

## **The Restoration of Redemption**

### **Ruth 4:13-17**

When we left Boaz and Ruth last time, they had experienced a tender moment, where Ruth let Boaz know that she would like for him to redeem her. By asking Boaz to ‘redeem’ her, Ruth was asking Boaz to fulfill the place and office of her husband who had died, probably less than a year before and maybe only a month before. A lot in this story depends upon our understanding the concept of redemption. We think of redemption as saving someone or something from a fate they don’t deserve or even righting a wrong. And that’s part of it. But redemption for the Jewish people, God’s people, was a part of the law. It detailed in the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 25 and it is a legal process by which a person who has fallen into poverty or debt is delivered from it by their closest relative. The closer the relative, the greater the obligation they had to redeem to their relative. Leviticus 25:25 commands:

**If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold.**

There are two important ideas underlying this. First, there is the idea that no one should live as a slave, either legally or practically—like a slave, because God set His people free from slavery in Egypt. The second idea is the importance of the land. God gave His people land to live on, to provide for themselves and their families, to experience His blessing.

But underlying these two important ideas is a truly foundational idea—one of the most foundational ideas in all the Bible and a principle that goes right to the heart of God—covenant. The Lord works through covenants. A covenant is an agreement whose guarantee is the character of the person making it and nothing else—even the response of the party with whom you are making the covenant. So, covenants are not entered into lightly or often. An agreement, even a promise, can be impacted by circumstances or the response of the other party. I may promise to take my kids to see a movie one afternoon, but there is a tornado or a snowstorm that stops us from going. I may agree to pay someone for some work on my house but the work they do is incomplete or they get too busy to do the work and so I don’t pay until the work is done. The intent of a covenant is to be unbreakable and of course with God—whose character is perfect and unchanging, a covenant is just that.

The principle of redemption is grounded in the idea of covenant. And God invites us into a covenant relationship with Him through Jesus that redeems us, rescues from sin and death. And God also invites us to participate in the redemption of the world and being His instrument of redemption in the lives of other people through the covenants we make and keep. The most well-known of these covenants, of course, is marriage which Malachi Chapter 3 tells the purpose—to make ‘godly offspring’, literally to spread the seed of the Divine amidst a broken creation.

And this tells us so much about covenants and their purpose. A covenant is God's instrument for redemption, for redeeming this world from the power of sin and death. The Word of God becoming flesh, God becoming a human being, Jesus of Nazareth is the ultimate covenant. Jesus is Emmanuel, which means God with us. God is with His children, meaning followers of Jesus, no matter what. We cannot outrun God. We cannot hide from God. We cannot discourage or dissuade God. We're not that powerful. Jesus' determination to love is stronger than our undying disposition to sin—even at great personal cost to Him.

That is the Gospel. And we see in Ruth and Boaz's love story another picture of the Gospel, given to us to demonstrate God's great love story for his rebellious, sinful, ungrateful and irascible people.

The day after Ruth laid at Boaz's feet in the dark of the night, on the cold and windswept stone of the threshing floor, and asked him to redeem her, Boaz headed to the city gates Bethlehem where the elders gathered and spent their days hearing the people's problems and complaints and resolving disputes. This practice went back to the time of Moses, 300 years before Ruth lived. And the practice we have of being led and ruled by elders at First Presbyterian Church goes back to these same elders. Right inside the gates of the city walls in Israel was usually a room where the elders gathered to act as judges and rulers, much like this ruin in another ancient city in Israel. **(insert picture)**

That's where Boaz went to redeem Ruth.

And very important man happened to pass by—another relative of Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, and a closer relative than even Boaz.

**Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, "Turn aside, friend; sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down.**

The Bible doesn't name this man. He remains anonymous—perhaps because he refuses to pay the price of redemption, to do what the law did not command him to do but strongly encouraged him to do and made it difficult for him not to do.

In the hearing of the elders, Boaz laid out the situation for him. Naomi has returned from the nation of Moab and she is selling the parcel of land that belonged to her dead husband. And if you buy it, these elders will see it and know that the land belongs to you. But if you don't want to buy it, Boaz said, I will buy it. And this man jumped on the deal. He saw an opportunity to acquire land and increase his wealth and standing and didn't wait. And he said, "I will redeem it," meaning he would keep the land and God's blessings of the land in his family clan.

But then Boaz told him there was a little more to the deal, that it was not just a matter of buying land but also marrying a woman—Ruth.

**Then Boaz said, “The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.” Then the redeemer said, “I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.”**

### **Ruth 4:5-6**

This man was actually closer to Ruth than Boaz but you heard his own words, he did not have the ability to be her redeemer. He couldn't do it. How many things do we turn to, that seem close to our hearts, so close to our work, our effort, our skill, our gifts, our passions that we think will bring redemption? How many things do we turn to that seem like they should work to give our life meaning and rescue us from meaningless and despair? And then we find out that these things so close to hearts have no power to redeem?

The second day of college I sat in an assembly of every freshman in the school. Standing on the stage in front of us the student government president gave a speech welcoming and encouraging all of us. From the moment, I heard him speak, I dedicated my life to someday holding that very job. I believed that if I could only get that job, my life would be perfect, redeemed. I spent my freshman, sophomore and junior year working my way up the student government ladder and then finally at the end my junior year, I was elected President—by exactly one vote. And then I set myself to work being the best President I could be. I worked hard, had good people in place, got a little lucky and we had a great year. I actually won some leadership awards and scholarships and was honored on a stage in a fancy hotel in Minneapolis next to the world famous evangelist Joni Erickson Tada, the a United States Congressman and the President of Wal Mart! Things could not have gone better. God had given me more than

But you know what, I didn't feel redeemed at all. It felt good. It was nice. I felt some measure of accomplishment. It's a nice memory. But I felt far from redeemed. I felt far from rescued from meaninglessness.

What do you we look to for redemption? What or who is near our heart? Is it work? Is it a relationship? Is it an achievement? Is it religion? Redemption, to prove ourselves worthy, to find meaning and purpose is actually the great quest of our lives but there is redemption by no other name than Jesus. His friendship with us is what redeems our broken lives.

And Jesus redeems us because He placed Himself near us and paid the price to redeem us from sin and death. Much like Boaz did for Ruth.

In the view of the elders, the other would-be redeemer and the townspeople of Bethlehem, Boaz committed himself to buy the property, and take Ruth as his wife—becoming her redeemer. And what follows in Scripture is a description of how the deal was sealed with a rather strange practice involving footwear.

I want to go into a little bit of detail here because I think it undoes a prevailing cultural myth that the Bible is against women.

**Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself," he drew off his sandal. Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day."**

#### **Ruth 4:7-10**

Again, the strongly encouraged practice when the husband of a childless woman died, was for her to be married to the next available kin.

But, if he refused, there was a shaming process for the man and the woman was released from her husband's family. And we see a shade of this described in Ruth. The entire practice is written out in Deuteronomy it was called, "**halitzah**" which means "**taking off the shoe.**"

**And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, 'I do not wish to take her,' then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him who had his sandal pulled off.'**

#### **Deuteronomy 25:7-10**

In a patriarchal culture, this practice protected a woman in three ways. First, it was strongly encouraged that the family of her dead husband continued to provide for her needs and give her a place to live. Second, the man was strongly encouraged (to the point of shaming) but not commanded, the man could refuse, like the unnamed redeemer did, rather than marry a woman against his will. This protected the woman from a man who being in a marriage with someone he either could not support or had no desire to be with. In that kind of marriage, she be a victim of abuse or simply be ignored or neglected. Third, if the man refused, the woman was allowed to maintain her dignity, the man and his family were shamed, and she was given an opportunity to begin her life anew and afresh to seek a new husband with no obligation to her former family.

The entire process was designed of course to continue the family name of the dead husband but to protect his widow too. And I know to our modern ears, it may not sound like much. But in the ancient world, there was nothing like it except among the people of God—who recognized that men AND women are created in His image.

And we see here any another aspect of God's practice of keeping covenant which is He provides not just for one person, a couple people or even a select few. Instead through His covenants and our choice to live into them, God provides new life and blessings to dozens, hundreds, even thousands and tens of thousands. I know we are tempted to believe that covenants limit us because they demand that we remain faithful to our choices and they limit our options for response. With Jesus it is never zero-sum game. It is only when we stray outside of His covenant, when we choose to stand apart from His grace and faithfulness, when we compete with people with whom should be in covenant, that we become at odds, when we get into conflict. When we live into His covenants, there are no winners and losers, God does not set us against each other. Instead, Jesus provides new life for all—buckets and buckets of new life.

And what happens with Ruth was no exception.

Remember, she was faithful to her covenant with Naomi. That's what started the story.

Boaz was faithful to the covenant of the family, to redeem the widow of a deceased family member.

And God was faithful to all of them.

**So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. 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! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.**

**Ruth 4:13-17**