



RELATIONSHIFT

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He looks like a nice, ordinary man with a friendly smile, but don't let the photo fool you: This man is really a machine. He has to be. Because Howard Stephen Berg can read 25,000 words per minute. No joke – 25,000 words per minute. He is the Guinness World Record holder for speed reading. I do not get that at all. I am such a slow reader. What's really sick is that Howard also remembers everything he reads. His comprehension is incredible. Get this: his latest project was speed reading the almost 2,000 page health care bills out of the House and Senate and then explaining them accurately on TV. That's almost more than the people who wrote the bills can do.

We may not quite be in Howard's league, but we've been doing our own speed reading through the book of Ruth. We've clipped right along at a pretty good pace these past three weeks, and today we wrap things up already. Hopefully even though it has been fast, we've managed to have good comprehension. Just to review where we've come from, here are a few of the highlights Ruth gives us:

1. The book of Ruth is a picture of God's redemption (rescue) of humanity.

It is intended to be read as more than a great love story between two people. It is a love story between God and humanity. Ruth was an foreigner who was brought into the family and saved from a desperate situation, just the way God brings us into his family and saves us through Jesus. It's all about outsiders becoming insiders, and it is right for us to make that connection with the text.

Ephesians 2:13

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

2. An invitation into the story.

Besides this being about what God is doing, this book also shows us how God works through us to bring people closer to him. Naomi was reaching out to Ruth even when she wasn't aware of it. We have a role to play in helping people find their way to God. We are here for a reason and need to keep in view the world at large that God is wanting to reach.

3. An example of a "safe" person.

Boaz created an environment where Ruth felt safe to come and glean in the fields. Similarly, we are called to welcome the stranger, to hear and value their stories, to not be judgmental, and to remember our own dependence on God and treat other people accordingly.

We last left Ruth in the fields of Boaz. After she and her mother-in-law Naomi resettled in Bethlehem, Ruth had gone into the fields to gather leftover grain, because they had no other way to get food. There weren't many other opportunities for women who were on their own to survive. Boaz had graciously made it easy for Ruth to do what she needed to do.

But that was a temporary fix. Naomi had a bigger plan in mind.

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."

In July of last year, Kelly O'very placed the following ad in the barter section of the local classifieds:

Free '92 Jeep Wrangler...with proposal and wedding ring

That's right! Act now on this one-time offer. All you have to do is date and marry me and you can be the proud owner of a 1992 Jeep Wrangler (along with a 1970 woman). Jeep has a lift, safari top for the summer/hard top for the winter, rear locker, 33" tires and (new this year) an 8000 lb winch.

Terms and Conditions:

- 1. Marriage must last a minimum of 5 years.***
- 2. Jeep cannot feel neglected – but it's a package deal. You take the Jeep, you take me!***
- 3. Honda 400EX included in lifetime package.***
- 4. Honeymoon required.***

Asked why she did it, Kelly said, "The people I spend the most time with are married. They make it look so good. How can you not want that for yourself?" So she took matters into her own hands. She got over 300 responses. Whether Mr. Right was one of them remains to be seen.

That was a wild and crazy marriage proposal. But it was no bolder than the way Ruth proposed to Boaz. Because that is exactly what this whole encounter was – a marriage proposal. When you strip away all the strangeness of uncovered feet and threshing floors and all that, at its heart, this was a woman asking a man to marry her. And it was an incredibly brave thing to do. Going in the middle of the night. Being where women weren't allowed. Asking a man who wasn't expecting it. Boaz had certainly been kind and gracious up to this point, but that was more out of politeness and sympathy.

This was taking the relationship to a whole new level. It's a relationship. It's not like they really knew each other. Ruth was just one of many recipients of Boaz' wealth and kindness. There were lots of people out in his fields who benefited in some way from his charity. But being out in the fields wasn't cutting it. It wasn't enough to live on for more than a season. So now, Ruth is stepping in far closer. She's asking for something much more personal and permanent. It's an entirely different ballgame.

This is the key moment in the book, and here's why: Because it's a metaphor for the most critical decision facing each of us. We all have to reach a relationship moment with God where we decide: are we going to just stay out in the fields at a distance from him, or do we want to know him in a personal way as a God who loves us? Will we just stay churchgoers, or become Christ followers? It's a move from knowing about God intellectually to knowing God heart to heart.

It's a big step. It was a big one for Ruth. But there was a reason she felt she could be so bold in approaching Boaz. It stemmed back to something you might have caught Naomi saying last week that was repeated in our passage this morning. When Naomi found out Ruth was working for Boaz, she told her,

Ruth 2:20

That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers.

Redeem is one of my all time favorite words. I think of it like this: When you deem something, you are assigning it value, forming a judgment of it. "I deem this to be worthy of my attention." To re-deem something is to give it value again after value has been lost, to judge it differently than it may seem to deserve.

Now a kinsman-redeemer was a family member who was invested with power to act on behalf of their less fortunate relatives. There are four ways this could look.

First, a kinsman-redeemer could **get back what was given away**. Property was a big deal for the Israelites. It was like a birthright. God had given each tribe a specific territory within the Promised Land. Property represented God's inheritance and blessing.

But occasionally, money would get tight. When that happened, an Israelite might choose as a last resort to sell off part of their land. While that might provide some cash in the short term, it was something they would regret down the line. It was a loss of livelihood and their anchor in the community. So God made a provision that made it possible to get the land back:

Leviticus 25:25-26

If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative has sold.

That "nearest kinsman" is the same word translated kinsman-redeemer in Ruth. It was their job to recover what had been lost due to hardship.

But suppose a person had already sold off all their property and they still didn't have enough money. What happened then? Something even worse: They might sell themselves into slavery. When that happened, they gave up control of their very selves. But they could have a kinsman-redeemer come to their rescue, because the kinsman-redeemer was charged with **restoring freedom**.

Leviticus 25:47-48

If an alien or a temporary resident among you becomes rich and one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells himself to the alien living among you or to a member of the alien's clan, he retains the right of redemption after he has sold himself. One of his relatives may redeem him.

Having a family member who was willing to do that for you was a source of tremendous hope.

One thing you may be surprised to learn about kinsman-redeemers in the Old Testament is that one of their roles was **killing the killers**. If somebody murdered a member of your family, and you knew who it was, as a kinsman-redeemer you became the avenger and had a license to kill.

Numbers 35:19-20

The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death.

Our modern ears are a little shocked by those words and the kind of justice they practiced over a thousand years before Christ. There actually were safeguards in place to protect anybody wrongly accused. But it shows us what a high a value God places on life that he wouldn't let a murder go unaccounted for. And it shows the tremendous authority placed in the hands of the kinsman-redeemer.

Ruth was needing something else from Boaz. She is concerned about **securing a future**. She had no child, which meant that Elimilech and Naomi's family name would end forever. That was a terrible tragedy in a culture where lineage and heritage were so important. Here again, God established a rule to remedy such situations:

Deuteronomy 25:5-6

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

Ruth wanted a home for herself, but also to secure a place for her and Naomi in the future of Israel, a legacy that would keep going. That was the ultimate blessing.

We too have a kinsman-redeemer in Christ. Boaz is what they call a "type" of Jesus – foreshadowing on a small scale what Jesus does on a much bigger, more profound scale.

We can count on Jesus in each of these four ways. He gets back what was given away. Life can rob you of joy as stress crowds in. Peace gets eroded by worry and anxiety. We exchange contentment for cravings. Before long we are burdened, tense, depressed and unsatisfied. And we look around going, "How did I get here?" We were intended to be whole people who experience God's goodness, and that's what Christ replenishes for us.

All the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, self-control – all that we were meant to have finds its source in Christ.

He also restores freedom. Throughout the New Testament, sin is referred to as slavery. What's the chain around your heart today? Bitterness and anger and an unforgiving spirit, greed, lust, selfishness – they can all lock us up and shut us down. But praise God we have a redeemer! Galatians says:

Galatians 5:1

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

We can get out! We can now escape the trap and power of sin because of the greater power of Jesus.

And Jesus is in the business of killing off our killers. Spiritually speaking, we're all dead at the hands of sin. Part of Christ's redeeming work in us is to kill off that sin. Jesus is not satisfied living side by side with it in our lives. Knowing what it has done to us, he is zealous to root it out and destroy it. His Holy Spirit starts working on our hearts, convicting us of what needs to stop. And its only by his strength that we can do what Paul says and put to death all the evil that belongs to our old nature.

The ultimate goal of Christ's redemption is to create a future for us. He says in Revelation,

Revelation 3:5

He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.

We are talking permanence. When Jesus is our kinsman-redeemer, we're on solid ground for all eternity. There is a future guaranteed for us that overcomes death itself. What an incredible thought.

I came across an amazing picture this week. Some birds had built a nest at the top of a downspout. A big rainstorm came, the gutter filled up and the water was threatening to wash the nest along with the babies down the downspout. So what did the mother bird do? She puffed herself up to twice her normal size and wedged herself into the gutter between the flood and the nest. She put her own life at risk to save her children.

That is a kinsman-redeemer. We might think it's a nice idea to have someone available to bail us out, but we can't forget the incredible cost and great danger involved for the one doing the redeeming. It is a sacrifice. Christ puts himself between us and the flood of trouble that wants to overwhelm us. We are saved by what he gave up for us.

Boaz had the potential to act as Ruth's kinsman-redeemer from the day they met. He had been a relative the whole time she was working in the fields. But up until that night on

the threshing floor, Ruth hadn't asked him to fulfill that responsibility. For the law to kick in, she had to apply it to herself.

That's so much how God is with us. He could easily make us all choose him. He could force us to comply with his will. But God is a God of freedom. He will not impose himself on us, because he wants us to choose him willingly.

Jesus is our kinsman-redeemer, but he leaves it in our hands to apply that to ourselves. We have to come to him with the desire for him to serve that role in our lives.

How does one go about claiming a kinsman-redeemer? What's the proper protocol? Ruth was a foreigner, and all these strange customs must have been somewhat bewildering. Fortunately, she has Naomi, who knows exactly what to do. Naomi walks her through the steps and helps Ruth understand exactly what to do.

As the story unfolds, Ruth is faced with four decisions. And if you're here today wondering about how to have a relationship with God, you can walk through these same steps for yourself. The first question was relatively simple: **What has to go?** Naomi took one look at Ruth's work clothes and said, "This will never do. You've got to change. Get out of those grubby things, go take a shower and put on something nicer."

Granted, Ruth had no money. Even her finery probably wasn't all that fine. The point was not to make it look like she was a queen – the point was simply to show that she was serious about this proposal and was making the request after deliberate thought and effort. It was not to look like a casual whim. She knew what she was doing.

What has to go? I have a friend who sits on the fence with God all the time. He likes the idea of God. He likes to talk to me about faith. He even lets me pray for him. But he knows that if he is serious about wanting a relationship with God it's going to mean a major change in lifestyle for him. And he's not willing to do that yet. At least he's honest. He fears what he would have to give up. But his life is a mess, which makes me want to borrow Dr. Phil's line and say, "How's that working for ya?" Changing your clothes and cleaning up your act isn't always such a bad thing. You may like it.

A second question Ruth had to answer was **Who am I pursuing?** That may sound like a no-brainer. Of course it would be Boaz, right? But even Boaz knew Ruth had other options. There were other, men out there who might have been more attractive on the surface. Boaz praised Ruth for not running after a younger man.

We also have many options of what we can pursue. Choosing Christ means making the conscious choice to not chase after other things as our source of hope. That promotion or that relationship or that house will not fill the God void in me. It will not bring true joy. What am I turning to when I'm in a crisis? What do I think I can count on for my future? Christ wants to be the one we're looking to and a relationship involves abandoning lesser pursuits and saying with conviction, "I choose Christ".

Naomi told Ruth she needed to go at night to the threshing floor, and when she get's there, she is to lie down at his feet. That's about as humble of a position as you can put yourself in. That act speaks volumes, because it tells Boaz that she is placing herself at his mercy and under his authority.

Like Ruth, we have no business waltzing into the throne room of God and saying we want a relationship. We are completely at his mercy. And when we come to Christ, we are faced with the same question Ruth faced: **Where will I place myself?**

Much of what stands in the way of me having a close relationship with Christ is my own pride. Humility is great for other people, but I don't want to see myself as under anyone's authority than my own. But moving in closer to Jesus means acknowledging his rightful place as Lord and bowing at his feet. The old diagram from the four spiritual laws tract still holds true. If there's a throne in your life, who is going to sit on it? Your "S" for self, or Jesus? Placing yourself at his feet is saying, "I need you to be in charge of my life. I'm ready for you to take over."

Ruth isn't just humbling herself, though. She has something she wants from Boaz:

Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.

This is more than "Hey can I have part of that blanket?" This is code for "I want to be in a relationship with you." It's actually a marriage proposal, and Boaz understood it as such. They say that this custom is still used in some parts of the Middle East as a way of getting engaged. It's very picturesque in the Hebrew, because to say the "corner of a garment" you use the same word as "wing" It's a way of saying, "This world's a cold place. Can I come under your wing?"

Earlier, Boaz had prayed a blessing for Ruth:

Ruth 2:12

May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Same word. Now, it is as if Ruth is asking Boaz to fulfill his own prayer. She has had to ask herself, **Am I ready for relationship?** Once the answer was yes, it was a simple matter of putting it to Boaz.

And Boaz was ready! He said, "Do not be afraid; I will do for you all you ask." She didn't even have to spell it all out. Naomi had told Ruth he would know what to do, and he did. Naomi had said he wouldn't rest until it was resolved, and he didn't. Once Ruth came to him, Boaz ran with it.

When we are ready, for a relationship with God, when we finally say, "Okay God. I want to move in closer. I want come under your wing," he's ready. He will say wholeheartedly, "Don't be afraid; I will do for you all you ask." And he will run with it.

But he waits for us to reach that point where we ask him. It is only when we're ready for relationship that we will know him as our kinsman-redeemer.

Some of you know Dean Owen, maybe by way of his daughter Embry. Like everyone else, he wrestled through those steps for himself. I've asked him if he would come and share a little bit about what the process was like for him to go from being "out in the fields" to "under God's wing."

DEAN'S STORY

You might be here this morning and thinking "Honestly, I'm like one of those people out in the field, and I'm perfectly happy with that level of commitment. I don't really want something super personal with God. That sounds too intimidating."

Maybe that's where things are right now. But I would encourage you to explore why that is. What's the fear? Is it your ideas about who God is? Or is it about what the implications would be for your own life if you chose relationship? What's keeping you from all the benefits of God as your kinsman-redeemer?

Life out in the fields is temporary at best. It's unsustainable and getting by on scraps. God invites you into so much more than can be experienced apart from him.

Some of you here today feel more like Ruth. You're tired of treating God like a vending machine, hoping he'll be like good karma and reward you now and then. You're ready for a real relationship, you want to know God as a friend and Father, to communicate with him from the depths of your soul. You want that, but maybe it feels so foreign that you're needing a Naomi to help you walk into it step by step. If that's the case, you can come up and talk to me after the service, or talk to someone else you trust. Or if that feels like too much, you can just check off the box on the tear-off card and drop it in the offering box and somebody will call you this week and walk you through it. But don't let the opportunity slip by. There is no describing the difference between God as an idea and God as a person..

There's a third group of you, though, who crossed that threshold a long time ago. You've committed to a relationship with God, and you're maybe thinking this message is old news. It's easy to hear sermons with someone else in mind.

The question I would put to you is: Am I living like I have a kinsman-redeemer? Is there an area of my life that doesn't reflect the truth of that? Is there something I've lost that I can ask Christ to replace? Have I let myself become enslaved to anything? Is there some sin that needs to be killed off? Where am I looking for my future and security?

Those steps we take to enter that relationship with God are steps we continue to walk through after we're in relationship. There are always things in my life that need to go. I

still need to consciously choose to turn to God. And I have to come back again and again to lay my pride at his feet.

Am I living in light of his rescue? What relationship do I need today?