

TWO ESSENTIALS TO MAKING AN ETERNAL DIFFERENCE

Ruth 4: 1-10

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My wife can flat cook! She ought to open a restaurant! She can even make health food taste great, which is not easy. But it wasn't always that way. In those early years of her experimenting with alternative foods, it wasn't too hard for me to lose weight. One time when her brother came to visit, he happened to bring some dessert or chips and dip. Upon seeing his offering, she immediately switched to her educational/informational mode and explained to him why he should not eat that junk food--that it would poison his system.

Later, I got a kick out of watching his facial expressions and his antics when she used him as her taste tester for something new she had concocted. First, she took a bite and exclaimed, "Umm. That's good. Hey, David, try this! I think you will really like it." And before I could warn him, he was at the kitchen sink hacking up what he had just ingested. Then one day when he and I were out alone dining, I tried a new dish. As I was taking in my sampling bite and commenting on how good it was, without missing a beat he quickly instructed me, "If it tasted good, quick, spit it out, because it will probably kill you!" I started laughing so hard I almost choked on my food!

But now, Becky makes some of the best tasting, good-for-you dishes going. Her soups are especially good. Just don't ask what she puts in them, as it might give you some concern! But I guarantee that it tastes good, is good for you, and you will want more.

Recently, Becky has added two new seasonings that really make for a tasty dish. She has found two that are essential for making her soups taste great. They make a real difference—cumin and ground cloves! Five years ago, I had never heard of cumin. And who would have ever thought that you would add ground cloves to a soup? But those two spices are essential to her great soup recipes. They are what make the difference.

Today, we want to look at two ingredients that are necessary if our lives are going to make any eternal difference for Christ's Kingdom as we invest our

time that we have been allowed on this earth. Both of these ingredients are modeled for us by the key figure of our study for this morning, Boaz. Our passage is found in the fourth chapter of the book of **Ruth**.

By the time we come to **Ruth 4**, the widow Ruth has made her request known to Boaz, a close relative of the family. She has let him know that she has passed her grieving stage and is now ready to remarry, if he be interested. Her hope was that he would take her under his wing of protection and provision. But she and her mother-in-law Naomi discovered that Boaz was not the closest relative with the first choice of marrying Ruth. However, Boaz very much wanted to marry Ruth and to take on the role of Kinsman Redeemer. He promised her that he would immediately look into whether or not he could do so.

In view of his midnight promise to Ruth at the end of **chapter 3** to act on behalf of Ruth “**in the morning**,” plus Naomi’s expression of confidence that Boaz would not rest unless he settled the matter “**today**,” this scene that we are about to look at, beginning with **4:1**, must be understood to have transpired that very same day, following the early morning sending of Ruth home from the threshing floor.

¹Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there, and behold, the close relative of whom Boaz spoke was passing by, so he [Boaz] said, “Turn aside, friend, sit down here.” And he [the close relative] turned aside and sat down. ²He took ten men of the elders of the city and said, “Sit down here.” So they sat down.

The verb “**to go up**” reminds us that the city of Bethlehem rested on a higher point on the ridge of a mountain than Boaz’s threshing floor. Boaz was traveling from his threshing floor, which lay in the relatively lower lying fields of the surrounding countryside up to the city.

In addition, “**go up to the gate**” is a culturally idiomatic expression for “going to court,” for it was at the gate of the city that business of this sort was

conducted. City gates in Palestine in the early Iron Age were complex structures with lookout towers on either side of the gate, followed by a series of rooms on either side of the gateway where defenders of the town would be stationed. But these gateways also served a secondary purpose as gathering places for the citizens of the town. This was where the official administrative and judicial business of the community was conducted.

Normally, when individuals would come in from the fields and go up to the town, they would pass right through the gate and go straight to their homes. But Boaz seems to have had no time to go home. As soon as he arrived at the gate early that morning, he “**sat there.**” The citizens recognized that Boaz’s sitting down in one of the open rooms was an official act; he had arrived to conduct a legal transaction. No sooner had Boaz sat down than the Kinsman Redeemer, the closest relative to Naomi, just happened to pass by. This is another providential sign that God was working behind the scenes--that on this day, during this early hour, this man of all people would come through the gate.

The word “**behold,**” which begins the second sentence of **verse 1** (not reflected in the NIV), serves two functions: First, it expresses Boaz’s surprise at his relative’s appearance; and second, it turns the reader’s attention to this important new character in this unfolding drama.

Boaz wasted no time getting to the heart of the matter. In the next two verses is Boaz’s first speech. We read:

³Then he [Boaz] said to the closest relative, “Naomi, who has come back from the land of Moab, has to sell the piece of land which belonged to our brother Elimelech. ⁴So I thought to inform you, saying, ‘Buy it before those who are sitting here, and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if not, tell me that I may know, for there is no one but you to redeem it, and I

am after you.’ ”

According to Mosaic law, Elimelech’s land was never to leave the family, and the institution of the Kinsman Redeemer was designed to prevent any person’s land from being removed from his family or clan (**Leviticus 25:25-30**). Hence, Boaz reminded the man of a small but significant detail: the owner of the land in question was “**our brother**,” that is, a relative to both of them. How closely related they were we may only speculate. As recounted in **Deuteronomy 25:5-10**, the legal levirate obligation applied to the immediate brothers of a deceased man (also **Genesis 38**). While we have no textual documentation, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that according to Israelite custom (not law), in cases where there was no unmarried brother, the principle of levirate obligation was extended in accordance with the pecking order of inheritance law.

According to **Numbers 27:9-11**, if a man died with neither son nor daughter, his property would pass to his brothers; if he had no brothers, it would pass to his paternal uncles (father’s brothers); if he had no uncles, then the property would pass to his nearest relative from his own clan. The text does not indicate how far down this family order Boaz or the Kinsman Redeemer were.¹

None of these cases in which land was being transferred from one Israeli to another involved a purchase or money. At the personal economic level, a person in debt could “hand himself over” or “be handed over” to a creditor as his personal laborer or servant/slave for six years (**Deuteronomy 15:12; Jeremiah 34:14**) or until the next Year of Jubilee (**Leviticus 25:39-54**), whichever occurred first. The Year of Jubilee happened every fifty years. In neither case did the turning over of a person or a person’s land constitute a true sale.

At issue here was not the transfer of ownership of property but the acquisition of the right to use and enjoy the property of another, provided that the property itself was not impaired, destroyed, or altered in any way. This limited the type and amount of building on the land, the destroying of trees, or

¹ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 708). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

the removing of structures or walls that separated fields or other properties. For instance, you could not go in and tear out century-old olive trees that were still producing in order to produce grapes or grain. But if the property were in disrepair and the vines or trees dead, then certainly the possessor could plant new crops and trees.

As it concerned Naomi's late husband's property, she and Elimelech had been gone for more than ten years. In their absence, someone apparently had had use of their land. Hence when Naomi returned to Bethlehem, she could not automatically reclaim the land and begin making her own living from it. This is why she and Ruth were left with no options but to scavenge for food to stay alive, until they could legally reacquire the land. Because of Boaz's generosity to Naomi and Ruth, they no longer had to glean, and Naomi was able to turn her attention to the legal issues relating to her husband's holdings.

Accordingly, Naomi's action was to not sell the land that belonged to her deceased husband Elimelech, but to transfer the use of it to a Kinsman Redeemer for the purpose of caretaking until a son or grandson could take over. It was Naomi's hope that her son's widow Ruth would produce a son and owner of her deceased husband's land. In the meantime, for the work invested in making the farm productive, the Kinsman Redeemer could keep any profits made from the use of the land.

Apparently, Naomi was quite happy to allow Boaz to be her representative in this situation, initiating efforts to get the land back into the family and to negotiate who would have the right of Kinsman Redeemer. Even though his conversation with Ruth at the threshing floor had not mentioned land at all, he and Naomi knew that gaining the rights to the use of Naomi's property was the key, according to Mosaic law and custom, to winning the right to Ruth's hand.²

Hence, having gotten the potential Kinsman Redeemer's attention, Boaz challenged him to acquire the rights to Elimelech's land in the presence of the gathered witnesses.

² Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 710–711). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

At the end of **verse 4** we read the potential Kinsman Redeemer's brief response. **"And he said, 'I will redeem it.'"** Thankfully, neither Ruth nor Naomi was there to hear his response; for had they been, their hearts would have sunk. But Boaz was far from done. He was not a quitter, but a determined negotiator.

Boaz's next move was to introduce no minor complication, as is detailed in **verse 5**. **"Then Boaz said, 'On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance.'"**

The manner in which Boaz introduced Ruth is significant. First, he introduced her by her full name, **"Ruth the Moabite."** This more precise identification seems intended to cast doubts about the wisdom of acquiring the rights to Elimelech's land in the mind of this potential Kinsman Redeemer. Boaz may have been counting on a measure of anti-Moabite sentiment on the part of his kinsman, rendering him less inclined to accept Naomi's offer.

Second, Boaz introduced Ruth as **"the wife of the deceased,"** though which deceased he did not clearly specify. The kinsman obviously knew about the death of Naomi's husband, but maybe he didn't know that Naomi had a son who also had a widow. This raised an unknown complication to the deal. This was not going to be a simple, get the free use of the land deal. This was going to require that he marry the widow Ruth in order to fulfill responsibility for rescuing the family line of Elimelech.

In the ancient world, one of the most fearful curses one could invoke on another was, "May your seed perish and your name die out." In order for this not to happen to Elimelech's family, this close relative would have to marry the widow for the specific purpose of fathering a child to preserve the family line and history. At that time, the line of Elimelech was hanging on by two fragile threads: Naomi, Elimelech's elderly widow who was probably past child-rearing age, and Ruth, Elimelech's Moabite daughter-in-law. Realistically, Ruth represented the only hope for the line.

Technically there was nothing in the Levirate law of marriage (**Deuteronomy 25:5-10**) that obligated a distant kinsman to marry Ruth and establish the

name of Elimelech or Mahlon. The Mosaic prescription had the immediate brothers of the deceased in mind. If there were no brothers, then the line could die out. But there was a custom, a tradition, that Biblically dated back to **Genesis 38** and is illustrated again in **2 Samuel 14:7**, that if someone from further down the family line wanted to assume this responsibility, they were not forced to, but could do so if they chose.

Accordingly, when we read of Boaz's second challenge to this other kinsman to **"establish the name of the deceased,"** Boaz was not appealing to the letter of the law but its spirit. Neither man was legally bound by **Deuteronomy 25**, but this did not eliminate a moral obligation. Boaz was prepared to operate on these moral and customary grounds. But the question was, "Would this other relative be willing to do so?"

In the next verse, we find the answer. **"⁶The closest relative said, 'I cannot redeem it for myself, because I would jeopardize my own inheritance. Redeem it for yourself; you may have my right of redemption, for I cannot redeem it.'**"

Whatever enthusiasm the closest relative to Naomi may have had previously for acquiring the rights to the land, it had suddenly and completely been dampened. In essence, he said, "No thank you," because somehow, he believed that his taking on the marital responsibilities for Ruth's child bearing would jeopardize his own family inheritance.

However, it is not so clear how this addition of Ruth into the equation could jeopardize his own hereditary holdings, which presumably referred to the land that he had inherited from his own ancestors. Several factors need to be considered.

First, When he added up the cost of redeeming the property (time, money and energy to bring the land to the place of profitability), plus the cost of maintaining the widow Naomi, plus the cost of marrying Ruth, he may have concluded that this was not a fiscally sound move. Rather than enhancing his assets, the newly acquired responsibilities would drain resources from the holdings he had inherited from his own ancestors.

Second, he probably also considered the implications of raising up the name

of the deceased, that is, producing an heir for Elimelech. Given his own age and the age of Ruth, he may have thought that she might bear him no more than one child. If that were the case, and if this redeemer had no other immediate sons, then this single child of Ruth's would be legally considered the heir of Elimelech's property and his own property upon his death. Maybe his family wouldn't want that to happen. Maybe his extended family had a brother whom they would want to have this close relative's property. Furthermore, since the name of Elimelech would be established through the child, the Kinsman redeemer's entire estate could fall into the line of Elimelech, and his own name disappear.

Third, in view of Boaz's introduction of Ruth as "**the Moabite**," he may have pondered the racial implications of such a transaction, concluding that his patrimonial estate would be jeopardized by falling into the hands of one with Moabite blood in his veins.

In the next two verses, the writer puts forth an explanation aimed at future generations as to how contracts were finalized in that day. We read:

⁷Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning the redemption and the exchange of land to confirm any matter: a man removed his sandal and gave it to another; and this was the manner of attestation in Israel. ⁸So the closest relative said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself." And he removed his sandal.

By this relative's removing of his sandal and giving it to Boaz, he symbolically declared the abdication of his own rights to redeem Naomi, Ruth, the land, or the family name. And so that there could be no question as to what was meant before the witnesses present, this symbolic act was accompanied by another verbal declaration, "**Buy it for yourself.**"

Our text closes with Boaz's final response to the outcome of this court. In keeping with ancient legal proceedings, Boaz turned to the witnesses, the ten elders and all those who had passed through the gates and stopped to listen in,

and made three declarations.

⁹Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses today that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon.

¹⁰Moreover, I have acquired Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, to be my wife in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance, so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his birthplace; you are witnesses today.”

Notice that Boaz first declared that he had taken full advantage of his right to acquire the estate of Elimelech. The use of the land now belonged to Boaz.

Second, he declared his intentions to marry Ruth, because the responsibility of providing for her came with his privilege to use the land for his own benefit.

Third, he declared that his sole motive in taking on this responsibility as the Kinsman Redeemer was to ensure that the family name, heritage, and inheritance of Elimelech would not die out.

In relinquishing his rights to Naomi’s property, the previous closest relative disappeared from our story, and his name also disappeared from history. However, because of Boaz’s righteous action, his name and reputation for integrity will be forever remembered, from now through eternity. In contrast, the other relative’s name will never be known.

At his point, I’d like to step back to highlight the providence of God in action. For the royal line of David to be preserved, meaning that the line that was predicted to produce the Messiah, Jesus, two realities had to be true. If both of the following realities were not true, we would not have had the royal line

of David.

The first reality was that the man who was to be the Kinsman Redeemer had to be a gracious man and not solely a self-serving man who would be willing to accept and care for a Moabite woman. If Boaz had turned out to be an ungracious rogue, a racist shooing off aliens, or so preoccupied with self that he would ignore the plight of orphans and widows, Ruth would never have been redeemed.

Secondly, the Kinsman Redeemer would have had to come from the clan of Elimelech in order for him to hold the legal right to be the Kinsman Redeemer. My point is this; if both of these elements, being gracious and from the same clan, were not true of the Kinsman Redeemer, then Ruth would not have been redeemed.

To be specific, if Boaz, at whose field Ruth arrived, were gracious but had come from outside Elimelech's clan, he could not have functioned as a redeemer. Conversely, if he had been of Elimelech's clan but was not gracious and generous, neither would Ruth have been redeemed. Hence, the divine agenda to redeem Ruth was fulfilled, because in God's providence, Ruth happened upon a stranger's field to glean, of whom both of these elements were present. Boaz was both generous and willing, and he was from the clan of Elimelech. God was at work!

This all leads to my point of application. God's providential hand works through generous, non-self-serving believers to make major impacts for His kingdom. He works among people who first look up to Him, men and women of faith, loyal to His purposes--in a word, faithful. And then, because of the need they see around them and because of what they see the Lord doing in their lives, they look out beyond themselves to make available whatever is theirs, their time, their talents, and their treasures to further His Kingdom by making an eternal difference in the lives of others.

In short, God looks to bless and use those who are faithful and available for His purposes. If you were to measure your sense of purpose in life, if you were to describe how much you feel like your life counts, how would you rate it? If it is boring, lacks purpose or satisfaction, or if you feel like your life

doesn't matter, could it be because you are living only for yourself? Are you putting yourself first and doing those things that will make others think well of you? Or, is it your intention each morning to somehow, through the mundaneness of your day, prove yourself available and faithful to serve God's purposes?

I challenge you to write down this question and put it where you will see it first thing in the morning: Have I committed this day to the LORD, making myself faithful and available for His purposes?

