

# “The Joy of Redemption”

Ruth 4:1-12

Why did God come down from heaven and mess up the construction of the Tower of Babel? Was he intimidated by human progress? Or did he just want some diversity of languages?

Genesis tells us that the problem with the people building the tower was that they said to one another, “let’s make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11).

These days, a lot of people say they just want to have as much fun as they can before they die. That’s the reason they get out of bed, learn, and work. For the weekends. For vacations. For romance.

But I don’t buy it. I don’t think there’s any such thing as a real hedonist---someone who lives for pleasure. If someone lives for pleasure, it’s only because they have buried their deepest desire under a pile of pleasures. People really want lasting significance. We want to outlast our short lives. Even if we’ve fooled ourselves about what we really want, we really want to *last*.

God knew this about the architects of Babel. Their desire to have a lasting significance was not the problem. Their plan was the problem. Let’s make a name, by ourselves, for ourselves. “By myself, for myself,” or even “by ourselves, for ourselves,” might be the way that the world works. But it’s not the way was designed by its creator to work.

And as we’ll see today, “by myself, for myself” is not the way that the redemption of the world is going to happen, either. This whole book of Ruth has been leading us by the hand to this moment---the moment of redemption. The moment when people are saved from insignificance.

But as we approach that moment, we’ve got to approach it carefully to fully appreciate it. So let’s look together at 3 aspects of the redemption we find in this passage: the need for redemption, the cost of redemption, and the joy of redemption.

## **1. The Need for Redemption**

So, why the need for redemption?

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I loved teaching philosophy in Korea for 3 years to 16, 17 and 18-year-olds. My students and I read the contemporary French philosopher Luc Ferry. Ferry is not a Christian, but he has deep respect for what religion is trying to do. Religion and philosophy both, he says, attempt to do this: to help us deal with the fact that we're not going to live forever. Religion and philosophy, he says, offer salvation, redemption, to us---a way to make our lives significant *even though we're going to die*.

How did people like Elimelech and Naomi, and even Boaz and Ruth, deal with the fact that they were going to die? Very simple: they hoped that their name would be carried on through the generations that followed them. That God would help them keep their families together, keep their land together, and give them children to inherit their name and land --- so that their lives and names were not forgotten.

Speaking of forgetting: It's been so long now since we've heard Elimelech's name that it's easy to forget that, in a real way, this story is very much about him. Elimelech was trying to establish his lasting significance when, suddenly, he died. And his early death put the significance of the women in his family, in big, big trouble.

Naomi is not depressed because she's lost her soul mate. She's devastated because her own significance is bound up with the family project Elimelech was working on

Ruth was not heartbroken because she lost her hunk of a hubby. She was made radically vulnerable because she wasn't able to play her assigned part in the family business: bearing a son to inherit Elimelech's name and land.

Their needs are definitely emotional. But they are social and spiritual. Their need for redemption is a need for significance in the face of death.

So, what happens on this decisive day when Boaz heads into the city to see if he can secure their redemption?

Verse 1: Boaz walks to the town gate---where business was done. Just as Boaz arrives, this relative of Elimelech's walks up. Boaz gathers 10 elders so they could have an impromptu city council meeting.

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He tells this relative about the family’s need for redemption. And he makes it sound like a great opportunity:

Verse 4: “Here’s your chance. Be a true Israelite. Redeem this land of your dead relative. Buy it. Keep it in the family. Make sure that Elimelech doesn’t go down in the history books as the poor fellow who lost his family’s slice of the Promised Land. And the land will eventually turn a profit. What do you say? Will you be a redeemer?”

This fellow can get a good piece of land, and in the process he can be something of a hero.

You can almost see this fella, stepping forward (4) in the presence of these town elders, and the crowd. And he says: “I myself will be the redeemer.”

And with that, Elimelech is saved from being forgotten. From insignificance. He’s not back from the dead, but he’s brought back from insignificance and utter failure, which is almost the same. A happy ending! For Elimelech, for Naomi! And they all lived happily ever after. The end! Right?

## 2. The Cost of Redemption

Ah, but not so fast. Boaz is brilliant here. With the audience around, he has given this man a chance to do what’s right and to look really good doing it.

But now, the important detail.

“Listen, buddy,” he says. (5) “If you take this deal, you also take the Moabitess Ruth. She comes with the land. And your job is to marry her, try and have a child with her, and then pass along Elimelech’s land to that child. Cool?”

What’s this relative going to do? He can be even more heroic than anyone expects. Or he can be a smart businessman and back out of the deal. If he backs out, he can secure the inheritance, the significance, the name --- that *he* wants to leave. Remember: he’s going to die, too. And his way of escaping the horrors of death is to leave his heirs with more than he started with.

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His response?

“I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. I cannot do it” (6).

The cost is too high for him. More mouths to feed. And the land ends up in another man’s name. He’s making a name for someone else. It costs too much to be a redeemer.

Of course, *we* don’t *want* Ruth to marry this other guy, because it ruins our romantic story! But before we rejoice with the happy ending that we can see coming together, Let me ask you this:

What’s this other guy’s name? Go ahead: look through verses 1-8. Find me his name.

This man, by just doing what was sensible. By making a smart business decision. By looking out for his own name and his own legacy. By calculating the cost.

What is the result of his perfectly sensible decision?

Answer: his name is blotted out of the Book of Ruth.

In fact, verse 1, Boaz calls him (NIV) “friend.” “Buddy” might be closer. The term in Hebrew is condescending and dismissive. Around here it would be like calling someone Mueller-Pueller or Schmiddy-Diddy. The point is, this guy is definitely not the point. He’s hustled onto the stage, given a chance to be significant *beyond* himself, to participate in redemption. But decides to look out for himself. And, just like that, he’s forgotten.

He has a chance to have his name stand alongside some other really remarkable Bethlehemites---people like David and, you know, minor figures like Jesus. To show *hesed*. To show extraordinary lovingkindness and loyalty. To do what we’ve been seeing Ruth and Boaz do. Significance!

But instead he’ll try to make a name for himself, by himself, for himself. And he goes off to build his own pathetic little Tower of Babel on his tiny little Bethlehem farm. And we never hear from him again.

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Folks, you and I have a choice to make, don't we? A choice we have to make every day. Are we going to live our lives for our legacies? See how much money we can leave to our kids? Build our pathetic little Towers of Babel on our teensy slivers of land, hoping to make a name for ourselves?

The way to be truly significant is to enter into the joy of the Lord and be called by his name. To rest under the wings of the Almighty. To play some small role in someone else's story of redemption.

We must stop worrying about making a name for ourselves, and start participating, even anonymously, in the little stories of redemption that we see happening around us. We must get under God's *hesed* and start giving *hesed* away.

Don't get wiped off of the pages of redemptive history by trying to make history about *you*. As that greater Boaz, Jesus Christ, said, whoever tries to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for my sake, finds it (Matt 16:25).

### 3. The Joy of Redemption

Is that a little depressing? Sorry! Let's turn to the joy of redemption.

Schmiddty-Widdy disappears, and Boaz steps up in front of the elders. And he makes a wonderful speech.

And Boaz's speech is laser-focused on his mission; on his commitment. It's not about his feelings, although the speech was surely heart-felt. It's not about his own name, but about the name of a man who has already *died*. It's not about his own significance, but about the significance of another.

It's not even really about Ruth. His marriage to Ruth is certainly built on affection, on mutual respect and admiration. They made love and became lovers.

But marriage is not a self-fulfillment quest for Boaz, or for Ruth. Their marriage is a mission: to show loving loyalty to Naomi and her family. To bring a little bit of God's own abundant generosity to bear on a sad, poor, old widow. To revive the name of a blundering and now dead Israelite man. To lead the Elimelech family back under the

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wings of the Almighty, where it belongs, where it can thrive, where it can have significance that goes well beyond death.

Between the two of them, they’ve created a considerable amount of chatter at the city gates (3:11; 4:11ff)!

Joyful chatter! The elders simply needed to say “we are witnesses.” But, verse 11, they erupt into a benediction:

“May Ruth be as significant for our country, for the kingdom of God, as Leah and Rachel were --- those women who had periods of sorrow and barrenness, but ultimately gave birth to the 12 tribes of Israel.” They want Ruth to be super-famous!

And they want Boaz to be famous, too, so they bless him.

And they do so with joy, almost rapture!

But you know where the real joy is? The real joy of redemption? It’s with Boaz, alright. But I’ll bet it’s with Boaz *right now*. His body is in the grave, but his spirit is with the Lord.

We don’t know much about what the spirits of those who have died in Christ can see and do and know right now. We just know they are safe with the Lord in heaven, waiting for the resurrection of their bodies.

But if Boaz’s spirit today has any idea that we’re studying this book named after his wife, then he’s full of the joy of redemption.

Why? Because everything worked out according to his plan?

No. Because when he hears the words “May you be famous in Bethlehem!,” he knows that’s not really the point. He knows there was a more famous Bethlehemite than him. He knows that the real Redeemer is someone else.

And if Ruth’s spirit knows what we’re up to this morning, she’s chuckling with joy, too, I bet. Because she knows that she got the joy of building up the family of Israel (11). But

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especially because she knows that her Redeemer, the Lord Jesus, has built up the family of Israel with people from every tribe and tongue and nation, from Moabites to Malaysians; from Hittites to Hungarians; from Arameans to Americans.

Friends, do you want to chuckle with joy one day when this life is through? Then tuck yourselves under the loving and protective wings of the famous Bethlehemite Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, and, in *his* name, spend your lives finding some little corner of his kingdom that needs his redemption, and join him there in making his name famous, through deeds of love and mercy done *in his name*; through words of grace and truth spoken *in his name*, as if our Redeemer himself were doing them and saying them.

How can you afford to do this? Isn't the cost too high?

I can live my life in service of others. I can even be forgotten. That's fine. Because no one can blot my name out of the book of my Redeemer! Because he stood up, counted the cost of my redemption, of bringing me back from the dead and giving me a lasting hope. The cost was his own extravagantly generous life, and his own sacrificial death. And he claimed me. Have you claimed his claim on you? Then you'll be pulled out of the insignificance of your death, and raised to life and glory.

Do you want to have significance after you're dead? Of course you do.

Find that significance in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, your Redeemer. And you'll have the joy of redemption---now and forever.

Amen.