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How do you understand the story of Ruth? On face value, it reads like an innocent romance short story. There’s tragedy, and there’s hardship, and there are strong characters, and in the end, the man and woman live happily ever after. I’d venture to say that many people who read the book of Ruth do not get much farther than that. The story is a beautiful story. But if that is all it is, then why did God put this story in the Bible?

In poetry and even in Hebrew prose, very often the clue to reading the book is to find the passage that is at the very middle of the book. A good example of that would be the book of Job. Here is a story of human suffering beyond imagination. It’s the story of a man whose faith is tested and stretched and rocked to the core, but which doesn’t break. Do you know what well known Bible verse lies in the middle of the book of Job? It’s this passage. “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27) The point is that life may fail us, but our God and Redeemer will not. In the end, in the resurrection on the last day, I will see my Savior face to face.

Do you know what verse lies in the middle of this book and the story of Ruth? It’s this verse. **Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. “The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz,” she said. ²⁰ “The LORD bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” She added, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers.”** In this story God introduces us to what this word “redeemer” means. So this really is a love story, not just between Boaz and Ruth, but between God and ourselves. It shows us two things about our Redeemer. It shows us WHAT our Redeemer came to do for us, and it shows us FOR WHOM our Redeemer came.

I KNOW THAT MY REDEEMER LIVES!

When you go home, I hope that you will take the time to read the story of Ruth over again for yourselves. It is not a hard read or a long read. It’s a short and beautiful story. It begins with a man named Elimelech and his wife, Naomi. They left the land of Israel because there was a famine in the land. We can assume that they probably had a small parcel of land, which was theirs by ancestral right. Every family in Israel was given a lot of land when the land of a

Canaan was divided. You never sold that land, unless, of course, you were so poor that it was either sell your land or starve. And even if you sold it, the title stayed in your name. But you couldn't use it until you redeemed it. And when that money was gone, then what? Elimelech chose to move to Moab, where perhaps they had some greater chance to make a living.

While they were in the land of Moab, Naomi's two sons married women from Moab. After ten years, her husband died, and then her two sons died as well. Naomi was left without support. What do you do if you are a widow in a foreign land, and you have no means by which to support yourself? You go back to your people. You go back to the place where you can find help from friends and family members. Naomi heard that God had answered prayers of his people and that there was no longer a famine in the land. So she decided to go home.

But she could hardly ask her daughters-in-law to go with her. They had family in Moab, and perhaps they could find husbands among their people. Naomi couldn't promise them anything in Israel. Hers had been a hard and bitter life, and she could not expect her daughters-in-law to come with her. She urged them to stay. One listened. But Ruth refused to leave her. And this exchange gives us what is probably the most memorable line in the book. Not the most important – but the most memorable. **“But Ruth replied, “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.¹⁷ 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.”**

Maybe you heard this text used at a wedding. It really doesn't apply to the vow that a husband and wife make to each other, though it would be easy to see why people might think so. Why did Ruth promise to stay with her mother-in-law? Because Ruth found salvation in the God of Israel. For Ruth, if she had to choose between faith and family, there was no question what she would choose. She wanted to be with Naomi and her people because then she could learn more about this wonderful God they worshipped.

But life in Israel wasn't easy, either. Naomi and Ruth went back to nothing. There was a law in Israel that provided at least some food for hungry people. When farmers harvested their fields, they were not allowed to pick up any grain which they dropped to the ground. Nor were they allowed to harvest to the ends of the field. So Ruth went out to the fields to pick up any grain she could that fell to the ground and bring it home for Naomi and herself. *It just so happened* that she found herself in the field of a wealthy man, named Boaz, and this wealthy man was a near relative of Naomi.

Don't you love the coincidences in this story? I think that's another lesson we can learn from this story. Your life is not a gamble. Your life is not determined by the alignment of the stars. God is in control of your life.

There are lots of little lessons like this in the story of Ruth. Did you notice what a good and honorable man Boaz was? He protected Ruth from the men in the field so she wouldn't be harmed. He was generous toward her, even though she was a foreigner and not an Israelite. And what attracted him to Ruth so that he fell in love with her? It was because she was an honorable woman who worked hard to care for her mother-in-law. He looked at her character and her faith above all. Good advice for young people looking for a spouse!

But the most important lesson in this story is in what we learn about the *redeemer*. So the law in Israel was that if a man died and left a widow, and that widow was childless, she could ask a near-kinsman, a close relative, to buy back her inheritance in Israel and also to become her husband. The first child born would then legally be the heir of her first husband, who had died. The qualifications of a kinsman-redeemer was that he had to be ABLE to redeem the land that belonged to the widow's husband and he had to be WILLING to do it.

There was another man who was a closer relative than Boaz to Naomi, so he met him at the town gate, where people met to do business. He asked him to redeem Naomi's property, which he was able to do. But when he found out that Ruth was part of the deal, he backed down. Why? He said it might endanger his own estate. Our text doesn't say why it would endanger his estate. But wouldn't the same also then apply to Boaz? Of course it would. The moment Boaz became Ruth's redeemer, he not only invested in an estate that would never be his, but he would immediately make Ruth co-owner of his whole estate. Boaz was not only able but willing to step up to be the redeemer for Ruth and Naomi.

Friends, stepping up to help a friend or family member always carries a risk. For example, if you had a brother whose kidneys failed and he needed a kidney transplant, would you donate one of your kidneys to him? You can get by on one kidney, but there are some risks. And what if at some point in life you got a kidney disease and lost the function of your only remaining kidney? You are able to help your brother, but would you be willing? Would you be willing to help your cousin? What about a friend? How about a stranger?

So what does this teach us about Jesus, who identified himself in the Bible as our *Redeemer*? Jesus was both ABLE and WILLING to be our Redeemer. The Son of God came into this world to become one of us, our brother, and to put himself under obligation to be our Redeemer. Our God is not some deity way out there who watches over us from a distance. He is not a god who really doesn't care too much about what's happening down here, or what's happening in your life. He is not a god who sets us out on our life journey and says, "Well, I hope you make it." Our God came down from heaven to walk among us, to experience the sorrows and hardships and temptations that we have to face every day. He became our brother and put himself under a moral obligation to redeem us from our sins.

ONLY Jesus is able to do that. No one else ever perfectly completed the examination of the law and did EVERYTHING that God required. Of no other person in this world could God say,

“With you I am well pleased,” as God said to his Son at his baptism. God could certainly not say that about anyone of you, or me, because we commit sins every single day in our lives. In fact, everything we say or think or do is somehow touched and marred by sin.

Last week in New York my wife and I visited the Corning Glass Museum. There were signs everywhere telling us not to touch anything, because our fingers and hands would leave dirt and oil on the perfect glass. And there were museum workers walking around all day long with spray bottles and cloths to wipe out the evidence of the evil doers who touched the glass. Friends, whatever we touch, whatever we do, leaves the mark of sin, because we are sinful.

We are always just beggars before God’s throne. *“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked come to thee for dress, helpless, look to thee for grace. Foul I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.”* Only Jesus was perfect, and only Jesus was able to offer the perfect sacrifice to take away our sins.

He is ABLE and he was WILLING to redeem our inheritance in heaven. In John 12: 27, Jesus was contemplating the cross, and he said this, **“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!”** Jesus didn’t just risk his inheritance. Jesus had to lose his inheritance and suffer death and damnation in hell so that he might regain an inheritance in heaven, both for himself and for us.

I know that my Redeemer lives! I have an inheritance before God! So do you. Paul wrote in Romans 8:17: **“Now if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings that we may also share in his glory.”** Paul wrote that in his chapter that deals with human suffering. Sometimes when we are suffering in this life, the devil wants to convince us that we don’t have a place in heaven. We really aren’t God’s children. Isn’t that what Job’s friends were saying to him all through the book? Job, you must have done something wrong. You have become a homeless beggar sitting in this ash heap because God is angry with you and you’ve lost your status as one of his children. You don’t belong to him any longer. (How many times hasn’t the devil whispered that accusation in your ear?)

And in the middle of his suffering and his friends’ relentless badgering, Job screams from the depths of his believing heart and says, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and even though my physical body is destroyed, it will be raised with him in glory and I will see him with my own eyes!” Dear friends, you always have a Redeemer! That’s the most important lesson the book of Ruth teaches you.

The second lesson is almost as important. How do you know that YOU have a redeemer? How do you know that Jesus came to live and die FOR YOU? The story of Ruth answers that question in this way. Ask yourself the question, “Why Ruth?” We know that nothing happened in the story of salvation without God’s intention. Ruth became one of the ancestors of King

David, and therefore she was an ancestor of David's greater son, Jesus. Why Ruth? Why this Moabite woman in the lineage of Jesus?

God teaches us in this story the same truth which he explicitly teaches us in the New Testament. 1 Timothy 2: 3-4 states that **“God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”** That's not just a New Testament truth. It is also an Old Testament truth, and Ruth is an example that God wants all people to be saved.

How do you apply this truth in your life? You can apply it personally. How do you know that Jesus came to redeem you from your sins? How can you be sure? You can be sure because God our Savior wants all people to be saved. It doesn't make any difference by the color of your skin. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor or somewhere in between.

Another application of this truth is to see through the eyes of Jesus as you look around you in the world. There seems to be a lot of discussion about immigrants in your country. When you see someone on the street who is not the same as you, what do you think? It is easy to fall into some critical thinking. The next time you see someone who is obviously from another place, remind yourself that God our Savior wants all people to be saved. Rejoice in the fact that people from all over the world want to live in our country and have what we have. Rejoice that God is giving us as Christians an opportunity to share the gospel, to give someone what we have in Jesus. Boaz didn't turn away from Ruth because she was a Moabite woman. He didn't judge her on the color of her skin or by the fact that she was gleaning in his fields.

I know that my Redeemer lives! When you think of this name of Jesus, remember that you have a brother who came to pay the price to redeem your place in heaven for you. Sometimes you will go to an auction and see some little trinket. You will think it is the biggest piece of junk you have ever seen in your life. You would say to yourself, “If they paid me, I wouldn't take that.” Then the bidding starts and you think they will never sell it. The first guy offers \$50. The next guy says \$100. The next says \$200. You just want to stand up and shout, “What's the matter with you? Have you lost your minds? That is a worthless piece of junk!” And it ends up selling for \$500 or \$1000 because it is some heirloom that some great sculptor made two or three hundred years ago. What was junk to you turns out to be precious to somebody else. Listen to this. In an auction, a thing is worth what a person will pay for it. Think what we must be worth, then, to God. Think what it cost him to purchase our salvation. It cost him his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. I know that my Redeemer lives! Amen.