

The book of Ruth tells the story of Naomi and Ruth who are both widows. Naomi had lost her husband and two sons in the land of Moab. When she returned to Bethlehem from Moab, Ruth her widowed daughter-in-law, came with her. Ruth embraced Naomi's God as her God and Naomi's people as her people. By God's providence, Ruth had come into contact with Boaz, a well-to-do relative of Naomi's, and she had boldly asked Boaz to be her redeemer.

A redeemer in ancient Israel was a family member who was obligated to help a relative who was in need. If a family member lost his land because of financial hardship, the redeemer was to buy it back to keep the land in the family. A closely related institution in ancient Israel is called levirate marriage which dealt with a situation in which a man died without producing a son. A brother of the dead man was to marry the dead man's wife and the first son born of that marriage would inherit the dead man's land and his name. It was important that land stay in the family and it was important that the family lines be continued from one generation to the next.

In the book of Ruth it appears that the ideas of redeemer and levirate marriage are combined. Ruth has asked Boaz to be her redeemer and from the story that follows we see that that included buying the land that would have gone to her husband had he lived, but also marrying Ruth with the hope of producing a son who would carry on the dead man's name.

We have come to chapter 4 in the book of Ruth and this chapter begins with a meeting at the city gate to determine who would be Ruth's redeemer. Boaz was willing to do it, but there was another relative closer to Naomi's husband's family and he had to be consulted first and because of the importance of this matter, this discussion had to be held at the city gate with ten elders of the city as witnesses. The name of this other closer relative is never mentioned. He is simply called the redeemer.

Boaz tells Naomi's story. He says that Naomi "is selling a parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech." Boaz offers the nameless relative the opportunity to redeem that land – that is buy it to keep it in the family. The nameless man agrees to do that. Then Boaz adds a further requirement. Verse 5, "Then Boaz said, "The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance." The redeemer is not willing to do that. He says "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it."

You see if he married Ruth and had a son with her, that son would be counted as Elimelech's grandson and Mahlon's son. Naomi's land would not be his to pass on to his existing posterity. He would have to buy the land, but it would never really be his. And he did not want to take on the burden.

So they have this little traditional ceremony. The redeemer took off his sandal and handed it to Boaz. The conversation and the sandal ceremony was witnessed by the elders and by it the nameless relative

relinquished whatever right or obligation he had concerning Naomi, Ruth, and the land. Boaz says, “You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place.”

Then the people gathered there and the elders give a little speech. Probably one of the elders made the speech on behalf of the rest who were gathered there. There are 4 parts to the speech. 1. We are witnesses. 2. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. 3. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renewed in Bethlehem. 4. And may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman.

So that’s the story. We will now unpack some of the details. The first is the fact that the name of the nearer relative is never mentioned. This is done on purpose and it is the author’s way of expressing his disapproval. It is in contrast to desire of the townspeople expressed in verse 11 that Boaz’ name might “be renowned in Bethlehem.” The author of the story wants us to think well of Boaz and not to think well of the nameless relative. He is not a worthy man. And so he is presented without a name.

The man only thought of himself. When he thought that he could profit by buying Naomi’s land, he was all for it. When he found out that it would require sacrifice on his part, he backed away. He was not concerned about Naomi and Ruth. He was not concerned about preserving the name of Elimelech and Mahlon. If there was something in it for him – he was all in. If he had to sacrifice for the good of others – he was out. And by not even using his name in the story the author is saying that this man is just a shell of a man. He is worthy of being forgotten. He is a shadow of a man. Boaz’ name will be renowned. This other guy’s name is not worth mentioning. He is just that nameless person.

This reflects one of the principles of life in God’s world. Those who sacrifice to serve God and other people grow in their humanity. They grow as people. They become people of character and weight and substance. While those who are selfish – thinking only of themselves – they become less and less substantial in their humanity. They wither and shrivel up in their inner person. It is that reality that the author of this story is pointing to in this passage. The nameless one is a person without substance, while Boaz is a man of depth and character and he will be renowned in Bethlehem.

Jesus teaches us this principle in Matthew 10:39 “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” In God’s world a person who is selfish and lives only for himself is not really living while a person who is willing to make sacrifices for other is living a life which is truly life.

The ultimate example of this principle is our Lord Jesus. Jesus lived the perfect human life and then he gave his life for sinners. Jesus' is worthy of renown. His name will always be remembered. He is the ultimate example for us of someone who found his life by losing it.

Next I want to comment on the language of Boaz acquiring or buying Ruth as his wife. That is language that sounds strange to our ears. It seems wrong for Boaz to use the language of buying Ruth as he wife, even though in this case Ruth had asked him to be her redeemer. It seems that in certain situations at least, people did not have much to say about who they would marry. If you go back to the law of levirate marriage as we find it in Deuteronomy 25, it makes it clear that God required a brother-in-law to marry the wife of a man who had died without producing a son which means that God required the wife of a man who had died to marry that brother-in-law.

It's clear that in this kind of situation, at least, certain people were to marry for reasons other than mutual attraction. The importance of "perpetuating the name of the dead in his inheritance" trumped whatever attractions there might have been or might not have been between the people involved. While personal choice probably was a factor in many marriages, it is clear that in ancient Israel there was a greater emphasis on doing things for the good of the family than there is in our culture today - which is to say that there was less emphasis on personal freedom in that culture than there is in our culture. The law concerning levirate marriage is not binding on us today – although the more general principle of caring for one's family members certainly is. It is interesting that there have been many different customs concerning who decides who will marry who. The way that we do it is certainly allowable according to biblical principles, but it is not the only way that is allowable according to biblical principles.

I want to say a little more about the idea of perpetuating the name of the dead in his inheritance. So a man dies without leaving a son. A brother-in-law was to marry the dead man's wife with the hope that a son would come from that marriage. That son would be considered to be the dead man's son. He would carry on the dead man's name and inherit the dead man's land. Part of the reason for this would be to provide a son to care for the dead man's widow. Part of the reason for this would be to keep the land in the family. And part of the reason would be to perpetuate the dead man's name. Boaz gives a little more detail on this last reason in verse 10. "Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the date of his native place."

It has been hard to find a detailed and satisfying answer to the question of why it was so important to "perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance." It has something to do with the importance of family lines not dying out. It has something to do with keeping the land in the family. It has something to do with having offspring to participate in the future that God had planned for his people. But it seems to me that

whatever the exact reason was, it was about some kind of continued existence beyond the grave. The dead man's name was preserved in his offspring – in his family line. He lived on in some sense in his offspring. And that idea of living on beyond death, is gradually revealed in the Bible as eternal life – dimly in the OT and with great clarity in the NT.

For us there is still a desire to be part of God's future on earth through having children and raising them in the fear of the Lord. God does not give that gift to everyone, but it is something that most Christians want. But it is not the same level of tragedy if our family name disappears from the earth because we know that our name is remembered by God and that when we die our life does not end, but we go immediately to be with the Lord. There is nothing like levirate marriage in the NT because of the clarity the gospel gives to eternal life. We know that even though our name may be soon forgotten on earth after we die, it will not be forgotten by God because we will be with God in heaven. Our names are written in the book of life. In Revelation 3:5 Jesus says of those who remain faithful to him, "I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels."

Next we come to the prayer of the elders and the townspeople at the gate after Boaz had committed to buying Naomi's land and marrying Ruth. In verse 11 they pray, "May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel." Rachel and Leah were the two wives of Jacob who between them gave birth to the twelve sons from whom the twelve tribes of Israel descended. It is a little more complicated than that, but there is no need to go into all of those details. Rachel and Leah gave birth to the sons from whom the 12 tribes of Israel descended. And the townspeople here referred to that as building up the house of Israel. And they pray that Ruth would make a similar contribution through the children she would have with Boaz.

This is a wonderful way of thinking about the significance of giving birth to covenant children – building up the house of Israel – in our day building up the church. There is a significant emphasis in the Bible on the great significance of believers having children and raising them in the fear of the Lord. One of the facets of the promises that God made to Abraham was that his offspring would be like the dust of the earth in that their number would be uncountable. Psalm 79:13 says, "But we your people, the sheep of your pasture will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise."

Having children and bringing them up in the fear of the Lord is an important way that the church is built up. And while fathers are more in the foreground in some passages, in this passage it is mothers who are in the foreground. Rachel and Leah together built up the house of Israel. The townspeople of Bethlehem prayed that Ruth would be like them building up the house of Israel through her children. And this highlights the great significance that mothers have in building up the church through their children.

Of course, that is not the only way the church is build up. Not all are given the blessing of children. And the Bible is clear that all believers are involved in one way or another in building up the church. We are all gifted in various ways to build up the body of Christ. To highlight the importance of one way of building up the church is not to say that it is the only way. The NT teaching of spiritual gifts makes it clear that every single one of us has an important contribution to make. But this passage is a wonderful acknowledgement of the importance of mothers in building up the house of Israel. By having children and training them in the way that they should go you are building the church.

Next the witnesses at the city gate say to Boaz, “May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem....” Boaz has shown himself to be a worthy man throughout this story. Here the townspeople are praying that he will continue to live as a worthy man and that he will be renowned in Bethlehem. We have seen already that this is in contrast to the self-centered relative of Elimelech whose name is not even mentioned. He is like a shadow in the story because his name is not even mentioned. Boaz on the other hand is described as a worthy man and here the hope is expressed that he will be renowned in Bethlehem.

Now in our day in which there are so many people of little substance who seek to make a name for themselves, this prayer that Boaz may be renowned in Israel might not seem like a worthy prayer. But there is a huge difference between someone being recognized in the community as a person of character and someone who is just seeking fame. Seeking fame for fame’s sake is not a worthy goal. But the Bible does teach that we should live in such a way that the result is a good name in the community. The goal then is not fame or recognition as such, but to live the kind of life that will naturally be respected.

Proverbs 22:1 says, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.” Proverbs 3:35 says “The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.” Paul says of elders that they “must be well thought of by outsiders....” (1 Timothy 3:7).

The goal here is not to be our own glory. Rather it is to live the kind of life that God is calling us to live and the result of that will be recognition and that recognition can be used in positive ways in influencing and blessing others. This belongs to being witnesses to Jesus Christ. We are to live in such a way as to reflect the character of Christ.

Finally we come to the prayer of the people at the city gate that Boaz’ house would be like the house of Perez. Verse 12, “And may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman.”

It is very interesting that the house of Perez is mentioned here in a positive way. It is a reference to an earlier case of levirate marriage that is recorded in Genesis 38. That is a rather sordid story. Judah was one of Jacob’s sons. He married a Canaanite woman and had three sons with her. When the sons were grown up, the first

son married a woman named Tamar. He was wicked and so the Lord put him to death. So there was a situation that called for a brother-in-law to marry Tamar. Judah told his second son to perform the duty of a brother-in-law but he practiced an ancient form of birth control and the Lord put him to death as well. Judah was not willing to risk giving his third son to Tamar because of what had happened to Tamar's first two husbands. So Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and tricks Judah into having sex with her in the hope that that union will produce a son. And it produces two sons – twins – the first to be born was named Perez.

So this Perez, born of Judah and Tamar was the son to carry on Judah's lineage. And it is in the light of this story that the people at the city gate that day say to Boaz "may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman." Perez was the ancestor of Boaz. He had been born by means of a levirate marriage albeit a sordid one. Even so it was his line that was the line that inherited God's promise to Judah that "the scepter shall not depart from Judah." (Genesis 49:10). It was from the line of Judah through Perez that the kings of Israel would come and eventually Jesus Christ.

And so, the prayer of the people of Bethlehem was that Boaz and Ruth would produce a son who would continue that royal line. And this all happened during the time of Judges when "there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." And so, the townspeople of Bethlehem were praying that through the union of Boaz and Ruth the royal line of Judah would continue until a king would be born who would lead the people in Israel in faithfulness to the Lord.

And as the end of the book of Ruth tells us, Boaz was the father of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, from whose line Jesus Christ was born.

The point of all this is that two of David's descendants were born of levirate marriages. The first one was a very sordid affair, the second one involved Ruth who had been born a Moabite, but who had converted to the God of Israel and have lived an exemplary life in harmony with that confession. Both Tamar and Ruth were Gentiles, and they were both ancestors of David and of Jesus Christ. God used both of them in a significant way in the fulfillment of his plan of salvation that led to Jesus Christ.

The point is that the ancestry of Jesus was not a pure line of the biological offspring of Abraham. The ancestry of Jesus was not made up of the cream of Jewish piety and ethnic purity. It included a Tamar who was a Gentile and willing to pose as a prostitute to lure Judah who was willing to use a prostitute in order to produce a son who would carry on the name of Judah's firstborn. And it included Ruth, who was also a Gentile, but a woman who lived an exemplary life as a follower of Israel's God.

So, Jesus had notorious sinners among his ancestors, and he had Gentiles among his ancestors and the message is that he was not ashamed to be associated with sinners and he was not ashamed to be associated with Gentiles. He came for Jews and Gentiles. He came for notorious sinners and more respectable sinners.

And that was reflected in his attitude while he was on earth. He was known as “a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Matthew 11:19). His ancestry was published. He came from a royal line, but it was a line which had plenty of unsavory characters as well as outsiders like Ruth who was a noble character yet an outsider.

All of this highlights how Jesus was willing to be associated with sinners and with outsiders. Jesus was born of a royal lineage. He came to be the king who would rule over his people forever. But included in his ancestors were Tamar and Ruth. Tamar was a notorious sinner and both Tamar and Ruth were Gentiles. And by including such people in Jesus’ lineage, God was showing us that Jesus was willing to associate himself with the greatest of sinners and with outsiders.

Jesus himself was sinless. But his mission was to save sinners and his mission was to save people from every tribe and nation. Indeed, his association with sinners and outsiders went far beyond having such people as his ancestors. The sins of all his people were imputed to him. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

One of the key facets of the good news of salvation in Jesus is the glorious truth that all are invited to come to him and find forgiveness and life in him. No one is too great a sinner. No nationality is excluded. Jesus’ ancestry anticipated the fact that Jesus was a friend of tax collectors and sinners and that Jesus came to save people from every race and every nation. And this is summed up by the word “whoever” in John 3:16. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”