

# Our part in happy endings

## Intro

If you haven't been with us, we're preaching our way through the book of Ruth and today we reach the grand finale - we're looking at the last chapter. And I have good news for you – it's the happy ending!

## Context

**Timeline:** Just to very quickly place this for you in the big story of the Bible, it's pretty near the beginning overall:

Beginning—Abraham—Moses—Joshua—Judges and this is where Ruth's set

Ruth 4 is a happy ending – but what's a happy ending to a three-thousand year old love story got to do with us? Well, stick with me and hopefully we'll find out!

### Story so far:

- Naomi goes from famine-struck Israel to nearby Moab in search of food. She settles and her children marry. But disaster strikes – husband and sons die
- She hears Israel's famine is over and returns with one daughter-in-law, Ruth
- Back in Israel Ruth provides for the family by picking up grain the harvesters leave behind – and meets unexpected kindness from wealthy Boaz, who it turns out is a relative.
- At the end of the harvest season Naomi sends Ruth to meet Boaz one night and the bedroom scene we were hearing about last week ensues, where Ruth proposes Boaz rescue the family by marrying her.
- Boaz is delighted – but there's a hitch; someone else has "first dibs" on rescuing the family

I'm on the edge of my seat – what's going to happen next? Will the other guy step up? That's where Ruth 4 picks up the story – so let's read:

# Boaz

Ruth 4:1-10

Woah – what is going on here?

## Gate

Boaz heads straight for the gate – why? Bethlehem's a small country town and it's three thousand years ago. There are no police, no courts, no lawyers. In those days the gate was the place where anything that needed to be done got done. You did your business there and your law. Just needed some tribal elders to witness it all. Boaz is straight to sorting things out – and here comes the other family redeemer – perfect timing.

## Redeemers

What does it mean when it says guardian-redeemer or kinsman-redeemer? What's a redeemer? Well, Israel had a bit of an unusual way of thinking about land; their law made it clear the land didn't belong to them. It really belonged to God all the time – and the people were just looking after it for him. Different families were given different bits of land – and that land was meant to stay with that family for the long term.

So if someone was strapped for cash – a few too many Greek investments perhaps – then they couldn't just sell "their" land – because it wasn't theirs to sell, it was God's. But they were allowed to sell the rights to it for a while – only the law said it had to come back to them in the end.

And there was also a wider family responsibility to sort things out when they went pear-shaped. If someone had sold land rights then their wider family was meant to buy them back – or **redeem** them – if they could. Seems like there was a pecking order of redeemers, and Boaz wasn't quite top of the list. So it's the other guy's job to buy back the land.

## The Twist

And at first it looks like he's going to take it. What's happened to Boaz marrying Rut? Well, that's the twist. Boaz adds at the last moment, "oh, and you'll need to marry Ruth, of course". Um why?

Why would the other redeemer need to marry Ruth? Well, like I said, Land and families go together in Israel. There's another set of laws designed to ensure families continue – providing for what to do if a father dies without a son. And unless something changes, Naomi's family line is over. The laws don't cover this exact situation, but it seems like the other redeemer and the elders all accept Boaz's conclusion as valid. Ruth – and more children for Naomi's family – are a part of the bargain.

The other guy is quick to back away, worried for his own inheritance and realising he won't get to keep the land he would redeem because Naomi's family would continue.

What's the surprise? Surely he knew about Ruth? 3:11 tells us so – “all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman” – she's not some secret stowaway. He had obviously assumed she wasn't part of the deal – perhaps because she's a foreigner. Or perhaps he figured he'd marry elderly Naomi instead, probably past childbearing, and so no inheritance threat. Either way, he doesn't challenge Boaz's logic – and neither does anyone else.

### **Boaz's statement**

What's the deal with the sandals? I guess that's just the way they did things back then. It has connections with the whole marrying-to-continue-the-family-line thing so perhaps that's where it comes from.

Either way, Boaz formally and carefully settles things. He's bought or redeemed the land. And he's acquired a wife – with the specific purpose of keeping the family alive on their land.

*Let's take a moment to think a bit more about what Boaz has done here, and what we can learn from him.*

### **Boaz makes a happy ending**

In three short chapters Boaz has turned around Ruth and Naomi's life. He's made a happy ending for them after all.

- He rescues them from poverty and destitution, helping them glean.

- He rescues their inheritance for them, redeeming their land.
- He rescues their family from extinction, marrying Ruth.

It's worth noting that Boaz **took a big risk** here. He's embraced Ruth who is a foreigner, an outsider, from another nation who aren't exactly Israel's best buddies. He put his reputation, as a leading man of the town, on the line when he took Ruth.

He's taken a risk – but **he's not been reckless**. Ruth has already proven her character. He knows she's stuck with her mother-in-law through thick and thin, taking care of her. He's seen her work her way through the whole harvest. He knows she's got guts – coming to the threshing floor.

### **Boaz used to answer to his own prayer**

But if we look close there's something more here for us. Boaz wanted a happy ending for Ruth from the beginning – look at 2:12, Boaz speaking: “May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose **wings** you have come to take refuge” It's a beautiful picture, taking refuge under God's wings, isn't it. Snuggly, feathery and safe.

But take a look at what Ruth asks of Boaz on the threshing floor too in 3:9, “Spread the **corner of your garment** over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family”. Well, it's funny but what's translated here “corner of garment” is exactly the same word translated **wing** earlier. She's saying “Spread your wing over me”.

Wing **and** garment? My children are quite capable of making their clothes into wings by flapping them around so I guess you can see the connection.

It's the same word – so what?

Well Boaz sees Ruth taking refuge under the Lord's wings – but Ruth eventually finds her refuge under his own wing! He is used to answer his own prayer for her.

But does this have something to say to us all more generally? I wonder if it does.

I really haven't figured out how prayer works, but I've often heard people say that prayer changes us, not God. And perhaps that's what we're seeing here – is Boaz changed by his prayer that the Lord would spread his wing over Ruth, finding himself led to spread his own “wing” over her?

And are you changed, or challenged, by your prayers? Perhaps we should all be so more often.

- Do we find ourselves praying for the Lord to provide - where we could be the one who should give?
- Are we praying for a change – where we could be the one to act?
- Are we praying for the kingdom to advance – where we should be the one to share the Good News of Jesus?
- Are we praying for more workers to go – where perhaps it's us who should put our hand to the plough.

Seek God for a moment – is there something for you here?

### **Don't be the nameless one**

Remember there are two characters at the gate – Boaz and the “other guy”. The nameless guy. The NIV has Boaz label him “friend” but the original Hebrew words underneath are very unusual. Most commentators agree they are mainly there to deliberately avoid giving the man a name and are probably best translated “so-and-so”. He doesn't have a name because he hasn't earned one.

When he sees there's a price to pay he hightails it out of there. You can see he's **self-centred** in what he's concerned with: *my* inheritance. *My* estate. *My* security. *My* reputation. Put him next to Boaz and the contrast couldn't be sharper. Boaz is in this for others, not himself. He'll see Ruth rescued. He'll see Naomi's family continued. He'll see their land redeemed.

Don't be the guy who steps back from paying the price and ends up nameless with a walk-on walk-off bit-part. Think about it – where you're challenged to act, what's holding you back? Selfishness? Perhaps cleverly dressed up as security or prudence?

**Boaz is the answer to his prayer. He takes a risk to embrace the outsider, and gives Ruth a happy ending.**

*But I think there's more for us to learn here too. Take a look at the story from Ruth's point of view with me:*

## Ruth

Let's remember first where Ruth has come from – she's a Moabite, as Boaz has repeatedly mentioned here at the gate. Who exactly are the Moabites? Good question.

### Moabites

We run into them first in Israel's long winding journey through the desert to the promised land. Israel needs to cross through Moab but the king won't let them – instead he tries to get them cursed. But it gets worse. While Israel is camped alongside Moab their men become entangled with Moabite women who lead them away from God leading to a deadly plague. This maybe helps us understand why we find in Deuteronomy 23 that Moabites are *never* to enter the assembly of the Lord, and Israel is *never* to seek the peace or prosperity of Moab. It doesn't get any better, either. In the time of the Judges, where Ruth is set, we repeatedly see Israel fully at war with Moab.

No question about it, Moab is the enemy. When you read Moabite think enemy. Think politician. Think banker. Imagine your son marrying a banker!

### Ruth's Journey

Ruth goes from hated enemy all the way to true Israelite insider. It starts with her putting her faith in God when she chooses to go back to Israel with Naomi following what I think we can read as her conversion speech from 1:16

– “your God will be my God” – but look at where it ends – let’s pick up the story at verse 11, the response to Boaz’s actions:

Ruth 4:11-13

Ruth is embraced by the people. It’s amazing. It’s not even slightly a reluctant acceptance. Their wish for Ruth is that the Lord make her like Rachael and Leah – THE women of Israel. These are the two wives of Jacob who had the twelve sons who become the twelve tribes. There aren’t more respected or important women to point to. There’s no-one higher to choose. It’s like the queen!

It’s a remarkable statement of acceptance for Ruth. And see how it’s the elders **and** the people making it in verse 11– well in the Hebrew the people come before the elders, emphasising the groundswell of support for Ruth from the crowd which would have gathered.

How did such a massive change happen? It wasn’t something Ruth could do by herself. She was just a poor foreigner from a hated nation. Sure, she headed back with Naomi. Sure, she worked hard in the fields and began to build a reputation. Sure, she took the step of faith to push Boaz to redeem. But she couldn’t bring herself into the core of Israel like this. Notice she’s still a Moabite in the text all the way through the story, over and over again despite all these things. All the way up until Boaz takes her as his wife in verse 10 – and then suddenly that’s the end of it.

Ruth’s connection to her redeemer, Boaz, is what finally and truly makes her an Israelite.

### **Ultimate happy ending**

And then she gets the ultimate happy ending – a child once she’s enabled to conceive by the Lord. We are definitely meant to notice God’s direct involvement in this – one of the two places where he’s presented as “publicly” at work in the book. He ends the famine in 1:6 which brings Naomi home. He provides the child in 4:13 which continues her line. Although

there's not much public action from God, these two bookends show us how he's sovereignly in control of everything in between.

## **Ruth is the redeemed enemy**

So Ruth gets the ultimate happy ending: From widow to wife. From childless to parent. From enemy to Israelite.

So what? What does this story have to say to us?

Well, I want to tell you that just like Ruth our story starts with us as outsiders not insiders, as foreigners not natives. We're all starting from a place of being God's enemies, not his people.

## **God's enemies**

Now hang on a minute. Is that really right? Enemies of God? Isn't he a loving and kind God? And how could one of those have enemies?

Well, Paul, one of Jesus' earliest followers, writes to the church in the city of Colossae "once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds" and he goes on to explain why: "because of your evil behaviour" – that's Colossians 1:21.

God is good and so God hates sin. Hate is a strong emotion– but that's how He's told us He feels about it.

Sin. Little, unpopular, old fashioned word that one. Sin is doing what we shouldn't do. Sin is not doing what we should. And God hates both. And I think that makes sense – it's not good to smile and nod while people do terrible things. And God doesn't. He's an enemy of sin and evil behaviour.

But maybe you're thinking I've gone overboard putting all of us in this category of enemy. Maybe you're thinking it's just where the really bad guys go and the rest of us are in some sort of middle ground, a DMZ. Maybe you're not really an enemy - but at the same time not one of those overenthusiastic types who get carried away either. You're doing ok on balance and so it's going to go ok with God.

I hate to break it to you, but it's all rather more black and white than that I'm afraid. There are only two teams. And you're on one or you're on the other. You're an enemy or you're a friend. There's no Switzerland with God. And the Bible tells us we all start out on the other guy's team. John, one of Jesus' 12 disciples, writes "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves". We sin and so we're enemies. The bad news is that our story starts with us as God's enemies.

### **A first step – words and action**

But it doesn't have to stay that way. Ruth sets out towards God. She speaks words of faith, like we noticed already, "your God will be my God" - and she acts on them too, coming to Israel with Naomi, turning her back on her old homeland, the enemy nation of Moab.

And I think this is a really helpful picture for us of how we too can become a part of God's people. Because I think sometimes it's really quite hard to figure out what to do next when you're on the edge of believing – what is it you actually do to finally cross the line? How do you step off that cliff? How do you have faith? How do you believe? How do you know it's done?

Ruth shows us very practically how we can put trust in God – say it and then act on it, turning our back on our old home and the way things were done there and starting walking towards Him. And that's enough – even if it's just a small faltering first step. It's enough.

### **Jesus our Redeemer**

You see we, too, have a redeemer who's not going to rest until the job is done. One who's going to bring us all the way into his people, doing what we can't no matter how hard we work at it. Jesus.

And Jesus, just like Boaz, is willing to put his reputation on the line for us. Jesus is willing to take an enemy into his family.

### **Do you want to take a step of faith towards God today?**

I wonder if there's anyone here who is ready to take that step of faith towards God today? Are you ready to step off that cliff, standing right at the

edge? I've been there and I know what it feels like. And I also know the moment after you step off - into what seems like thin air.

If that's you I want to encourage you to do it today. Act. Don't waste your life peering over the edge, staying an enemy. I'd love you to come and talk to me or one of the leaders here after the service so we can help you take your first steps and get started in your new people.

Or if you just need someone to push you off the edge, I'd be delighted to do that too.

**We all started as enemies, like Ruth. We too can be redeemed and share Ruth's happy ending.**

*But there's more to be said about happy endings in Ruth.*

## Naomi

The biggest story arc of the whole book is Naomi's – she's the character the story begins with and she's the one it ends with too. When Naomi first returns to Israel the women of the village hardly recognize her – “Can this be Naomi?” they ask, stunned. She's a bitter widow, angry at God, “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty”.

Let's pick up the story again and see where things end with her:

Ruth 4:13-end

Naomi's bitterness is turned into rejoicing. Her emptiness is filled once more. “Naomi has a son!” – Naomi, not Ruth! And there's more – the family line is spelled out for us – Obed father of Jesse father of David, Israel's greatest king. The pile up of names here at the end of chapter four is no less than a whos-who of Israel. And we know things go one step further – the child isn't just David's ancestor, he's Jesus's too.

Naomi goes from empty to full. Her family line goes from extinction to King David and King Jesus. There is no more dramatic turnaround possible. This is the ultimate happy ending. Life couldn't get better.

## Where's our happy ending?

But where are we in this story? Where's our happy ending? What happened to the happy-ever-after once you're with Jesus thing?

There seems to be a bit of a disconnect, doesn't there? I don't know where you are today – maybe things are working out for you. But I can tell you they aren't working out for everyone and they won't always work out for you, either. This world's a mess and terrible things are going on all around us. And it's not just God's enemies, it's his friends too. There's very little happy-ever-after in Syria. Try talking to a Burmese Christian about a happy ending.

For that matter, take it up with Jesus' disciples – what happened to their happy endings? Pretty much all of them ended up dead in unpleasant ways. Where's the happy ending in that? Or what about Stephen, the first deacon? Not so much happy there as he's stoned to death. Or the story of countless other Christians down through the ages.

Look I'm not saying there isn't any happiness, that there aren't any happy endings – but I am saying there aren't many people who'd say they've arrived at theirs. Doesn't this seem like a bit of a problem for all our lessons from Ruth? Doesn't it undermine everything I've been saying? What good is redemption if there's no happy ending attached? If you're still empty, barren, alone, and hopeless? Have you really been redeemed?

## Just over the horizon

I'll tell you what good it is: there *is* a happy ending for everyone who's redeemed by Jesus. Every single one. No exceptions or exclusions. No fine print. Everyone in Jesus. Guaranteed.

We just might have to wait a while to see it. It's just around the bend. Just over the horizon. Coming up just after the break. But it is there.

You see Jesus, our redeemer, lives. He didn't stay dead. He **did** get his happy ending. And that third day when he rose again the Bible tells us he was the first fruits, the first one to break in to the true, happy ending ahead of us all.

### **Pie in the sky when you die?**

You might say: That's a cop-out. That's just "pie in the sky when you die". It's always just over the horizon 'cause it's not real. I have to say it does sound like I'm saying that, doesn't it.

But anyone trying to sell you a happy now just isn't reading the same book as me. And doesn't every bit of your experience tell you that's true? Following Jesus is no guaranteed one way ticket to a happy life with a window seat. In fact, quite the opposite. Peter, another of Jesus' disciples tells Christians "do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Sorry, this really isn't much of a sales pitch, is it?

### **Encouragements on the way**

At the same time we mustn't jump all the way to the other end of the spectrum and think it's a nothing-now-everything-later kind of thing. Yes, following Jesus is not a ticket to a happy life -- but it **is** the start of a journey. Naomi, though she's arrived, has been on a painful journey. Jesus walked through the painful journey that was his earthly life too. And we are also on a journey, not at the final destination. But there are encouragements along the way.

Think back through Naomi's story – are there any reasons to hope along the way? Yes there are. They arrive just at harvest time. Ruth just happens on Boaz's field. Boaz shows them kindness. Ruth's risky proposal is well received. The nameless redeemer just happens to be walking by. The community accept Ruth, the alien, as one of theirs. There are encouragements on the way, signs they are on the right road, though this isn't the final destination.

Are there things along your path that you can see and be thankful for? Are there things that encourage you in the middle of the struggle that is life? It's

so easy to miss these things unless we go looking for them – but I think we need them to keep us going, to help us persevere as we press on round one more bend in the road of life. When another thing goes wrong. When another apple cart is upset.

*Ali's head – an easy mistake to make. But we make a big mistake if we only think we're redeemed when everything is going our way.*

### **Zoom out – God is in control**

Zoom all the way out in the book of Ruth and what do we see? We see God is in control. In the end, this is God's story. And no-one can mess with His plans. Who does Naomi's impossible and yet God-given child lead to? To David and then to Jesus. God's big rescue plan is unfolding – and it's utterly unstoppable.

### **Trust Jesus for our happy ending**

The question for us as we follow Jesus is whether we really trust our redeemer to get the job done or not. Whether we really think God's in control of the big story. Most likely our happy ending is going to remain around the corner until we die. Can you keep going? Can you keep walking the path? Use the encouragements along the way to keep you going. You might have to look for them – but they are there.

Just like Naomi said, the redeemer won't rest until it's done. And the glorious truth is that our redeemer *is* now resting – and that's because it *is* done. Jesus finished the job at the cross. Just like he said there. "It is finished".

Our redeemer delivers a happy ending.