

Saving the Sojourner Ruth 2:8-13

I have a friend named Kevin who is a pastor who likes the story Ruth because he can relate to it.

When he was in his early 20's his Dad died suddenly. And he and his mother were left alone. They were well cared for even after he died, but he struggled with something else—having a purpose and being separated from God. He didn't believe that he could ever measure up to what his Dad had been and God seemed so far away. He went far from home for college and then moved to New York where he lived a directionless, selfish life as a well-paid tutor for teenagers from elite families trying to get into Ivy League schools. And there, despite being taught to love Jesus, he had almost nothing to do with him and wondered how anyone could really believe in God. But he was never really comfortable in that life and it felt like he had left his home behind. It felt like something was severely missing from his life and he had no idea how to get it back. And although he didn't know it and could not name it, he was dead in his sin and pain and desperate for a Redeemer.

And we see this in the life of Ruth and Naomi.

When we left Ruth last week, Ruth had pledged her absolute devotion and faithfulness to her mother-in-law—a woman named Naomi. Ruth told her mother-in-law, where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Ruth told her that nothing short of death would separate the two of them.

And this was significant for two reasons. First, they were both widows and were entirely alone in the world. Naomi's husband died about a decade earlier. And then Ruth's husband and Naomi's son died too—leaving the two women without any way to care for themselves. Second, it was significant because Naomi and Ruth were from different nations. Ruth was from a country called Moab, just east of Israel, where Naomi's family had emigrated to escape famine in their native city of Bethlehem in Israel. But one day Naomi heard that the famine was over so she determined to return to her homeland where there was family who could possibly care for her. And we would expect Ruth to stay in Moab and return to her own family. In fact, Naomi plead with her to do just that. But Ruth refused saying, "I am with you until one of us dies."

It is about a 50-mile journey from Moab to Bethlehem, traveling through mountainous, rugged terrain. It would have taken Ruth and Naomi at least a week—especially carrying whatever they owned. And when they arrived in Bethlehem, which was a small village at the time with a population of maybe a few hundred, everyone noticed and came out to greet them.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.

Ruth 1:19-21

Naomi could not help but share her pain—even to the extent that let her pain define her to the point of changing her name.

In Hebrew, Naomi means blessed. Mara means bitter. Naomi said, “I used to be blessed but now just call me bitter.” And I apologize to anyone named Mara who is here today or watching on-line, if I have ruined your name.

Have you ever known someone who just cannot help but share their pain? They can’t stop talking about it or even causing others pain? Have you ever been that person? There is something so wrong, so unjust, so hurtful that it cannot just be laid aside or moved beyond. It just pours out of them.

Unresolved pain is contagious as a virus.

A couple of weeks ago, I took three of our kids shopping. It was a day when it was pouring down rain. We were at the outlet mall running from shelter to shelter. We had driven a long way and the one store I had gone there for was closed—announced with a handwritten note on a piece of notebook paper stuck in the window. We went to the Disney store where I bought a stuffed cat for my six-year-old daughter. And since it was pouring down rain, I asked for sack. And the very friendly, smiling, pleasant Disney store manager told me “We’re going green. A sack is a \$1.50”. And I replied, “Are you going green or are you making green?” I shared my pain with that very nice lady carrying out a company policy.

That’s a mild way I have shared my pain.

Biblically speaking, sin functions a lot like pain. Pain is always the fruit, either directly or indirectly, of sin. Someone sins against us. Its unjust and it causes pain. We bring pain into our own life through sin. Sin has cursed and broken God’s world that He made very good and brought death and pain into it.

Naomi was overwhelmed by her pain, she let it define her life—making it bitter. And that’s not to minimize her pain because she certainly endured terrible, terrible loss. But Naomi was helpless in the face of her overwhelming pain just like we are helpless in the face of our sin. Naomi’s pain had left her as good as dead—just like we are dead in our sin.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world.

Ephesians 2:1

And when we are dead, we need a Redeemer. We need someone to give us new life, a hope and a future. That is how Ruth served her Mother-in-Law.

And in this we see a picture of Jesus.

The Bible is not mainly a book of advice telling us what do. It is mainly a book of redemption telling us what God has done. Jesus is on every page of the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation. Everything in the Bible points toward Jesus and the salvation He earned for us. It is one long story of what God has done for us and His dogged, persistent unrelenting pursuit of you and me—over our sin, over and shortcomings, despite our objections and attempts to escape His love.

Often, when we read stories like Ruth’s, we see it merely as litany of helpful example to follow and emulate. And that’s not bad of course but its not the most important thing Ruth has to show us. Ruth’s story is really a series of pictures of the Gospel, showing us how Jesus loves us and is our Redeemer. If we understand Ruth fully, it is not a book of advice telling us what to do but a book of redemption telling us what Jesus has done.

When we are dead in our sin, Jesus redeems us and gives us new life.

Similar to what Ruth did for Naomi.

Naomi had a relative, a cousin--part of the same family clan--named Boaz. And the Bible uses one word to describe Boaz—a word it uses sparingly. It is a word that suggests that someone has a heart after God, a character a lot like the Lord's. The Hebrew word is ***gibbor***. The English Standard Version translates *gibbor* as worthy. The King James Version translates *gibbor* as a mighty man of wealth. The New International Version says a man of standing. But that only starts to get at it. *Gibbor* when it is talking about a man means **manly, vigorous, hero, virtuous, champion, strong, mighty—even lord**. Imagine James Bond but with morals and filled with the fruits of the Spirit and rich. If you are a parent, *gibbor* is what you want your kids to be. If you are a, *gibbor* is what you wish you could be.

Boaz was wealthy and good, and he loved the Lord. As his men worked in the field, he would shout out to them “The Lord be with you,” and his men would shout back, “The Lord bless you.” Boaz was a *gibbor* and loved God so much that he followed his law even in the little things—things that may not make a lot of sense to some of us. One of those laws said:

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 23:22

That's how Boaz ran his farm. He did not harvest his field all the way to the edge and he left the gleanings behind for the poor to and the stranger to gather. Ruth did not live in Bethlehem very long before she learned how this *gibbor* man ran his barley farm. So she asked Naomi to go into the Boaz's field and glean among the ears of grain.

What is gleaning? We might not even know. **(insert painting)** When I was in high school and desperate to make money I spent a couple of days gleaning ears of corn, walking in the field after the combine came through, picking up ears of feed corn that the machine missed and tossing them in the back of an old truck. It wasn't easy work bending over thousands of time in a day and the only thing that made it tolerable was the fact it was a cool late October day. I think I made about \$20 a day and I could have spent it all on a chiropractor because my back was sore having bent over maybe a couple thousand times. Sometime around mid-April, Ruth would have walked through the field picking up stray pieces of barley, missed by the reapers who came through in a big group.

Ruth told Naomi:

Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him (Boaz) in whose sight I shall find favor.

Ruth 2:2

So Ruth went to work and even though Naomi had worked in the fields when they were in Moab, she stayed home—despite their dire circumstances. It simply underscores the point that Naomi needed Ruth to survive. Without Ruth, Naomi was as good as dead.

So Ruth—the foreign, destitute, penniless, widow went alone to glean in Boaz's field.

And Boaz took notice. And he told Ruth told her only to glean in his field, with his people, in his community and he would make sure she was protected and taken care from anyone who might be tempted to harm a vulnerable, foreign, widow. He said she could drink from his wells. But that's far from all Boaz did for Ruth. Boaz was generous with Ruth.

And at mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

Ruth 2:14-15

Boaz made Ruth one of his own. He made her part of his community—even though she was a foreigner, a stranger from a land God's people were told to have nothing do with, Ruth was overwhelmed by Boaz's generosity, favor and grace. She bowed down low, putting her face on the ground and ask Boaz why he was showing her such compassion and kindness. And Boaz gave her a very specific reason—actually two reasons.

But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"

Ruth 2:11-12

Ruth earned Boaz's favor because of the way she cared for her mother-in-law who could give her nothing and for her dependence and reliance on the Lord. And you may remember from last week this is the very thing Ruth promised her mother-in-law she would do—that where Naomi went, Ruth would go and where Naomi lived, Ruth would live, that Naomi's people would be Ruth's people and that she would be devoted to and honor and worship Naomi's God.

Ruth worked all day and returned to Naomi that night in Bethlehem, bringing home the leftovers of her meal and about two weeks supply of barley—which was used to make bread and soup to live on. During this time in Israel about 3/5 of the calories of the poor came from barley. So, to borrow an expression, barley was life. If you had barley, you could survive. And Ruth continued to glean in Boaz's field throughout the rest of the barley harvest and continued through the wheat harvest—which would have been about 3 months—enough time for Boaz to provide plenty of resources for Naomi and Ruth and move them out of immediate danger.

And it was all Ruth's work—not unlike Jesus' work for us.

Naomi was unable to help herself. She was so overwhelmed by her pain, that she was left broken and powerless—without Ruth she would have been dead. This is a lot like us who are left broken and powerless in our sin, just like Ephesians tells us—we're dead in our sin. There is nothing we can do.

Ruth loved Naomi and devoted herself fully to her—pledging to never leave her or forsake her and be absolutely present in her life. The Biblical term for this is incarnate—meaning in the flesh. Ruth was not present through warm wishes or good thoughts or even prayer from afar. Ruth was present in Naomi’s life in the flesh. She was with her wherever she went.

This is a lot like what Jesus does for us.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

This is also what Jesus meant by His promise:

I will never leave or forsake you.

Hebrews 13:5

And Jesus doesn’t unite Himself to us because we are worthy or deserving or even because we have anything we can offer Jesus. Jesus doesn’t need anything from us. Remember, we’re like Naomi, we have nothing to offer. We are dead in our sin and trespasses. We are far a *gibbor* woman or a *gibbor* man, we are unworthy. In fact, Paul’s letter to the Romans puts it like this summarizing the Old Testament on just how unworthy and broken by sin we are:

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Romans 3:10-18

Our only hope is for a redeemer. Our only hope is for someone to love us and unite themselves to us in our sinful condition, in spite of who we are, and lift us out of it.

How does happen?

Boaz took care of Ruth, provided for her, because of the way she cared for her mother-in-law who could give her nothing and for her dependence and reliance on the Lord. Naomi earned Boaz’s care and provision because of the way she lived. And Boaz provided for her in such abundance that she was able to care for herself and for Naomi.

This, again, points us to Jesus.

By carrying out the law perfectly, through loving God with all His heart, mind and strength and loving His neighbor as Himself, living a sinless life, a life of perfect obedience,

Jesus did what we cannot do. He overcame sin and earned unity with God and eternal life for any who want it.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous...so that grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 5:18-29

Just as Naomi, who was dead in her grief and pain, received sustenance and provision and care and even life through Ruth's work, we, who are dead in our sin and trespasses, are made right with God and righteous and we receive eternal life through Jesus' work. We are justified, which simply means set right with God, not through anything we have done, but through what Jesus has done.

The 19th Century Princeton professor of theology Charles Hodge put it like this:

We are not justified on account of our faith or considered virtuous or holy. Nor are our works the ground of our justification. Nothing done by us or wrought in us satisfies the demands of God's justice. The ground of justification is the righteousness of Christ, active and passive, including His perfect obedience to the law as a covenant and His enduring the penalty of the law in our stead and our behalf.

In other words, Jesus has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. We were dead in our sin and Jesus, through His obedience, has given us new life.

He is our Redeemer who unites Himself to us, even when we are dead in our sin, and through His sinless perfection, give us new life.

My pastor friend, Kevin, the one-time tutor received a phone call out of the blue. It was from a friend of his father's, a man he had never met. In fact, the first time the man called, my friend didn't even call him back. But the man was persistent. And when they finally spoke, the stranger he had never met, invited him to come and stay at their beach home with he and his wife for a weekend, a week, or even longer. The man said that my friend's deceased father, who had been a well-known pastor, had meant so much to him that he wanted to return the favor. My friend thought he was crazy and he quickly declined. Eventually, he spoke to his mother and shared this wild story and she said "I think you need to go. Maybe it will just a nice vacation." But she knew God was doing something greater.

And with not a little hesitancy and uncertainty, he went and he stayed at their beach house anticipating that he would turn around and go back to New York right away.

But that's not what happened. He stayed with them and the Holy Spirit changed his life.

The man and woman spent the days and nights simply showing Kevin Jesus. They served him at every turn. They listened and talked for hours on end. They let Kevin share the unresolved pain of his father's death. These strangers simply loved him as he was, demonstrating the Kingdom of God and showing Him Jesus, His Redeemer. He left their home changed. The Holy Spirit was alive in him in a way that He never was before.

And for years, the man kept up with Kevin, supporting, loving, encouraging, accepting, receiving, and standing in the gap for him.

My friends, if you can do this for someone, anyone, simply, in the power of the Holy Spirit, meet them in their pain and sin, enter into their dead life, and make their struggle, their pain, their battle yours, I pray you do. There is no higher calling.

But know this.

Jesus has already done that for you. Remember, the Bible is one not a book of advice telling you what you need to do. It is a story of redemption declaring what Jesus has already done for you. And if you want to experience the new life Jesus has already won for you, your first step is to simply ask Him to turn the death of your sin into new life, to enter into your desperate circumstances and stay with you, to give you the righteousness, the eternity He has earned through His sinless perfection and obedience.

Are you ready to ask Jesus to join you? To live where you live, go where you go, to never leave you? Are you ready to be part of His people and know Him as God?

Lets pray for that now.