

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

The Nearer Kinsman

Ruth 4:1-22

1. Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there; and behold, the close relative of whom Boaz had spoken came by. So Boaz said, "Come aside, friend, sit down here." So he came aside and sat down.

Boaz, meanwhile, goes up to the city gate and sits down there. This would be similar to going to the courthouse today, for business at that time was done in the city gate. This was really a very sensible place to do business, for at that time, most men were farmers. They would have homes in the city where they would sleep at night, for there was much more safety at night behind city walls. During the day, however, they would leave the city, and go out to their fields surrounding the city, where they would do their daily tasks. That was the way most men like Boaz lived at the time.

Since nearly every man in the city, or at least all the landowners and those who worked for them, would pass through the gates of the city every day, the city gates became a very good place to conduct business. If you were looking for a person to do business with him, all you had to do was to arrive at the gates plenty early, and you would be almost sure to catch him as he went out of the city to tend his lands. Therefore, all the men in the city who were involved with government would congregate at the city gates, so they could be there when anything important took place. Because that is where all the important business took place, all the city records would be stored at the gates as well. Any sort of trial or any judicial decision would also take place at the gates.

So Boaz, anxious to conduct his very important business, arrives early at the gate to wait for the closer kinsman. The last thing he wants to do is to appear there late after the nearer kinsman has already passed by. So Boaz sits down there and waits. Soon his patience is rewarded, as the nearer kinsman makes his appearance.

When he appears in the gate, Boaz calls him aside. Boaz calls him "friend," but in the Hebrew that is "so and so." In the Septuagint Greek Version of the Bible, they translated it with a dash instead of a name, and then said, "Name withheld." In other words, Boaz said the man's name, but the Spirit has left it out of the Word, leaving more or less a blank in its place, or "so and so." The Lord has not given us his name, but has kept the nearer kinsman anonymous.

2. And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down.

Boaz now calls ten men of the elders of the city. These would be the city officials who could approve the transaction Boaz was about to propose. Again, such officials would be congregated at the city gate, where business was always conducted.

3. Then he said to the close relative, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, sold the piece of land which belonged to our brother Elimelech.

Boaz in the presence of the nearer kinsman and these elders speaks of the matter of Naomi's return from Moab, and of Elimelech's property, which had been sold off when the family left for that land. This property has been lost to the family, but according to God's law, either the family themselves or a kinsman-redeemer had the right to redeem it, as long as he could pay the price for its redemption.

4. *And I thought to inform you, saying, 'Buy it back in the presence of the inhabitants and the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know; for there is no one but you to redeem it, and I am next after you.'*
And he said, "I will redeem it."

Boaz, after revealing these facts to the unnamed nearer kinsman, offers this other kinsman the first chance to redeem the inheritance of Elimelech's family. He expresses his plan: that if this kinsman will not redeem the property, then Boaz himself will redeem it, for he is the next in line, and the only other one who can do it.

The other kinsman, after listening to Boaz, apparently thinks this sounds like a desirable thing to do. He says he will redeem it himself. Often it seems that when someone wants something and someone else gets the chance to get it instead, it seems a more desirable thing to that person knowing that someone else wants it, than if no one else wanted it at all. This kinsman may have known about this property and his kinship to Elimelech, but he has made no move to redeem it until now. Now that he knows Boaz wants it, however, he probably figures that Boaz is a good businessman and knows what he is doing, and so this land must be a good buy. So, he is ready to purchase it.

Notice, however, that up until now, Boaz has only mentioned the property, and has made no mention of the matter of Ruth. This is very clever on Boaz's part, as we will see in the following verses.

5 *Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also buy it from Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance."*

Now at this point Boaz brings up the matter of Ruth. Whoever redeems the property will also have another responsibility. This responsibility is set forth in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

5. "If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the widow of the dead man shall not be married to a stranger outside the family; her husband's brother shall go in to her, take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her."

This was only allowed if the man's brother was dead. Marrying a brother's wife was strictly prohibited while the brother was still alive. When a brother died childless, however, this law came into effect, and the brother was supposed to marry his brother's wife.

Notice that there is no exemption here for if the brother is already married. This is the one case where polygamy could be sanctioned. There are several reasons for this. One is that a woman, when she marries into a family, is now considered a part of that family, and no longer part of her parents' family. A woman alone could not take care of herself, so she was dependent upon her husband's family. If he was dead and she had no son to care for her, then she could easily become destitute. If the husband's brother was required to marry her, however, then she would be taken care of, and not be terribly impoverished.

The other reason is given in the next verse.

6. And it shall be that the firstborn son which she bears will succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

Your inheritance was crucially important as an Israelite. It was given to you by God, and so it was your duty to pass it on to your male descendants. If a man failed to produce sons to carry on his line, it was not just a kind of sad thing, like it might be today, but would be a serious failure. He would be letting all his ancestors down, all the way back to when Israel first came into the land and received their inheritance! Therefore, this provision was made for giving the dead brother a seed to carry on his inheritance.

7. But if the man does not want to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate to the elders, and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to raise up a name to his brother in Israel; he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother.' 8. Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him. But if he stands firm and says, 'I do not want to take her,' 9. then his brother's wife shall come to him in the presence of the elders, remove his sandal from his foot, spit in his face, and answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house.' 10. And his name shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him who had his sandal removed.'

So this was considered a very serious matter, and was something the brother was really expected to do. If there was no brother, then this duty would fall to the next-of-kin, as we would call it, or in Hebrew the *ga'al*, the kinsman-redeemer.

So Boaz reveals to the nearer kinsman that if he redeems the property, he must also redeem it from and marry Ruth the Moabitess to perpetuate the dead man's family and his line of inheritance.

6 And the close relative said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I ruin my own inheritance. You redeem my right of redemption for yourself, for I cannot redeem it."

Now the closer relative changes his mind, and states that he cannot redeem it. Yet notice how Boaz's clever withholding of this fact has made it clear that the reason this kinsman will not redeem it is not because he is unable to buy the property, but only because he is unwilling to marry Ruth. He cannot pretend anything else, for his mind has been revealed. What he might have done if Boaz had not made this clear is hard to say. Might he have pretended to want to buy it but not have the funds, and waited to see if Ruth would marry someone else out of desperation and the hardship of poverty, and then have bought the property for himself once it was free and clear? It is hard to say, but he will have no such opportunity now, for he cannot pretend that his refusal is for any other reason than the real one.

The kinsman claims that the reason is that he has an inheritance of his own, and he cannot redeem this one without ruining it. In other words, he is not willing to sacrifice himself for Ruth. Perhaps he had a wife and children of his own already, and did not want another wife and set of children to complicate things. But whatever the reason, he is totally unwilling to redeem and marry Ruth.

This brings up the question as to why Boaz himself did not have his own inheritance that he did not want to spoil at this point. Why was an older man like Boaz not married already, with children of his own?

The consensus on this question seems to be that he was probably a widower, whose wife had died without leaving him any children either. The reasoning is that it would have been most unusual for a "man of great wealth" like Boaz was to be unmarried at that time and in that culture. Therefore, it is reasoned that the most likely thing is that he had been married, and was now widowed. His widow could have died in the same famine that drove Elimelech and his family out of Bethlehem. Regarding this, we can say that it could be that marriage was the most likely thing, and it may be that Boaz was indeed a widower. Yet I would point out that even today the most likely thing isn't always the thing that happens, and we certainly cannot be certain that this was the case with Boaz.

Another possibility is that Boaz was already married. As I have pointed out before, there was no provision in the law of the brother of the man who died without children taking his brother's wife to raise up seed for his brother, that this law was negated if the brother of the dead man was already married. This was one case, the only real Biblical case, where polygamy may have been required by the law. This might seem rather odious to us, who pride ourselves on having nothing to do with polygamy in our culture. This is rather hypocritical, since we do in our culture have to do with things that are far worse. Yet there are some things we need to think about. While for us love and the romantic ideal may seem to be the most important thing in a marriage, it may be that in some cases other things might be more important. Perhaps this matter of a continuous family line was more important to God than the ideal of marriage between one man and one woman. Remember too that this provision was made in the case of a husband who died, something that already was not an ideal situation to begin

with. The ideal would be that the widow would receive her dead husband back. Since that was unlikely to happen on this side of the resurrection, other provisions had to be made to make the best of a bad situation.

Yet at the same time as I suggest this, I do not think this is all that likely. The Bible, while it does record the romantic story of David and Abigail in I Samuel 25, makes no attempt to hide the fact that David had already been married before this, and that he married other women afterwards. Yet in the story of Ruth, there is no mention or hint of another wife or family that Boaz had. To imagine one is to go beyond the record of Scripture, and it seems unlikely that God would have hidden this.

Is there any possibility that Boaz had never been married before he married Ruth? I will not deny that culturally this is unlikely, though remember that not everything that happens is the most likely thing, as I said. Yet could there be reasons a wealthy and eligible man like Boaz might not have been married? Well, for one thing we do not know that he had always been wealthy. Remember that men who are quite rich in their older years sometimes were anything but rich when they were younger, and it may be that he was not always so eligible.

Yet on top of this, we could point out the fact that, according to the Biblical genealogy anyway, his mother was Rahab, the Canaanite. Unless some generations were skipped, as I discussed earlier, this means that Boaz was half Canaanite. Since the Canaanites were the enemies of Israel and the ones God told Israel to destroy, this could have caused some prejudice against him. He probably looked like he was part Canaanite, and the reputation of being part Canaanite would have followed him. Even though Rahab had been a woman of faith, and she was spared from the destruction of the rest of her city by the orders of the LORD Himself, it could still be that this caused some to view Boaz as being an inferior person to the rest of the house of Perez who dwelt in Bethlehem. This could have made him seem a less than ideal match for the fathers who were searching for a man for their daughters, and it could be that Boaz had been passed by when the usual time for a man to marry came around. Thus, he could perhaps have found himself at a rather advanced age, and yet unmarried. Yet the LORD's view of this man considered his heart, not his appearance, and He saw there the same faith that was in his mother Rahab, and so the LORD provided for him a wife eventually, not from Israel, but from Moab, another Godly Gentile like his mother.

Yet let us return to the issue at hand, which was the nearer kinsman. Now knowing that he cannot redeem the property himself, the nearer kinsman offers it to Boaz. Of course, this was exactly what Boaz wanted. Unlike this nearer kinsman, there is nothing he wanted more than to marry and redeem Ruth.

Now we return to the story of our redemption, which this history of Ruth and Boaz is illustrating. If Ruth stands for the sinner, and Boaz for the Savior, then who is this nearer kinsman who must be considered first of all? Who could possibly be closer to us than the God Who made us, that he should be considered first as a possible redeemer? I think there can be only one answer: the closer relative is we ourselves. If it were possible for us to do so, we would have the first right to redeem ourselves from the lost position we are in. Yet just like in this story, we are totally unable to redeem ourselves from our sin and death. In our case, the problem is not reluctance, but inability. We simply cannot do the job. We cannot redeem ourselves by ourselves. Therefore, if we are ever to be redeemed, we must give up the right to attempt our own redemption, and we must give that right to God. He is the only One Who, through His great love and grace, can redeem lost sinners like we are.

7. Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging, to confirm anything: one man took off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was a confirmation in Israel.

Now we come to the matter of the sandal. This is not exactly how it was set forth in Deuteronomy 25, but then Ruth was not present, nor was this man really Mahlon's brother. Rather, this verse explains that exchanging sandals at that time in Israel was the customary means of sealing a deal. This might seem strange to us. We would sign a contract, or shake hands. Yet either of these things might seem very strange to someone from a different culture. Many of these things are customary, and there is

nothing inherently right about them. This was just the custom in Israel at that time. Apparently, the custom had already changed several generations later when this book was written, however.

8. Therefore the close relative said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself." So he took off his sandal.

The closer relative enacts this sign in the presence of all the elders of the city, making it official. He gives his right of redemption over to Boaz, and seals his statement by giving him his sandal.

9. And Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, from the hand of Naomi.

Boaz also makes a statement of his own, and calls upon the city elders to witness it. He is buying all that was Elimelech's, and Chilion's and Mahlon's after him, from the hand of Naomi. This probably means he was buying the land for himself, but doing it on her behalf, and on behalf of her family after her, which would be represented by the first male child of Boaz and Ruth.

10. Moreover, Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, I have acquired as my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brethren and from his position at the gate. You are witnesses this day."

Boaz also declares in the presence of all these elders his intention to marry Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow. Notice that prior to this we have had no indication whose wife was whose, or of who married Orpah and who married Ruth. Yet in my commentary I have been calling Ruth Mahlon's widow throughout, having this verse in mind.

By marrying Ruth, Boaz knows that he will perpetuate the name of the dead family of Elimelech through God's inheritance to them, which would now continue in the name of their family and not be lost. Their family name would not be cut off from among their Israelite brethren, and their seat in the city council would not be vacant. To all these things, Boaz calls the elders there to witness.

11. And all the people who were at the gate, and the elders, said, "We are witnesses. The LORD make the woman who is coming to your house like Rachel and Leah, the two who built the house of Israel; and may you prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem.

The elders do witness it, as Boaz requested, and offer a blessing from Israel's history. Their blessing is that Ruth for Boaz will be like Rachel and Leah for Israel, whose children built the house of Israel that became the nation and the twelve tribes. In a way, this did come to pass, for from Ruth and Boaz was built the house of David, the ruling family in Israel. Then they desire Boaz to prosper and be famous. Remember, Ephrathah was the old name of Bethlehem, so the two towns they are wishing him to prosper in are actually the same town, that is, their own.

12. May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring which the LORD will give you from this young woman."

The elders offer a second blessing on them as well, this time from the history of Judah. They desire Boaz's house, built through Ruth, to be like that of Perez, the son whom Tamar bore to Judah, and from whom their own clan in Judah was descended, for it was the largest and most significant clan in Judah. Thus they end their blessing.

13. So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son.

So in this way Boaz marries Ruth. Having finished the typical significance that He has been teaching us through this story, the LORD does not follow it out in detail from this point. We are left to imagine Boaz's triumphant return to Naomi's house to let Ruth know that the last obstacle has been removed,

and they are free to be married, and all the bustle that followed as she became his bride. We are only briefly told the bottom line: that she became his wife.

So now, having married Ruth, Boaz goes in to her, meaning he has relations with her. The LORD looks with favor upon the couple, and causes Ruth to conceive. The time of pregnancy passes by, and Ruth bears a son.

14. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a close relative; and may his name be famous in Israel!”

The other women comfort Naomi. Perhaps they are referring back to her bitter words of chapter 1, when she told them that the LORD had caused her to return to her home empty. Now they point out to her that the blessed LORD has not left her without a kinsman-redeemer, a *ga'al*, to rescue her, and through him to give her a grandchild. They also desire for her, as the elders did for Boaz, that the name of her grandchild may be famous in Israel.

15. And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.”

They now wish for this child to be a restorer of life to Naomi. The word for “life” here is the Hebrew word *nephesh*, which means “soul.” The soul has to do with the desires, and it can also be used for those things which fulfill those desires. Naomi’s poverty, which kept her from the things that would satisfy her soul with comfort, would be alleviated by this child.

The child will also be a nourisher of her old age. When a woman got old at that time and her husband was dead, she was entirely dependent upon her children and grandchildren to care for her, giving her food and basically keeping her alive. When her husband and two sons died, Naomi appeared as if she would be left alone and destitute in her old age. Now, however, with the birth of this grandson, she can breathe easy again, for her old age will be cared for. The women are sure of this, since Ruth, who loves Naomi so much, has borne him. They also compliment the love of Ruth, as being better than that of seven sons. Ruth did indeed love Naomi in an unusual and impressive way, as we have seen.

16. Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him.

Naomi now holds the child and lays him on her bosom. She who had no child left has now become a grandmother! At this time she became the nurse, a kind of second mother, for her grandson. Probably Ruth insisted on this, and Naomi was happy to oblige.

17. Also the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, “There is a son born to Naomi.” And they called his name Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

The neighbor women name the child as well. This might seem strange to us, for in our society the parents always get the final say in naming the child, but apparently they viewed this as much more of a community event. So they name him “Obed,” which means “Serving.” This is based on the blessing they have pronounced upon him, hoping that he will serve Naomi in her old age. Since he was brought up by Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, we can have little doubt but that he did.

Now we are made aware of an important fact about this new child Obed. He is the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David, the very man who became God’s choice for king of Israel. So the blessing of fame and prosperity came true!

18. Now this is the genealogy of Perez: Perez begot Hezron;

Now working once again to trace this event to the significant events in the tribe of Judah, the author of this book takes us back to Judah’s son Perez, the father of the people of Bethlehem, and traces the line from him. Perez, as we read here, begot Hezron.

19. Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab;

These generations happened in Egypt, up to the time when Israel was oppressed. Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab.

20. Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon;

The lineage continues, taking us out of Egypt and through the wilderness under Moses. Amminadab begot Nahshon. Nahshon begot Salmon. These generations are very familiar to anyone who has studied the line of David, for these are his ancestors.

21. Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed;

We pass through more of the lineage, taking us into the land under Joshua and into the time of the judges, when Boaz begot Obed. As mentioned earlier, some generations might be skipped here, as these do not seem to be enough for the amount of time that passed. Yet these names are not meant as “family trees” in the technical way we look at them, and a grandfather is responsible for producing his grandchildren, if somewhat indirectly, yet just as surely as his children are.

22. Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.

So we come to the end of this lineage, repeating what we had in verse 17. Again, this reminds us that Obed begot Jesse and Jesse begot David, so Ruth’s son Obed was the grandfather of David, the man whom God chose to be king. Since Jesus Christ was born through the lineage of David, this means that both Ruth and Boaz are in the line of Christ.

So why has the LORD placed the story of Ruth here? He has not told us in the text, but we can guess at several reasons. One is because He thinks highly of Ruth and her willingness to give her all for another. Certainly she in her choices and her attitude and behavior is a great role model for any young woman to follow! He also shows us in this book a great example in Boaz of the kinsman-redeemer, an important concept that helps us to understand that we too have a Kinsman-Redeemer in our Lord Jesus Christ, Who buys us back from sin and death, praise God! So we can well thank the LORD for this beautiful little book, and for the lessons He teaches us through it. May we all be more like these two people, and remember always our own Kinsman-Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, in all that we say and do.

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