

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

(Ruth 4.1-22)

Introduction

I've found that most people want life to be like driving with nice scenery, on new tarmac, straight to your destination, with empty overtaking lanes and no Sunday drivers.

But for most of us, life is more like driving on a winding lane in the middle of nowhere. The satnav, if it's working, is sending you down blind alleys, there are potholes, tractors, fog, sometimes snow and sheep stepping out in front of you every other my mile.

Yes, I have driven in Wales before...

A lot of the time, we feel life's just a series of frustrations. Well, the book of Ruth is like a tour guide for this journey. The message of Ruth is that, however hard the road seems, it is not a dead end. In every turn of your life, God is at work.

The Story So Far...

The story so far, you'll remember, is a series of tragedies and setbacks. In Chapter 1, Naomi, her husband and their two boys leave their home in famine-struck Bethlehem and relocate to an unholy place called Moab. The head of the family dies. The two sons meet Moabite women and marry outside of God's people. For ten years, neither couple is able to have children. Then the two sons die leaving Naomi with her two daughters-in-law destitute widows.

But then Naomi begins to wonder if there is perhaps some hope after all because, on returning with Ruth to Bethlehem, this godly man with a good job, who just happens to be single, called Boaz turns up and he is so kind to Ruth that hopes rise that Cupid's arrows might start to fly.

Boaz, kind and considerate though he is, turns out to be no Casanova. After a promising start, it all goes quiet. There is a bit of suspense. Is he, or isn't he, going to show any interest?

We don't like that, do we? We want to *know*. We want answers. It's hard to trust God when you just don't know what the future holds and where you stand.

So, as we saw last Sunday, Naomi and Ruth throw caution to the wind in an audacious move that I wouldn't advise any young woman to try at home.

Ruth puts on her best dress and perfume, does her hair nicely, and creeps into Boaz's room when he's asleep at night, after a few drinks. He wakes up. She startles him. Who's this lovely, attractive woman lying down at the end of his bed?

I can think of a few men who would think they've hit the jackpot in that situation. Here he is, in a dark room, all alone with her, beautifully dressed, and smelling like a garden of flowers.

But Boaz is a godly man so he doesn't take advantage of her. She doesn't exactly say "Will you marry me, Boaz." That would be weird. So she says, "I am asking you - to ask me - to marry you."

Interestingly, Boaz tells Ruth not how presumptuous she is, but how *kind* she is. He says, "You haven't gone running after younger men."

So that means Boaz is an older man. He calls Ruth "my daughter" - he's probably old enough to be her dad.

That raises a very obvious question. Why would an older man with property and a good income in that society be unmarried? Was it just that he hadn't yet met Miss Perfect? Did he have some physical disfigurement? Was he a widower? Was his personal hygiene a bit iffy? Was he just not the marrying type? None of the above.

Here's the reason; no girl wanted to marry Boaz *because of who his mother was*. Matthew 1.5 tells us that his mother was Rahab – that's the Rahab from Joshua 6; a prostitute who betrayed her own people. For some reason, none of the girls in Bethlehem want a double-dealing, retired sex worker as a mother-in-law!

Boaz is nice, and he's done well for himself, but he's got baggage so no one wants to marry into his family - except Ruth, who sees his heart and accepts him, and loves him as he is. No wonder Boaz said to Ruth in 3.10 "The Lord bless you for this kindness." This is the first woman who has ever seen him and loved him for who he is.

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? You were chosen to be adopted and cherished by your heavenly Father. You are the apple of his eye.

Shifting the Last Obstacle

And so to tonight's reading. Just when Ruth and Naomi's long and winding road straightens at last, an almighty landslide blocks the highway.

There is someone else who, according to Jewish custom, is first in line to redeem Ruth and marry her. It's complicated.

Here's the problem in three sentences.

- 1) The law said that if someone lost his land, for whatever reason, his immediate family had an option to buy it back and keep it the family.
- 2) If a man who lost his property died *before having children*, the nearest of kin had a duty to marry his widow and have children with her to carry on the name of the deceased.
- 3) If this new couple had children, it was the children who inherited the land, not the nearest of kin who had bought it back.

The invisible hand of God is at work here. Boaz discusses the situation at the city gate, with this nearest of kin *who just happens to be there that day* when Boaz needs to talk. We don't know this man's name. Boaz calls him "friend" so let's call him Mr. Friend.

Boaz tells him that his relative Naomi is selling a bit of land. It's not worth much. It can't be. Otherwise Ruth wouldn't have been gleaning like a beggar in the barley field.

In all likelihood, Naomi needs to sell her one, last, modest asset just to have food to eat. So Boaz says "Friend, you have first refusal; it's yours if you want to buy it. If not, I'm next in line."

Now, Mr. Friend is a waste of space. He has a moral obligation to look after Naomi and Ruth after their husbands' deaths. It's his job. What has he done for these two widows so far? Nothing! This is the first we hear of him.

The harvests are over. That's at least 8-10 weeks Naomi and Ruth have been in Bethlehem. He hasn't called round, he hasn't provided for them, he hasn't protected them, he has been anonymous - Mr. Friend doesn't care about anyone.

In v4, it all goes pear-shaped. Mr. Friend says he *does* want to buy the land. So Ruth, this sweet, loyal, hardworking, godly woman is going to get landed with a guy who doesn't love her and doesn't care and Boaz is going home empty handed.

So Boaz ups his game - and what he does is brilliant. "Oh yeah," he says. "Did I mention the small print? The land comes with a Moabite woman whom you'll have to marry."

Notice he doesn't say anything about how lovely Ruth is and how she has become a member by faith of God's chosen people. He just says "Ruth the Moabite, the dead man's widow." In other words, she's a foreign migrant, on benefits, and she's been married before.

No doubt he gave away a bit more on the CV. "We don't know how her husband died; mysterious circumstances eh..? She doesn't seem to be able to have children either. Oh, and she has a bitter mother-in-law who'd have to live under your roof as well. The two women are inseparable. Still interested?"

Mr. Friend's jaw drops. "You know, I would *love* to, but I just can't. You do it." Boaz, under his breath, says, "Yes!" and they shake hands.

And so in v9, Boaz becomes the family guardian and redeemer of Naomi and Ruth. He is under no legal obligation at all. Just like Jesus didn't *have* to redeem us. It was pure grace.

There are so many parallels.

Boaz was eligible to redeem Ruth - Jesus was eligible to redeem us.

Boaz was willing to redeem Ruth - Jesus was willing to redeem us.

Boaz paid a price to redeem Ruth - Jesus paid the highest price to redeem us; his own blood.

Boaz overcame obstacles to redeem Ruth - Jesus overcame the greatest obstacle to redeem us by rising again.

In this part of the story, Ruth is in the background, and doesn't say a word. Her redemption is a free gift to which she contributes *nothing*.

We don't bring anything to our redemption either; no good works, no religious performance, no persuasive arguments, just ourselves, just as we are.

So, v13, Ruth and Boaz commit to one another, for better or for worse, then they consummate their marriage, and then they have a little boy called Obed which means "servant worshipper."

After all the darkness; the famine, the funerals, the poverty, the homelessness, the low-paid jobs, the misery, the bitterness - here is Naomi, tears running down her face, with a little grandson in her arms; *a baby boy, born in Bethlehem, who makes everything right*. Who does that remind you of?

And I love it in v15 where they say to Naomi, "your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given birth."

In our world, even in our day, especially in places like China and North Africa, people often think that boys are worth more than girls. In fact, we don't even have to go abroad to find this.

In 2012, two doctors in Birmingham and Sheffield were filmed in an undercover sting investigation offering to abort babies because they were girls which is illegal.

The Crown Prosecution Service were handed the recordings, but decided it was not in the public interest to prosecute. So someone launched a private prosecution and the doctors were summonsed to answer charges in Manchester Crown Court.

The CPS refused to release the tapes, so the judge could not allow it as evidence. The case collapsed and the court ordered the brave young woman who brought the case to pay these doctors who offered sex-selective terminations £47,000, compensation and costs.

So in the UK we have state collusion in abortion of healthy babies by healthy mothers *because they are girls*.

God's word says that kind and loyal daughters, like Ruth, are more valuable than the perfect number of sons.

Ending

We saw how Boaz, as a redeemer, foreshadows Jesus. But I end by looking at this young woman, Ruth, who had nothing, but *through her faith* became the great-grandmother of King David.

You look at Ruth, and:

- You see one who left the comfort of her father's house to become poor in a strange place

- You see one who loved the loveless
- You see one who considered a man's heart, not his background
- You see one who gave her life for a bitter, hopeless woman and became her salvation

This laughing stock, this family tragedy who had no name, became, through faith, the ancestor of the one whose name is above every name.

Because when you look at Ruth, you see her greatest descendant, the Lord Jesus.

The invisible hand of God. As we begin Lent today, may we see God at work straightening the messes in our lives, caused in part by our foolishness and sin, to bring outcomes we could scarcely dream of.

Amen.