

Dreams Can Come True

Ruth 4

A little boy was writing a letter to God about a Christmas present he badly wanted. “I’ve been good for six months now,” he wrote. After a moment’s reflection he crossed out “six months” and wrote “three.” After a pause, he changed it to “two weeks.” Finally, he crossed that out too, got up from the table, went over to the family’s nativity scene and removed the figure of Jesus. Then, he went back to his writing: “Dear God, if ever you want to see your son again...”

Sure, it’s a bit of a moldy, oldy, but it raises the question: How passively should we wait on God to make a dream come true and how aggressively must we act to make things happen? This is the dilemma Boaz faced. He was willing and anxious to marry Ruth because he loved her, no doubt, but also to fill the role of kinsman-redeemer, which was to provide for the widow of a dead relative and keep a piece of property in the family. The only problem was that another relative was first-in-line to fulfill this function. Legally, that man’s desire would trump the mutual desire of Ruth and Boaz. So, would Boaz respect the Law of God and the rights of his relative, or might he try to force things to work out as he wanted? Could he risk his dream in order to act obediently?

“There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘All right, then, have it your way.’” - C. S. Lewis

The latter is that pushy, presumptive sort who will do as he pleases and even rationalize that it was God’s will. We will see that Boaz chose to honor God’s law, even over his love for Ruth.

I. The Surprising Integrity of the Romance (1–4)

¹Meanwhile 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.

²Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, “Sit here,” and they did so. ³Then 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. ⁴I 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.

A. Boaz Had Already Surrendered His Dream to God

Boaz wished to marry Ruth, but his wishes must cede to those of another. Naomi rightly assured Ruth that Boaz was the kind of man who would settle the matter, one way or the other, that very day. When the couple left the threshing floor after making a tentative plan to wed, Ruth returned to Naomi, and Boaz headed straight to the city gate, a place that served as a public forum and where town leaders presided over matters of law. There was only one gate in most little towns, so if one townsman wanted to rendezvous with another, that was the place to wait him out.

Boaz was there bright and early. Eventually, the relative passed by. "My friend" is a very loose translation of a phrase best rendered "so and so." Now, certainly, Boaz knew his relative's name. He probably used it. "So and so" is the author's technique of conspicuously not naming this man. Perhaps, he did not know his name. Perhaps, he did not think he deserved any recognition or scorn he might receive from some readers. In God's scheme of things, his name is irrelevant to the story, for it would be Boaz who would step up in regard to the needs of Naomi and Ruth.

Boaz is adamant to do everything on the up and up. He assembles a full complement of elders to witness everything. He informs his relative, "cousin so and so," that Naomi is looking to dispose of what is probably her only asset. "I should bring this matter to your attention" translates a Hebrew figure of speech meaning "uncover the ear." The idea is that the relative pull his hair back so that he won't miss a thing. Boaz is being very straightforward. "You have first dibs at redemption, but if you pass, I intend to." The elders are there to hear everything. A pang of grief may have shot through Boaz when "so and so" said, "Sure! I can always use more land."

B. This Was Foreign to How the World Pursues Its Dreams and Romances

Imagine if this story had been played out according to the values of the age. There was no king during the era of the judges upholding God's Law. Everyone did as he saw fit. Boaz could have married Ruth and counted on his relative's ignorance of the law (from which, apparently, he did suffer). In days as corrupt as those of the judges, a man might knock off any rival standing in his way. Imagine if this story were played out in our culture. I see the way paved for adultery, wheelin'-and-dealin' and all sorts of other shenanigans. A modern soap opera account of this triangle would be written in such a way that we, the audience, would be so rooting for "true love" to win out. We might overlook almost any behavior on the part of Ruth or Boaz.

When we are not zealous for God's Law or cognizant of His authority and His holiness, we can justify many sins in the pursuit of our dreams. We need to be careful about some of our rhetoric these days. Sometimes, God brings blessings out of our sins. That does not mean that He willed, led us into or sanctioned our actions, only that He salvaged them. Praise God when he does that, but just keep straight who it is that actually wills our disobedience, and it's not Him. Boaz was determined to do the right thing according to the Law of *YAHWEH*. Winning the girl was not the endgame. Honoring God was, so Boaz risked his plans with Ruth in order to see what God would bring to pass.

There is a kind of Christianity rampant today that essentially teaches that God exists to be the vehicle for you to achieve your dreams. This message of motivational, pop psychology fills the airways, but its preachers seldom speak to matters of self-denial, surrendering one's dreams for some greater cause, duty to God, His displeasure with our self-absorption or our need for holiness. Those who proclaim only what people like to hear may draw huge crowds, but they are a dime a dozen. Boaz could have pursued his dream. It was more important to honor God and get it right.

II. The Selfish Indifference of the Relative (5-8)

⁵Then 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."

A. It Sounded Like a Sweet Deal, Until ...

I get the sense that “cousin. so and so” was not really clued into the intent and spirit behind the law of “kinsman-redeemer.” He latched onto the privilege of being the closest relative more than onto the duty. He was looking for an acquisition that would expand his holdings. When Boaz reminded him that there was a wife that came with the package, he said, “Whoa! That just changes everything.” This meant that any first son by Ruth would be considered the heir of Mahlon, her deceased husband, as well as the rightful heir of that property. Any older sons he may have already had would have no standing in regard to this particular plot of real estate.

He protested, “I might endanger my own estate,” meaning to mar, weaken or diminish it, and he was right. He would have to provide the initial capital outlay for the land. He would have to raise the child as his own. The future of the property was already determined as a matter of Law, so he would have no option to resell it. From a purely fiscal perspective, the transaction would be all investment and no return. It was all just too sticky, so he said, “Boaz, you feel free to redeem it. If I do it, it won’t be an investment. It would be more like an act of benevolence.” And, I wonder if Boaz was able to resist the urge to say, “Well, duhh!”

B. Honoring God Is Not Always about What is Advantageous to Me

The law of kinsman-redeemer was not on the books so that one man’s death might be another’s opportunity and good fortune. It existed to maintain family lines and family allotments of property dating back to when the Hebrews occupied the Promised Land. This system minimized the havoc of poverty upon whole families. Land was never permanently sold anyway. It reverted back to the original owners every fiftieth year. Essentially, a purchaser just enjoyed what the land produced. God’s intent was to perpetuate His covenant nation, not to make one man rich at the expense of another’s family.

Living brothers were required by the Law to fulfill this role of kinsman-redeemer. One might question why any thinking man not required to do so would ever step up and perform this service. It could only be from a desire to reflect some value that was important to *YAHWEH*, such as family loyalty, kindness or just “getting” what *YAHWEH* had in mind for His community. In fact, if a brother required by Law to marry his deceased brother’s widow just flat did not want to do it, the Law provided an out. The widow would publicly spit in his face, take one of his shoes and pronounce a legacy of indifference upon him, but that was worth it to some fellows. In this case, the man removed his own sandal and gave it to Boaz, which was a symbol of a contractual transfer of a right or a property. All that spitting and name-calling would not prove necessary.

Again, this is a lesson that desperately needs to be grasped anew in this modern age of the church. Christ’s disciples are not above their Master. If He did not come to be served but to serve, then how does it figure that your dreams and desires are somehow at the center of God’s cosmic agenda? We remember Boaz because, even though he loved Ruth, he chose to trust God and to honor and to obey Him. Perhaps, Ruth would be the reward of that faith. Perhaps, she would become the wife of another man. Without knowing the outcome, Boaz honored *YAHWEH*. Then, there was “cousin so and so”. He wasn’t necessarily a vile or rotten fellow. But, confronted with the privilege of duty, he showed himself to be a tad selfish. Which kind of a kingdom legacy do you want to leave? Honoring God is no guarantee that you will be advanced in this lifetime.

III. The Supportive Interest of the Rulers (9–12)

A. Boaz Reiterates His Righteous Case verses 9, 10

⁹Then 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. ¹⁰I 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!"

When we met Boaz in chapter 2, the author introduced him as "a man of standing." This term seems to have addressed more than simply his wealth, power and real estate holdings. He has already demonstrated great kindness. He has already demonstrated a faith that will risk his own happiness in order to give due respect to the Law of God and to the rights of another. Boaz was "a man of standing" not only because he was a success, but because he was also a man of honor.

Boaz made his case one final time. "I am marrying Ruth and fulfilling the role of kinsman-redeemer for the right reasons, to maintain Mahlon's family line and to protect his holdings." He did not pretend that his love for Ruth was irrelevant anymore than I would imply that romance, passion and God's goodness do not factor into our own discovery of a godly spouse. They do. And, Ruth did, in fact, turn out to be God's gift to Boaz. But, from his frame of reference, God's Law spoke only to the matter of Mahlon's line and to the matter of "cousin so and so's" rights. So, God's Law would govern how Boaz must now order his steps, even in this matter of the heart.

A great distance of time and space separates us from most of the laws governing God's covenant nation, but He has spoken to our covenantal unions, marriage and otherwise. Still, Christians persist in marrying non-believers, convinced they can bring them around. How many believers look for God's validation in some business venture or some inappropriate relationship AFTER they have jumped rather than before? God is the Author of great blessings in the realms of commerce, romance and every other walk of life, but from a believer's frame of reference, those walks of life must be conducted according to boundaries established by God. We see this in Boaz.

B. Good Character Secures Good Will verses 11, 12

Boaz was determined that everything in this matter be well-established. When he summoned his relative, he explained why he also had gathered ten elders. He begins and ends his summation with the identical phrase: "Today, you are witnesses." Now, they confirm what he wants to hear, saying, "We are witnesses," but enough already. They want to move on to commenting on the joy God has brought into his life because they are big fans of Boaz and Ruth. They know the story of Ruth's love and sacrifice for Naomi. They have watched Boaz do the right thing, not only at this moment, but all the time. It was time to move out of the court of law and into the courts of joy.

The council blesses the union. "We hope Ruth will build up Israel just like Rachel and Leah did!" (I want to be at the next wedding reception to see the look on the bride's face when someone raises a glass and says, "I hope she gives you twelve sons!") They want Boaz, a person they believe to be among Bethlehem's finest men to have a fine family and legacy. From this exchange, we learn that people tend to wish you well when you live honorably and treat others well.

IV. The Substantial Importance to the Redeemed (13-22)

A. Bethlehem's Women Recognized God's Hand verse 13-15

¹³So 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. ¹⁴The 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! ¹⁵He 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."

For recording purposes, this child was Mahlon's son, making him Naomi's grandson and heir. It is now this child that is identified as the kinsman-redeemer. He is the one who will restore fullness to a life she once described as empty. He is the son who will rescue her from her poverty and care for her as she grows old. The women of Bethlehem attributed all this to the goodness of *YAHWEH*, but they did not fail to praise her Moabite daughter-in-law. They acclaim Ruth as better to Naomi than seven sons. Legacies and standing were established through sons in ancient Israel. Seven was a number of fullness. These women were not denigrating the importance of sons. They were simply celebrating the tenacity of the love and loyalty of Ruth towards Naomi.

B. The Author Recognizes God's Hand verses 16-22

These final verses disclose why Ruth likely was written, to provide some background on David, Israel's greatest king. A partial genealogy connects David to Perez, a son of Judah. Only a few key names appear. Amminadab was the father-in-law of Aaron, Moses' brother and the first high priest. Salmon is the husband of Rahab, the heroine-prostitute of the battle of Jericho. Many generations are skipped to bring us to Boaz, who is just three generations removed from David. Still, enough names appear to assure the reader of the significance of David's family tree.

C. We See God at Work Where Even the Author Could Not

These same names appear again in a larger genealogy that appears in *Matthew 1*, the one that traces Jesus the Christ back to Abraham. Certain parallels are hard to miss. Someone needed rescue from the misery and poverty that accompany death. God worked in circumstances that the casual observer might call good fortune or amazing coincidence to produce a Baby, a Kinsman-Redeemer, Who could bring rescue and remedy to lives that seem utterly empty and broken.

Ruth's simple story was all the story that the original author intended to tell, but it seems clear to me that the Holy Spirit was directing our thoughts toward more. If a good man, a gentleman like Boaz, will love and redeem one who is an outcast and an alien, bringing her into covenant fellowship with himself and with the people of *YAHWEH*, then, what can the perfect love of God, Who became flesh so as to enter our world as a Redeemer, accomplish for a world of outcasts?