

LOYAL LOVE AND REDEMPTION

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF RUTH



ROBERT A. SNYDER

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To the congregation of
Bible Chapel of Delhi Hills

Thank you for our time together in the word

May the Lord Jesus continue His loyal love to us
and use us to show His loyal love to others.

*Here is love vast as the ocean,
Lovingkindness as the flood:
When the Prince of life, our ransom,
Shed for us His precious blood.
Who His love will not remember?
Who can cease to sing His praise?
He will never be forgotten
Throughout heav'n's eternal days.*

*On the mount of crucifixion,
Fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God's mercy
Flowed a vast and endless tide.
Grace and truth like mighty rivers
Poured incessant from above;
Heaven's peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.*

*Who His love will not remember?
Who can cease to sing His praise?
He will never be forgotten
Throughout heav'n's eternal days.*

—William Rees (1802-1883), alt.

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Preface

It has recently been my privilege and pleasure to speak at a family retreat for the Bible Chapel of Delhi Hills in Cincinnati, Ohio. On this retreat, set among the wooded acreage of a state park south of Columbus, we explored the book of Ruth together. By the Spirit, who alone gives true knowledge, we were enabled to see the glory of God through the characters of this book. Convicted, yes, but perhaps even more, captivated by the beauty of loyal love, we offered prayers in faith that God would continue to treat us with this kind of love and use us to demonstrate it to others. It is with heartfelt gratitude to Pastor Kevin Landis and to the church for inviting me to speak that I dedicate this small exposition to them.

Before we begin, let me first give credit where credit is due. In three seasons of my life, I have been led to consider closely the book of Ruth. First, growing up in western Minnesota, our church hosted a conference with Major Ian Thomas on the book of Ruth. Although tending towards allegory, his exposition captivated my attention and I remember relistening to those messages as a young man in college. Second, during my early seminary days at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Bruce Compton had us translate the book of Ruth from Hebrew and read several articles on its literary form and cultural background. From those years, I learned about the theme of private lovingkindness leading to public redemption. That theme became the basis for preaching the book of Ruth in 2007 at Open Door Bible Church in Hudson, Michigan. Third, this past month, I spent a week carefully reading Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.'s excellent commentary, *The Book of Ruth* (Eerdmans, 1988), in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament. My debt is immense. Much of this present work is either taken from Hubbard directly or spawned by him. It would be tedious to trace every detail and it would encumber the text with footnotes; however, the reader should suspect that many of the best insights have come either through or from this work. Instead of apologizing for this debt, I find it satisfying and imagine that Dr. Hubbard would as well. Why should we apologize for a partnership of scholar and preacher that benefits Christ's church with technically-accurate material presented in a popular format?

In everything, we are all debtors to God, to Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. It is not a cliché to say that *love is from God* or that *God is love* (1 John 4:7-8). If we love, it is only because He loved us first (4:19). If we have any true insights into the nature and ways of God, Christ, or the Christian life, it is due to God alone, who is the Truth. To Him be the glory forever and ever in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Bob Snyder
Midsummers Day, 2019

Chapter One

The Nature and Significance of Loyal Love

“May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.”

—Ruth 1:8

When I was growing up, we used to watch reruns of *The Brady Bunch*. Perhaps you too can still hear the opening line, “Here’s the story, of a man named Brady...” In much the same way, the book of Ruth opens with names. Here’s the story of a man named *Elimelech*, who was still married to the “lovely lady” of his youth, *Naomi*. Literally, their names mean “My God Is King” and “Pleasant,” a truly romantic pair! But then we read of their boys, *Mahlon* and *Chilion*, who have mysterious names with a rhyming ring, perhaps meaning “Sickly” and “Pining Away.” The second name has the little-boy “y” like Billy and Bobby. Why such ominous names? Together this family of four grew up in Bethlehem, a town famous to us today because of Christmas, but not famous then. They were Ephrathites, apparently the clan name, and they lived in dark days of the judges, long before there were kings in the land. This story, as one preacher put it, is like a flower in the desert. But first, the flower must wilt.

Ironically, there was a famine in the land and this family left *Bethlehem* (literally, “the house of bread”) to sojourn in the fields of Moab, perhaps on the plateaus to the far east, opposite their hometown, across the Dead Sea. *Did the family do well in leaving the land?* We are not told—but then again, like all good literature, Hebrew narrative leaves many things untold. Only subtle hints mark the trail. In this strange land, “My God Is King” dies, and the woman is left with her two sons. Hope revives when her two sons marry—one marries Orpah, whose name has an unknown meaning, and the other marries Ruth, whose name means “refreshment” or “satisfaction.” After ten years, however, neither woman has borne a child—a fact important for rest of the story—and then both husbands die, leaving the “lovely lady” without any men. No husband. No son. No heir. *Again, we ask, did the family do well in leaving the land?*

Surely, we have all asked such a question. Faced with a trial, we made a decision. If things had gone well, we may have given the previous decision little thought, but when things go bad, we tend to question our decision. “Perhaps if I had chosen the other option,” we speculate. Now, while the book of Job cautions us not to read a bad choice behind every bad thing, the possibility often remains, as it does here. This book has many echoes of the patriarchs. Sojourning in a foreign land reminds us of Abraham. Given that Abraham nearly lost his marriage when he left the land due to a famine (Genesis 12), and given that God tells Abraham to stay in the land (Genesis 13), it would appear that Elimelech should not have left the land, but rather waited with the people of God in faith. Perhaps we are confirmed in this

conclusion through the choice of marriage for his sons. Like today, children often find spouses where their parents reside. So also, here—only here, the Moabites were a people strictly forbidden to enter the assembly of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3ff) and their women were known in sacred history for seduction (Numbers 25). Intermarrying with foreign women, who worshipped foreign gods, is forbidden in the law and displeasing to God (Deuteronomy 7:3-4; e.g. Ezra 9:1-2). If Elimelech had thought that this sojourn would be short-term, his death led to long-term residency without his presence to guide in the choice of wives. At any rate, whether due to a bad choice or not, the men are dead and the woman is alone with just her daughters-in-law in a male-centered world. *What will she do?*

One of the things I appreciate about the Bible is its realism. There are widows in every culture, and we are surrounded today with messy families. Perhaps our family is among the messiest. Blended families did not begin in the 1970s with the Brady bunch. While not every custom in this book is clear to us—or even to its original readers, as we shall see in chapter four—the basic human story is clear. We all know grief. We all know widows. And if God can work something out of this mess, He can work something out of ours, especially given that this story has not just one widow, but *three*, and that two of them are from a *forbidden race*. How will the love of God triumph within the law of God, so that hope can arise for this family?

God acts. This first domino starts the chain of events. Naomi rises to return to the land, because she has heard how the Lord “visited” His people to give them food (Ruth 1:6). Like bookends on the story, the Lord is said to do only two things in this book explicitly—He *visits* His people, in attending to their needs (1:6), and He *gives* conception (4:13). These actions highlight the sovereign prerogatives of God over weather and childbearing, perhaps in contrast to the ancient world’s faith in fertility gods and even to our own culture’s faith in technology. These actions also enclose a story filled with providential timing and believing blessings and oaths. While there are no miracles *per se*, there is certainly a wondrous providence at work. For our purposes, we should keep in mind that it only takes one act from God to start a sequence of events that may turn our lives around. *Are you in a mess right now? Do not give up hope!* Such an act can occur at *any time*.

At this point in the story, the women begin to talk. In fact, the bulk of this chapter features a conversation between Naomi, returning to the land, and her two daughters-in-law. The key word in this chapter is “return”, occurring eleven times. Naomi begins with a command and a blessing: “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me” (Ruth 1:8). Then she makes her blessing very specific: “The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband” (1:9)! By “rest,” she does not mean cessation from labor, but settling down with a family. Even the reference to a “mother’s house” refers, as we see in the Song of Songs, to marriage. Naomi is truly wishing them well. After ten years of barrenness and now

widowhood, let each woman return to her homeland, settle down, and raise a family. And with that thought, Naomi kisses them goodbye and all three women lift their voices and weep loudly.

Now, whether out of politeness or genuine resolve, neither Moabite woman complies with Naomi's request. "No," they say, "we will return with you to your people" (1:10). At this point, Naomi begins to reason with them. "Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?" (1:11). Obviously not. And regarding the future, she adds, "I am too old to have a husband" (1:12). But even if the women were disposed to argue with Naomi over this assertion, she grants the premise for the sake of argument: "Even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying?" (1:12-13). Again, obviously not. Therefore, given that Naomi has no sons *now* nor will she have any in the *future*, the women should return to find a husband among their people. And, if that were not enough reasons, Naomi adds how *bitter* life had become for her due to the extended "hand of the LORD" (1:13). Instead of the outstretched arm that saved Israel from Egypt, the outstretched hand has seemed to be against her—although, one wonders, if it was even now saving her.

The cultural background to this argument is the practice of levirate marriage. If a man dies with no son to bear his name on his land, his brother should marry the widow and give to the firstborn son the name of the deceased, thereby putting a man on the land (see Deuteronomy 25:5-6). Naomi has no more sons; therefore, the widows have no brother-in-law to marry. Nor would there be a brother-in-law in the future. To Naomi, this is a rock-solid argument—and truly it was. Given the cultural practices of her day, it made no sense to stay with Naomi. Therefore, the women should have returned. For us, who are listening to this conversation, two things are important to note. First, there seems to be no prospect for Naomi ever having children again. Second, the traditional practice of levirate marriage is impossible here. Both facts will be important for us to keep in mind at the conclusion of this story.

Once again, the young women are faced with a decision, but this time they differ. Again, the women weep. Reversing the earlier sequence of kissing and weeping, Orpah now returns Naomi's kiss with a kiss of her own (goodbye!) and returns to her people, but Ruth *clings* to Naomi. The language here is significant. Given that the topic under discussion is marriage, there seems to be a literary echo of Genesis 2:24, as if Ruth is foregoing marriage in order to cling to Naomi with a marriage-like covenant. This relationship would *not* be a marriage, but it would have the same commitment as marriage. Proof for this conclusion is found after Naomi's third and final line command for Ruth to return.

Naomi adds two final reasons for Ruth to return. First, she leverages Orpah's example: "See, your sister-in-law has gone back" (1:15). Second, she adds religion to ethnicity: "To her people and to her gods" (1:15). Therefore, she *again* concludes, "Return!" But Ruth is resolved to stay with Naomi. In words that are strikingly beautiful and rise to poetic prose, Ruth gives to her embittered mother-in-law a

set of vows reminiscent of marriage:

“Do no urge me to leave you or to return from following you.
For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge.
Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.
Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.
May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you” (1:16-17).

At least two things are striking here. First, this commitment to Naomi is simultaneously a conversion to her people and to her God. Ruth, significantly, mentions God by His personal name (“the LORD”), the only time in this book, and she takes an oath in His name, something the law commands as a sign of exclusive allegiance (Deuteronomy 10:20). Second, Ruth goes beyond what marriage would require of her. Even after Naomi’s death, an event likely to occur before Ruth’s, she still vows not to leave Naomi. “Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried” (1:17). Ruth, in essence, is determined to stay with Naomi *forever*. Seeing this determination, Naomi is left speechless, having little choice but to let the young woman return with her to Israel.

Is Ruth being disobedient to her mother-in-law? After all, should not the fear of parents and the honor due to old age incline a person to follow through with the wishes of the elderly? Some of us are quite squeamish about the wishes of others. We reason within ourselves, “But they *said* they did not want any help.” All the while, we may wonder whether our acquiescence, as Orpah after her tears, betrays a fundamental lack of concern. We appear to be quite okay with not helping. In fact, we may even be relieved that they did not want our help or request it. Now granted, there *are* situations when we must comply with adamant refusals to receive help and then entrust the person’s well-being to the Sovereign Lord of all, but even then, our heart should *desire* to help and the person’s adamancy should be tested and *proven* to be adamant. Just as Ruth looked past the arguments and focused on Naomi’s real need, so we too should look past the arguments and emotional appeals and resolve to seek from the Lord some way to help. The old saying, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” while being bad in a strict theological sense, certainly makes sense proverbially. Those who *really* want to help will often find a way to help. Ruth is of this mindset.

For myself personally, I have often been amazed by Ruth’s determined love for Naomi. *How can this foreigner pledge herself in love to someone as unlovely as Naomi?* Like Abraham, Ruth is a foreigner striking out to reside in an unknown land; but unlike Abraham, she lacks the promises of blessing given in advance. *Without the assurance of a promise, how can she be so bold?* And as for the woman she loves, Naomi refuses to take any comfort from Ruth’s presence. When the two of them return to Bethlehem and the whole town is “stirred” because of them, Naomi resolutely tells the town’s women, “Do not all me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me” (1:20). The name Mara means “bitter”. This echo of her earlier words shows how fixated she is on this interpretation of her

life (1:13). Like some I have met in the nursing home, she is ending her days with a jaded view of life and a jaundiced view of God. He is “the Almighty” (*Shaddai*), as if He were merely a power devoid of love. And her “proof” is fallacious: “I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty” (1:21). Empty! Can you imagine Ruth standing beside her, thinking to herself, “Am I nothing?” Again, Naomi concludes, “Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (1:21). In one sense, this is a statement of faith, in that it attributes everything to God—but it may not go much farther than the demons, who believe and “shudder” (James 2:19). In this distrusting kind of faith, God lacks love. Indeed, He testifies against us. Whether rightly or wrongly, He brings up charges, acts as our Judge, and sends calamity upon us. Now, as we shall see in the next chapter, I believe Naomi has genuine faith in God, even saving faith. After all, she responded to His visitation by returning to the land (1:6) and blessed the young women in His name (1:8-9). Ruth also testified to Naomi, the LORD is “your God” (1:16). But at this moment, even as Job complained in his pain, Naomi’s attitude is bitter indeed. *Again*, we ask, *how can Ruth love such a person?*

Before we attempt to answer this question, let us first define what we are seeing. Last year, at a fellowship of pastors led by Leadership Resources International, I learned that the genres of the Bible are like a bowl of fruit. Each kind of fruit must be handled in its own way. We peel a banana, for example, but we cut a pineapple. Similarly, we must handle the genres of the Bible individually—the stories, the teachings, the poetry, and the apocalyptic visions—each must be handled in its own way. Ruth is narrative, a story. The form of narrative is determined by its scenes, much as in a traditional play or in a modern movie. When the scene changes, a new section begins. In the book of Ruth, the first three chapters have three scenes each, with the first and third scenes having some kind of similarity. This arrangement has a “bullseye” effect (technically called a *chiasm*), where the focus is on the middle section. Not surprisingly, the middle of the first three chapters all focus on the same virtue, identified by the Hebrew word *hesed*, pronounced with a guttural, raspy “h” sound (e.g. Ruth 1:8; 3:10). This word, while being untranslatable into English through a mere term-to-term translation, has been variously glossed as “lovingkindness” or “steadfast love.” Greek also lacks a good singular equivalent to *hesed*, so the apostles translated it as either “mercy” (e.g. Matthew 12:6) or “grace” (John 1:14). Personally, I prefer to call it *loyal love*. One reason for this preference comes from the word often being paired with “truth” (Heb. *’emeth*). Together, the hendiadys “*hesed* and truth” means remaining lovingly true to someone (e.g. Proverbs 3:3-4). In truth, Ruth is the poster child for this virtue. Other than God Himself and our Lord Jesus Christ, Ruth is the best picture we have in the Bible about what loyal love really looks like. She is lovingly true to Naomi to death and beyond!

Again, we ask, *how can Ruth love such an unlovely person as Naomi with this kind of loyal love?* While the text does not tell us explicitly, the answer seems to be implied in the second chapter,

where Boaz (a man whom we will meet shortly) commends Ruth for what she did and then blesses her, “The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” (2:12). Here, her *love* is linked to *faith*, to the act of taking refuge in God. While we already know from Ruth’s words to Naomi that faith and love were linked in Ruth’s mind as part of one determined resolution (1:16-17), we suspect that her faith has empowered her love. In chapter three, for example, we see faith in future protection empowering an act of love. Ruth appeals to Boaz using the same language he had used earlier to describe her faith: “Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer” (3:9). Therefore, in chapter one, it is likely that Ruth was making a similar appeal to *God*, when she was committing herself to Naomi. In other words, through *faith*, Ruth committed herself to Naomi in *love*. Ruth may have been emboldened to make such a loving commitment based on Naomi’s blessing, a blessing that sounds very similar to Boaz’s later blessing (cf. 1:8; 2:12). In her blessing, Naomi highlights God’s love and justice—not only that He Himself acts in loyal love, but that He rightly acts in loyal love to those who act in loyal love. If Ruth had internalized this blessing, she would have been empowered to venture everything on this God coming through for her in the end with loyal love. From the New Testament, we know that faith involves confidence in the future: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). When I was preparing for these messages, I prayed through Psalm 36 and come across this very connection: “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 36:7; cf. 9:10). Faith is based squarely on God’s loyal love being real. Therefore, I conclude that Ruth was enabled to act in loyal love because she believed that God would treat her with loyal love. After all, faith not only believes that God “exists,” but also that “he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrew 11:6; cf. Psalm 9:10).

Before continuing, I need to clarify this idea of justice. Please do not read into this notion any idea of works-based salvation, merit, or earning things from God. There is nothing that we could give to God that He does not already have; therefore, we cannot put Him in our debt (Job 41:11; Acts 17:25; Romans 11:35). He alone is *the Giver*. We are always the receivers. In fact, due to our sins, we were the ones in debt to God, as the parables of Jesus not uncommonly show (e.g. Matthew 18:23-35; Luke 7:41-48). We are forgiven purely as a gift of His grace, freely given to us through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24). However, God takes such delight in His attributes that whenever He sees a man or woman banking on His love and acting in such love, it gives Him great pleasure to return such love to them in due time. We may call this return a repayment or a “reward”, as Boaz does, but we must remember that this fitting response is due to His delight to render to a man *according to*, not *because of*, his deeds (e.g. Matthew 16:27; Romans 2:6). Perhaps it is better to call this “poetic justice” rather than “distributive justice” or some such term. With regard to loyal love, Jesus expressly placed it in the

category of poetic justice in the fifth beatitude: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Similarly, the writer of Hebrews gained confidence in the future salvation of his dull readers by remembering God’s poetic justice with regard to their earlier faith and love: “God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do” (Hebrew 6:10). When we bank of God being God and have supreme regard for His name, we will venture forth in risky love, knowing that He will come through in the end, *somehow* and *sometime*, even if it is in eternity (e.g. Hebrews 10:32-35). My former pastor John Piper once described this faith as believing in future grace. I like that phrase.

Therefore, we should not separate Ruth’s commitment to the people of Israel from her conversion to the God of Israel. Both go together, even as Peter describes a Christian conversion as “having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love” (1 Peter 1:22). Faith and love have always been the hallmark virtues and distinguishing marks of a genuine believer. In fact, we could even say that loyal love is part of the essence of being godly—not only because God *Himself* acts in loyal love (hence, “godly” as in *God-like*), but also because believers *alone* can act in true loyal love, which requires for its motivation a vision of God acting in loyal love in the past, in the present, and into the future. Oddly enough, one of the titles given to believers in the Old Testament is *hasid*, someone characterized by *hesed*. (The term *Hasidic Jew* is related to this term.) If, like Ruth, I truly believe that God acts in loyal love to me, especially now in Christ, how can I fail to live a venturesome life of loyal love towards others? Real faith produces real love (Galatians 5:6).

How would you characterize *your* life right now? Are you more like Ruth than like Orpah, more willing to press forward than to turn back? If so, how clearly have you seen the precious value of God’s loyal love, expressed so powerfully through the redemption of the cross? Only then will you gladly “spend and be spent” in love for others (2 Corinthians 12:15). How firmly are you banking on the rich promises of that redemption for the future? “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things” (Romans 8:32)? On the most basic level, have you pledged yourself in love to God’s people by *first* taking refuge under God’s wings? In presenting this story of loyal love, it will be my aim not to *push* you by the force of law, but to *pull* you by the attraction of beauty. Given the character of loyal love, especially as something above and beyond the call of duty, it really cannot be *commanded* as much as *commended*. It is this theme that we will explore together and commend to each other. By the end of this study, I hope that you and I will aspire to be like the God of loyal love, through banking on His loyal love for us in Christ and then reflecting this love to others. I truly want us to be *godly*. May God’s Spirit lead us, then, into conformity to His Son, who certainly exceeds His Moabite mother in loyal love and who perfectly explains to us the loving heart of His eternal Father!

Chapter Two

The Varieties of Loyal Love

*“The LORD repay you for what you have done,
and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel,
under whose wings you have come to take refuge!”*

—Ruth 2:12

The book of Ruth initially presents us with one family in exile, bereft of its men, and then three women in route, faced with a crisis. Only two women return to the land—Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, a remarkable foreigner who has pledged herself to her embittered mother-in-law with the same kind of love (and beyond!) that she would have given to a husband. We suspect that Ruth is acting in faith that the God of loyal love and poetic justice will someday respond to her loyal love with more loyal love—not because He is forced to do so, but because He takes pleasure in those who take refuge in Him in this way. For her part, Ruth shows us what it means to be *godly*. Loyal love is a characteristic of believers, who simultaneously swear allegiance to God and form a firm alliance with His people. “Blessed are the merciful,” Jesus said, “for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). And at the start of it all and behind it all stands one God, who explicitly visits His people and then quietly remains at work within and among His people through their willing and acting (cf. Philippians 2:13).

Having now seen the nature and importance of loyal love, what does it look like day-to-day?

Yes, we know that loyal love *clings* to the one being loved, but once that relationship is formed, how does loyal love express itself in everyday life? The answer to this question is the topic of chapter two, but to appreciate its answer, let us first step back for a minute to consider the topic of love in general.

My eyes were quite opened to the nature of love through a little book by scholar D. A. Carson, entitled, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (2000). God’s love comes in a variety of forms—five are described by Carson—even as the apostle John testifies, “See what *kind* of love the Father has given to us” (1 John 3:1). Moreover, how love is expressed in practice depends on the nature of the relationship. Perhaps the easiest way to see this reality is through the love of the Father and the Son, as recorded in the gospel of John. According to John, “the Father loves the Son” and “has given all things into his hand” (3:35) and “shows him all that he himself is doing” (5:20). A Father’s love is expressed in giving and showing—that is, through *investment* with His authority and *involvement* in His activities. In contrast, the love of the Son towards the Father is expressed through His perfect obedience. As Jesus said, “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (14:31). Jesus always did “the things that are pleasing to him” (8:29). Therefore, the Son’s love is expressed differently than the Father’s love. Interestingly, reversing the roles would not express love, as many

families have discovered. A father who is always seeking to please his son is not a loving father. The relationship between a father and his son is also not a friendship, such that complete openness prevails (cf. 15:15). A father is a father, and a son is a son. Each must love the other in a particular way, appropriate to the nature of the relationship.

Similarly, in Ruth, we are introduced in the second chapter to two forms of loyal love—the loyal love of the giver, and the loyal love of the receiver—of the “have” and the “have not.” The “have” is introduced to us in the first verse: “Now Naomi had a relative of her husband’s, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz” (Ruth 2:1). Literally, he is “a man of strength,” meaning *wealthy*. Apparently, he had been a friend to Elimelech, perhaps like a cousin today can sometimes be close as a brother. The “have not” is introduced to us in the next verse under the title “Ruth the Moabite” (2:2). This phrase occurs strategically in the beginning, middle, and end of this chapter, emphasizing that Ruth is a *foreigner*. In other words, she is a “have not” for more than material reasons. Unlike Boaz, a man of the clan, Ruth is a woman from another nation. In fact, she is from the forbidden nation of Moab (cf. Deuteronomy 23:3ff).

This ethnic emphasis reminds us in the West of something we often forget. Poverty is more about lacking relationships than about lacking material goods. In their excellent book on benevolence, *When Helping Hurts* (2009, 2012), authors Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert relate how a study done by World Bank asked the poor of the world to define poverty. About eighty percent of the answers came back in psychological and sociological categories, not materialistic ones. Rather than predominately seeing poverty as lacking resources, the poor of the world see it more as feeling inferior and lacking friends and connections—a fact also stressed by the biblical book of Proverbs (e.g. 14:20; 19:4). Ruth is very poor. Not only is she lacking funds, she is lacking friends. And her only personal connection at the moment is Naomi, a woman destitute like herself. *What should she do?* Through her actions and the care shown to her through Boaz, we see two varieties of loyal love. One involves taking risks, and the other involves meeting needs, but both involve taking refuge in the God of loyal love.

According to the New Testament, God has “chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith” (James 2:5). While materially poor, Ruth is certainly rich in faith, and her living faith acts. She tells her mother-in-law, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor” (Ruth 2:2). In this scene, she appears very alone. Not only is she going out to glean alone, Ruth appears to receive little support from Naomi beyond acquiescence. “Go, my daughter” is all she says (2:2). But we remain hopeful and so does the narrator. In the world of God, who controls the entire continuum of space and time, Ruth went out to glean at the right time and to the right place. Regarding time, chapter one closed with the hopeful note: “And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest” (1:22). Barley harvest came before the wheat harvest, and together they lasted about

seven weeks, from late April to early June. Therefore, the women came at the right time. Regarding space, the narrator winks at us as he reports, “She happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech” (2:3). How lucky! (Wink, wink.) How coincidental! (More winks.) Through literary understatement, the narrator achieves the great effect of convincing us that Ruth went to the exact place she needed to go, all by divine providence, but without her knowing it.

Incidentally, this book as a whole is helpful in modeling the flexibility we may take in telling our own stories. Not only is it not required for us to attribute every little act to God *explicitly*, even though it is true that nothing happens apart from divine appointment (Ecclesiastes 3:1), we also are not forbidden to use the language of chance or happenstance, even though in a true sense, nothing just *happens*. These terms are servants of the context.

Next, we see another example of perfect timing. Just as God makes “everything beautiful in its time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), so the narrator announces, “Behold”—a Hebrew way of saying “Hey!” or “Look!”—and then says, “Boaz came from Bethlehem” (Ruth 2:4). This is just the man Ruth needs to meet. His first words, like Naomi’s in the last chapter, are words of blessing. He blesses his reapers and they, in turn, bless him. Now, whether these words were specifically for the harvest season or (less likely) a customary form of greeting like our *goodbye* (an archaic form of “God be with you”), this exchange should not be taken for granted in the dark days of the judges. Literarily, this exchange has the effect of bringing God near to the scene and raising our expectations as readers. Boaz then asks his foreman, “Whose young woman is this?” (2:5). Interestingly, he is less interested in her name than in her boss, perhaps because he himself has employed young women for harvesting (2:8). In reply, the foreman identifies her as the Moabite woman who returned with Naomi. He also makes it known that apparently (the text is difficult to translate) Ruth has been standing “from early morning until now,” waiting for permission to “gather among the sheaves after the reapers” (2:7). In those days, the young men would reap the grain by grabbing some stalks and cutting them off. When the handful became too much to handle, they would lay it down and keep moving. The young women would follow behind and bind the handfuls into sheaves. Gleaners were legally allowed to follow the young women. Ruth may be making the audacious request to glean immediately after the reapers, among the women binding the sheaves. Whatever the nature of her request, she has apparently been waiting patiently to obtain permission from the owner of the field.

In reply, Boaz speaks kindly to Ruth. She should stay in this field and also stay close to his young women. Moreover, his word will protect her from the young men and give her access to the water they have drawn. This act alone will save her valuable time and keep her sheltered among the group. Ruth responds with astonishment, bowing and asking, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” (2:10). Here we have an echo of Ruth’s original plan

(“find favor”) as well as a glimpse into her self-consciousness as a foreigner. The entire question reveals her poverty of connections, and a little later she will repeat the idea of having “found favor” in light of her lack of employment (2:13, “I am not one of your servants”). We also see through a clever pun on the Hebrew words “foreigner” (*nokriyah*) and “take notice” (*nakar*) that it is actually fitting for an Israelite to show favor to this foreigner. Boaz does and explains why: “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before” (2:11). Did you hear again an echo of Genesis 2:24, the marriage verse? Not only does this chapter mention leaving father and mother—the only other exact occurrence of this phrase in the Old Testament—but the key word “cling” shows up again in the command to “keep close” to Boaz’ young women (2:8). Could the narrator be hinting at us? The conversation then ends with Boaz blessing her, asking the Lord to repay her and to *fully* reward her (whatever *that* means!), because she has sought refuge under His wings (2:12).

At lunch, Boaz again shows Ruth special favor. Just as he earlier invited her to the water cooler, now he invites her to the lunchroom and gives her some roasted grain. She eats to her satisfaction and even has some left over. Once she leaves, Boaz specifically instructs the young men to let her glean among the sheaves (again, a special request?) and to pull out some stalks from the bundles for her to glean. In telling them not to rebuke her, we are reminded that gleaners may not have been treated kindly in every field—due, perhaps, to some gleaners overstepping their legal limits. We are therefore relieved to see Ruth protected and not just fed. Perhaps making up for lost time, she then gleans until evening and beats out what she has gleaned. About an ephah of barley! (We will return to this strange measurement in a bit.) With this load of grain in her shawl, Ruth returns to the city.

Her mother-in-law is shocked. Not only does Ruth show her how much she has gleaned, but she also gives her the leftover roasted grain from lunch. Naomi asks excitedly, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked” (2:19)? Obviously, given the abundance, someone has paid special attention to Ruth, so Naomi gives the anonymous donor a blessing: “Blessed be the man who took notice of you” (2:19)—again, the verbal connection between “took notice” and (implied) “you, the foreigner.” At this point, the text slows down for the grand unveiling, almost as if to a drumroll, “The man’s name with whom I worked today is Boaz” (2:19). The mention of this old friend of her deceased husband causes Naomi to bless him again, using the same phrase about loyal love to “the living” and “the dead” that she had earlier given in route to the land (2:20; cf. 1:8). It should not be missed that Boaz and Ruth have now *both* received the same blessing from this elderly widow. Her excitement is heightened in discovering that a man of such loyal love is among her close relatives and “redeemers,” a phrase we will examine in the next chapter. Ruth closes by telling of Boaz’ invitation to stay with his harvesters throughout the harvest season. Recognizing the love of this man, Naomi agrees, lest Ruth be “assaulted”

in another field (2:22).

What a remarkable turnaround in Naomi! As the central concern in this book, she is at times easily overlooked among the other actors, who work in the Lord on her behalf. However, she closes every chapter in this book, often with the last spoken line. In contrast to the close of chapter one, Naomi is no longer blaming, but blessing. Instead of telling people what they should *not* do, now she is telling people what they *should* do. She is starting to think positively and constructively, which will play a key role in the next chapter. Moreover, she seems to see great potential in Boaz' role as a redeemer, perhaps in light of his proven character of loyal love. This connection sets up the plan given in the next chapter, which will quickly lead to the end of the book. Loyal love leads to redemption.

Again, we ask, what does loyal love look like in everyday life? As stated earlier, loyal love involves taking risks and meeting needs, each based on taking refuge in the God of loyal love. In this chapter, Ruth is the one who takes the risks. She ventures everything on God, in the hope of finding favor in the eyes of *someone*. She truly “happened” to come to Boaz' field, because she did not plan it. She had no plan beyond stepping out of the house in faith, in order to glean *somewhere*. But she also shows loyal love in meeting the immediate need of her mother-in-law, in giving her some of the roasted grain from lunch, beyond the pile of grain she had beaten out. In contrast to Ruth's poverty as a foreigner and as a widow, Boaz represents the giver with resources and relationships. He takes note of this foreigner (remember the pun!) and shows no signs of rejecting her due to her ethnicity. In fact, her character has so captured his attention that he is happy to give abundantly for her needs. His conduct reminds us that benevolence should take the character and conduct of the needy into consideration, just as Paul instructs the church in the New Testament (e.g. 1 Timothy 5:9-10). Just like his God, Boaz delights to show loyal love to those who have shown loyal love—and so should we!

Even more than taking risks and meeting needs, *loyal love takes risks respectfully and meets needs lavishly*. In taking risks, Ruth is bold, but not aggressive. She appears to make an audacious request—something that the reapers need to be informed about—but then she stands patiently nearby until she has obtained permission from the owner. She does not use her need to justify the removal of property rights from the owner. Her conduct is a great lesson for us today. In my own life, I remember an incident when I was very much in need financially, with a wife and four children to feed, but I was having a hard time finding work for my window-washing business. When I finally did find a whole house to wash, I showed up on the proper morning, only to find the house locked and no key under the mat. Panicking, I waited a bit, then found an open window and started the job. When a friend of the owner discovered me later in the day *inside the house*, you should have seen the look on that man's face! Thankfully, no gun was involved and the owner apologized for having forgotten to leave the house accessible. Knowing, however, this principle from the book of Ruth, I can now see that I acted in unbelief and wrongfully let

my need justify the trampling of the rights of others. Even if we act lovingly on behalf of others, we need to show loyal love to *all men*, including the donors. Loyal love takes risks *respectfully*.

Similarly, Boaz not only meets needs, he meets needs *lavishly*. Not only does he show abundant care for Ruth during her first day on the job by treating her as one of his own employees and by giving her more than enough food to eat at lunch, perhaps thinking of Naomi, but he especially meets her needs *lavishly* in setting up the extra grain to be gleaned. An ephah of grain is about three-fifths of a bushel or twenty-two liters, according to the margin note in my Bible. That is about twenty-nine pounds of grain! According to an old Babylonian record, a working man could expect to bring home about a pound or two of grain a day. Therefore, on her first day, Ruth brought home about a month's income! No wonder Naomi was shocked and thought so well of Boaz! In all, we see Boaz giving Ruth permission to glean in special areas and to eat and drink among his employees; we see Boaz giving Ruth protection from his young men and from the danger in other fields; and we see Boaz giving Ruth provision with both abundance at lunch and abundance to take home. All the while, he treated her with utmost respect—not simply giving her provisions, but giving her the opportunity to work for a living through gleaning. His conduct is also a great lesson for today. We too should meet needs lavishly, yet thoughtfully. Even in marriage, a couple should go beyond the expectations of psychologists, who speak of meeting the needs of a spouse—security for the woman, significance for the man. Rather than merely meeting his or her needs, let us resemble Mary of Bethany, who anointed Jesus with a year's wages of costly perfume. In a sense, loyal love goes beyond the mere need and “wastes” its resources on the one loved!

*Which character do you most identify with in this chapter? Are you more like Ruth or Naomi, in the “have not” category? Specifically, if you are like Ruth, who is your Naomi and how devoted are you to her in loyal love? Are you willing to take risks on her behalf? If so, what risks need to be taken? What courageous conversation will you pursue, making a bold request without being aggressive? Whose property rights and protocols should you respect in loyal love, not letting your personal need cloud you from seeing their right of respect? The challenges here are great, but not too great, if you also have taken refuge under the wings of God. Nothing is too difficult for Him and He has perfect timing. Resist the temptation to make something happen *now* or in a wrongful way, just because the need is urgent and you feel the desire to help. God can be trusted in all circumstances. And if you are like Naomi, renew your hope in the Lord and your gratitude if someone like Ruth is in your life. She is a sign of God's loyal love towards you—a woman that the end of the book will be described as better than “seven sons” (4:15). The potential is great, not because Ruth herself has a lot of resources, but because the God of loyal love loves to act in loyal love to those who act in loyal love. *The potential is great because of God!**

Conversely, if you are more like Boaz, a person with wealth and position, having the resources and the power, please consider the richness of God in your life as a gift to be shared. The same God of

the poor, who looks after them with loyal love, also looks after the rich who love to lavish those in need with abundance. Rightfully and logically, the New Testament says, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Corinthians 9:6). Is not your abundance for someone else’s benefit rather than for your own padding and added assurance (cf. 8:14)? As one who is “rich in this present age,” you have the joyous opportunity to be “rich in good works” (1 Timothy 6:17-18). Set your hope on God and give lavishly! And do not think merely in terms of material goods, but also think in terms of networking and opportunities. Think also of human dignity and eligibility. Just as Boaz affirmed the dignity of Ruth by putting her to work, taking into consideration her character and conduct, so also let your mind work with biblical conditions on benevolence and in ways that truly build up the whole man. Even then, strive to find ways that go above and beyond. Has not God in Christ treated us that way, such that “in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7)? God has truly lavished us. In redemption, we are not merely returned to the *garden* of Eden, we inherit the *city* of Eden. God has far surpassed the mere meeting of needs, and so should we. God bless you in showing your faith in a God of loyal love by meeting needs lavishly!

Now, whether you are more like Ruth or more like Boaz, it should be noted that neither expression of loyal love is better than the other. In fact, the story shows how both kinds of loyal love combine to bless Naomi. As books on benevolence have amply shown, including *When Helping Hurts* and also *Toxic Charity* (2011) by Robert D. Lupton, when it comes to poverty, we must remember that all people have assets and all people are in need. This is especially true in the church, where the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:21). Therefore, we should think in terms of *parity* more than *charity*. Boaz and Ruth are equally commended in the sacred text. Boaz is literally “a man of strength” (Ruth 2:1) and, according to his own estimation, Ruth is literally “a woman of strength” (3:11). It is my contention that it is in demonstrating the *adverbs* of loyal love, both the *respectfully* and the *lavishly*, that we show most clearly our esteem for the other person as our equal. Merely doing our duty, especially when we disregard the rights of others, shows that we regard ourselves as superior and deserving the most consideration. What counts is not simply *what* we do, but *how* we do it!

Another proof of the parity found in loyal love comes from Christ taking on both forms of loyal love for us. As our Ruth, in the emptiness of our humanity, Christ took the risks (as it were) of the cross and obtained for us an eternal redemption from the Father, but without trampling down the rights of the law of God. Christ took the risks *respectfully*. Similarly, as our Boaz, still having our humanity but now being glorified, Christ has the connections in heaven as our advocate and the authority to give eternal life to all His elect. As stated earlier, He came not merely to pay our debts, but to make us rich with His loyal love. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake

he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Christ has met our needs *lavishly*. Both roles are found in Him perfectly. And the Spirit of Christ Himself now lives in us through faith, in order that we might “be Christ” to one another, as Luther so aptly put it. As Jesus is both our Ruth and our Boaz, so we too in Him can be the Ruth or the Boaz for a Naomi in need. May the Lord do so in us and among us *respectfully* and *lavishly*! Hallelujah!

Chapter Three

The Test of Loyal Love

“If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you.”

—Ruth 4:4

Often in professional programs of study, there is a gateway class, the class that separates the academically qualified from the unqualified. In engineering school, it is thermodynamics; in pre-medicine, it is organic chemistry. These classes are purposely difficult in order to put pressure on the students. Without this pressure, it would be difficult to know how capable these students are for the challenging curriculum ahead. In this way, a test brings to light what is hidden within the person.

In the same way, God tests us. He may make an outlandish request, as He did with Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac or with Philip and the feeding of the five thousand (Genesis 22:1-2; John 6:5-6). Can you imagine being told, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering” (Genesis 22:2)? What would you say, if Jesus rebuked your callousness toward the hungry crowds and then said, “You give them something to eat” (Matthew 14:16)? The weight of the request reveals the heart. It just takes a little pressure. Sometimes the pressure can come from something good. For example, “The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise” (Proverbs 27:21). When others speak well of us, the Lord is testing us (17:3). At other times, ironically, the pressure may even be even released, in order to allow what is in the heart to come out. For example, when the fame of Hezekiah’s healing reached an international audience, and envoys were sent to “inquire about the sign, . . . God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart” (2 Chronicles 32:31). The absence of pressure revealed that Hezekiah had become proud (32:24-25). Either way, the true nature of our *own* heart remains hidden from *ourselves* until a test brings it to light. The Spirit of God testifies, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways” (Jeremiah 17:9-10). God, of course, knows all things already—He has no need for anyone to “bear witness” about a man (John 2:24)—but through the test He *makes it known* who we really are and He *acknowledges* it openly (e.g. Genesis 22:12).

A while ago, I was reminded of the value of testing the heart when I heard about a foreigner sweet-talking one of our young ladies overseas. He purposely pursued her with kindness, but she remained confused about him. At times, when he was not paying attention, he acted rudely and made little side remarks. *Who is the real man here?* Two tests would make his heart known. First, we could see how he acts and speaks when the pressures of life are unbearable or when the young lady disappoints

his expectations. If anger and foul language arise, we have just discovered the heart, regardless of how much he (or we) may wish to excuse his conduct as not acting “like himself” on that occasion. Second, we should not easily dismiss the thoughtless manners and loose remarks as giving no indication of the heart. Jesus said, “On the day of judgment people will give account for every *careless* word they speak” (Matthew 12:36, emphasis added). In contrast to purposeful words, which may conceal a man’s true motives, the uncontrollable words under pressure and the careless words under no pressure are the words that reveal a man’s true nature. The little things mean a lot.

In the final chapters of the book of Ruth, we find two men in a test. There is a crisis of decision with no middle way or delay possible. They must either decide yes or no. Interestingly, we have already witnessed such a scene in this book, when Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. The book of Ruth, then, appears to be bookended with such tests, one involving two women and the other involving two men. *What is God saying to us through these tests about the nature of loyal love?* May the Lord give us insight into His ways!

The final test in the book involves the cultural expectations of *redemption*. In Hebrew, there are two words for “redeem.” The first word, *padah*, literally means “to ransom” someone—to pay money for another person’s freedom. The second word, *ga’al*, involves the restoration of a clan to wholeness through a payment or an action involving one of the family members. Because a clansman is acting on behalf of his clan or a specific member of the clan, the word “kinsman-redeemer” (*go’el*) is often used to describe this individual. In the Law of Moses, four acts are included among the duties of a kinsman-redeemer: buying back an enslaved relative, buying back his indebted land, avenging the blood of a murdered relative, and receiving restitution money on behalf of a deceased relative (see Leviticus 25 and Numbers 5 and 35). The list of duties is probably not exhaustive. Metaphors of redemption in the Old Testament sometimes go beyond these four duties (e.g. Job 19:25). In any given situation, in order to restore wholeness to the clan, the kinsman-redeemer may be expected to act creatively. It is this second form of redemption (*ga’al*) that appears in the book of Ruth, and it will be very important to keep its elastic nature in mind as we witness the testing of a kinsman-redeemer.

At this point in the book, the narrative appears to have stalled out. Naomi and Ruth no longer lack food. Through the loyal love of Boaz and a bountiful harvest, their short-term need has been met, but they still have the long-term need of an heir to care for them in old age. Moreover, those who have already died lack a namesake. In light of both duties in Leviticus 25, there needs to be *a man on the land*. But who will give them an heir? As we saw in chapter one, the levirate marriage laws do not apply. There is no brother to marry Ruth. And with the short-term need of food met and the harvest now over, it would appear that Ruth and Boaz may no longer see each other regularly. Chapter two ends by saying of Ruth: “And she lived with her mother-in-law” (Ruth 2:23). This seems disappointing! In light of both

the loyal love of Boaz, expressed so lavishly, and Naomi's recent identification of Boaz as a kinsman-redeemer, we may be asking *why Boaz has not taken more initiative to care for these two widows*. Surely, he is a better man than such inactivity suggests! Now what?

In our home, I am the one with the hints of OCD behavior—not that my “obsessive-compulsive” behavior is necessarily a “disorder” (although, who knows!), but I tend to fixate on certain things being orderly when problems remain unresolved. My wife, on the other hand, is definitely OCM, suffering from “obsessive-compulsive matchmaker.” I arrived at this tongue-in-cheek diagnosis through her persistent delight in imagining potential spouses for others (especially our children) and her tendency to tell me whether couple so-and-so would really look good together or not. Whether it is simply because I am a guy or due to some further psychological deficiency in me, I often fail to see what is so clear to her regarding a couple. We have a good time discussing such disagreements.

Naomi seems to be cut from the same cloth as my wife. It may be that as soon as she knew that *Boaz* (of all people!) was the one lavishly loving Ruth with loyal love, she thought immediately about marriage. After all, her mind identified him not merely as a “close relative” but also as “one of our redeemers” (2:20). And while redemption in the law of God did not explicitly include the levirate practice of marrying in order to put a man on the land, such a goal would have certainly fit into the larger purpose of a kinsman-redeemer in restoring wholeness and it certainly would have coincided well with the redemption results of freeing a man and his land. Naomi's acceptance and inclusion of Ruth within the family (note the possessive pronoun “our,” 2:20) and the subtle way she directed Ruth to stay near the “young women” (and not simply the “young men” of Boaz' original instructions, 2:21-22) may indicate that the potential of marriage was already on her mind. At any rate, Naomi now takes the initiative and gives Ruth a daring plan.

The plan has two parts—preparation and execution. First, Ruth is to bathe, anoint herself with aromatic oil, and dress up (3:3). Once she has prepared, she is then to go down secretly to the threshing floor, where Boaz will be winnowing his barley that evening. Winnowing involved throwing the threshed grain into the air, where a stiff wind would carry the chaff and stalks away, leaving the kernels of grain to fall back to the ground. (Incidentally, as suggested to me recently by a Hebrew professor and his wife, the winnowing itself may be a metaphor for the coming test that will separate the two men.) Once Boaz has finished winnowing as well as eating and drinking, the woman is to note carefully where the man lies down—after all, the threshing floor is a public place with perhaps more than one farmer present, so she needs to find the right man—and then, under cloak of darkness, she is to uncover his feet and lie down too, waiting to be told what to do. While uncovering his feet would not immediately wake him, it would eventually wake him (personally, I can attest to an inability to sleep with cold feet) and then a private conversation would be possible. What exactly Ruth thinks about this daring plan, we do not know. She

merely says, “All that you say I will do” (3:5).

Again, the plan strikes us as daring. At the very least, a woman is proposing to a man! Is she being manipulative, catching him at a happy moment with all the allures of womanhood? Or is she being flat-out audacious? Where is the leadership of the male here? In response, it should be noted that initiative and leadership are not the same thing. The book of Ruth seems to commend the women for taking initiative, but we should not forget Naomi’s final words to Ruth: “He will tell you what to do” (3:4). Moreover, in that day of arranged marriages, it may not be odd that Naomi is taking the initiative. The bride-to-be is passive: “All that you say I will do” (3:5). And when Ruth does make her request, she (again) is taking risks for the sake of *another*, not herself. No woman is acting insubordinately here, but each is acting courageously in taking initiative. As in chapter two, risks are being taken *respectively*.

Perhaps more troubling are the unspoken implications of the plan. Under cover of darkness, in the middle of the night, a single woman approaches a man *alone* and lies down with him. The smell of perfume, the silhouette of beauty, the uncovering—all these details have serious implications. In reading this chapter about a year ago, I remember thinking, “Lord, what are they doing in the middle of the night? And what are You saying about all this?” The biblical text actually confirms our uneasy feelings. Names are not as frequent—even God’s name. The figures are at times simply “the man” and “a woman” (e.g. 3:8). There may be sexual innuendo, such as the mention of “feet.” Even the place is suggestive. In that culture, the threshing floor was known as a place of harlotry (Hosea 9:1)—not unlike the barn of colonial America, where, according to one historian, “unsocial behavior” occurred. And if that was not enough, we may also wonder how much Boaz had to drink that night—after all, “his heart was merry” (Ruth 3:7; cf. Psalm 104:15). At this point, we are left with questions, wondering if what happens in the barn must stay in the barn. What will result from Naomi’s daring plan?

Regarding the plan, Ruth complies beautifully. She goes down to the threshing floor, waits, notes the place where he lies down, waits again, and then uncovers his feet and lies down at his feet. At midnight, the man shivered (according to one possible translation) and turned over, only to find a woman laying at his feet. What a shock! Just feel the “behold” at this moment! “Who are you?” he asks. In comparing this question to his earlier one (2:5, “Whose young woman is this?”), we realize that Ruth is eligible. She responds, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer” (3:9). At this point, we may wonder whether Ruth has contradicted Naomi’s instructions in not waiting for the man to tell her what to do. Possibly. We may also wonder whether Ruth went beyond Naomi’s instructions in bringing up the role of a kinsman-redeemer. Again, possibly. However, his role as a kinsman-redeemer was already brought up by Naomi herself (2:20). Rather than supposing that Naomi merely had a husband in mind for Ruth (3:1, the “rest” of settling down with a family), it seems more likely that Naomi had the redemption of the family in mind. Ruth certainly does. In fact, Ruth may

be playing off Boaz's earlier blessing for Ruth. Just as he blessed her to be rewarded in full by "the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings" she had taken refuge (2:12), so now she asks him to "spread your wings over you servant" (3:9). In a sense, she is asking for him to be the fulfillment of his own prayer. This awareness of his desire for her blessing may have given Ruth the boldness to ask for redemption. Her initiative would then be submissive; her risk-taking, respectful. (As a side note, we should be careful to discern another's heart before we make bold requests for heroic action, especially for something beyond the explicit call of duty.) Finally, we should note that Ruth is acting boldly for others, for Naomi and even for "the dead" (her husband, her brother-in-law, and her father-in-law), knowing that their land lacked an heir.

Boaz certainly regards her initiative as loyal love and commends her for it. In fact, according to his estimation, this last act of loyal love exceeds her first. In the first case, Ruth had given up family and homeland for Naomi (2:11), but now she is giving up her prerogative to have a young man of her liking (3:10). Truly, this is amazing! It is one thing to give up marriage altogether for the sake of Christ or another person; but it is yet another thing to let your choice of a spouse be determined by the needs of a third party. Given Boaz' emphasis on Ruth foregoing "young men" and the fact that Boaz had earlier been described as Elimelech's friend (2:1), it is likely that Boaz is a generation older than Ruth. Think about it. How many young women would forego marriage to care for a bitter old woman? Not many. But then, how many young women would strategically marry an old man for the sake of that same old woman? Hardly any. Her loyal love to Naomi and the family is truly wondrous. On the surface, the book of Ruth may appear to be another story of how a man and a woman came to love each other and get married—the kind of story that women especially love to hear—but this is truly a love story beyond a love story. This is *loyal love*.

Again, Boaz blesses her and promises that he will do what she has asked, for he says, "All my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman" (3:11). Literally, she is a "woman of strength," the same Hebrew phrase that occurs in Proverbs 31:10 and possibly the verbal link that eventually placed the book of Ruth immediately after Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible. With all this praise and blessing, as well as the mention of noble character, it should come as no surprise that nothing immoral happens. The woman is told to lie down until morning and the text tells us that she lay "at his feet" until morning (3:13-14). Together, the couple chose to act nobly in loyal love, rather than make excuses or even force something to occur through illicit sexual activity. Out of prudence, especially given Boaz' possible need for this Moabite woman to have a good reputation in order to marry her (3:11, "for"), he sends her off early (3:14, "before one could recognize another"), so that no one would know she had been there (3:14). It is all daring and teaches us some valuable lessons. On the one hand, when we as Christians act in loyal love, we should not necessarily let the mere appearance of evil or the temptation itself keep us from doing

what is right. After all, there may have been no other way for Ruth to have a private conversation with Boaz. On the other hand, we should not turn our loving intentions into an excuse about not caring what others think or how things appear. Wisdom lies on both sides of these concerns (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:21).

If Ruth startled Boaz that night, Boaz now surprises her. There is another kinsman-redeemer! In fact, he is closer to Naomi than Boaz; therefore, he should have the first option to redeem the family. This may have been the exact reason why Boaz has not yet taken initiative to help the family. He does not have that right of redemption. This news may have disappointed Ruth, but it certainly disappoints us. With all that has providentially occurred so far, it seems obvious to us that God intends for Ruth to marry Boaz. *Can't you see that too, Boaz?* Yet, as with Ruth seeking permission before gleaning, Boaz will not trample the rights of others in order to act in loyal love. He will act in a respectful manner and leave the matter to God. "If he will redeem you," he tells Ruth, "good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you" (Ruth 3:13). This is faith. Leaving the matter in God's hands without forcing outcomes or manipulating people. Amazing respect! Amazing faith! And with that resolve in mind, sealed with an oath, Boaz again sends Ruth home with *lots* of grain, saying that Ruth should not go back to her mother-in-law "empty-handed" (3:17)—an apparent echo of Naomi's original complaint (1:21). At this point, the women are left to wait. However, given the proven character of Boaz, the women wait in confidence that he will not dilly-dally about this matter, but will get at it right away (3:18). This example is such a good lesson for all men. Meet the need *immediately*, when you are able. It is dishonoring to make a woman wait.

At last we come to the test. We have seen each chapter open with someone taking initiative—God, Ruth, and Naomi. Now it is Boaz' turn. Chapter four opens with Boaz in the gate of Bethlehem, the place of both business and legal dealings as well as the best place to meet someone, because everyone had to pass through the gate to go to the fields. As in earlier events, the Lord is in the timing of things: "And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by" (4:1). We may even smile to ourselves as we see how he *happened* to pass by at that moment (cf. 2:3)! Boaz then tells ten of the city elders to sit down and they do. The number ten may represent a quorum for doing business or settling legal transactions. As we shall see, other townspeople join with the elders in being "witnesses" of the proceedings (4:9, 10, 11). If some disagreement should arise in the future, more than one person could vouchsafe for what really had occurred. Furthermore, as witnesses, they are not judges. This court concerns administrative family law, not a lawsuit. The proof of its nature is found in the conversation itself. Boaz speaks directly to the other kinsman-redeemer, rather than to the elders.

Boaz announces that Naomi is selling Elimelech's land. The idea of *selling* seems foreign to the nature of redemption, so perhaps this simply means that she is letting go her own rights of retention (my idea). At any rate, the property is available, so Boaz makes the options clear: "If you will redeem it,

redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you” (4:4). Apparently, these two men are the only possible kinsman-redeemers. The man agrees to redeem the land, but we are left perplexed. *Where is Ruth?* No mention is made of her, but was she not the focus of all this? Boaz is apparently using strategy. He certainly is acting respectfully towards the man in letting him have his choice, but he also seems to be clever in withholding part of the deal from the table. The fact that his words echo his earlier words to Ruth tips us off that he is not neglecting Ruth, but has her very much on his mind. At this point, then, Boaz tells the man that the land and Ruth are a package deal. The goal here is not just the redemption of the land, but to put a *man* on the land. If the closer kinsman-redeemer had thought that perhaps no widow was mentioned due to Naomi’s age, then at this moment, he may be quite surprised to find that Ruth has apparently been substituted for Naomi. “The day you buy the field,” asserts Boaz, “you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance” (4:5). Faced with this choice, the man declines, citing not any unwillingness, but merely an inability (4:6, “I cannot” is repeated twice).

How should we consider this man’s choice? Like Orpah, who initially made a decision to stay with Naomi and then returned, this man also makes an initial decision to redeem, but then backs away. *Is he doing wrong?* The text did not condemn Orpah, but let her go without comment. *Should we evaluate this man’s actions in the same way?*

Technically, the man is not acting contrary to the law. There is no legislation that officially and explicitly commands a kinsman-redeemer to marry a widow and raise up offspring on the land of her deceased husband. That situation describes a levirate marriage and we have seen from chapter one that no prospects exist. However, as we stated earlier, the kinsman-redeemer can have expectations that go beyond the mere letter of the law. In keeping with the spirit of redemption, anything that would restore the wholeness of the clan could possibly be expected of a kinsman-redeemer. In declining this opportunity to put a man on the land, the closer kinsman-redeemer is not acting illegally, but he is definitely acting dishonorably. Two lines of reasoning in the text substantiate this conclusion.

First, the text leaves him nameless. This fact should not be overlooked in a book where names have been shown to have significance (e.g. Naomi versus Mara). Not even Orpah is left nameless, even though we are not certain about what her name means. But regarding this man, the text introduces him as *pelsoni almoni* (4:1). The rhyme here may be an example of what is technically called *farrago*, when words are put together due to sound, such as hodgepodge and helter-skelter. In essence, the text identifies him merely as some *yoho*, often translated “Mr. So-and-So.” (I am even tempted to call him a “phony-baloney.”) Here we see God’s justice at work. Because the issue at stake is whether to “perpetuate the *name* of the dead in his inheritance” (4:5), it is fitting that the man who declines to perpetuate the name should be left nameless forever. Conversely, when Boaz agrees to “perpetuate the name” so that “the

name of the dead should not be cut off from among his brothers” (4:10), the people and the elders rightly bless him to “be renowned in Bethlehem” (4:11)—literally, to “call a name” (cf. 4:14, 17). The man who redeems the name of his brother rightly and fittingly makes a name for himself.

Second, the text also slows down to describe an obsolete ritual in sealing a deal: “Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel” (4:7). The sandal may have represented the rights of ownership, especially of land. After all, it is with a sandal that a man walks upon the land. Therefore, in making his decision final, Mr. So-and-So takes off his sandal, and Boaz announces that he has acquired both the land of Elimelech and his sons as well as Ruth, the widow of Mahlon. The people testify, “We are witnesses,” and bless the bride, the groom, and their new home (4: 11-12). *But why does the inspired text mention the sandal, especially in detail?* After all, the text could have omitted it completely and yet made essentially the same point.

It appears that we have a literary echo of the levirate marriage passage from the law of God (Deuteronomy 25:4-10). In it, Moses describes the function and purpose of the levirate marriage, then he describes what should be done for the man who “does not wish to take his brother’s wife” (25:7). The widow should tell the elders in the gate of his refusal. They, in turn, should summon the man and try to convince him. If he still persists, the widow should publicly pull off his sandal, spit in his face, and say, “So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house” (25:8-9). Moreover, the “name” of his house would then be called, “The house of him who had his sandal pulled off” (25:10). So many literary echoes are here! Admittedly, the situation is not the same—for example, the widow removes the sandal, not the man himself—but the similarities abound. While the man in Ruth is not required to marry Ruth, the echoes of the law shame him by connotation and association. Just as he is left nameless in the text, so he is pictured without a sandal—kind of like the scandalous name of baseball player Shoeless Joe Jackson, who allegedly helped to throw the 1919 World Series. Shoeless So-and-So may have rights to do with his property as he pleases, but in not living a life of loyal love, he is shamed and dishonored by God Himself. Even the brother in a levirate marriage situation was not *forced* by the law to marry his brother’s widow, but it is very clear that God would want him to do.

On that morning in Bethlehem, God put a man to the test and he proved himself to be half-hearted, lacking in loyal love. Just as Orpah made it halfway, so this man made it halfway. Loyal love is not a calculating, self-preserving halfway commitment. As we have abundantly seen, loyal love is lavish in its commitment. It does not need the external push of law to act, because it has the deep internal pull of love. Requiring us to make a tough decision puts our heart to the test. Perhaps the man had ostensibly legitimate reasons. Perhaps taking on Ruth would have “impaired” his own inheritance through more mouths to feed and no land in the end to rent out or work in his own name. As humans, we understand

the rationalizing and the rights of an individual to make a personal decision *uncoerced*, but we find the lack of loyal love shameful and dishonorable, even ugly. And so we should. God abounds in loyal love and fills the earth with it, and so should we. Not because we have to, but because we want to. In fact, in its very nature, loyal love cannot be commanded. Because it must be freely given, it cannot be *commanded*, only *commended*.

As parents, we often know how the difference between commanding and commending feels. We desire that our children would *want* to call grandma or would *want* to visit the elderly neighbor on their own accord. We tell them, “I will not force you to do it, but I wish you would *want* to do it.” Similarly, as adults, I can envision a situation (not uncommon) where children in need are thrust upon a couple unprepared. Perhaps the mother grows attached to the needy children and wants the father to move in the direction of adoption. Reluctantly, the dad agrees, but inwardly he resents the pressure to act and feels himself being alienated from both the children and now his wife. *What should he do?* If the man capitulates to his wife’s wishes, he will not be acting in loyal love. Mere duty will not suffice. In fact, there is no duty here in any technical sense. No force of law *requires* a man to take on more children, so he should be taught his rights and be given his freedom. If the man now refuses to take in the children, he will be acting freely but dishonorably—not only in the eyes of God, but also in the eyes of his wife and (any) current children (cf. Proverbs 3:3-4). If this reputation is not what he wants, then he may be tempted to show kindness in order to save face or to impress God in hopes of going to heaven. Even then, he will still lack loyal love, for loyal love must be done truly for the sake of others and it must be done *freely* as well as respectfully and lavishly. Because loyal love focuses on the person more than the duty, it highly values the relationship and despises the cost. *Therefore, given the freedom and extravagance of loyal love, what should the man do?*

Personally, I sometimes hate those decisions. I would rather have God tell me what to do. I can live with duty. But instead, in situations like this, I feel as if God looks down from heaven and smiles, saying, “It’s your choice. Do what you want.” But that is the whole problem: *I really do not want to act in love!* By giving me the choice, my heart is exposed and my impoverished spirit becomes obvious to myself and to others. It is a test! And it is good for me. Legalism—always being told what to do—actually hides me from myself and leads easily to self-deception. And that may be the very reason, as we were reminded at the retreat, why we like legalism so much! God, however, gives us choices and lets the true nature of our heart come out. If we find ourselves lacking in loyal love, there is really only one recourse left. We must fall on our faces, confess our sins and believingly beg God for a greater work of the Spirit in our hearts. “Love is from God,” John writes, “and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7). We truly need a fresh work of the Spirit in those moments of crisis. In sensing my own lack of love at times, I have been encouraged to step out in faith by remembering what

happened to the ten lepers in the gospel. The text says, “And as they went they were cleansed” (Luke 17:14). So often, as I have stepped out in faith, looking to Him alone, the Lord has cleansed my heart and filled me with His love. Today, in the age of gospel light, we have an even greater encouragement than Boaz or Ruth possessed to live in loyal love. We have the story of Christ and His love! As we are enabled to see the glory of Christ, the very One who has loved us with an everlasting love, even to the point of giving Himself up freely for us, we too are “transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18). May the Father truly grant us to be strengthened by His Spirit to “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,” in order that we too may be “filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19). Amen.

Chapter Four

Loyal Love and Royal Redemption

“Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel!”

—Ruth 4:14

We now have a daunting task before us. As I learned last year through Leadership Resources International, we need to ask ourselves, “What is the main idea of the book of Ruth?” and “What is its intended response?” To answer these questions, we must avoid our pious tendency to jump immediately to what God may be saying *to us* through this book. While perhaps good-hearted, such an approach often errs in missing the original context. And as the old saying goes, “A text without a context is a pretext.” Therefore, we must first consider the book of Ruth in its original context before we consider our own context. Yes, the Bible was written *for us*, but it was first written *to them*. What was God saying to them? Then, what is God saying to us?

What was God saying to them through the inspired book of Ruth?

First, at this point in the book, we are fairly certain that one of its purposes must be the commendation of loyal love. As we have seen, this theme is found in the “bullseye” of the first three chapters. God Himself is a God of loyal love, and in justice, He loves to act in loyal love to those who act in loyal love (Ruth 1:8). Ruth not only at first chose celibacy out of love to Naomi, she then chose marriage to an older man for the sake of the family—both choices were made in consideration of Naomi’s needs as an older woman, and the latter choice was also made in consideration of Ruth’s deceased husband and his family, to raise up an heir and thus place a man on the land. In like fashion, Boaz has acted in loyal love by not only taking care of the widows’ immediate need for food, but in showing an eager promptness to obtain from a half-hearted kinsman-redeemer the rights of redemption over Ruth and the land. Ruth acted in loyal love by taking risks respectfully; Boaz acted in loyal love by meeting needs lavishly; and both of these strong individuals, so fitting for each other, acted in loyal love by keeping the law of purity and pursuing a right course of action. All this has been handed to us in a story of beautiful prose, thereby showing that loyal love is better commended than commanded. The inspired text is crafted to stir up holy aspirations for loyal love.

Second, the book also seems to have been teaching the Israelites that citizenship is based more on creed and character than on bloodlines. Ruth is a foreigner. Even worse, Ruth is a Moabite. Her people were forbidden from *ever* entering the assembly of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3ff). Her questions in chapter two show how keenly aware she was of her alienation. She asks Boaz, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” (Ruth 2:10). In reply, Boaz

focused on her character—what she had done for Naomi—and on her creed, how she had left her family and native land to come to an unknown people (2:11). The echoes of Abraham’s call are unmistakable. Just as Abram of Ur, a pagan, was called by God to leave his family and home to go to a land that he did not know, so now Ruth has been called to do the same. Abram did so in faith, and so does Ruth. She has taken refuge under the “wings” of the God of Israel (2:12). Boaz not only accepts Ruth as one of his own servants, he later expresses confidence that the town will accept her for the same reason. “Do not fear,” he tells her, “I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman” (3:11). Accordingly, the text shows a subtle climb in her status through describing her as a slave, a maidservant, a woman, a wife, and finally a mother in Israel. Ruth, and foreigners like her, should be accepted as citizens in Israel.

How shocking this message may have been to its original audience! If Boaz receives Ruth as one of his maids, if Naomi receives Ruth as one of the family in speaking about “a close relative of ours” (Ruth 2:20), and if the entire town receives Ruth as a founding mother in Israel (4:11), then how should the exclusion of the Moabites have been understood? Or more generally, how should the Israelites have understood the prohibitions about intermarriage with foreign women? In response, it is interesting (perhaps even ironic) to note that the law of God commanded the Israelites to circumcise their *hearts* (Deuteronomy 10:16). It was quite possible, as later prophets made clear, to be an uncircumcised Jew, who did not know God and who was under just as much punishment as an uncircumcised Moabite (Jeremiah 9:23-26). Did not the law of God say that transgressors would be “cut off” from Israel? Conversely, the New Testament asks, “If a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision” (Romans 2:26)? It was not John the Baptist nor the apostle Paul who first criticized the Jewish presumption of acceptance based on bloodline alone or who taught that a true Jew was one inwardly and circumcision was of the heart (Matthew 3:7-12; Romans 2:17-29). The book of Ruth had already taught the nation that citizenship depended on creed and character, not bloodline. Ruth was eligible for marriage and citizenship because she was *no longer* a Moabite. She had sworn allegiance to the God of Israel and formed a firm alliance with the people of Israel. She was not going back. From now on, she is regarded as a true Jew. As the text subtly states, Ruth *returned* with Naomi. In the sovereignty of God, Israel had always been her true home.

Before moving to the next point, I would like to pause briefly and propose some applications for the modern church and for modern America. Regarding the church, we too have conditions for membership. As the Great Commission instructs us, we accept disciples of Jesus—those who have sworn allegiance to Him in faith and have formed firm alliance with His people in love. We symbolize this acceptance with baptism and we expect there to be fruit in keeping with repentance. Those who are born again will conduct themselves *in general* according to the precepts of Jesus. As a result, we are open to

folks from all ethnicities. We reject prejudice based on race or economics (2 Corinthians 5:16; James 2:1ff). Racism and partiality have no place within our churches. Once people receive Christ, we should receive them (Romans 15:7). Yes, we reject *interfaith* marriages (and we should), but we fully affirm *interracial* marriages among *believers* (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:39). Boaz and Ruth demonstrate this principle beautifully. There is no hint that Ruth's Moabite background has influenced Boaz in the least, though we may wonder about Mr. So-and-So. Nor does the town show any hint of rejection, which is to Bethlehem's credit and which, frankly, strikes me as remarkable. It is fascinating to me that the two "short stories" in the Bible—Ruth and Jonah, each having four chapters—should *both* highlight the repentance and faith of Gentiles, with the book of Ruth showing full Jewish acceptance and the book of Jonah showing full Jewish prejudice. Surely the history of the church has also witnessed both extremes. May we follow in the steps of Boaz and Bethlehem!

Regarding modern America, it is true that the United States is not a chosen nation nor should politics replace religion as the focus of our pulpits; however, as one of the pastors in our church, I have become aware of how citizenship issues in America can hurt the church's acceptance of foreigners. For this reason, it is necessary to touch on this matter, especially as it is a theme in the book of Ruth. Let me make two points. First, we should recognize, as a missions-minded friend of mine once told me, that what is good policy for the nation may not be good policy for the church and vice versa. Just as an individual should not take revenge and yet the government is ordained to be an avenger of wrongdoing, so also the church operates under a different set of principles than the government. Robert Benne, I believe, made a similar point in his helpful book *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics* (2010). Therefore, a Christian can rightly hold to certain views of foreign policy in politics for the good of the nation, while operating under a different set of rules as an individual Christian or within the church. An illegal alien, for example, may be excluded from the nation but yet welcomed into our homes and into our churches. Second, even in the political sphere, the book of Ruth teaches that true citizenship should be based on creed and character. If C. K. Chesterton was correct when he quipped that America is the only nation founded upon a creed, then it is all the more applicable in America that any foreigner who pledges allegiance to American principles of government and then conducts himself or herself accordingly should not be rejected but accepted through a process of naturalization. In the past, American government has acted inconsistently and yet persistently upon these principles. But recently, it has been sad for me to hear of ostensibly legitimate refugees turned away from America—a vice criticized in the biblical book of Obadiah—when previous administrations had accepted them, even though one may wonder whether a previous administration required the allegiance and alliance we see in Ruth as a condition of citizenship. Again, these comments are not being made because of politics, but because political issues have been sometimes having a negative effect on Christian hearts.

Third, the book of Ruth promotes the prominence and pregnant expectation of blessings. From the first chapter to the last, blessings are given when people meet, when they part, and when they discover outstanding conduct in its moral and spiritual beauty. But what is a blessing, other than an archaic word from southern America? (Smile.) According to Scripture, a blessing is an *indirect prayer* invoked over another person in conversation. Just as a curse calls upon God to hurt a person—we call those four-letter words “cuss” words, for short—so a blessing calls upon God to help a person, but yet does so without stopping the conversation in order to pray. Often a blessing begins with the word “may” and asks God to “grant” something (e.g. Ruth 1:8-9). Such blessings of goodwill should not be written off as pious talk any more than fervent prayer. It may be that Ruth’s ten-year infertility is overcome through the blessings of the townsfolk. After all, it was a prayer that granted Rebekah conception and it was the blessing of God Himself that launched the human race (Genesis 25:21; 1:28).

But what makes a blessing more than a wish? When I search for a greeting card, for example, and read the inside, I often find a wish that sounds similar to a blessing (“May your birthday be great!”), but without any mention of God. This is merely a wish. Similar to “Have a great day!” It is important, however, to ask what makes a blessing more than a wish, so that our words do not miss the mark and hit only air. The same principles that apply to prayer apply also to blessings. When can we expect to find a favorable answer to our prayers? When either our prayers are based on an explicit promise or on the general character of God in all His attributes. With regard to Ruth, we discovered a faith like Abraham’s but without an explicit promise. She has taken refuge in the general character of God, specifically His loyal love and justice. So also, throughout the book, these two attributes form the basis of expectation in the blessings. If God is truly a God of loyal love, such that in justice He delights to act in loyal love to those who act in loyal love, then we should *expect* lavish results that go way beyond the seeds sown.

With that thought in mind, let us consider the end of the book together. After Boaz has announced that he has acquired both the land of Elimelech and the hand of Ruth, the people and the elders of Bethlehem ratify it with their witness and then pronounce three blessings—one for Ruth the bride, one for Boaz the bridegroom, and one for the new family, the house of Boaz. First, regarding Ruth, they ask that she will become a founding mother in Israel—like “Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel” (4:11). In essence, the seed of Ruth will rival the seed of Jacob in importance! Second, regarding Boaz, they ask that he will prosper and become famous in his clan and in his town. To me, this seems like a step down from Ruth’s blessing, but still fitting, given Boaz’ desire to “perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance” (4:10). He will receive a name. Third, they ask that the house of Boaz will be like the house of Perez—one of the twin fathers that founded the tribe of Judah—through “the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman” (4:12). We will return to the significance of this comparison to Perez, but for now let us note the audacity of this town’s faith. Their confidence

that “the LORD will give” a child is bold, and yet, sure enough! The very next verse tells us that the Lord Himself acts again—only the second time explicitly stated in the book—in giving conception to Ruth, the formerly infertile woman from Moab (4:13). Does this not encourage you to pray? My heart is lifted in just reading this account! But again, the expectancy is rooted in God’s consistent character as He gladly responds to loyal love, both the respectful risk-taking and the lavish need-meeting of believing human beings.

Then, as if the previous blessings were not enough, we read of a further blessing on the boy born to Ruth. Significantly, the scene is devoid of parents. As a complement to the end of chapter one, only the town’s women and Naomi are present, along with the baby boy. In contrast to chapter one, where the women welcomed Naomi but were told to call her “Mara,” now the women welcome the baby and take the initiative in calling him “Obed” (literally, “servant”). This may be the only place in Scripture where people other than the parents name a child, although the naming of John the Baptist comes close (Luke 1:59-63). The women also proclaim the significance of this baby, when they see that Naomi has taken the child into her lap to become his “nurse” (4:16). They say, “A son has been born to Naomi” (4:17). This statement used to confuse me greatly. How could an old woman become the *nurse* of an infant? Rather than resort to fantastic theories, it is helpful to note that the Hebrew word for “nurse” is also applied to the woman who cared for five-year-old Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 4:4) and that the verb form of the word is used of Mordecai, who raised Esther, the orphaned daughter of his uncle (Esther 2:7; cf. 2:20). Therefore, just as the English word “nurse” has gained a much larger meaning than breast-feeding a baby, so we should interpret Naomi as a “nurse” in the sense of becoming the foster-parent of Obed (hence, the women’s announcement that Naomi now has a son). Apparently, Ruth has closed the story with one final act of loyal love to her mother-in-law. It is her *love* for Naomi that is mentioned by the women in their excitement over the eventual care that this boy will bring to Naomi in her old age. Therefore, because Ruth loves Naomi and desires for the boy to be a “nourisher of her old age,” Ruth allows Naomi to raise the boy as her own, so that *perhaps* his heartstrings would be tied tightly to her and he would then tenderly care for her as his own mother in her declining years. Just beautiful! And with that gift of loyal love, the story has come full circle. The same old woman who in unbelief told Ruth that she would never have a son is now holding the very son of Ruth as her own baby. Oh, the depth and wisdom of the love of God!

One blessing, however, remains. When the women first bring the newborn from the house of Boaz to the house of Naomi, as they apparently are doing, they bless the Lord and then they bless the baby, saying, “May his name be renowned in Israel!” (4:14). This blessing is really big and matches the blessing given earlier to Ruth. In contrast to Boaz, whose name is blessed in Bethlehem, his hometown, the name of his son is to be blessed in Israel, his nation. Just as Ruth is blessed to become a founding

mother in Israel, so Obed is blessed to become a famous man in Israel. *What large blessing could possibly fulfill such large expectations?* The text then reveals: “He was the father of Jesse, the father of David” (4:17). And if we missed it the first time, the book ends with the shortest form of history, a genealogy: “Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminidab, Amminidab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse father David” (4:18-22). Like the credits after a great movie, it is satisfying to read of some of the star roles here—the head of the house is Perez, the honored seventh spot is given to Boaz (perhaps with some names omitted from the list), and the tenth spot, the final spot, is given to David, the king. Overall, the echo of “generations” from Genesis signifies once again that a divine work on the scale of Abraham has begun—the seed of David shall be equivalent to the seed of Abraham.

With the surprising mention of David, we arrive at the fourth and final message for the original context: *The book of Ruth promotes the kingship of David*. We know from the sandal ritual that the events in the book happened in “former times” as compared to the prophetic narrator and his readers (Ruth 4:7). The mention of David also reminds us that at least three generations have passed since Ruth arrived with Naomi. Therefore, it is no longer the time of the judges (1:1). The book is speaking, more than likely, in the time of the kings, with David perhaps in the initial stages of his reign. The book encourages its initial readers to accept David as their king, on the basis of his remarkable family background. To be specific, because the blessings pertain explicitly to “the house of Israel” (4:11; cf. 4:14), the book is calling upon *all Israel* to accept David as the divinely-given king of the nation. Given the precariousness of David’s reign, both in its initial stages with respect to the house of Saul and then in the rebellion of Absalom, it is clear that David was not always universally regarded as the rightful king, even within his own tribe of Judah but especially within the nation as a whole. Moreover, the presence of foreigners within David’s administration—Uriah the Hittite, Ittai the Gittite—may also have contributed to some skepticism within the land. However, the blessings of the book of Ruth should have led the first readers to expect something really big from God, and to see that God can use a believing foreigner to start the whole process of blessing. The reign of David matches this expectation for bigness, even with the foreigners (and perhaps through them), and thus the book of Ruth commends David to the entire nation as their divinely-appointed king.

Going further, we could say that the book of Ruth is the birth narrative of King David. Many of the key individuals in both the Old and New Testaments are marked for greatness through their birth. Just think of the miracle birth of Isaac, the drawing out of Moses by Pharaoh’s daughter, the vow of Hannah over her son Samuel, and the birth of John the Baptist and then of Jesus Christ in the Christmas narrative. *But where is the birth narrative of David?* Nothing is said of his birth and little of his heritage

in 1 Samuel. Instead, the Spirit of God inspired the book of Ruth to describe in detail the remarkable beginnings of David and his family. *But where are the miracles that would commend him to the nation as a divine gift?* The miracles in the book of Ruth are not physical, but moral. No one can love with loyal love apart from a miraculous, spiritual rebirth (1 John 4:7-8). Truly, if we are honest, we have rarely if ever seen such loyal love exhibited, either by one of us or by a stranger in our midst. Such love is truly wondrous and must lead, in the poetic justice of God, to something truly wondrous—and it does, it leads to the remarkable reign of David, a man after God’s own heart. Moreover, the loyal love of Ruth the foreign widow seems to have also given to the house of Perez a new identity. Just as the tribe of Judah began with Tamar, a foreign widow, in need of a levirate husband to raise up the name of the deceased, so we see the same need in the book of Ruth. But in contrast to Ruth’s respectful conduct, Tamar practiced anything but loyal love in manipulating her father-in-law, an older man, to sleep with her incestuously and then blackmailing him into accepting her. The whole affair is a blotch on Judah’s history, similar to the mess of our own homes today. But just as the Levites’ zeal at Sinai, after the golden calf episode, turned their destiny from one of *shame*, due to their father’s fierce anger and revenge, into *honor*, due to their unique access to the Lord as their sole inheritance, so also here—*the Ruth incidence gives to the tribe of Judah a new identity*. The exact correlation with the house of Tamar in the town’s final blessing seems to signify a replacement event that can redeem the tribe and grant a new identity to the house of Perez (4:12). How hopeful this is for our own lives! Due to the loyal love of God, our past does not need to define us nor determine our future. Yes, “such were some of you,” but in the grace of God, you have been “washed,” you have been “sanctified,” you have been “justified,” in the name of Jesus and by the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Therefore, in light of the commendation of loyal love, the acceptance of all those who act in loyal love—even foreigners—and the expectation of blessings, the book of Ruth commends David to all Israel as their divinely-appointed king. Moreover, just as the house of Abraham was marked by faith, so also the house of David is marked by loyal love that leads to redemption. Because God justly blesses loyal love with greater loyal love, the entire nation can expect national redemption through the loyal love of the Davidic kingship. In truth, *loyal love leads to royal redemption*. Therefore, just as the book opened with Elimelech, “My God Is King,” so the book closes with David and says to the nation, “Receive your king!”

Based on these observations from the original context, the book speaks to us today along similar lines in at least two ways.

First, the book of Ruth teaches us that *in the sovereignty of God, private acts of loyal love can lead to public acts of redemption*. As readers, we know the big picture. Ruth is the great-grandmother of David; but Ruth did not know that. Neither Ruth nor Boaz set out to redeem the nation from foreign

oppression. In one little town (pardon the Christmas reference!), one local man and one foreign woman both acted in loyal love to redeem the family of one elderly widow. A very limited goal, it would seem. But because God is “not unjust as to overlook” such work and love to His name and for His people (Hebrews 6:10), we are led in faith to expect more—much more—and this is exactly what we begin to see at the end of the book. Not only is the family redeemed, but the nation is slated to be blessed through this founding mother and her blessed son. David comes! Truly, localized loyal love in the hands of God can produce a big redemption, even a royal redemption!

This lesson is so important for us to remember when we are tempted to leave our little posts in search for significance in the larger world, even significance in the kingdom of God. How tempting is it for us to break off our current relationships in light of some proposed larger good! How short-sighted and unbelieving of us! God is not blind nor His hands bound that He cannot produce a large and public redemption through a small and private relationship of loyal love. We must be wary of justifying our disloyalty to present relationships in order to have a larger sphere of influence. We must let God be God in our lives and let Jesus be Lord in our hearts in determining the bounds of our present sphere of activity. Is it not already difficult for us to love truly the relationships we already have? And what is more important than the two commandments of loving God and loving people? Truly, this book provides a good and hopeful message for so many Christians today. It may not appear significant to remain at home to raise the little ones, with day after day of apparently no progress, but we must not make light of homemaking. In the hands of God, what might He do through these children, if they are nurtured in the arms of loyal love? Similarly, we must not despise the day-to-day care given to the elderly or to the infirm people in our lives, even if they no longer remember who you are. It may not look like this relationship will go anywhere, but loyal love is precious to God and in His hands, who knows what may result! Author Os Guinness once told the story how one of his Irish ancestors changed his mind over committing suicide due solely to watching a peasant whistle to work one day. *Did that peasant know he saved a life that day?* No, and neither do we. Let us leave the results in God’s hands, but not with the limp hands of unbelief and a heart of hesitant resignation. No! God is not unjust. We must repent of our small expectations and believe that God will *somehow* in Christ turn little acts of loyal love into bigger redemption.

And by the way, before I leave this point, it is interesting to note that God often accompanies His public redemption with a private redemption. In other words, just as there is no conflict between God doing all things for His name and also for our good—something Jonathan Edwards pointed out so well in his dissertation concerning *The End for Which God Created the World*—so also God may simultaneously meet our little needs while working out His big plan of redemption. In the Christmas narrative, it is touching for me to read that Gabriel’s first words to Zechariah are not about the big picture, but about his

marriage: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John” (Luke 1:13). That is remarkably tender! How many prayers had this barren couple offered, in hopes of a child, and how many years had passed, since they gave up that prayer as hopeless and unheard? No, God heard! And God answers! And when He delays and answers in a big way, He accomplishes something bigger than our little request—but not less than our little request. Even Elizabeth interprets this gift of a child in very personal terms, saying, “Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people” (1:25). Similarly, the book of Ruth presents Obed as both a blessing to the nation and a blessing to one woman, Naomi. In one sentence, the women not only bless Obed to be famous in Israel, but they also bless God who has not left Naomi without a redeemer. They tell Naomi, “He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age” (Ruth 4:15). In truth, Obed is said to be Naomi’s personal “redeemer,” the only time in Scripture that a baby is called a kinsman-redeemer (4:14). As David is the kinsman-redeemer of the nation, so Obed is the kinsman-redeemer of Naomi. Two redeemers, but one redemption. So it is with us. We all have one large redemption in Christ, but many smaller, personal redemptions as well in Him. In the words of the hymn, “Hast thou not seen, how thy desires ere have been, granted in what He ordaineth?”

Second, for all that is said about loyal love, the book of Ruth is also teaching us that *the leader is more important than the lifestyle*. In other words, receiving our King is more important than living a moral life. The morality within the story serves the bigger purpose of commending the person at the end of the story. So it is with us today. The Bible definitely commends a godly lifestyle through many stories and with many motives, but if that is all we get from the inspired text—the personal aspiration to live a better life—then we have missed the point. The goal of life is not to have a better self—even a *godly* self—but to worship God and to receive His Son, Jesus Christ. If the book of Ruth is the birth narrative of David, then the Old Testament is (in one sense) the birth narrative of Jesus Christ. Just as we read the book of Ruth and wonder what could be fitting as a “full reward” for such a remarkable beginning (Ruth 2:12), so we read the Old Testament and wonder, “Could anything less than the coming of the Son of God Himself match the level of expectation raised by such remarkable events?” After all, both the promises given to Abraham and the promises given to David were left pending on the obedience of their offspring. The law of Moses specified that blessing in the land—even remaining in the land—depended on obedience to the law. Similarly, the covenant with David specified that the blessings of endless rule depended on the obedience of David’s sons. Both Abraham and David were given absolute promises of land and throne, but the fulfillment of those promises in future history depended on obedient offspring. But who would be that offspring? *Who would be that Seed?* Blessed be God! The first verse of the New Testament reads, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham”

(Matthew 1:1). Just as Ruth bound herself to Naomi in her poverty, so Jesus came to earth and bound Himself to us in the likeness of our impoverished humanity—“born of a woman, born under the Law” (Galatians 4:4)—and then, suffering with us and for us, He bore our guilt on the cross in our place, as if it was His own, but all the while obeying the will of God perfectly as the obedient son of Abraham and son of David. He took the risks, as it were, but respected the rights of God. Instead of asking God to lower the bar to let us in, He became our surety and suffered in our place, and now He offers Himself to us as our kinsman-redeemer. If we will take refuge under His wings, He will treat us better than Boaz. His name is famous in the universe and His house endures forever. As our kinsman-redeemer, he is the Man on the Land, a true “restorer of life” and “nourisher” to every needy believer. In an amazing way, Jesus is both our Ruth and our Boaz. He joined with us in loyal love and then lifts us up in loyal love. He took the risks of our redemption respectfully and meets the needs of our humanity lavishly. Truly, His loyal love brings royal redemption.

Have you received your king? If the book of Ruth has stirred you to love the beauty of loyal love, how much more should you be stirred with an appreciation for the loyal love of Jesus Christ? If the final scenes of redemption in old age have stirred you—the tender care of a devoted son—how much more should you be stirred by the devoted care of the Son of God to His people in their weakness, exile, and death? He left His homeland to “return” with us. He received us in the fields of Bethlehem. No one is excluded by race or poverty. The Great Commission of Jesus to “make disciples of all nations” is matched in the gospel of Matthew with the Great Genealogy, which includes four women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—three of which are foreigners and three of which are scandalous sinners with incest, prostitution, and adultery in their record (Matthew 28:18-20; 1:1-17). *No one is excluded!* Let this Kinsman-Redeemer buy you out of moral poverty and give you an inheritance with Him on His land. Believe in this God of loyal love and receive His royal redemption. *Receive your King!* All those who do have the promise of new birth (John 1:12-13). Through the Spirit, those who receive Christ as their King receive the inner character of the house of David—the loyal love of true faith—and are thus marked in Christ as true sons of David’s house, with all the covenanted blessings of David belonging to them (cf. Isaiah 55:30). They should believingly expect to live with Christ forever, for He Himself said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). In light of such mercy, who can cease to sing His praise? *May God be praised in Jesus Christ, both now and forevermore! Amen.*