

## I NEED A HERO, PART IV

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Today is our last Sunday looking at the Book of Ruth. Next week we'll begin a new series called, "God in my world." One of our core values at New Day is to give people tools to live for Christ in whatever their daily settings are – not just on Sundays. So we're going to talk about our jobs, our families, our money, our friends and so on. But we're going to do more than talk about it – we're going to actually hear from people about what God is doing in their world. Each week will be a different guest star. It's going to be great.

But that's next week. This morning, we're in Ruth. It's been a couple weeks since we were last there, so let's review what we've seen so far:

### Chapter 1

Naomi, Elimelech, Mahlon & Killion travel to Moab. The boys marry, then all three men die. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are left as childless widows. Orpah goes back home, and Ruth heads to Bethlehem with Naomi. The lesson: God works through difficult circumstances.

### Chapter 2

Ruth goes to work gleaning in the field of Boaz to bring home a little food. Boaz is generous. Lesson: The nature of God's grace.

### Chapter 3

Naomi hatches a plan to win a man for Ruth. Ruth carries it out. Boaz jumps at the opportunity. Lesson: All three show us Christ at work in the process of redemption.

Now we come to the conclusion of the drama, chapter 4.

### Ruth 4

*Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down.*

*Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. Then he said to the kinsman-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line." "I will redeem it," he said.*

*Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property."*

*At this, the kinsman-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it."*

*(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.)*

*So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." And he removed his sandal.*

*Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!"*

*Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."*

*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. 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."*

*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.*

*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.*

You can see why a few weeks ago I said this was a happily ever after story. Everybody goes home feeling good at the end. Naomi has a grandson. Ruth has a husband and a home. Boaz has a wife and an heir. And they all become part of national history as they enter the line of David, who will eventually become king of Israel. And they become part of the lineage of Christ as well. It's a great ending.

It could have all ended so differently. Boaz was taking a bit of a gamble by meeting with the other kinsman redeemer. But God prevailed and things came to a satisfying conclusion.

But I got to thinking about that other guy. We don't even know his name – this mystery relative who decided not to get involved. Was he happy with his decision? Did he regret not marrying Ruth? Who knows? There's no follow up on him. And yet his decision was critical to the way events unfolded.

Let's backtrack for a minute and review the story in more detail. After Ruth made her move on the threshing floor, Boaz took swift action. We don't know whether it was the next morning or the next week, but shortly after that encounter, Boaz went up to the town gate to seal the deal. Once again, God showed that he was the one in control, because wouldn't you know it, who should come along but the very guy Boaz was hoping to find. What are the chances of that?

The town gate was kind of like the town hall. It was where legal transactions and civil business was conducted. It was a gathering place for public decision making. Boaz wanted to make sure this decision would stick. So he rounded up a council of 10 elders – enough of a quorum to act as witnesses to what he was about to do.

And then he raised the matter with the kinsman redeemer. But did you notice how he did it? He didn't start with Ruth.

*"Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line."*

You've all seen pictures like this of dogs playing poker. Notice how all of them have total poker faces – even the bulldog who's slipping a card to the dog next to him. They don't want anyone to know what they're thinking.

Boaz has his poker face on here. He is hiding his excitement pretty well, downplaying the interest in Ruth as the prize and focusing instead on the land – which he knows will be the more attractive piece to the other kinsman redeemer. And he does a superb job of baiting the trap. The guy is very enthusiastic initially. Here's a chance to pick up a piece

of land for cheap. He can probably make a lot of profit by farming it, which would make it a very good investment. He'd also look good, like he was helping out an old relative.

Then Boaz plays his ace. "Oh – I almost forgot to mention. With the land goes the wife. And actually, the land will really to belong to Elimelech's family still, because you'll need to produce an heir that can carry on their family name."

Suddenly that piece of land isn't looking like quite such a good deal. And with no hesitation, our number one kinsman redeemer says "I fold" and pushes away from the table. Boaz wins the day and the rest is history. We don't hear any more about the mystery man, because he is no longer involved in what transpires.

But let's not leave him just yet. Let's not let him disappear into the background without first seeing what he's about.

**Because I think the kinsman redeemer has something to teach us. Lessons about opportunities missed and opportunities taken.**

The kinsman redeemer missed a huge opportunity. He walked away from the chance of a lifetime. Why did he do it? Why do we miss opportunities?

God has many of them. If we were talking in financial terms, you can think of them as God's IPOs – his initial public offerings of stock in a new venture. Those are the golden opportunities to buy some stock – the first time a company offers it to the general public. Almost every day, I believe God brings before us chances to invest in someone's life in such a way that it makes a difference. He says along with Boaz, "I thought I should bring this matter to your attention."

And every time God has work he wants us to consider being involved in, our hearts become like that city gate. They become places of decision. Will we go the route of kinsman redeemer #1 and say, "I can't do it," or will we be like Boaz and jump at the opportunity?

It's a Robert Frost moment. Remember his old poem? Two paths diverged in a yellow wood – I chose the road less traveled, and that has made all the difference. We're faced by these decisions all the time. What we choose to do makes all the difference down the road.

Now I realize that for the sake of our story, Boaz had to be the one to choose Ruth. We want the kinsman redeemer to turn down the offer. But that doesn't change the facts about how he made his decision, and that's what I'd like to examine.

**So let's get inside his head for a minute. What influenced him to say no? As with any opportunity, there were three things to consider.**

Rewards, risks and responsibilities.

**Rewards** – What is to be gained from this decision? What’s the upside?

**Risks** – What will it cost? What could be lost?

**Responsibilities** – What new burdens will this choice bring with it? As Peter Parker learned, with great power comes great responsibility.

At first, all the kinsman redeemer hears is about rewards and risks. He weighs the two. Will it cost me much? No. The price of the land will be fair, probably cheap. Will the reward be worth it? Yes. I’ll get richer off the land. I’ll do it.

Then he hears a little more, and the responsibility factor enters the picture. I’ll have to take care of a new wife. I’ll have to raise a child for someone else. The risks increase: This could threaten the inheritance for my current children. This woman could be a gold digger. The rewards start to decrease. I’ll only be stewarding this land for a time, and I won’t get to keep it. I might not even get to keep the profits I make from it. What’s more, this is a public decision, and all these people here are going to hold me to my word if I say yes.

Given the new balance of pros and cons, our man says, “No thank you. It’s not for me.”

Knowing what we do now about how the story turns out, we shake our heads at the guy and think, “Pretty shallow and selfish. He only cared about his own interests.”

But if we’re honest with ourselves, most of the time our reasoning goes along much the same lines. God offers us the chance to be involved in something he’s doing and we look at the risks. We see the potential for being hurt. We see the potential for having to make sacrifices. We look at the responsibilities, and we become afraid of what could be asked of us. And suddenly, any rewards associated with doing God’s will seem pretty small in comparison. So we let the chance pass us by.

Sometimes that can be an everyday, small decision. I’ve had more than one perfect opportunity to have a spiritual conversation with someone and I’ve let it pass me by, either for fearing the risk of embarrassment, or fear of it taking too long and cutting into something else I was doing. God says, “I thought I should bring this to your attention,” and I said, “I can’t do it.” Those kinds of situations come up regularly for all of us.

Other times, the decisions are bigger, one time events. I know a church that passed up the opportunity to plant a daughter church like ours, feeling it was too great a risk. They missed the chance to see what God would have done through that step of faith.

The difficulty comes because we don’t know which decisions are the small ones and which are the big ones. We can’t always see what the results would be, what the true rewards would look like. We don’t always even know when it’s an opportunity from God. So how are we supposed to make the right choice?

Fortunately for us, we don't just have the negative example of someone who made a bad judgment call. We also have Boaz – the guy who wanted to do the right thing all along. What made the difference for him? He had no more knowledge of the future than the kinsman redeemer had. What gave him the ability to choose the road less traveled in the same situation?

**I think Boaz saw the entire scene from a different point of view for one simple reason: He was in love.** Boaz wanted a future with Ruth. He had been watching her, he saw the kind of woman she was. He never thought he would have had a chance with her, but she proposed to him. He genuinely cared about her personally.

As a result, he had different considerations as he looked the opportunity. The risk for him wasn't what he would lose if he took the opportunity – it was what he would lose if he didn't. He wouldn't get to spend his life with this woman. That would be a terrible loss for him.

His view of the reward was also completely opposite of the kinsman redeemer's. Boaz didn't really care about the land. That was just an excuse to force a decision. Ruth was the reward he had in mind. And that made the idea of the responsibility completely bearable. He would gladly take on the role of caregiver for that woman and Naomi. It would be a joy for him, not a burden.

The whole picture was changed by love. The question for Boaz was not “What's in it for me?” but “Who's asking me to do this?” Since the answer was “The woman I love,” there was no hesitation on his part to follow through. It was a simple decision.

It's the way Christ lived – who loved his Father so much and loved us so much that he was willing to ignore all the risks and die for us. He didn't just weigh the pros and cons. Hebrews says that it was for the joy set before him that he endured the cross.

We were up in Canada this week as a family, and one of the big stories in the newspaper this week was that singer Bono from U2 was making appearances with Prime Minister Paul Martin, and that the Prime Minister had agreed to increase Canada's contribution to deal with the AIDS crisis in Africa. If you've read anything about Bono's activism, you know he's a passionate crusader for both healthcare and debt reduction in Africa.

The media was having a heyday with the appearances, saying it was all political and an attempt by the Prime Minister to gain a few votes. Reporters asked Bono if he knew he was being used. And his response was, “I know and I really don't care as long as people with HIV are being helped.”

Like Boaz, his passion and his compassion overrode what would typically be seen as risks in what he was doing. What drove him came from a different motivation.

It's the love factor that should influence our decision making as well. Weighing the pros and cons of how it will impact our lives isn't enough. We have to ask ourselves, "Do I love God? And is He the one asking me to do this?" That will reframe our decision.

Not every opportunity we get is from God. We're not supposed to jump at everything. So how do we know which ones are from him?

That could be a very big discussion, so let's narrow it down a little bit. What Boaz was doing was called redeeming Naomi and Ruth. So we're talking specifically about opportunities to be involved in something God is wanting to do to redeem people. We said a few weeks ago that redemption is re-valuing something, to view it as having worth. God's process of buying people back for himself is lifting them up, giving them worth and restoring them to what he would want them to be.

**So the first way we can identify these opportunities from God is that they**

**Let us be gas pumps.** In other words, we get to fill someone's tank, to give them a boost that will help them keep going down the road. The women of the village told Naomi that her life would be renewed and she would be sustained in her old age.

Paul describes that "being renewed" as well. I like how the Message version translates it:

#### **2 Corinthians 4:16**

*So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace.*

That's a great description of God's ongoing, redeeming work. When something comes up where we have the chance to build someone up and be part of that process, that's one indicator the opportunity is from God.

**The second thing about these chances is that they**

**Pursue us.** Boaz didn't go looking for a wife. He wasn't seeking out a victim to help. Ruth and Naomi came to him out of the blue. It was something that no doubt Boaz wanted, but he didn't orchestrate the situation. God did.

More often than not, the "opportunities" I try to pursue are really my own ideas. Right after college, I really wanted to get into acting. I got my head shots, did some auditioning in L.A., but nothing ever came of it. And I have to say, if I were honest about it, I never felt a sense of peace that God wanted me to do that. I was struggling to make things happen on my own. I wanted it to be God's will for me. But I was the one manufacturing all the opportunities.

On the other hand, I've had things fall in my lap that I didn't ask for, and God clearly wanted me to do something about them. When it's from God, the opportunity will often pursue us rather than us chasing it.

### **A third way we can recognize opportunities from God is that they**

**Cause others to recognize God.** The elders and the women praised God and asked for his blessing as a result of what Boaz did. Ultimately God gets the glory and the credit for the things he's doing. If the opportunity is more about us than him, then it probably isn't from him.

I once got involved in a ministry at a church that was mostly about the leader's need for recognition. Any ministry that was happening was an unexplainable demonstration of God's grace. True opportunities from God will result in honor for him first and foremost.

One final thing to be said about these opportunities is that they are just that – opportunities, not obligations. Boaz had no binding legal requirement that said he had to do what he did. As we mentioned before, he was motivated by love more than a sense of duty. God wants our involvement, but even more importantly, he wants our heart. If we're just acting out of a sense of duty, we won't find the joy that should accompany the act.

It's not a guilt trip. Because God was not dependent on the kinsman redeemer to act, and if Boaz had said no, God would have found another means beyond him as well. His hands aren't tied if we miss an opportunity. He doesn't need us to get his work done. But he invites us to be part of it. He gives us the privilege of carrying his redemption work into the lives of other people. And that's a great blessing.

What opportunities has God put in front of you this morning? Has he set something in your lap and said, "Here's something I wanted to bring to your attention. What are you going to do about it?" Can you identify anything, big or small, that right now is your chance to get on board with his activity?

If so, what risks are holding you back? What feels like it is going to be too painful or costly to do?

Even entire churches can choose to act or not. How will we as a congregation respond when God gives us opportunities to do exciting work for him?

I read a story this week about a church board that came to its pastor and said, "We think we need to act more on faith when it comes to our budget. We're not trusting God enough here."

So they decided that rather than look at how much money they expected to come in and then plan how to spend it, they were going to try to determine what God was wanting them to do, regardless of cost, and then set their budget based on that.

Normally, the church's annual budget would have been around \$74,000. According to the new way of thinking, their financial needs for the year were going to be above \$160,000. They had no idea where they would get that kind of money, but they set their budget anyway because they felt strongly about what they felt God was calling them to do. And by the end of the year, they had taken in \$172,000.

That church could have operated in the safety zone, been very fiscally responsible and come out at the end of the year with little risk and a healthy financial picture. But they would have missed out on so much great work. And God blessed them for their leap of faith. That's the kind of church we'd like to be, isn't it?

In the book of Ruth, there's a great emphasis on someone's name being remembered and carried on. So I don't think it is accidental that the kinsman-redeemer's name has been left out. Boaz actually calls him "So and so" in the Hebrew, as if the author deliberately omitted the name from the record, leaving it blanked out. The idea is that the person who chooses not to participate in the story will have no place in the story.

I want to be remembered. I want us as a church to be remembered – remembered as a people who saw what God was doing and chose to get involved, over and over again. It's a bold, risky way of living that forces us to depend on God, to love him more and to expect great things from him.

God is offering us the opportunity to get in on his IPOs. Are we ready to invest ourselves in what he's doing? When we are, we'll find the return is unbelievable.