the scorn of her co-workers, but even the people she turned to for help quickly showed their true colors.

The reversals in Naomi and Ruth's lives are weighty. Naomi lost her husband, two sons, and her life support, all while in a foreign land. Ruth lost her husband, her brother-in-law, and her life support. Naomi is bitter. Bitter with her current situation and likely, bitter with God. Ruth also has every reason to be bitter, and yet, by God's grace, she chooses to remain loyal to Naomi and Naomi's God. Ruth's loyalty in the face of such reversals receives tremendous blessing from the Lord as He uses her to renew Naomi's hope and purpose. In a way that only God can do, this story of reversal shifts into a story of renewal. As the Lord continues to walk with Ruth and Naomi, He demonstrates that no reversal is outside His power to deliver renewal. Listen now to this story of renewal unfold in Ruth 2...

Today, we are telling the story of “family.” For many of us, family was always a given. We were raised in homes where we were supported, and when we met with reversals, we had loving parents who provided the things we needed to recover and thrive. But the blessing of a natural family that helps carry burdens and overcome obstacles isn't a reality for everyone.

In Psalm 68, David praises God with the proclamation that He is the “Father of the fatherless, and protector of the widow,” and that He, “settles the solitary in families” (Psalm 68:5-6). And, when the Church is doing what the Church is supposed to do, that is exactly what happens.

Renewal is a powerful thing. At a time when many of the people in Doris Salge's life had turned their backs on her, the church stepped up and stepped in to walk with her as she raised her baby girl. In ways that were both subtle and sublime, Emmanuel worked to meet the needs of a single mother, but more important than the physical and financial help was the hope these simple acts of love conveyed.

Reversal to renewal is encouraging, but it's still a long way from restoration. Ruth brought renewal to Naomi, and Boaz brought renewal to Ruth and Naomi. Ultimately, it's the Lord working this renewal, but His work isn't complete. The Lord is at work to provide more than a lifting up of Naomi and Ruth's spirits; He's also at work to redeem them. Boaz is the Lord's redeeming agent. According to the laws the Lord gave to Moses,

Boaz was a close relative of Naomi's husband, Elimelech, whose duty was to protect the land given to Elimelech from being lost from the family forever. This act of protection was called redemption. Boaz's purchasing of his relative, Elimelech's, land was his only legal role as redeemer, but Boaz was willing to go above and beyond the letter of the Law. Boaz was also willing to redeem Naomi and Ruth by marrying Ruth and counting their future son as part of Elimelech's family – someone to replace the sons Naomi had lost. Boaz chose to sacrifice his own right to a firstborn heir and give that gift to Naomi and Ruth. Boaz's promise and commitment to redeem went above and beyond the call, bringing a family from fading into oblivion to new life and a promising future. Let's listen to God's work of redemption through Boaz in Ruth 3.

In his book, "Life Together," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that, "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ." And that, "in Jesus Christ, we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity" (Life Together, 21). We meet each other as sinners in need of forgiveness, and by God's grace, the job of the church is to deliver this forgiveness in the present, always with the eternal in view. Bonhoeffer continues, "God has put this Word (of forgiveness) into the mouth of (a person) in order that it may be communicated to other (people)... Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him...and that clarifies the goal of all Christian community: (We) meet each other as bringers of the message of salvation" (Life Together, 22-23).

To me, this is what "family" means. We are in this community of faith because God has brought us together, and by His work and will, we share a salvation story and we sing a redemption song. Forgiveness is our business, and when we do the job of the Church, redemption becomes a reality and God's family grows.

The reality of redemption means future restoration. The reversals that left Naomi bitter weren't things that God would let define her permanently. By His grace and care, she was to be defined by her daughter-in-law and her grandson. Naomi wouldn't have to be known for what she lost but for what she was given. Naomi was literally connected to God's family, as her grandson would be part of Jesus' lineage. Boaz and Ruth's marriage and their son Obed brought things full circle from bitterness to blessing, from reversal to restoration. The loyalty and faithfulness of Ruth to Naomi, and the loyalty and faithfulness of Boaz to Ruth and Naomi, flow from Naomi's God, the God of Israel, whose loyalty and faithfulness preserved a promise of the Messiah and restoration of His people. Listen now to this story of restoration in Ruth 4.

Maybe the only story of family better to tell than Ruth's story is Jesus' story. Honestly, Ruth's story foreshadows Jesus' story, and not merely because they're relatives. Ruth's story of reversal, renewal, redemption, and restoration is Jesus' story as well. In the greatest of reversals, Jesus didn't cling to His rights, honors, and privileges as God Almighty, but humbled Himself to cling to the humanity of His creation. Taking on flesh and blood, He renewed the hope of God's people, revealing to them that God hadn't forgotten them, but personally was fulfilling the promises made by the prophets of old. And this renewal He took to the cross, fulfilling His promise to redeem His people. Above and beyond His duty and call, Jesus lived, suffered, and died so that the reversals that sin, Satan, and death brought upon all of humanity might not define His people permanently. Rising from the grave, Jesus sealed His people's redemption in victory and now points His people forward to the future promise of restoration. His resurrection proclaims that sin, Satan, and death's days are numbered, and their impact will be removed. One day, every tear will be wiped away, death will be no more, mourning, crying, and pain will be gone, and He will dwell among His people forever.

Dear children of God, our story is Jesus' story. Like the story of Ruth pointed to Jesus' story, our stories also point to Jesus. The same God who walked with Naomi and Ruth from reversal to restoration walks with us now. We see this reality in Doris and Carol's story, and by His grace, we get to see it in ours as well. The reversals you've faced, are facing, or will face are no match for the God who can and does transform these stories into ones of renewal, redemption, and restoration. In fact, it's already started because God has connected us to Jesus' death and resurrection. And by God's grace, we will see this amazing work completed when we all reside in heaven someday as God's family from all time and places. We truly have the best story to tell, thanks be to God. Amen.