

This time of year we often hear the words of **Micah 5:2**, “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *Too* little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”

And we sing the song, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” God’s choice of Bethlehem made it a little town of great importance. It may have been small in population but not in significance. Bethlehem is the hometown of Ruth and Boaz as well as King David and eventually the birthplace of Jesus. In the hands of God’s providence there are no little towns, insignificant days, unimportant people or unrelated events. Bethlehem proves it. So does the book of Ruth.

Ruth illustrates that God’s purpose is to connect us, His people, to something far greater than ourselves. When we follow him our lives always mean more than we think they do. Because of God’s providence there is always a connection between ordinary events and the sovereign work of God in history. Everything we do, no matter how small, is part of a cosmic mosaic which God is assembling to display the greatness of his power and wisdom. What you do matters to God. Who you are matters to God. There are no little people and no trivial matters. Serving a widowed mother-in-law, gleaning in a field, falling in love, having a baby - these things are all connected to eternity. They are part of something so much bigger than they seem because we are in the hands of providence. Did you hear the theme of God’s providence in the song we just sang?

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

Did you hear God’s providence in our family’s story? It illustrates that **in every circumstance God is quietly working behind the scenes to accomplish His will. In every disappointment God is at work plotting our good and His glory. In every loss God is at work planning our gain.** That’s the message of the book of Ruth. Let’s see how the story ends...and how a much bigger story begins.

Boaz follows through on his promise to redeem Ruth and take her for his wife...vv. 1-5.

Ruth’s nearest relative refuses to redeem her...v. 6. We are not told why the man is willing to redeem the property but not Ruth. It may be that he calculates the relational cost of getting the property but not being able to give it to his current children if another child comes along through Ruth. Maybe his current wife was not a big fan of the whole levirate marriage system. I know that was the custom in Israel and it was merciful and kind but I don’t think many women would be too crazy about sharing their husband not to mention sharing her home with the other family.

Ruth's nearest relative loses face...vv. 7-10. If a man was unwilling to redeem a member of his family his refusal was considered shameful. His neighbors publicly shamed him. **Deuteronomy 25:5-10.** "When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be *married* outside *the family* to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. It shall be that the firstborn whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. But if the man does not desire to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And *if* he persists and says, 'I do not desire to take her,' then his brother's wife shall come to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall declare, 'Thus it is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' In Israel his name shall be called, 'The house of him whose sandal is removed.'

Ruth, Boaz and Naomi receive words of blessing from the townspeople...vv. 11-15.

- That Ruth would be like Rachel and Leah. (v. 11). These two women (with their handmaids) produced the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. But there is also a more obvious blessing being issued here – that of being able to conceive. First Rachel and then Leah were unable to conceive. In both instances, God opened their wombs and they bore children. Ruth had no children so this blessing assumed that God would open Ruth's womb so that she could bear children and build up the house of Israel.

- That Boaz would be like Perez. (v. 12). Why Perez? Like Boaz, Perez's mother Tamar was not a Jew. Like Ruth, Tamar's husband died but she conceived Perez through a levirate arrangement with her father-in-law, Judah. However, Judah was tricked into the arrangement by Tamar because Judah would not give Tamar his youngest son to fulfill his levirate duty. Tamar's desperate (and immoral) actions resulted in the preservation of the tribe from which Israel would be given the Messiah. Again we see that God causes "all" things to work together for good. Even the evil done to us or done by us can be redeemed for God's purpose.

There are similarities between Judah/Tamar and Boaz/Ruth in that both women were not of the husband's generation. However, one detail is strikingly different. Whereas Judah had to be tricked into performing his duty as kinsman-redeemer, Boaz willingly offered himself to Ruth. Boaz demonstrated his love for God and his love for Ruth.

- That Naomi would experience a restoration. (vv. 13-15). Naomi lost her home, her husband, her two sons and one of her daughters-in-law. This book reads like a bad country song. **But in every loss we endure God is at work plotting our good and His glory.** The story begins with Naomi's loss but it ends with Naomi's gain. Like the Gospel itself, this story begins with

death and ends with life. God took Naomi's sons but gave her Ruth. God took Naomi's husband but preserved her wealthy relative Boaz.

God made Ruth barren for ten years but in 4:13 we read, "So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son." She was unable to have a child during her ten year marriage to Mahlon, Nomi's son. Now she has a child. When the baby is born the women of the neighborhood give him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.'" (4:17). Naomi? Ruth is the mother. Why not, "a son has been born to Ruth?" The writer wants us to know that Naomi's previous perspective was not true. She said that the Lord had brought her back empty from Moab. (1:21). The Good News of the Gospel embedded in this little OT book is that in every loss God is plotting our gain. If we will just trust God all our complaints against Him would prove untrue.

The older I get the more distance I need to bring things into focus. I don't need glasses – I just need longer arms! One of the blessings of a long life is that the farther we get from past events the clearer God's plan comes into focus. No doubt there are days when things happen that we don't understand. God seems to write across them, "Will explain later." But if we will trust Him we will see that so much of our suffering leads to blessings that we could never have imagined.

This book of Ruth is not here so God can brag about blessing a couple of widows and a few Jews in Bethlehem. If you step back from the story you see that He was preparing the greatest king the nation of Israel would ever have - King David. And if you step back even farther you see that King David carried within him the hope of the Messiah, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who promises an everlasting kingdom of justice, righteousness, and peace.

That is why the book of Ruth ends with a genealogy...4:18-22. It may seem unimportant but it is one of the keys to understanding the magnitude of this story. Why was Boaz the Israelite so sympathetic to Ruth the Moabite? For the same reason Richard sympathized with Erin's situation – because of his own history. Mt. 1:5 tells us that "Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab." Rahab was a Canaanite from Jericho. Rahab was the mother of Boaz. If your mother was a foreigner you are more likely to be sympathetic to foreigners.

This is the Gospel according to Ruth - the Good News that though we were foreigners, "separated from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." (**Ephesians 2:12**) we were adopted into His family. We were estranged from God. We had forfeited the right to be His children but Jesus, our kinsman-redeemer, did what was legally necessary to bring us into His forever family.