

I NEED A HERO, PART III

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Federal Way, WA
May 2, 2004

Two weeks ago, we met a woman named Naomi, who traveled with her husband and sons to Moab, leaving their home in Bethlehem because of a famine. In Moab, the three men died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law. One went home, the other, Ruth, decided to stay with Naomi. God sustained them through that tough time and brought them back to Jerusalem.

The two woman arrived there and Ruth went to work gleaning in the fields to bring home something for the two of them to live on. Life wasn't easy for a widow in those days. There weren't a whole lot of options. As luck would have it (or as we saw, as grace would have it), Ruth ended up working in the field of Boaz, a man who not only showed her a great deal of kindness, but who also happened to be what they called a kinsman-redeemer – a family relative who could be called upon legally to come to the women's rescue. Even though he didn't know that at the time, he still showed incredible grace to Ruth that she in turn shared with Naomi.

This starts Naomi's mind working, and it's where we rejoin the story.

Ruth 3

One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

"I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer."

"The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning."

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor."

He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her. Then he went back to town.

When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?"

Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'"

Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

For the past few weeks, I've had this brick sitting on my desk at work. It's a new product that one of our clients may start distributing. It looks a little different than an ordinary brick, because it's made out of borosilicate glass. It's also unusual because it glows in the dark.

Invariably, when people see it in my office, they ask two questions: First, they say, "Wow! What's that?" I explain it to them. Sometimes they take it across the hall to a dark room to check it out. Everyone thinks it's great. It's different than anything they've seen. It's intriguing. Then they ask the second question. "What do you use it for?" That's what our client is still trying to figure out. But without exception, anyone who has seen this on my desk has asked those two questions.

That's also the response I have when I read this story in Ruth. First I find myself going, "Wow! What's this?" It's such an unusual story with strange customs, a kind of scandalous setting and a flavor unlike almost any other Bible story I can think of. It's different and intriguing. But then I had to ask, "What do you use it for?" Even though it's a great story, what are we supposed to take away from it in terms of practical application?

As a funny sidenote, I did come across an old, old commentary that warned women they shouldn't imitate what Ruth did because it would be dangerous, but by and large I don't think most of us would read this passage and think it is telling us to repeat any of these events. So why is it in the Bible?

This is actually a great case study for looking at how we interpret the Old Testament in general. It's easy to find spiritual value in sections like the ten commandments or the Psalms, but most of the Old Testament is filled with stories from the history of Israel. Are we just supposed to learn by example from them, or is there something more there?

I always come back to the scene in Luke 24. After Jesus had risen from the dead, he was walking down the road with two of his followers. Luke tells us what Jesus did.

Luke 24:27

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

That's our key to interpreting the whole Bible. As Christians, we don't just look at the story for what it says on the surface. And we're not even just looking for general spiritual principles, as good as they may be. Instead, we're supposed to understand that no matter what book we're talking about, it has something to show us about Jesus himself. For Christians, interpreting the Bible means looking for Christ.

So as I look at Ruth 3 and say "What do we do with this?" I have to ask myself, "What does this say about Christ?" When I come at it that way, I find that actually it has quite a bit to say.

Many characters in the Old Testament are viewed as a "type" of Christ. In other words, something about their life parallels what Jesus did for us and highlights a truth about him. The story of Joseph being sold into slavery is a good example. His sufferings are compared to Christ, and the salvation that he brought to his family is compared to the salvation Christ offers us.

In the book of Ruth, Boaz is generally regarded as a type of Christ, because he's called a redeemer. He plays the role of savior. But in this particular chapter he's not the only one that gives us a portrait of Christ.

Did you ever squeeze one end of a balloon and watch the other end bulge, or squeeze the middle and watch both ends bulge? In this chapter, if you squeeze on one character, thinking that's the person who shows you Christ, you'll find that he pops up in another place. Naomi, Ruth and Boaz all have something to show us about Christ. It's not a singular person who fits the bill, but all three taken together.

Naomi is the first one on the scene. She says to Ruth, "Shouldn't I make a home for you?" And she sets about laying a plan to do just that. Naomi knew that Ruth should be settled. She had left behind her family and the world she knew in Moab. She was a displaced person, and she would feel that way until she had a home of her own. Naomi took it upon herself to make that possible, and that is where Naomi has something to show us about Jesus. Because like Naomi, Christ speaks to our need for

A “make yourself at home” place

A basic human need is the need for belonging. Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they’re always glad you came. We were designed to need contact and love. We want to be known by name and by nature. That people recognize us and know who we really are and care about us. And that’s what Jesus offers us.

Psalm 68:6

God sets the lonely in families.

He gives us a family and a place to live together forever.

John 14:2

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.

That seems to echo Naomi’s words: Shouldn’t I find a home for you?

Have you seen that Extreme Makeover Home show? Each week they find some deserving family who is living in a house that just doesn’t work for them, they move them out for a week and completely overhaul the place, knocking down walls, adding a second story, replacing all the appliances, etc.

One thing that is really neat is how they find out what each person in the family likes, and when they’re creating a room for them they incorporate some of those elements. It could be a sound studio in the garage or an entire room décor that feels like it’s under the ocean.

Our place in God’s family and our room in his house have been tailor made to who we are. God knows what makes us tick, what makes us unique in the whole world. And just like those families have no idea of how great their house will be when it’s done, we have no idea just what God has in store for us. The Bible says no eye has seen, no ear has heard what God has prepared for those who love him.

That shows a great deal of care on Christ’s part, and Naomi reflected the care that goes into those kinds of preparations. If we learned last week that God could work through random circumstances, Naomi shows us that God can also work through meticulously detailed plans. She had thought through everything. And she walks Ruth through step by step.

Jesus, in preparing a place for us, in making room in God’s family for us, has put thought and energy in it. It is a well-laid plan, and we can trust that it is as effective as Naomi’s, and it will be forever.

Revelation 3:12-13

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.

When Christ enters our lives, he makes us a permanent part of his family. He gives us that sense of identity that says, “I know who I am and I know who loves me.” He puts his name on us.

Belonging is such a basic need that people can spend an entire lifetime looking for it if they don’t hear Christ saying along with Naomi, “I’ve found a home for you. It’s yours for the taking if you want it.”

Ruth takes it. And as she begins to act on Naomi’s plan, the spotlight shifts to her, and we see that she too shows us something of Christ.

In going forward with this bold idea, Ruth knows that it really isn’t just about her. It’s about Naomi. It’s about Naomi’s dead husband. And it’s about Ruth’s dead husband.

What Ruth’s decision tells us is that Christ speaks to our need for

A “my life matters” future

We talked before about this concept of a kinsman-redeemer that Boaz is supposed to play, and that was a very important concept in Israel. If someone died childless, their property would be redistributed to others. It was almost as if the person never existed.

By establishing the kinsman-redeemer laws, God preserved the inheritance of people. A nearby relative would be asked to raise children and hold property in the name of the person who had died. In this way, their memory was perpetuated. It gave them immortality in a way.

We all are searching not only for belonging, but also for significance. We don’t want to just die and have it all be over. We want to know that we matter, that our lives have made a difference.

In 21st century America, we can pretty well mask this need. We have so many luxuries and conveniences that life can be one big distraction. We can fill up our days with enough fun or just plain busyness that we don’t stop to think about ultimate questions like “Why am I here?” and “What happens when I die?”

In a Carnegie Commission survey of American undergraduates, researchers asked students questions about the future. This interview was a typical one:

Interviewer: Will the United States be a better or worse place to live in the next ten years?

Student: The U.S. will definitely be a worse place to live.

Interviewer: Then you must be pessimistic about the future?

Student: No, I'm optimistic.

Interviewer: Why?

Student: Because I have a high grade point average, and I'm going to get a good job, make a lot of money, and live in a nice house.

We don't have to worry about the big questions because we can disconnect from them. It's only when our life is interrupted by tragedy or a close call that we stop to take a quick inventory. And when we do, the questions hit hard, because deep down we do want to be significant. We do want to have hope that this isn't all there is.

Christ gives us that hope.

Jeremiah 29:11-12

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Boaz calls Ruth's act one of great kindness. What was it that she did? By laying down at Boaz's feet and asking him to spread his blanket over her, she was essentially proposing marriage. Even to this day, in some Middle Eastern and even Hindu cultures, part of a wedding ceremony includes the groom extending a cloak or cloth over the bride, symbolizing that she would be coming under his protection. So this was a very serious thing Ruth was suggesting.

It was kind to Boaz because he was an older man and probably not all that physically attractive to Ruth. But ultimately, the kindness was really toward Naomi, because Ruth finding a home meant Naomi and her family would have a future. Ruth was entering into a contract that would ensure that Elimilech's name would carry on.

Peter talks about Christ's kindness to us.

1 Peter 1:3-4

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

God sees us as worth continuing. He values us and gives us the means to live forever. There was great personal sacrifice involved in providing it, just as there was for Ruth. It shows the depth of love she had for Naomi, that she would put her personal preferences

aside to ensure her mother-in-law's future. Christ put aside his own human will to be obedient to his Father and demonstrate his love for us. He speaks to our need to matter.

Naomi made her plans and Ruth carried them out, but both women were depending on Boaz to respond a certain way. Would he be angry? Would he take his job seriously? Fortunately, he does everything they would have wanted and then some.

Here Boaz shows us Jesus, because like Christ, he speaks to our need for

A “made right” world

Ruth and Naomi were looking to see their damaged lives repaired. They were husbandless and childless, which in that day was a double blow. Their prospects were grim, even though Ruth was bringing home a little grain from the fields. They could squeak by on that, but what they really needed was someone to come along and set the world right again, to bring justice.

That's another basic human need. We look around at our lives and the world in general and see so much that's wrong. And we have a deep desire to have things corrected. The psalmist gave a voice to that cry.

Psalm 80:7

*Restore us, O God Almighty;
make your face shine upon us,
that we may be saved.*

There is built within us a deep longing for resolution to problems. We want to believe that in the end, good will win out over evil.

And the thing about our desire for justice is that it almost always takes someone else to achieve it for us. If we are victims of injustice, it is usually because someone is in a position of more power or influence than us, or because circumstances are beyond our control. Naomi and Ruth needed an advocate with power to change their situation, and we need a powerful advocate to come to our defense. We can't do it on our own.

God responds to our request for him to make things right.

1 Peter 5:10

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ... will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

Boaz comes on the scene and immediately goes to work setting things right, restoring the fortunes of Ruth and Naomi. He tells Ruth, “I will do what you ask.” And he knows what it is going to take to get the job done right. He can't just go out and marry Ruth right then and there – he has to first take care of the other kinsman redeemer. There's a proper procedure to follow, and Boaz knows what it is going to take.

God does the same for us in Christ. He knew that he couldn't just snap his fingers and make it happen. That wouldn't satisfy justice. Our being bought back had to happen in a certain way.

He does that not just for our individual lives, but also for all of creation. One day, he will restore complete order and justice.

Revelation 21:5

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

His words are trustworthy and true. Look at Naomi's words again when Ruth went back to Naomi.

Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

Jesus is not going to rest until the matter is settled. He's constantly working on our behalf. Like Ruth we can wait and watch to see how it will all unfold, but we can be confident that he will in fact do exactly what he says. The world will be made right.

Those are three pictures of Christ that we see in this chapter of Ruth. They're also the pictures we see in the Lord's Supper that we're about to take. Christ meets us on all three levels, and as we get ready to celebrate communion together, think about how you're needing to see him this morning.

Is God's love real for me? Are you needing that sense of belonging? Do you need to know that God does in fact love you and wants you in his family? Are you feeling isolated and alone in the world? Christ's death represented in the bread and cup says just how deep that love really is.

Are you searching for significance? Maybe it is difficult to believe that what you are doing and who you are really matters in a world of billions of people. You do matter to God. He sees you as being of incredible worth – worth the life of his son to give you a secure future.

Or maybe you're in deep need of things being made right. Maybe there are so many hurts that you've experienced that you find it hard to believe God will ever restore things to the way they should be. Boaz tells us that Jesus not only cares about justice, but he is working hard to bring it about. In fact, the work he has already done on the cross guarantees that he will one day restore things to the way they ought to be. Behold, he is making all things new.

Bonus question: Which way can picture Christ for someone else? Is there someone you know who needs you to tell them, "God has a place for you"? Or maybe someone who

needs someone else to help set things right again in their world? Christ can work through you to be a portrait of him in someone's life. It's not just Naomi, Ruth and Boaz who can do that. As Scott Krippaehne says in one of his songs, "He can make a Bible story out of you."