

Redeeming Ruth, week 5
God's Hand in Our Shrewdness (Ruth 4:1–12)

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“If you will redeem [the land], redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you.”

— Ruth 4:4

Last week's sermon addressed chapter 3 of Ruth, in which Ruth takes the bold step of revealing the depth of her love and desire for marriage to Boaz on the threshing floor. Boaz responds by declaring his love for Ruth. He rejoices at the opportunity to marry such a godly and delightful young woman. However, chapter 3 concludes with one remaining obstacle for Boaz to overcome before he can take Ruth as his wife. According to law and social custom, there was another male relative who was in line ahead of Boaz to redeem Ruth, her mother-in-law Naomi, and the land that had belonged to Naomi's deceased husband Elimelech. Chapter 4:1–12 explains how Boaz shrewdly acted within the bounds of the law to take Ruth as his beloved wife. Naomi rightly counseled Ruth to trust in both God and the godly man Boaz, knowing that he was shrewd and strong enough to take care of this legal matter that very day (3:18). Leaving his harvest in the care of an employee, Boaz heads into town early in the morning, determined to redeem Ruth and take her as his wife. It was his highest priority.

Boaz arrives at the city gate, which was the central place where business was transacted, legal matters were settled, and social relationships were established. Echoing the “chance” arrival of Ruth in the field of Boaz (2:3), here the providential hand of God is once again revealed—the very man with whom Boaz needs to negotiate the redemption of Ruth just “happens” to walk by, shortly after Boaz arrives at the gate.

The author of Ruth is careful to note the names of various characters throughout the story, but here omits the man's name; Boaz literally calls him Mr. So-and-so, likely to show that the man was not a great man. Demonstrating strong initiative and leadership, Boaz quickly gathers enough elders to render a legal decision and orders them to sit down and listen to his case. Boaz then explains that Naomi the widow was in financial desperation and was looking to sell her land for her very survival. The fact that Naomi owned the land was very unusual, and that she was also willing to sell what had belonged to their family for generations underscored the degree of her desperation. The family name and line of Elimelech is at this point dangling by the thread of two impoverished, childless widows, and without Boaz shrewdly redeeming the situation, tragedy was virtually guaranteed.

By law, when land was put up for sale it was preferable to be purchased by a near relative so as to keep it in the family (Leviticus 25:25–30; Jeremiah 32:6–12). Mr. So-and-so was a closer relative to Naomi than Boaz and therefore had first position before the law to purchase the land. So, Boaz presses the man to make a decision that very moment, revealing that if the man is unwilling or unable, Boaz would be glad to do so, since he was also a relative and therefore able to redeem if permitted.

Tragically, in considering the opportunity to increase his land holdings, the man chooses to redeem the land! This would mean that he would obtain Ruth and that Ruth and Boaz could not marry and live together happily ever after as husband and wife.

Rather than accepting an answer he did not desire, or breaking the law to get his way, Boaz chooses to shrewdly negotiate and turn the conversation in his favor. He uses both wisdom and clever bargaining, through which the providential hand of God works for good.

Boaz wisely reveals the strings attached to the deal: Not only would the man need to pay a hefty sum to purchase the land, but he would also need to assume responsibility for the two widows, marry Ruth, and impregnate her with a son so as to perpetuate the family line of Elimelech through his daughter-in-law. Furthermore, the man likely does not personally know Ruth, and Boaz reminds him that she is a Moabite, which would make her a very poor candidate for a wife (unless he knew of her godly character like Boaz did). In this negotiation, Boaz in no way lies, but presses the man for a swift decision while painting a difficult picture of expense. Furthermore, the man may have already had a wife and children, which meant that in exchange for a good business deal he was assuming a great deal of additional expenses and disruption for his family—making it in fact a very bad deal.

Influenced by Boaz's shrewdness, the unnamed man realizes that he cannot afford to buy the land and care for the two widows and children that he would bear through Ruth. If they had children together, they would lay claim to his inheritance. This would not benefit him or his family but would be a burdensome expense that could virtually destroy him financially. So, the man passes on the opportunity to redeem Ruth and in so doing permits Boaz to assume first position as redeemer!

Rather than waiting, Boaz, who throughout this section is a man of fast-action, quick-wit, shrewd business, and legal obedience, essentially inks the deal with the man that very moment. With the witnesses looking on, the man gives Boaz his sandal, which is akin to a notary seal signaling the legally binding nature of a business agreement. The fact that Boaz was older, financially established, and seasoned in business is exactly what enabled him to redeem Ruth. Boaz and Elimelech serve in stark contrast as men of plans and action, with one important difference: Boaz was a man of wise faith who was a blessing to the women, whereas Elimelech was a man of foolish unbelief who led his family into tragedy.

Filled with joy for his legal victory and thrilled to be marrying Ruth, Boaz launches into a speech before those he has assembled to witness this great day of redemption. He promises to lovingly care for Ruth as his wife, Naomi as his mother-in-law, and also honor Ruth's deceased husband Mahlon and Mahlon's deceased father Elimelech. The nobility of Boaz once again shines forth; he has been a blessing to everyone in the book from his employees to Ruth, Naomi, and their deceased husbands. Boaz has taken upon himself great expense and responsibility and proves to be a man "worthy" (2:1) of respect, trust, and imitation for every man.

Those present respond to Boaz's speech by asking God's blessing on Ruth, Boaz, and the child that everyone trusts God to providentially provide. In asking that Ruth be blessed like Rachel and Leah, the people accept Ruth as not merely a Moabite, but rather a converted sister in faith, equal to the mothers of

the very twelve tribes of Israel. The request that Boaz's name be known throughout the earth has indeed occurred, as some 3,000 years later he continues to mentor men through his example. In asking God to make Boaz's home like that of Perez, the people are asking that the family legacy of Boaz, who himself along with many of the Bethlehemites is a descendant of Perez, be continued through his son (Genesis 38; 1 Chronicles 2:5,18).

Indeed, Boaz shines forth in this chapter as a strong, bold, wise, and shrewd redeemer. He is clearly a man of action who makes a promise to Ruth, heads immediately into town, calls a court meeting to session, calls the unnamed man to sit down and make a decision on the spot, and in a short period has obeyed the law and redeemed Ruth.

Through Boaz will ultimately come Jesus Christ, who is "our glorious Boaz," according to the great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Jesus comes as our great redeemer who Boaz in many ways resembles. For example:

1. Just as Boaz was a near kinsman to Ruth, so Jesus in becoming a human being made Himself like us and near to us.
2. Just as Boaz was able to redeem Ruth, so Jesus in remaining sinless is alone able to redeem us from sin.
3. Just as Boaz was willing to redeem Ruth, so Jesus has chosen to redeem us because of His great love.
4. Just as Boaz paid the price to redeem Ruth, so Jesus shed His own blood on the cross to redeem us.
5. Just as Boaz did all of the work to redeem Ruth, so Jesus has done all the work to secure our salvation, which we receive by pure grace.
6. Just as Boaz loved his bride, so Jesus has loved His bride the church.
7. Just as Boaz redeemed both Ruth and the land, so Jesus has redeemed both His people and all of His creation.

Verses for next week: Ruth 4:13–22