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Ruth 4:13-22

Sixth Message

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LIFE RENEWED

SERIES: FROM EMPTINESS TO FULLNESS

This has been a big week for parents with young children. I live down the street from an elementary school so I see the parade of children and their parents walking to school for their first few days of classes. I can see from the expressions on their faces that they are filled with apprehension, excitement, and hope at the prospect of the coming year.

I can easily relate to those feelings because, even though my kids are no longer in elementary school, they are in an important time of transition. My youngest is just starting his high school years and my eldest will be taking on her senior year in high school. I can't help but look into the future and imagine what life will be like for them years from now. I too am filled with apprehension and hope.

As we look ahead, the future always seems worrisome. This is as true for us now as it was for Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi. As generous and compassionate as Boaz was, there still were things beyond his ability to remedy. He could financially support the two widows, he could redeem the land, and he could marry Ruth, but he could not in his own strength guarantee a pregnancy or a son. This would have to be the Lord's doing.

Our story now reaches its climax and conclusion. We learn whether the Lord will bring them from emptiness to fullness. As we saw last week, the elders and bystanders at the city gate offered a prayer of blessing upon Boaz and Ruth for fruitfulness and renown. Will their prayers be answered?

I. Ruth gives birth to a son (4:13)

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. (4:13 NIV)

The Book of Ruth opens with famine and funerals, but it closes with a wedding and a birth. In the very short span of just one verse we are told a great deal. Ruth became Boaz's wife, their marriage was consummated, and the Lord gave Ruth a son. In contrast to her several years of infertility in Moab, Ruth's once barren womb has now been opened by the Lord.

The loyal-love Ruth has shown to Naomi and to God has returned to her in full measure. Ruth now sees restored all that she has lost, and more. She is no longer a poor widow, she is a wife and mother. Naomi's prayers for her have been answered. In his loyal-love the Lord has graciously provided Ruth with a home, a husband, and family. The Lord has also blessed Naomi with the birth of this baby boy, and the community rejoices with her.

II. Chorus of praise (4:14-15)

The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." (4:14-15)

This is the second time in chapter 4 that we hear a chorus of praise from the townspeople of Bethlehem. The first time was the praise of the men at the city gate affirming Boaz's expression of loyal-love in redeeming Ruth. This second chorus of praise comes from the women of the community who first saw Naomi upon her return to Bethlehem. At that time she was consumed by her loss and drowning in grief and bitterness. How appropriate that these same women are now gathered around Naomi to share in her joy.

They rejoice with praise for God's good hand upon her, and they offer commentary on the meaning of what God has done. In spite of what Naomi may have previously thought, the Lord had not forgotten or abandoned her. In fact, the Lord is her ultimate provider in her journey from emptiness to fullness. The women of the town serve as witnesses to this loyal-love shown by the Lord toward Naomi, and offer a prayer of blessing upon her and the newborn child.

First, they praise the Lord for he has not left Naomi without a male heir who will act as kinsman-redeemer to preserve and restore her family's property and name. Second, they petition God that this child may one day be honored throughout Israel. And third, they give thanks because they foresee that this child will renew her life and sustain her throughout her old age.

They boldly proclaim that this boy will do all these things because they are confident he will reflect the character, love, and loyalty of his mother. Ruth loved Naomi through thick and thin. In spite of very difficult circumstances she never once stopped caring for and supporting Naomi. Having witnessed such dedicated loyal-love, the women declare that Ruth has been better to Naomi than seven sons. Considering the importance of sons in the ancient near east, this public tribute to Ruth is staggering.

She has come a long way in this book. Originally a stranger to the covenants of Israel, she is blessed and grafted into the family of God through faith in him. She has gone from being an outcast in the community to becoming praised in the city gates as a woman of honor and better than seven sons.

Because Ruth “clung” to Naomi in an act of loyalty and faithfulness in the midst of the darkest circumstances, they are both graced beyond measure.

Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, “Naomi has a son.” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (4:16-17)

After receiving the benediction by the women of the town, Naomi draws Obed to herself and lovingly places him in her lap. The women witness the tender intimacy and affection of Naomi for Obed and declare, “Naomi has a son.” They name him Obed, which means “one who serves,” because he will serve to renew sweetness to Naomi’s life and care for her as she ages.

In a very real sense, Obed was Naomi’s son. Even though he was not a bloodline descendant of Naomi, under the provisions of levirate marriage, Obed nevertheless became Naomi’s legal male heir.

God used Boaz’s generous spirit and Ruth’s obedience to fill Naomi once again. Naomi could no longer say that her hands were empty. Ruth’s faith and obedience had brought blessing and a complete transformation in their lives.

The testimony of the women of the town about Ruth being better than seven sons, and the baby boy on Naomi’s lap, are clear signs that the Lord has replaced her emptiness with fullness and her former bitterness with unspeakable joy. By his grace he has redeemed her life from the pit and crowned it with his lovingkindness.

Although the sorrow of losing her husband and sons has undoubtedly never left her we see Naomi as we have never seen her before: she is calm and at rest. She is anchored in hope, knowing that the child in her lap is evidence of God’s constant loyal-love for the present and the future.

In this story we have seen how Ruth and Naomi have had their life renewed, but what about the nation of Israel? During this time of the Judges, “when everyone did what was right in his own eyes,” how will Israel be restored out of their spiritual, moral, and political chaos?

The answer comes more clearly into focus when we read that from Obed comes Jesse, the father of David. What started out as a story of two poor widows in a desperate predicament turns out to be the story of how God was laying the groundwork for the coming of a king. Ruth and Naomi weren’t the only ones who needed help. The people of Israel needed a righteous leader. Through the birth of Obed the Lord would give them David, a man after his own heart.

As a Gentile convert, Ruth’s integration into the people of God is a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that from his offspring all peoples on earth would be blessed. More than simply grafted into the people of God, Ruth is an ancestress of King David. The loyal-love of the Lord is made clear as we look at the course of history through generations.

III. Epilogue (4:18-22)

This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David. (4:18-22)

Although Boaz in his marriage to Ruth sought to ensure that the names of Elimelek and Mahlon would always be remembered, the Lord rewarded Boaz. It is his name that is remembered throughout history.

These closing verses of Ruth may seem to be an anticlimax. For most, genealogies are the least meaningful part of a biblical text, but for the people of Israel it would be hard to overestimate their importance. With this genealogy the story bursts its own horizon and opens out into the future.

This beautiful story of faith is not just about the tragedies and triumphs of one family. God has indeed shown his covenant faithfulness to Naomi and Ruth, but this genealogy highlights that he also faithfully keeps his covenants to his people Israel. This book that begins with the opening statement, “In the days when the judges ruled,” closes with the genealogy of Israel’s most famous king.

Nowhere else in the Bible is a genealogical list used at the end of a narrative; they are always used to introduce a story that follows. The genealogy is not the end of the story. God’s work of redemption and salvation continues. We find that this genealogy is reproduced in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and connects Boaz and Ruth with the salvation history that has its fulfillment in Christ. The story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz turned out to be an integral chapter in a much bigger story.

God’s plan of redemption is not haphazard. He works out his purpose generation after generation. Limited as we are to one lifetime, each of us sees so little of what happens, but the genealogy at the end of Ruth reminds us that your story and my story didn’t start with us and it doesn’t end with us. Our decisions and actions matter. Our choices have great significance. Not only does God use them here and now to shape us in his image, they have a lasting impact for generations to come.

I have really been blessed by reflecting on the book of Ruth. I am inspired by each of the main characters in this story. There is Naomi. Her life was one of tremendous grief and loss but she holds on and comes through to eventual peace and security. Then there is Ruth, the foreign girl from Moab, prematurely widowed yet drawn to her mother-in-law’s faith. Through her courageous obedience and initiative the Lord brings her into marriage and motherhood. Amazingly, she goes on to find her permanent place in spiritual history as the very ancestor of David and Jesus. And of course there is Boaz, who consistently shows great kindness and generosity toward Ruth and Naomi,

demonstrating nothing less than the character of God. Above all, there is the Lord who demonstrates faithfulness and love, proving that we can always take refuge under his wings.

As look at the book of Ruth as a whole there are a few key themes that are important to us as we live our life of faith.

A. Our God is a redeeming God

Though he is not often mentioned in the book of Ruth, the Lord is very much at work in this story. His work of redemption and transformation is evident throughout. The story moves from death to life, from famine to feasting, from threshing floor to city gate, from widow to wife, from barrenness to fruitfulness, bitterness to joy, from emptiness to fullness. God has been pouring out his grace every step of the way.

The scope of God's redemption covers the entire world... every race, every land, every nation, every tongue. No one is beyond his reach. God longs for us all to know his forgiveness and grace. This story demonstrates the far-reaching scope of the grace of God who is ready and eager to welcome into the fellowship of his redeemed people anyone who clings to him in faith.

The journey of Ruth from outcast to royalty is what the Lord has done for each of us in adopting us into his family. Through faith in Christ we are redeemed and renewed. The Lord sought out each of us while we were lost, drawing us into a much larger story of redemption. He has seated us with Christ in the heavenlies, made us co-heirs with him and blessed us with every spiritual blessing. We are children of God, finding rest in him forever through Jesus Christ.

Through Christ even death is conquered. No matter the obstacles or our frailties and foibles, God's purposes are nevertheless being advanced. My faith often trembles in the face of adversity and difficulty, but God works out his favorable purposes even in the most unfavorable circumstances.

We can take heart that nothing in this world, neither financial hardship nor the death loved ones, can separate us from the love and mercy of God. No matter how far we have strayed from him we are not beyond his reach. Redemption is available to us all. Our hope, rest, and security are found in him.

The apostle Paul reminds us,

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:4-7).

No matter how bitter our circumstances there is hope for redemption of a painful past and seemingly hopeless present. Our history is not forgotten or erased, yet our pain can be transformed into a new life that unfolds into a promising future.

B. God's grace is evident in every aspect of life

Who would have thought that when Ruth stepped out to get some food that the Lord would guide her steps in such a way that she would meet her future husband? Every aspect of life, the field, the threshing-floor, the city-gate, at work, at home, at parties, at Hobees or Starbucks, morning, noon, and night, the Lord is at work. From misery to joy, from the routine to the extraordinary, from private moments to public exchanges, God is always with us and he cares.

Eugene Peterson says it well: "As we follow Jesus and explore the life of salvation, we're frequently tempted by a variety of seductions to deny or avoid or denigrate ordinariness, the common way. We're incited to lust after miracle and ecstasy, after flashy displays of the supernatural... The entire meaning of the incarnation is that God enters our human condition, embraces it, comes to where we are to save us."¹

Last week I experienced a moment of holiness. We were in the Coleman's backyard and a group of kids were eating pizza, playing ping-pong, and basketball in the pool. Within minutes it was all transformed from the ordinary into the holy as four students publicly declared their love and devotion to Christ by being baptized. My daughter was one of those being baptized. I was overwhelmed by the Lord's love with such a gift.

God extends his love and grace to us in so many ways. We may only notice his intervention in loud and extreme ways, but within the walls of our own homes, along the street of our own neighborhoods and behind the front door of our offices, God is at work.

C. We are key elements in God's grand plan of redemption and salvation

The book of Ruth shows us that the Lord works out his plan of redemption through the loyal love expressed by his people in their day-to-day lives. Ruth is often read as a simple and romantic love story between Boaz and Ruth, yet in a very real sense the deeper significance of what God is doing lies well beyond the lifetime of its central characters. We can learn a great lesson from this perspective. The purpose for much that takes place in our life may lie well beyond our life.

God does not touch only our lives by what he does in and through us, he also has the lives of others in view. This is why life can seem so untidy. God has not yet finished his business. The full tapestry of history is only partially complete. There are still many loose ends but the future is certain.

In the "big picture," in the future that Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz cannot see they play an integral part in salvation history. These two women who seem so insignificant have a vital role to play in that redemption. God chose to use their acts of faithful and loyal-love to accomplish his eternal purpose. In the interplay of loyal-love within this one family God brings salvation to the world.

None of us can see into the future and know what God is going to do. What we do know is that our everyday choices can have eternal consequences. When we consider the ministry of Crisis Pregnancy Center, it becomes clear that caring for a pregnant mother can save both mother and child. Every life is precious and significant, and the choice to give birth to a baby can echo across generations for the glory of God.

But it is not just these obviously dramatic decisions that can have an eternal impact. The Lord is able to take the seemingly small choices of our lives and magnify their effect a million times over.

Let me share with you one example of how this has happened in my life. I had a friend in high school named Steve. We spent a lot of time together. We both played trumpet in the band and we were on the same tennis team. He was often curious about why I was always so “nice,” and why I didn’t swear or tell dirty jokes. I told him it was because I was a Christian.

That seemed to settle the matter for a while until one day we were with some friends at a swimming pool and he started asking all kinds of questions about my faith. Honestly, I was a little annoyed. I was just trying to flirt with the girls and get a good suntan, but I answered his questions as best I could.

My answers were quite feeble, so I thought there was no way anything would come of it. Well, the next night he attended a Young Life meeting on campus and invited Christ to be his Lord and Savior. It was awesome! God was already at work in Steve’s heart. Just as he did with the loaves and fishes, the Lord multiplied my paltry contribution into something miraculous.

The story doesn’t end there, however. Steve continued to grow in his faith and ended up marrying a Christian girl named Carole. She introduced me to Amy, who became my wife! The moral of the story is, be aware: God can do anything at any time. In the hands of the Lord, when you leave the house with sunscreen and a beach towel, you may end up with a wife and two kids—not to mention a brother forever in heaven.

Far too many of us believe that we are too unimpressive, too flawed, too sinful to be used by God. To believe this is to believe a very dangerous lie. It places all the focus and burden on us. It puts us at the center of the story. We must remember that ultimately it is not our story, but God’s story. Can we see that in the midst of our everyday and seemingly random lives, God’s grace is present and he is at work bringing about his glorious plan of redemption?

Commentator David Feddes puts it into proper perspective when he writes: “The almighty, everlasting God deals not just in moments and days and years but in generations-and centuries and millennia and eternities! The full significance of my life and actions may not become apparent in my lifetime.

It may not show up until a few generations down the road, or even until eternity. Meanwhile, I walk by faith, not by sight. I don’t always see where I fit in the big picture, but God does.”²

The Lord delights in using average ordinary people like you and me to tell his story. He receives glory when the easily overlooked, the ignored, the broken are restored and renewed to abundant life. That is the heart of the gospel. Our past does not define or limit us for use in the kingdom of God. The Bible tells the stories of many broken, damaged, and dented people. Some were murderers, thieves, and liars, while others were prostitutes, cowards, and hypocrites. The Bible recounts the stories of people who, despite their failures and faults, God loved and used in the telling of his story of grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

Our loving Heavenly Father is at work redeeming his people sometimes through and sometimes in spite of our decisions. The good news is that we cannot thwart, deter, or derail his story. His love, mercy, grace, and sovereignty weave our actions, good and bad, into his beautiful story of redemption.

This means we don’t have to be afraid of our weaknesses. We can even embrace them because they force us to rely on the Lord. Our confidence comes not from faith in our very limited capabilities but through faith in the Almighty God who loves us and desires to use us in his plan of redemption.

The Lord treats us with immense respect and astonishing dignity, and he invites us to freely participate in his ways. The good news is that we are not left to our own devices. It isn’t our intellect, our charisma, or our church attendance that qualifies us to be used by God. It is his Spirit moving within us that strengthens us to step out in faith and obedience.

Though oftentimes we are deeply puzzled by the circumstances and events of life we can rest assured that our loving Heavenly Father is weaving a marvelous and beautiful mosaic that is ultimately for our good and his glory. It is my hope and prayer that we discover with great confidence that our life will have an impact that goes on far beyond our lifetimes. May we, like Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, obey God and be faithful to him in all that he puts before us, for his glory and honor.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (HarperCollins: New York, N.Y., 1997), 9.

² David Feddes, “A Widow’s Cry” (Back To God Hour Messages, February 26, 2006).

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