

Ruth's Reward

“May the Lord repay you for what you have done.
May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of
Israel, under whose wings you have come to take
refuge.” Ruth 2:12

The book of Judges concludes with the Israelites desperate to repopulate the tribe of Benjamin after having almost annihilated them. Wives were obtained for the six hundred surviving Benjamites by sparing four hundred young women from the slaughter of Jabesh Gilead and stealing another two hundred women from Shiloh. The scope and extent of Israel's evil appears almost unsurmountable and the big picture of Israel's future looks extremely bleak. The author of Judges leaves the strong impression that Israel has become even worse than the pagan inhabitants of the land. They have succeeded in doing the unthinkable, surpassing the evil of the Canaanites. Instead of obeying God fully, they had disobeyed God completely; instead of keeping the covenant, they had broken the covenant; instead of being God's treasured possession among the nations, they had become instruments of sin. Far from being a kingdom of priests, they had become a gang of iniquity.

But as discouraging as the big picture of Israel was during the time of the Judges there was still hope. And even though the famous line, “Israel had no king; [and] everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25), aptly described the Israelites as a whole, there were notable exceptions. The book of Ruth describes one family who did not bow before Baal and who continued to trust in Yahweh in spite of famine, death and destitution. Against the apostasy and anarchy of Israel's dark ages, Naomi, affirmed through her actions the words of Joshua, “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Josh 24:15). Out of the chaos and violence of Judges emerges a true story of God-centered lamentation, devotion and commitment that has continued to inspire and instruct God's people through the ages.

Naomi's Lamentation

The story begins with a family of four forced from their home in Bethlehem because of a severe famine. Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, along with their

two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, “went to live for a while in Moab” (1:2). The name Bethlehem meant “house of bread,” but it had become a place of famine. Elimelech’s name meant “God is King” or “My God is King,” but the circumstances suggested otherwise. Naomi’s name meant “pleasant,” “gracious,” “delightful,” but her life was filled with pain, grief and sorrow. First her husband died and then her two married sons died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, widowed. The austerity of the narrative fits the stark reality of three destitute women. In ten years Naomi had become a destitute widow in a strange land. Through her, the tragic era of the judges is shown in a personal way. Her dialogue reveals the soul of a woman of God who endured the extremes of personal tragedy in faith.

The story of Naomi and her family occurs early in the day of the judges. This is based on the fact that Rahab was the mother of Boaz (Mt 1:5). Joshua’s legacy was still fresh and Naomi’s deep seated faith in Yahweh comes through in everything she says. Her experience reminds us of Job. One disaster after another. Her losses were catastrophic. First, she became a poor refugee, then a destitute widow, and finally a grieving parent. Everything that was her's was taken from her and she is left with two foreign daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. In the tradition of Job’s friends, the Talmud regards the deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon and Kilion as punishment, but there is no indication in the Bible that Naomi and her family were being punished because they left Judah and went to Maob in search of food and livelihood. Like Abraham and Jacob, who went to Egypt in search of food, Elimelech and Naomi followed the Lord faithfully. Nor were they punished because their sons married Moabite women. It is true that the Old Testament issued warnings and prohibitions against the Israelites intermarrying with the Canaanites. These commands were meant to preserve the people's faith in God and obedience to God's Word. But as the story unfolds it is clear that the family's faith in God was not compromised in a foreign land but strengthened. Orpah and Ruth were drawn into this family circle of faith in Yahweh.

The stage is now set for the drama of the story. Naomi heard that "the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them" (1:6). Naomi’s ears were still open to the good news of what the Lord was doing. She was not about to sit down and die. Others might have been filled with self pity and anger, but Naomi was prepared to move again. As long as the Lord was “coming to the aid of his people” there was hope. Her determination to return home illustrates the sentiment of the psalm, "I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the

Lord in the land of the living" (Ps 27:13). Naomi gathered up what little she had, said her goodbyes, and in the company of her two Moabite daughters-in-law headed for Bethlehem.

What made the journey difficult was not the distance but the direction. She was retracing the route she traveled more than ten years earlier. Each step was a reminder of her pain and loss. When she left Bethlehem she was a wife and mother, now she was returning as a widow with her two widowed daughters-in-law. Somewhere on the road to Bethlehem Naomi came to a decision. Suddenly she announced to Orpah and Ruth, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband" (1:8). Naomi used the special name for God, Yahweh. Her deep commitment to God came through in everything she said. Her tone was firm, we can hear it in her words. These two young woman had a future and they didn't need to care for their mother-in-law. She rejected a guilt-induced dependency. Her farewell was a benediction, a blessing, she wished to free her daughters-in-law from the burdens of their past.

Orpah and Ruth were not easily persuaded, through their tears they insisted, "We will go back with you to your people" (1:10). But Naomi persisted, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me?" She could not bear the burden of their future. She had nothing to offer them. They were poor widowed foreigners with bleak prospects of marriage. It was out of love that Naomi told them to turn back. If she could do it all over again she would give her sons in marriage to Orpah and Ruth, but that was impossible. "Would you wait until they grew up? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!" (1:13).

To our ears this bottom line sounds like Naomi is blaming God, but that impression only reveals the deficiency of our theology. Like Job, Naomi sees everything in her life under the sovereignty of God. Her thoughts echo Job, her life was not ruled by chance and misfortune, but by the hand of the Almighty. "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Jb 1:21).

Learning to lament is a spiritual discipline essential for spiritual maturity and

Naomi's example is important for us. Lamentation is a sign of life. Consciousness, no matter how painful, is better than being comatose. Expressed sorrow is better than repressed pain. Naomi understood her situation. She was alive to pain and grief, sorrow and sadness. What she experienced was not normal. It was awful. It was painful. She refused to pretend that it was okay, but neither did she use her bitter circumstances to turn her away from the Lord God. She was honest about her pain before God and that places her in the good company of Job and the psalmists.

Naomi also shows us that our anguish ought to be proportionate to our ordeal. She didn't whine, she wept. She didn't blame, she mourned. She didn't complain, she cried. Naomi weighed her grief; she didn't believe in infinite sadness; she did not sorrow as those without hope. If she had, she never would have set out for Bethlehem. Naomi would have laid down and died, but she didn't. She went forth weeping, but she went forth (Ps 126:6). Every word of her lament made sense. Suffering was no excuse for immaturity. Lamentation done well serves as a restraint that preserves body and mind and strengthens relationships. As Eugene Peterson wisely observes, "Lament--making the most of our loss without getting bogged down in it--is a primary way of staying *in* the story" (Peterson, *Leap over a Wall*, p.121).

Naomi teaches us that the sovereignty of God is not a theological abstraction, but a practical reality. The Lord was sovereign over her situation. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Ps 46:1). Every time Naomi spoke she referred to God's action: the Lord's kindness; the Lord's will; the Lord's hand. Naomi was God-centered, God-dependent, God-conscious. Life was not a game of chance; a matter of fate or fortune--a pick of the draw, a roll of the dice, a flip of the coin. God was in this mess: "the Lord's hand has gone out against me!" Thankfully, Naomi does not see herself as the victim of famine and disease. Suffering is endowed with greater weight and meaning when God is the author of the story. Life cannot be reduced to time and chance, happenstance and accident. Naomi's boldness reminds us of Job and Jeremiah, Habakkuk and David. Everyone who lives by faith in God, has learned, often the hard way, not only the wisdom of resting in the providence of God but also wrestling with the restlessness of the providence of God.

Naomi's experience offers a beautiful illustration of how true lamentation strengthens rather than destroys the faith of others. How we sorrow may either

stimulate or stifle true spiritual growth. Grief can be a cause for growth, not only in ourselves but in others. Orpah and Ruth learned how to grieve from Naomi. She naturally took the lead and guided her two daughters-in-law in how to be faithful in the midst of painful loss. She assumed this role indirectly--implicitly.

Lamentation is not a technique. There is no "how-to" manual for sorrow. She didn't volunteer for duty, she was thrust into her role. As strange as it may sound, Naomi's lamentation is a blessing, especially to Ruth. Her grief is grace filled. Her lament did not get in the way of her love for her daughters (1:13). Naomi's sadness did not solicit pity, it inspired strength. Her sorrow invoked the presence of God. It was not Naomi's success that convinced Ruth of the reality of the God of Israel, but her sorrow. God used Naomi's response to tragedy to transform Ruth into a woman of God. Naomi's grief over her family may be compared to God's grief over Israel. Her sorrow before God may be a reflection of the heart of God.

Ruth's Devotion

Orpah "kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her." It is extremely difficult to be in the presence of mature saints who live on raw faith and earnest lament. Naomi was stepping out in faith and returning to Bethlehem. She was crying out in lament and grieving before God. Orpah said goodbye to Naomi, but Ruth "clung" to her. It is the same word used in Genesis to describe the relationship between husband and wife, "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife," or as an older version says, he will "cleave to his wife" (Gen 2:24). Ruth refused to leave Naomi. Her words were filled with confidence and conviction. They sound more like a declaration. Her mind was made up and she was determined.

"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me" (1:16-17).

The impact of Naomi on Ruth was so great that she was willing to leave everything to follow Naomi and Naomi's God. Ruth made it clear that her identification was complete. She did this in several ways. First, Ruth owned the decision for herself: "Don't urge me to leave you..." In saying this Ruth freed Naomi from feeling responsible for her. Second, she affirmed her identity and

solidarity with Naomi's people emphatically: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." Thirdly, Ruth stressed that this was a decision for life. Naomi was an older woman, many years older than Ruth and she could be expected to die years before Ruth, but Ruth pledged her commitment for life. "Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried." Finally, she invoked the name of Yahweh, the Lord. This wasn't a generic religious commitment for Ruth. She evidenced a personal relationship with the Lord for herself. "May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." In other words, "May the Lord be between you and me forever and ever" (see 1 Sam 20:42).

We cannot help but feel that Ruth's response is evidence of Naomi's effective witness. Naomi's life before God was so real that it encouraged Ruth to join her and become part of God's salvation story. The power of authentic God-centered living serves, often quite unconsciously, to attract outsiders, strangers, seekers to the grace of God. There is no substitute for humble companionship to draw people to God. Celebrity testimonies, spiritual success stories, manipulative "felt-need" sermons may gather crowds, but nothing compares to authentic friendship, honest lament, and genuine prayer for bringing people to Christ. When we read of Ruth's passion and devotion to Naomi and her God we can't help but think of her great grandson, David. Ruth, a Moabite young woman found God through her God-fearing, God-centered mother-in-law, Naomi. She is a reminder to us of what it means to follow Jesus: "In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he or she has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). This is where the story of David begins and it is a great beginning.

Getting into the gospel story and becoming a participant in salvation history, is not that difficult. No matter who we are or where we have come from, we are invited into the story. Naomi's lamentation brought her into the story. Through lamentation she became painfully, yet powerfully alive to the providence of God. Ruth got into the story through her devotion to Naomi and Naomi's God. Together they got into the story and stayed in the story, not only through lamentation and devotion, but by God's sovereign care.

When they arrived at Bethlehem we are told that the whole town was stirred because of them and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" This reception was the first of several signs of blessing. Consider what it would have been like if Naomi and Ruth returned and no one cared, no one greeted them, no one listened

to their grief. At least Naomi had a hometown to come home to. Nor can we overlook God's blessing in having them arrive at harvest time. The people of Israel had a longstanding tradition, one prescribed by God, that required that part of the harvest should be left for the poor to gather. "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest" (Lev 19:9). They were to show they cared for the poor by being purposefully careless with the harvest. Whether it was wheat or olives or grapes the people of God were instructed to "leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow" (Deut 24:20).

Another important blessing Naomi and Ruth discovered in Bethlehem was the genuine goodwill of the people. Ruth could have been maligned, made the butt of Moabite jokes, or targeted for discrimination, but instead people respected Ruth the Moabitess. They spoke well of her and appreciated what she had done for Naomi. We all know enough about life not to take this for granted. It was the sign of a healthy community that knew how to rejoice in the truth. The people of Bethlehem delighted in the story of Ruth. Naomi had arrived home to a community shaped by the commands of God. Ruth must have been impressed. Provision was made for her physical needs and her self-respect. She was treated with dignity and honor even though she was a poor stranger, a foreigner and a widow. Providentially she began to glean in a field owned by Boaz, one of her father-in-law's relatives. These are the not-to-be-taken-for-granted blessings from God that helped turn Naomi's lamentation into Ruth's love story. Their sad story was about to become a good news story.

Boaz's Commitment

Boaz got into the story by being a man of substance. Some say his name meant "in him is strength," others say, his name meant "quickness." In either case he lived up to his name. In a day "when everyone did what was right in his own eyes," Boaz was the exception. He was a man of principle, who acted on his convictions.

Couples enjoy telling how they first met. Even after many years the memory of their first encounter is remembered as if it were yesterday and can be told in vivid detail. Ruth would never forget the first words she heard Boaz say. She was bending over, gleaning whatever was left behind the harvesters, when she heard the voice of Boaz say, "The Lord be with you!" and his workers responded, "The Lord bless you!" (2:4). We could dismiss this as a customary exchange between

employer and employee, but why should we? The story is told with such simplicity that to include this greeting underscores its significance. It is the storyteller's artful way of giving us a glimpse into the character of Boaz. He is conscious of the Lord in the midst of daily work and relationships. Benediction and business go hand-in-hand for Boaz. His first words to Ruth will always be remembered as a blessing; his first thought was of the Lord.

Ruth must have also been impressed with how caring Boaz was. He entreated her with compassion, "My daughter, listen to me." The spirituality of Boaz is practical and down-to-earth. He assured her that she belonged working in his field and invited her to join his servant girls. He expressed his concern over Ruth's safety, having already warned "the men not to touch her." He made provision for her comfort, "Whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled" (2:8-9). Ruth was surprised by Boaz--his graciousness, his respect, his evident concern and care for her. "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me--a foreigner?" (2:10). She never expected this kind of treatment. "The Lord be with you!" Indeed, the Lord was with her. She had never imagined that she would be treated this well. But for Boaz there was no mystery behind her treatment. She deserved it. The story of Ruth had been told throughout the town of Bethlehem and had earned for her a well-deserved reputation. Boaz admired her and he had every intention of honoring her devotion to Naomi and Naomi's God.

"I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband--how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before" (2:11). Many men might not have cared about Ruth's devotion to Naomi, but Boaz did. And those who might care, would have never said anything about it, especially to Ruth. But Boaz was not like other men. We find Boaz to be a man of substance, secure in his own identity, wise in his understanding of other people, loving in his care for others, and he was not afraid to show it. He is drawn into the story by virtue of his love for God, and his respect and compassion for Ruth.

The exceptional nature of what Boaz did in his first encounter with Ruth ought to be appreciated and commended. Men with such strength and action are few and far between. Boaz was ready and willing to encourage and bless. "May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (2:12). Ruth had

met a man as God-centered as her mother-in-law Naomi. His benediction was rich in biblical imagery, metaphors that his great grandson David will also use, such as,

"Hide me in the shadow of your wings" (Ps.17:8);

"Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings" (Ps.36:7);

"Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed" (Ps.57:1);

"Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings" (Ps.63:7);

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty" (Ps.91:1).

The imagery of God protecting his people under his wings as a hen gathers her chicks also has significance later in the story as we will see.

When Ruth returned home at the end of her long but productive day, she told Naomi about her conversation with Boaz and recounted how gracious he was to her. Before Ruth could even tell her story Naomi was praising the Lord. Her bushel of barley was proof enough of blessing, but when Ruth said she labored in Boaz' field, Naomi was overjoyed. "The Lord bless him! The Lord has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead. That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers" (2:20).

Joy had been so long in coming that the storyteller wants everyone to appreciate the importance of this turn of events. This day in the life of Ruth will have significance for eternity. What appeared on the surface to be a chance encounter between Ruth and Boaz is all part of God's gracious plan. The Lord is sovereign and was in this from beginning to end. All three of these God-centered, God-shaped individuals have been brought together by divine appointment. As emphasized earlier, life is not a game of chance; a matter of fate or fortune--a pick of the draw, a roll of the dice, a flip of the coin. God was in this success, just as God had been in the mess: "the Lord has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead" (2:20).

After Ruth met Boaz she never left empty-handed. When they were about to be engaged Boaz poured out a generous supply of barley into her shawl and then put it on her. The weight may have been around eighty-five pounds (Morris, *Judges and*

Ruth, p.294), which was not impossible for a strong young woman to carry. Remember Naomi's lament when she returned from Moab, "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty" (1:20). The generosity of Boaz turned a sad story into a love story. From what we know of the era the judges, the blessing of Boaz, a man shaped by God's precepts, principles and providence, was truly exceptional. Ruth's response to Boaz's compassion was one of humility and amazement: "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant--though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls" (2:13).

Selflessness pervades the story of Ruth. Naomi was concerned for Ruth: first, that she would be safe working in the fields and then also, that Ruth would find a home where she would be well provided for. Ruth's over-riding concern was to provide for her mother-in-law, Naomi. From the start Boaz approached Ruth with admiration for her devotion to Naomi and offered her genuine hospitality and compassion. In an effort to please the other, each one was personally satisfied and fulfilled. Their individuality was shaped and strengthened in a caring community, in contrast to the spirit of the times. Their selflessness made this love story possible and illustrates the New Testament principle of discipleship, expressed by Jesus, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:39). Unlike the typical religious rhetoric of the judges, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz never spoke the name of God in vain, but in faith! They saw the Lord at work. The Lord God was in this story and they were filled with gratitude.

David's Great Grandmother

Naomi's selfless concern for Ruth caused her to take action on Ruth's behalf. Finding a home and husband for Ruth was one of her responsibilities. And being the God-centered woman that she was, Naomi had a practical plan. "Tonight Boaz, our kinsman-redeemer, will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor" (3:2). The immediacy of the story is triggered by the word, "tonight." Naomi's timing meant that Ruth did not have long to worry about what she was to do. Nor did Ruth lack for specific directions. Naomi was in charge of the details. "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" (3:2-4). Naomi's strategy may sound simple, but it was essential. Somebody needed to say it and Ruth's parental advisor was the

person to do it. Naomi's plan was supportive and reassuring to Ruth, and sensitive to Boaz. She advised Ruth of an ancient custom in order to signify her desire to marry Boaz. Then she assured the couple's privacy by making sure this would take place sometime in the middle of the night.

Naomi initiated the action. There was something that she could do to set-in-motion God's blessing and she did it. Not surprisingly the action which began with her, ends with her holding Ruth's newborn son. Given the trust between Ruth and Naomi it does not surprise us that Ruth responded, "I will do whatever you say." Ruth's acceptance of Naomi's advice led her to act boldly, but humbly. Naomi's initiative did not hinder Ruth, but freed her to act. She went to the threshing floor and noted where Boaz laid down after a hard day's work and a good meal. We are told that "Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down" (3:7). In the middle of the night something startled Boaz and he woke to discover 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" (3:9).

What may impresses us as an obscure custom was immediately understood by Boaz. Ruth used an expressive metaphor to ask Boaz to marry her. For Ruth to say, "Spread the corner of your garment over me," was the same as a man saying to a woman, "Will you wear my engagement ring?" For Boaz to cover Ruth with his garment was symbolic of bringing Ruth under his care. Ruth's proposal recalls to mind Boaz' benediction: "May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (2:12). The blessing of God is clearly seen in this whole scene. Ruth boldly, yet humbly asked Boaz to be the agent of that blessing, by using a similar metaphor. Her request for marriage was appropriate on biblical grounds, because Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer.

True to his name, Boaz immediately removed whatever awkwardness Ruth might have felt. "The Lord bless you, my daughter." Once again the storyteller wants us know that this man's first thought is the Lord and his first act is to bless in the name of the Lord. Up until now, everything has pointed to Ruth's ineligibility for marriage. Naomi's lamentation at the outset discourages us from thinking that Ruth's marital prospects were bright. Ruth was a foreigner from Moab, a fact that the author stressed seven times. She was a poor, destitute widow. But Boaz implied just the opposite. He saw her desire for him was an act of kindness. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the

younger men, whether rich or poor." The last phrase, "whether rich or poor," would indicate that Ruth could have had her pick of the eligible young men in Bethlehem. Once again Boaz surprises us with his graciousness in his ability to praise Ruth. "All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character" (3:11).

Out of love and devotion, Boaz acted immediately on Ruth's behalf. Evidently being a decisive man, Boaz determined to clarify his right to marry Ruth the very next morning at the city gate. The one complication in all of this was that Boaz was not first in line to redeem Naomi's family line. There was a relative of Elimelech who was more immediate than Boaz. "Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, I vow that, as surely as the Lord lives, I will do it. Lie here until morning" (3:13). Before Ruth left in the morning Boaz filled her garment with a gift of barley, as much as Ruth could carry, generous enough to show beyond a shadow of a doubt that Boaz felt blessed. When Ruth told Naomi everything that happened she finished by quoting Boaz, "Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed." His gift confirmed his words. Naomi knew Boaz was a man of his word and a man of action. "The man will not rest until the matter is settled today" (3:18).

There was more than a legal technicality that stood in the way of Boaz and Ruth. In order for this to work out the lawful terms of the kinsman-redeemer provision needed to be honored. Boaz wasted no time arriving at the city gate where such matters were transacted. When the relative next in line came, Boaz convened an elder counsel. Boaz proposed that the kinsman-redeemer buy Naomi's land to keep it in the family as the law of God directed. "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."

We don't know if Boaz groaned inside when his relative said, "I will redeem it." But we do know that Boaz was prepared. "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess (this, by the way is the first time he has mentioned Ruth) you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property" (4:5). This double financial burden changed the man's mind. He flat out said, "I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it" (4:6). The land alone might have proven profitable, but supporting a Moabite wife must have made the deal unacceptable. He signified his forfeiture by taking his sandal off and giving it to

Boaz. We would sign off on a contract, they gave up a shoe. According to custom, he waived his rights and turned over the responsibility to Boaz. The sacrifice was too great for the anonymous relative. In his effort to preserve his name and inheritance he remained nameless.

Boaz proved to be a true kinsman-redeemer. Motivated out of love for Ruth, he put his family obligation before his personal security. He accepted his responsibility, not as a burden, but as a privilege. My impression is that he boldly announced that he had bought Naomi's land and acquired Ruth the Moabitess as his wife. He was proud to carry on Elimelech's name. "Today you are witnesses," Boaz began, and he ended with the same pronouncement, "Today you are witnesses" (4:9-10). What Boaz did for Elimelech by taking Ruth as his wife and maintaining "the name of the dead," is what Yahweh did for Israel. The story of Ruth shows us how the Lord God continued to work in spite of the era of the Judges. When the elders gave their blessing to Boaz they referred to Rachel and Leah and drew attention to the blessing of the God of Jacob (4:11).

We learn a great deal about the kind of action we are called to do by observing Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. The way they showed love, assumed responsibility and honored God in their daily lives serves as a model for us. The apostle Paul prayed for the church, that we would "live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim 2:2). It is apparent that these three servants of Yahweh fulfilled in their day what the apostle encouraged Christ's followers to do. "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 Thess 4:11-12). When Christ is central to our work and family then people will pay attention to Jesus. The Gospel does not need to be advertized, it needs to be internalized and lived out. When Christians make daily decisions that reflect Christ, more people will make decisions for Christ, the way Ruth did.

The story of Ruth anticipates the story of David. We feel the passion of David in his great grandmother when she vows her commitment to Naomi and Naomi's God. We hear the speech and song of the psalmist in Boaz' imagery when he says to Ruth, "May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." The short genealogy at the end of the book only confirms what we expected. This is not a mini-series or a romantic novelette or a human-interest story. Ruth is part of a much larger story, with a beginning in

Genesis and an end in Christ, that stretches far beyond this ancient tale. Her life fits into the world of God's making; shaped by God's word; saved by God's action. As the story of Ruth anticipates the story of David, it also presupposes the work of God. This is how true theology comes to us, not as an abstract list of doctrinaire truths, but as salvation history calling out for our participation. Theology is not the definition of terms, but a description of God at work.

The sovereign, saving work of God is evident everywhere in the story of Ruth. God is not added to the story as an after-thought, but God is there in the precepts that shaped the Bethlehem biblical community. God is present in the providence of his sovereign will and readily apparent in his gracious provision. The storyteller insisted on our awareness of God. If we are going to be true to the story we must remember that everything is centered in God: lamentation, devotion, and commitment. God is present in the experience of these ordinary people making salvation history and shaping not only their destiny, but ours as well. Judges concludes with a tragic picture of the Israelites conspiring through murder and kidnaping to obtain wives for the Benjamites, but the book of Ruth concludes with the sovereign Lord of History bringing David's great grandparents together in marriage.

We cannot read this story without thinking of Jesus, the Son of David. The mere mention of all this taking place in Bethlehem inspires our imagination. When Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem from Moab with nothing but what they could carry on their backs, we think of Joseph and Mary, when she was about to give birth to Jesus, traveling to the city of David. Together they shared faith and trust in the sovereign God, believing that Bethlehem was not the end of the road, but the start of God's new work. Ruth reminds us of Mary. Her humility and devotion are as striking as Mary's words, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said," and they might just as well have come from Ruth (Lk 1:38). Joseph had qualities of dignity and compassion that remind us of Boaz. Both men got into the story by owning their God-given responsibility. At the end of the story, when Naomi held Obed, Ruth's newborn son, in her arms and praised God, she reminds us of Anna, the eighty-four year old widow, who prayed over the baby Jesus in the temple. She "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk 2:38).

The story of Ruth helps us to see the depth of salvation history. Although many people come to Jesus with little understanding of who he is, God's Word leads us

into a deeper understanding of this unfolding revelation. We come to understand who Jesus is in the context of God's salvation-history. True evangelism appreciates how God rooted the concepts of covenant and redemption among the ancient people of Israel, in order to fulfill his greater plan of redemption and salvation for the world. As Ruth and Naomi needed their kinsman-redeemer in order to meet their material needs and preserve their family name, we need Jesus, our Kinsman-Redeemer. As Boaz sacrificed his personal security on their behalf, Jesus sacrificed himself completely on our behalf.

We learn from the ancestors of David, Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, Mary and Joseph, how to trust in God and stay in the story. We begin to understand in a deeper and more meaningful way how to live in this gospel story, full of faith and hope. The real work of following Jesus is right before us in our immediate relationships and daily tasks. As the descendants of David, we work out our salvation in the ordinary course of daily events with fear and trembling, just the way Ruth did, because it is God who works in us to will and to act according to his good purpose (Phil 2:12-13).