

“The Bethlehem Redeemer”

Ruth 3:1-18

Phillips Brooks was a pastor in the city of Philadelphia in the mid 1800's. In 1865, when he was just 30 years old, he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On Christmas Eve, he traveled from the city of Jerusalem on horseback to the tiny village of Bethlehem where he participated in a worship service at the Church of the Nativity. He was deeply moved by the experience. Three years later, as he prepared for the Christmas season of 1868, he wanted to compose an original Christmas hymn for the children to sing during their annual program. Thinking back on his experience of that Christmas Eve he spent in Bethlehem, he sat down and wrote these words:

*“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie,
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the Everlasting Light!
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”*

Phillips Brooks was on to something when he said of Bethlehem, “Yet in thy dark streets shineth the Everlasting Light.” In the midst of dark streets, there was a Light that was shining bright. Bethlehem could very well have been a microcosm of the whole world, a world in darkness and great need, a world in desperate need of Christ, the Everlasting Light.

Very much so as it still is today, Bethlehem was a small town located 6 miles south of Jerusalem, surrounded by the fertile hill country of Judea. It came to be called Bethlehem during the days of Joshua and the conquest of Canaan.

Bethlehem was a very significant place in Scripture. Consider for instance:

- it was the place where Jacob buried Rachel

- it was the place where Ruth met and married Boaz
- it was the place where David grew as a shepherd

More importantly, it was the place that the prophet Micah wrote about when foretelling the birthplace of the Messiah:

Micah 5:2—“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from old, from everlasting.”

Micah prophesied hundreds of years before the birth of Christ that it would be in Bethlehem where the Everlasting Light would make His entrance into this world of darkness. God’s providence would see to it that our Redeemer be born in the little town of Bethlehem. You see, the providence of God often goes unnoticed. Like Hebrew, it can only be read in reverse.

This is a major theme in the book of Ruth as it illustrates how God’s providence orchestrates the details of our lives. It was the providential grace of God that was working in the lives of Naomi and Ruth to bring them into blessing in Bethlehem centuries before Christ was born. As chapter 2 begins, we saw that the women were back in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Their plan had been to eke out an existence the best they could. And yet God’s providence saw to it that Ruth went out to glean in the field of a man named Boaz, who would show her grace. That brings us to chapter 3...

Now, in order to fully understand what is happening in this third chapter, it is important that you have a basic grasp of two Old Testament practices. In the covenant that God established with Abraham and his descendants, He had promised that there would always be a people and a place. God promised to

make Abraham into a great nation, and all nations on earth would be blessed through him. The land of promise was important because it belonged to Israel. It would be the place where God would make His presence known among His people. God had blessed His people by giving them a place.

To safeguard His covenant intentions, God worked into His law certain practices that would protect and preserve both the people and the place He had given them. As far as the people themselves were concerned, there was something that was known as 'Levirate' law. The word 'Levir' is a Latin word that refers to a husband's brother. Whenever an Israelite man died and had no children or heirs, then the man's brother or nearest relative had a legal obligation to take his widow as wife and raise up heirs for his deceased brother. Deuteronomy 25 tells us what this involved. The whole purpose was to ensure that an Israelite would not lose a place among God's people.

Along those same lines, there was another practice that served as a safeguard as far as land inheritance was concerned. If someone lost their inheritance for whatever reason, then a close family member was expected to help redeem it back. This person was referred to as 'goel' which means redeemer. The law of the kinsman redeemer saw to it that land that had been forfeited could be redeemed and regained for the family. The 'goel' was a relative who came to the rescue. He was usually a prominent male in one's extended family, who served as the official guardian of the family's honor.

Both of these practices come together and serve as the context for Ruth 3. I want to make three observations:

1—The CONSIDERATION of Naomi (3:1-5)

“Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.’ And she replied, ‘All that you say I will do.’”

Naomi has a plan

She says to Ruth in verse 1, “My daughter, shall I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?” By ‘rest,’ she means welfare and security. It was a very important concept in the Old Testament.

She’s concerned that Ruth be provided for, that she has a place in society. Boaz is a relative, someone who could potentially be the family ‘goel’ or redeemer. So she comes up with a plan.

When she and Ruth came back to Bethlehem, the plan had been for Ruth to take care of Naomi. Now, Naomi has a plan of her own that involves a marriage proposal. Boaz is a near kinsman who qualifies as a redeemer. Given what Ruth has told her about him, she is able to conclude that he has shown interest in her. And so now as far as Naomi is concerned, its simply a matter of putting things in motion. You might could say that Naomi becomes a ‘matchmaker’ in which she plans for Boaz to really take notice of Ruth.

I bet that some of you in the room can identify. Maybe you were introduced to your husband or wife by a third party. Getting the right man and woman together

can sometimes be a challenge, can't it? It is often amazing at what lengths people will go to in order to get two people to meet.

I read about an ad that was taken out in the Atlanta Journal Constitution that read, "Single Blond Female seeks male companionship. I'm a very good looking girl who loves to have fun. I like long walks in the woods, riding in a pickup truck, hunting, camping and fishing trips, cozy winter nights lying by the fire.

Candlelight dinner will have me eating out of your hand. I'll be at the front door when you get home from work. Kiss me and I'm yours. Call (404) 875-6420 and ask for Daisy." Over 15,000 men called and found themselves talking to the Atlanta Humane Society about an 8-week-old Golden Retriever...

Listen, Naomi is a better matchmaker than Match.com and Christian Mingle ever thought about being. She wants to bring Boaz and Ruth together. She knows how providential it was that Ruth had been gleaning in the fields of Boaz. In those days, it was the parents who arranged marriages.

Naomi gives some counsel

She says in verses 2-3:

"He is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do."

In other words, Naomi is giving Ruth some basic counsel here as to how to present herself to Boaz and propose marriage. In those days, protocol forbade Naomi from approaching Boaz to arrange a marriage for Ruth. You and I may

think it strange, but this is how it worked back then in Israelite society. Call it woman's intuition, call it what you want, but she clearly recognized that Boaz had shown an interest in Ruth. Evidently, he needs some subtle hints to get the ball rolling, so look at what she tells Ruth to do:

- Wash yourself
- Anoint yourself with perfume
- Put your cloak on
- Put yourself at his feet

Basically, she is telling Ruth to make all the necessary preparations before she comes to Boaz with a marriage proposal, something that was unconventional. We know that he was an older man. It could be that his wife had died, leaving him a widower with no children. According to Jewish tradition, he had been a lifelong bachelor. At the very least, Naomi thinks that he needed some prodding. Though he took an interest in Ruth the moment he first saw her, it doesn't seem to have entered his mind to pursue the role of 'goel' on her behalf. So Naomi goes to work.

Some have pointed out that this is a really good picture of what any believer ought to do if he or she desires a closer walk with the Lord. For instance:

We must be **cleansed** from the everyday stuff that hinders fellowship with God. There is a cleansing that only God can do, such as when a helpless sinner comes to Him in repentance and faith. The Bible says that those who come to trust in Christ are cleansed from the defilement of sin. And yet at the same time, the Bible says that there is a cleansing that we ought to do.

2 Corinthians 7:1 —“Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”

We must be **consecrated** with the fragrance of the Spirit. Intimate fellowship with God demands that I be filled with God’s Spirit, that I yield my life fully to His control.

We must be **clothed** in the garments of holiness. I am to put off the old way of living and put on the new way.

We must be **committed** to daily offer ourselves in a place of submission to Jesus. And we must be **compliant** to do whatever it is that He tells us to do.

2—The PRESENTATION of Ruth (3:6-9)

“So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.’”

Ruth does all that Naomi tells her and she presents herself to Boaz. Notice a couple of things:

Her actions

Ruth listens to Naomi’s counsel and that night, she makes her way to the threshing floor. It was an elevated platform on a nearby hill where the grain was winnowed, a process that involved tossing the grain into the air. The breeze

would catch the lighter husks of chaff and separate them from the heavier grain which would fall to the floor. This is where Boaz and his men were. He would have worked late and slept at the threshing floor to guard the grain and get up early the next morning to go back to work.

When Ruth comes to the threshing floor, Boaz is asleep. She comes in quietly, uncovers his feet, and places herself at his feet. All of this may seem so strange and unorthodox to us. But again, don't let the sensual culture of our time influence your understanding of what is going on here. Boaz is a worthy man, and Ruth is a worthy woman.

What is happening here is a marriage proposal, a humble expression of Ruth's desire for Boaz to become her redeemer. And the proposal seems backwards because there are not many occasions where a woman proposes marriage to a man. It usually is the other way around.

But understand the position that Ruth is in. She is an outcast, a Gentile from Moab. She is alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. So once again, we find her in a place of humility at the feet of one who could redeem her.

When I read this, I can't help but think of Mary, the sister of Martha. Every time we see her in the gospels, she is always to be found at the feet of Jesus. She is always to be found taking the posture of sinner in need of grace. In a similar way, Ruth is placing herself at the redeemer's feet.

Her request

Look at what verse 8 says:

“At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! He said, ‘Who are you?’”

Have you ever woke up in the middle of the night because you were startled by something? Maybe it was one of your children standing over your bedside. Or, perhaps it was your husband or wife trying to slip quietly into the room as they got home late from a trip. The presence of another person in the room was alarming and your sensitivities were suddenly heightened. That's what is happening here.

Boaz went to sleep on a heap of grain, and when he wakes up in the middle of the night, his feet are cold and there's a woman at the threshing floor. He asks an obvious question that anyone would—"Who are you?"

Notice how Ruth responds in verse 9:

"And she answered, 'I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.'"

She doesn't say, "I am Ruth the Moabite." Instead, she will say to him, "I am Ruth, your servant." The reason is that when you place yourself at the redeemer's feet, you take on a brand new identity. And by asking Boaz to spread his wings over her, she is asking him to take her under his watchful care and protection, to fulfill the role of kinsman redeemer in her life. It is the same language used in the previous chapter to show how she had come to trust God.

3—The DETERMINATION of Boaz (3:10-18)

"And he said, 'May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I.

Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the Lord lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning.’ So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, ‘Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.’ And he said, ‘Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out.’ So she held it, and he measured out six measure of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city. And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, ‘How did you fare, my daughter?’ Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, ‘These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, ‘You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’ She replied, ‘Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.’”

Naomi had explained to Ruth that Boaz is a ‘goel,’ a kinsman redeemer. Ruth had gone to the threshing floor and requested that Boaz be her ‘goel.’ The question then arises as to whether or not Boaz is willing to be ‘goel.’ To begin with, consider:

The personal qualification

Not just anyone could be a redeemer. As far as the law of the redeemer was concerned, there were requirements for someone to qualify as a kinsman redeemer. Mosaic law stated the requirements:

Leviticus 25:24-28—“In all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land. If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold...”

The three important requirements to be met were these:

- he had to be near of kin
- he had to be able to pay the price
- he had to be willing to pay the price

We know that Boaz is near of kin. We know that he is a wealthy man who is very much able to pay the price. Is he willing to do so?

The promised hope

Look at what he says to her in verse 10:

“And he said, ‘May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.’”

He tells Ruth that he is very much willing! She had not gone after the younger men, she had not sought money for herself or any such thing. She is honorable in every way, and Boaz acknowledges this about her. He says that everyone knows her to be a ‘worthy’ woman, a virtuous woman, a woman of excellence.

Proverbs 31:10—“Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.”

He makes her a promise—“Do not fear, I will do for you all that you ask.” These are not empty words, but are words of sworn commitment. Now, you and I know that a promise can be a cheap thing. Promises are only as good as the character and capacity of the one who makes them. But Ruth has firm grounds for confidence here because Boaz is a ‘worthy’ man with vast resources and noble character. He is a man whose word can be relied upon, a man who has

both the means and the determination to do what he has promised. His word is his bond!

The potential obstacle

Notice in verse 12 that Boaz tells Ruth that there is relative who is closer to the family than he is. If this man is willing to pay the redemptive price, then Boaz would defer to him. It would seem to be an obstacle of sorts on Ruth's pathway to redemption.

Have you ever noticed when you read the Bible, there often seems to be a similar pattern of a promised hope, a glaring obstacle, and miraculous outworking? When the work of God seems to be advancing, an obstacle seems to appear.

Think of how this is true in the life of Abraham and Sarah. The Lord had promised to make him into a great nation, and through his seed all the world would be blessed. The obstacle arises when he and his wife are well past the age of bearing children. The same thing comes up in the life of Isaac and Rebecca. God has promised that he would inherit the blessing of Abraham, but Rebecca is barren.

Or what about how famine seems to threaten the lives of Jacob and his sons, who are forced to go to Egypt? Or how 400 years later, the Israelites would be delivered from slavery in Egypt only to come to the Red Sea? It was an obstacle that seemed to stand in the way of promise.

At other times, it would seem that the people of God act foolishly and endanger the plan of God. Israel abandons the covenant and turns to idolatry and are carried away into captivity. Or, think of how God's Son is about to make His

entrance into the world, but there is no room for Mary in the inn at Bethlehem. Obstacles seem to abound where God's promise is involved.

But how many of you know that there is no obstacle as far as God is concerned? What seems like an obstacle that is standing in the way to us is a non-issue with a sovereign God. Promised hope and a potential obstacle demands:

The patient response

Verse 14 says that Ruth lay at his feet until morning, but she arose while it was still very early. But before she can go, Boaz sees to it that she not go home to Naomi empty handed.

And he said, 'Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out.' So she held it, and he measured out six measure of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city.

He wants Ruth to take sufficient provision home. It is one more token expression of his grace. Look at verse 16:

"And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, 'How did you fare, my daughter?'"

Some translations say, "Who are you, my daughter?" That doesn't mean that she is forgetful. It is Naomi's way of asking, "Girl, how did it go? Are you going to be the future Mrs. Boaz?" Ruth then told her all that Boaz had done for her and what he had said. In verse 18, Naomi replies:

'Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.'"

All that was left for Ruth to do was wait and be patient, for there was nothing more that she could do. The chapter begins with Naomi seeking rest for Ruth, and it ends with Boaz not resting until he gets the matter settled.

“The man will not rest but will settle the matter today.”

Boaz is going to go to work as Ruth’s redeemer. He is determined to do whatever it takes, to pay whatever the cost, and to go whatever the distance—and their redeemer won’t rest until the matter is settled.

Let me give you some closing thoughts:

- *God is so committed to His glory that He is willing to do whatever is necessary to redeem His people*

When God finished His work of creating the world, we read in Genesis 2 that He ‘rested’ from His work. When Adam sinned, however, the perfect rest of God was broken and God’s creation became marred by sin. The curse of sin brought death and decay. Yet God made a promise that the future Seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, and what Adam forfeited through disobedience would be regained. God began His work of redemption and would not rest until it was accomplished.

Scripture is the story of the providential work of God.

- *Jesus is our near kinsman who has paid the price for our redemption in full.*

Galatians 4:4—“But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

What Adam forfeited through sin, Jesus came to rescue and redeem. He is our 'goel,' our kinsman redeemer, God becoming Man, Emmanuel, deity wrapped in humanity:

Hebrews 2:14-18—“...as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that though death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest.”

The Son of God had to become one of us so that He could rescue us from our sin. That is why the truth of the 'incarnation' is so vital to Christianity. God become Man!

- *Faith means that you come to Christ in complete trust and find new life at the Redeemer's feet.*

From the moment that Boaz took Ruth under his wings, she would no longer be known as the outcast from Moab. She would be known as his bride. All that was his would become hers. In a similar way, salvation is found through faith in Jesus Christ, trusting in His atoning death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

Isaiah 43:1-3—“But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

Jesus is our Redeemer, born in Bethlehem to save us from our sins. Charles Wesley wrote:

*Hail! the heaven-born
Prince of peace!
Hail! the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die:
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"*