

Let's pray. **Father, please would you open our eyes to see the beauty of the Redeemer. In Jesus' name, Amen.**

Who or what is your refuge? Where do you run when things get really bad? That's one of the big questions in this book of Ruth we're going to look at now.

There are four chapters, and we're going to be spending most of our time in chapter 3. But let me give you the outline of Ruth as we begin:

Chapter 1. Ruth Turns Back

Chapter 2. Ruth Shows Courage

Chapter 3. Ruth Takes Refuge

Chapter 4. Ruth Is Redeemed

So **Chapter 1, Ruth turns back.**

I'd like you to meet Naomi. She's an Israelite, married to a man called Elimelek. And when famine hits Bethlehem, he makes a bad decision and relocates his entire family, his wife and two sons, to a small town 50 miles away called Moab.

It's a bad decision because God's people were supposed to stay away from Moab. The town was named after the man Moab, who was the product of incest between Lot and his daughter. The people there worshiped a god called Chemosh the Destroyer and

they practised human sacrifice. It's really not a place you want to take the family.

And things don't go well. Elimelek dies, leaving Naomi a widow. Then their two sons further disobey God by marrying Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. And later, both their sons die, leaving Ruth and Orpah as widows.

Well ten years after arriving in Moab, Naomi hears that God has provided food for his people back in Bethlehem, and we read in chapter 1 verse 6, they prepare to *return*. Now that word "return" or "turn back" occurs multiple times in chapter 1, and it's hugely significant to the whole book of Ruth because the word translated "return" carries the sense of "repentance", to turn back, to change behavior. So this isn't just a return to Bethlehem, it's a return to God after years of suffering in Moab. It's not just a geographical turning back, it's a spiritual u-turn.

But Naomi says to her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, listen, for your own protection, you should stay in Moab.... my life is effectively over. No husband, no sons, no heirs, and that means no future for me. My family name is about to be obliterated from the pages of history. You should go home to your mothers, get remarried. Plus, you're Moabites! You'll be hated in Bethlehem, you'll be mistreated - and [as we've heard in recent weeks from the book of Judges] Israel was incredibly dark and lawless during that period of history. So Naomi says to her daughters-in-law, turn back!

Well how do Orpah and Ruth respond? Orpah kisses her mother-in-law, and heads back to Moab.

But Ruth responds very differently. **Verse 14: "Ruth clung to Naomi."** Even though Naomi has absolutely nothing to offer her, and she stands to lose everything by loving Naomi in this way: her friends, her family, her homeland, her personal safety and security, the chance of a husband. Despite ALL this, Ruth says, **chapter 1 verse 16: "where you go I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried."**

So you see it's not just Naomi who has a spiritual turning back to God. Remarkably, despite all the apparent downside, Ruth the Moabite turns to God too.

Maybe the reason you're here this morning is because God is calling you back to him, but all you can see is the downside. The things you stand to lose. You know you'll lose friends, relationships, family members, everything that is close and comfortable and familiar to you. At this point in the story, that's Ruth. There's really no apparent upside at this stage. And yet she trusts God. So she CLINGS to Naomi and returns to Bethlehem with her.

Verse 21, Naomi says, **"I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty."** What does she mean - "she went away

full"? She was starving hungry! She means that when she left, she had a family. She had a husband. She had two sons. She had a future. But the Lord, apparently, has brought her back empty. Later in the chapter she says, I'm changing my name from Naomi to Mara, which means bitter, "for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me."

And on the face of it, at this stage, you'd have to agree.

One of the unusual features of the book of Ruth is that the narrator hardly mentions God at all, and I think that's very deliberate: it's meant to put the question in our mind: where is God in all this? In the face of Naomi's bitter sense of emptiness and hopelessness - where is he?

But God has a habit of improving his people's fortunes in times of famine. Remember Abraham. Remember Isaac. Remember Joseph. God also has a habit, doesn't he, of doing the miraculous whenever somebody says, "I'm childless and I'm too old to have any more kids." God is seemingly drawn to the impossible, the hopeless, the lifeless. Now that is not to say that he'll always provide in exactly the way we want or expect - but even when it ISN'T what we want or expect, what Ruth shows us is that it ALWAYS turn out to be even better than we expect, if only we'll trust him. As we'll see shortly.

So that's chapter 1: Ruth Turns Back. Chapter Two: Ruth Shows Courage.

The second thing I think we can learn from Ruth is that her turning back to God is proved by her actions. Here she is, a vulnerable young woman, in this strange and dangerous land where she's likely to be verbally abused and perhaps even physically assaulted, and yet Ruth courageously goes out into the fields in order to provide for Naomi.

And if we were to ask at this point, "How do we know that Ruth is really a believer?" the narrator of Ruth would say, look at the way she lives. She acts courageously, self-sacrificially, even though she knows that culturally it puts her in an extremely vulnerable position. As Christians we find ourselves in an increasingly hostile place. If we call ourselves believers, it's worth asking: Does my profession of faith require any courage? If not, it may be that we're not serving the same God Ruth serves.

And God honors her courage. Because at this point, the Hebrew basically says, "*As luck would have it, she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz*" - and we're meant to see God's fingerprints all over this. Because Boaz, we're told, is a "worthy man who belonged to the clan of Naomi's husband." Of all the fields, in all Israel, Ruth walks into his. We're meant to see that God is blessing Ruth's courageous, risk-taking obedience.

Boaz overflows with unexpected kindness and generosity and protection towards Ruth. And she's overwhelmed. Verse 10: **"[Ruth] fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?"**

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.

12 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!"

Boaz sounds a lot like Jesus here, doesn't he? Remember in Mark chapter 10, Jesus says: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time..." Isn't that exactly what Ruth has done? And Boaz sounds even more like Jesus when he says to Ruth in verse 14, "Come and sit at my table. Eat bread and wine with me."

Well at the end of the day, when Ruth tells Naomi who she "accidentally" ran into in the fields, Naomi excitedly says, "You don't know the half of it - Boaz is a close relative of ours; he's one of our REDEEMERS!"

The “redeemer” was a man who had particular responsibilities toward the clan: to protect them economically and socially - even to redeem relatives whose poverty had forced them to sell themselves into slavery.

Is it possible that Boaz could in some way help Naomi and Ruth? We’re left hanging. Because at the end of chapter 2, the barley and wheat harvest has come to an end. Ruth and Boaz no longer run into each other in the fields. So what now?

Chapter 3: Ruth Takes Refuge.

Chapter 3 of Ruth is one of the strangest chapters in all Scripture - which is obviously saying something - and I want to spend most of our time here.

Naomi, perhaps showing a little godly impatience, wants to know - Ruth, what’s going on with Boaz? Things don’t seem to have progressed. And like every mother-in-law worth her salt, Naomi decides to get involved. She cooks up an ingenious and risky plan to get Ruth hitched.

She says, listen, Boaz is going to be winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.

You can read Naomi's plan in chapter 3 verse 3. She tells Ruth:

“Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” 5 And [Ruth] replied, “All that you say I will do.”

Now that sounds odd, right? What on earth is going on?

What Naomi is doing here is telling Ruth how things work in Ancient Israel. She's saying, listen Ruth, here in Bethlehem, if you want to find a husband, you don't go register your details with Christian Mingle, you appeal to the protection of a relative, a Redeemer. Someone like... Boaz. You go to him, you seek refuge in him.

She says, listen, he's only seen you in sweats with your hair tied back, so have a shower, put on some nice clothes. [This is significant by the way because it would show Boaz that Ruth is no longer in mourning for her husband, and is now an eligible bachelorette.] Naomi says, wait until he's finished eating and drinking, so he'll be feeling well-fed and contented - men are not at their best when hungry. And then after Boaz has fallen asleep, lie down near him. But as you do that, uncover his feet.

Uncovering the feet is like the Ancient Israelite version of setting a wake-up call for the middle of the night. The temperature drops in the night, his feet get cold, and then he'll wake up. And because Boaz is a redeemer, a man of integrity, he'll take it from there.

Let's pick it up from **Verse 6: So [Ruth] went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain.** [He does this to protect the grain from thieves in the night. So he's lain down, and he's fallen asleep. Verse 7:] **Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. 8 At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet!**

v9 'Who are you?' he asked. 'I am your servant Ruth,' she said.

Now I want to be as clear as I can, especially to the single women here. What we've just read is *de*-scriptive, not *pre*-scriptive. The reason God preserved these words for you is not so that you would wait for a potential boyfriend to have a few margaritas, lie down next to him, wake him up in the middle of the night, and then await further instructions. That is NOT what this is about. It is *de*-scriptive, not *pre*-scriptive. Very important biblical category.

Ruth is acting in line with very specific Israelite customs that Boaz would have immediately recognised. She's not trying to seduce him, she's seeking his permanent protection as her Redeemer.

That said, it would be naive to say that this isn't a highly charged moment, sexually speaking. Nice girls didn't go to the threshing floor. It had a bad reputation. And the Hebrew words for "uncover" and "feet" also carry sexual connotations, not to mention the phrase "lie down". So the question in the reader's mind here is: can Boaz be trusted? Is he a man of integrity? Will he protect Ruth in her vulnerability, or will he exploit it? Is THIS refuge a safe refuge?

Verse 9, Ruth says to him: **"I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."** She's saying, in the cultural parlance of the day: "Marry me."

Again, can I just say to the single women, this is descriptive, not prescriptive. I don't want to get letters from parents.

But we've heard that reference to "wings" earlier. In chapter 2 verse 12, Boaz had already prayed for Ruth: **"a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"**

So Ruth is subtly reminding Boaz of the prayer he had prayed for her weeks earlier, out in the barley fields. Boaz, will you be the answer to your own prayer for me?

You may remember that imagery of the wings again in the New Testament in Luke 13:34, where Jesus says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks *under her wings*". And that is exactly what happens as Jesus died. Jesus *did* gather Jerusalem's children under his wings. His arms were spread wide on the cross, so that his children could gather under them.

And notice that this refuge under God's wing is not roped off and restricted to people of a particular race or ethnicity or age or social class or perceived "goodness".

All Ruth does is come to him, and throw herself on his mercy. It feels like a risk. Perhaps you too are scared of taking that step. But like Boaz, Christ proves himself to be utterly trustworthy.

Verse 10: Boaz says to Ruth, "**May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.** [Boaz was apparently a much older man, and he's saying, your clinging to ME is even kinder than your clinging to your mother-in-law Naomi]

Ruth takes refuge in her Redeemer. Do you know who YOUR redeemer is? Your REAL redeemer? Ask yourself this diagnostic question: who or what is MY refuge? Where do I instinctively fly

when the famine hits? When I feel vulnerable or out of control or under stress, where do I turn?

Do we look for refuge in food or drink or by burying ourselves in work?

Do we look for refuge in entertainment, Netflix binges, by making grand plans for the future, or putting into place endless lists and strategies to try and make our lives feel like they're under our control?

When the famine descends, maybe your health fails or your marriage hits the rocks, or you lose someone you love dearly, where do you run?

Whatever it is, that is your redeemer.

But in the end, and maybe you know this from your own experience, those redeemers let us down. They might distract for a while, but after we give ourselves to them, we're left feeling disappointed, misled, manipulated, or worthless. How beautiful is THIS Redeemer who keeps his word, who can truly be a refuge in the face of all Ruth's worst fears.

You see Boaz says to Ruth what Christ says to us: I see you. You're an outsider. You're vulnerable. You feel exposed. You have no idea

what the future holds but it doesn't look good. Come to me, just as you are, and I'll be your refuge.

Verse 11, he says, "And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman."

The only qualification we need in order to take refuge under Christ's wing is that we come to him. Can I say, if you've not yet taken refuge in Christ, be like Ruth here: do not rest, do not leave here this [evening/morning] until you have taken refuge in the Redeemer.

But then Boaz drops a bombshell. **Verse 12** he tells Ruth: **"...it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I."**

In other words, there is someone who, legally, stands between him and Ruth. Someone who is more closely related to her, and therefore someone who has the right to marry her and be her redeemer.

v13 Boaz tells Ruth: **"Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the Lord lives, I will redeem you."**

Chapter 4. Ruth Is Redeemed.

Boaz meets with this other unnamed redeemer, and sets out the terms. He says, Naomi is having to sell her land, such is her poverty - are you willing to redeem it? The man says, I will. So at this point, it's not looking good for Boaz and Ruth.

But then Boaz says, oh by the way, one more thing. This is a package deal. Verse 5: If you buy the field, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, **"in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance."** In other words, any children you have with Ruth will perpetuate THAT family line, not your own. And when you die, your inheritance goes to her and her children. All that is yours will become hers.

How will the redeemer respond? Verse 6: **"I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it."**

And Boaz says, "Ok then :) I'll be Ruth's redeemer."

Chapter 4 Verse 13: **"So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife."**

You see what a beautiful picture of the gospel this is? Boaz isn't like the other Redeemers. And neither is Christ. Only Christ - as reflected by Boaz - loves us so much that he is willing to bear the enormous cost of redeeming us. Even though you're an outsider,

even though you're weak and powerless and have nothing to offer in and of yourself, even if you feel yourself to be like a Moabite, cursed by God because of your past or because of things you've done... Christ says to you, Even though it will cost me everything, I want to give you all that is mine. I'll give my life so that you can have an eternal inheritance. So that your name will not be cut off, but will live forever. I'll be your Redeemer.

Verse 13: "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 verse 17, the women say to Naomi [widow Naomi, bitter Naomi, too old to have children Naomi]: **"A son has been born to Naomi."**

In other words, Naomi's family line, which was dead, is now alive. The child may not actually be her own. But as is always the way when God doesn't give us exactly what we once hoped for: what he *actually* gives Naomi is even better.

Because look at verse 14: 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!** [Now at this point you assume they're talking about Boaz. Boaz is her redeemer, right? But it can't be Boaz they're talking about. Listen!] **Verse 15: 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.*" So they're not talking about Boaz here. They're talking about the little baby. How can a baby be her Redeemer?

Because, **verse 17**, this isn't just any baby. This little baby is Obed. Who will one day be the father of Jesse, who will one day be the father of... *David*.

Now *that* is what we call in the trade "a mike drop".

Because a thousand years after David, as we can see from the genealogy at the start of Matthew's Gospel, the great great great great great grandson of David turns out to be: Jesus Christ.

The ultimate Redeemer comes from the line of Ruth the Moabite and is born - where else? - in Bethlehem, in the streets where Ruth and Boaz had once walked together.

Who or what is your refuge? Your Redeemer? Does it love you as this Redeemer does? Does it lay down its life to save you? Does it offer you not only protection in life, but security in death?

Jesus is the *true* Redeemer - not only of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz, but of ALL those who lay down at his feet, throw themselves on his

mercy, and say, "Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."

Finally, there's a parallel here between the two redeemers of chapter 4, and the two daughters-in-law in chapter 1.

Orpah effectively says to Naomi, I can't join myself to you. It's too costly for me. But Ruth says, I love you. I'm clinging to you whatever the cost, and I'm never letting go.

The unnamed redeemer in chapter 4 is like Orpah. He says, I can't join myself to you. It's too costly for me. But Boaz says, I love you. I'm clinging to you, whatever the cost, and I will not let you go.

But there's one major difference. Ruth says to Naomi in chapter 1 "only death will have the power to separate you from my provision and protection." But Christ is the better Ruth, the better Boaz, the better Redeemer. He looks at you and says, do you understand, not even DEATH can separate us.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall *tribulation*, or *distress*, or *persecution*, or *famine*, or *nakedness*, or *danger*, or *sword*? [...] 37No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through *him* who loved *us*. 38For I am sure that *neither* death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all

creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in [our Lord and Redeemer] Christ Jesus”.

Let's pray.

Psalm 5:11 says: "...let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you."

In Ezekiel 16:8, God says, "I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine."

Thank you that you have given yourself to your people, as Boaz gave himself to Ruth, at great cost and with unswerving love. Would those of us already in the shadow of your wings, love courageously as Ruth did. And would those of us who have not yet taken refuge in Christ, lay down at his feet, throw ourselves on his mercy and say, "Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."

In Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**