

From Helpless to Hopeful

Ruth 2 and 3

June 17, 2007

Today is Father's Day – a day set aside for remembering fathers. It is something of a “non-holiday” in that it stands as a poor second to Mother's Day. I just read that about 16 billion dollars are spent on Mother's Day presents, less than 10 billion are spent on Father's Day presents. But we fathers are grateful for whatever we receive – personally I have no complaints except that I wish I could SEE both of my children today.

A lot is expected of fathers these days – in fact the pressure is so intense that it sometimes tempts fathers to do things that are not completely honest. For example, fathers tend to make up answers for their children's questions like when they are going through museums. For example, I read that at a space museum, workers had put ropes around a forklift to keep children from climbing on it. One child asked the father if the forklift was a piece of space equipment. Yes, the father answered, it had been to the moon. Obviously, we fathers also need the help and understanding of our children and our wives.

This week we witnessed the final chapter of one the most respected husband and wife teams in modern times with the passing of Ruth Bell Graham, the wife of Billy Graham. (Biography) Their marriage was and will continue to be a great example for people to emulate. They, along with the many others who worked alongside them in ministry, had a great impact on the church around the world. We saw Billy and Ruth Graham as parents who didn't raise perfect children but sought, by God's grace, to do what was right. Ruth is known for being a partner who was not afraid to speak her mind and think for herself. She remained a Presbyterian all her life even though married to a Baptist evangelist. With mutual respect, the two of them made decisions together, with Ruth's opinion given and received readily. For example, when Billy Graham briefly considered running for president in 1952, Ruth told him that she didn't think that Americans would vote for a divorced president. We are deeply indebted to the Graham's for the impact they have had on the church around the world.

We are currently looking at the character in the Bible named Ruth. The book of Ruth is focused on a mother and a daughter-in-law. However, a father and a man who would become a father played important roles in the book as well. The story of Ruth is a short story that is set in the real struggles of life. Ruth lived about 1400 years before Jesus during the time of the Judges – Israel had no king but there would be judges who would make decisions for the people and lead them to war against an enemy when needed. In last week's sermon, Pastor Kathleen covered the beginning of the story – how Elimelech took his wife Naomi and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion to the land of Moab to escape the famine in the land of Israel. The sons both married women from the Moab, but after about 10 years, Elimelech and the two sons all died. Naomi gets news from home.

When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. (Ruth 1:6)

Naomi decides to return to Israel and urges her daughters-in-law, to remain in Moab. One of the daughters-in-law, Ruth, refuses to stay and returns along with Naomi to the town of Bethlehem.

I don't know about you, but I can imagine that the walk back to Bethlehem was a difficult one with many tears being shed along the way. Imagine, leaving your home ten years before with two sons. Now, coming back empty – no husband, no sons, only a faithful daughter-in-law who is also a widow.

When Naomi and Ruth come to Bethlehem, the people of the village greet them with excitement. But Naomi was full of sorrow – she said, do not call me Naomi but call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. Being a widow today is difficult – in ancient times it was incredibly more difficult. They were facing a hard, hard life.

While most of us will not face those kinds of circumstances, I believe that every one of us here has, or is, or will experience some significant regret about choices made in life - some more than others. There may be a career that was not as successful as it could have been, a marriage that failed or became difficult, maybe a choice of study at a college or university that didn't bring you to the place you had hoped, or maybe a failed attempt at some goal. All of us have suffered some bumps and bruises along the way, and even if we are young, I imagine that most of could look back and say, "I wish I had done this instead." I know I do – while I am very grateful for many things in life, I can look back at a few turns that I took and say, "I wish I had done this instead."

But as we look at this story, we will see good news in dealing with the disappointments in life. When we examine what happened to Ruth and Naomi, we see three major truths about God that are just as relevant for us today as it was for Ruth and her family 3400 years ago. In this story we see that God invites us to Return to Him; that God is asking us to Respond to Him, and God offers to Redeem us to Him. So God invites us to Return, asks us to Respond, and offers to Redeem.

It doesn't seem that it was God's intent for Elimelech to leave the land of Israel in a time of famine. And while it was not prohibited for his sons to marry women from Moab, it was probably not looked on with favor by the people of Israel. So now as Naomi returns to Israel, I imagine that she is rethinking how those decisions were made and the sorrow she has experienced in the land of Moab. Yet she knew that she could return both to her country and to her people. She and Ruth were fleeing to find refuge under the wings of the Lord God of Israel. For them, returning to the village of Bethlehem in Israel was not just returning to their home, it was returning to the protection and promises of God.

For us, Returning to God will probably have little to do with going back to your home town. But I would venture to guess that every one in this room has some regrets, some decision that they would like to go back and change. Well, like the sign in the foyer says, God allows U-turns. God is always inviting people to Return to walking with Him, to obeying what He has asked us to do.

Maybe that return is seeking to restore a relationship, or coming back to be part of a church, or spending time each day with God. Or maybe it is a change in direction for your work or education. Or maybe it is renewing your commitment to God and offering yourself to be used by God however He desires. Whatever the case, God is continually calling people to RETURN to Him, to be in a personal relationship with Him.

After Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, they probably had to find a place to live and then begin looking at how to survive – how to get food and the basic necessities of life. They were looking for how to survive.

Ruth 2:2-3

The text tells us that they did not simply wait for things to come to them, they RESPOND. We read that Naomi and Ruth took at least two significant actions. First, we read in that Ruth asks to go out to glean in the fields to get grain for themselves. Gleaning was a tedious job – it probably involved stooping over and picking up individual heads of barley or wheat that had fallen as the harvesters had cut the grain, tied it bundles, and then carried it out of the field to a place where the grain would be threshed – removing the grain from the chaff or the outer hulls that covered the grain. After working one day, Ruth had gleaned about 30 pounds or about 15 kilograms. It was hard work for a little bit of grain.

Ruth 3:1-5; 10-11

Here we read that Naomi and Ruth take action in approaching Boaz. Naomi recognizes that Boaz as a close relative could be of help to them and both realize that Boaz has looked favorably on Ruth. Naomi instructs Ruth to approach Boaz at night when he has been working in the harvest. While this seems like a strange way to make an appeal to Boaz it did not seem strange to those in the story. And although we would see it as inappropriate for Ruth to come to Boaz in such a way, there was apparently nothing wrong about it. Boaz praises her for her

kindness and her virtue. However, it was a humble asking for mercy from Boaz, that he would act as kinsman-redeemer for Ruth and Naomi.

In both of these actions we see Ruth taking on the attitude of a humble servant, even calling herself as a servant of lesser standing than Boaz's regular field workers. With humility, Ruth was willing to respond to the provision and offer that God had made available – God provided for the process of gleaning and for the marrying of a deceased relative's widow – Ruth in faith and humility responded with action even when it involved risks.

God is looking for our Response to His offer of mercy be it provision for daily living or forgiveness of our sins or all the other needs we have. God provides because of His love and mercy, but He looks for our response. Will we by faith accept His offer, or will we reject it thinking we can do it ourselves? God is looking for people who will by faith believe that He is loving and merciful and will act on that faith to receive the promises. Ruth was willing to humble herself and act in accordance with the ways and promises that God had made to the people of Israel hundreds of years earlier.

This is maybe one of the more difficult tensions to deal with in our walk with God – how do I recognize that God is my Provider and Source of everything, AND at the same time recognize that I need to act on what God has promised. If I focus solely on God providing, I might be tempted to do nothing but wait. On the other hand, if I focus solely on what I must do, I am tempted to see that it is all my effort that gave me what I have.

In Philippians 2:12-13 Paul writes: *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

Paul wrote very clearly that we cannot earn our salvation or even make ourselves more lovable to God. But Paul also writes just as clearly that we must respond to God's offers and promises. God will work in and through us, but we need to obey. Working out your salvation does not mean to earn it, but rather to apply it to every part of our lives. God saved us and promised to keep us safe for eternity – we need to apply that Good News to everything we do.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:22, Paul says: *“I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”*

I can know that this is true, I can study it, think about, and agree with it. But until I respond and do it as an act of faith, it will have no impact. I am called to believe this principle and to put it into practice in order to bring the Gospel to those around me.

Paul understood that everything that he did was dependent on God by the Spirit working through him. In another place Paul states:

To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

Colossians 1:29

So Paul worked hard but at the same time recognized that it was God working through him. I am coming to believe that this truth is the secret to living a victorious Christian life – allowing God to have all of me, allowing His Spirit to be poured out in my life, so that He can work through me. It is not sitting around waiting for God to act; but it is not working on my own hoping that God will be pleased with my work. We become His instrument in this world as we work by His power in us.

The other character we must not forget in this story is Boaz. Boaz is the person who has the ability to take care of Ruth and Naomi. He has wealth and is of good character. He recognizes Ruth's love and devotion to Naomi, but also her faith in God. He recognized that when she came with Naomi, she was also placing her faith in the God of Israel and was trusting Him for protection and provision.

When Ruth comes to Boaz at night at the threshing floor, she was making an appeal for Boaz to have mercy on her as a kinsmen-redeemer. While it is not completely clear how the kinsmen-redeemer concept was actually practiced, it seems that there was a field that had

belonged to her late husband Elimelech that she was seeking to sell or maybe it had been sold already. It was the intent of the Law to protect property and keep it in the family from generation to generation. Therefore, it was the responsibility of a relative to buy the field or buy back the field if it was sold outside the family, and if possible produce children through the widow in order to keep the family line and property together. If Elimelech had a living brother, it would have been his responsibility to buy the property and marry Naomi. Without a brother and with Naomi too old for children, the responsibility would go to a close relative and also to Ruth as the eligible widow. Because Boaz was not a brother, it would seem that he was not under compulsion to redeem the property or to marry Ruth. It would be the right thing to do, but not the necessary thing to do.

Boaz apparently had a growing love for Ruth and he was a man of compassion and mercy. In this story he is an example of how God Redeems and Restores us. By acting as the kinsman-redeemer, Boaz will reestablish the family line, Ruth will have a child, Naomi will have a grandchild, and the physical needs of Ruth and Naomi will be supplied.

God is offering to do that for each of us – God through Jesus Christ has become our kinsman-redeemer. To redeem means to purchase back something that was lost by the payment of a ransom. God is offering to redeem in two important ways. First, He is offering to redeem our lives so that we can spend eternity with Him. When we disobeyed God, and we all have, we became slaves of Satan, God's enemy. We became separated from God. When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the ransom to get us back. He redeemed us. We were bought with a price (1 Cor 6:19)

But God is also seeking to redeem our lives here and now. Like Naomi and Ruth, the action of Boaz would redeem their lives in this life. We will see next week that, while the clock cannot be turned back, God restored the property and family line of Elimelech. In fact Jesus would someday be born as a descendent of Ruth and Boaz.

Most of us can look at our lives and say, I wish this had happened instead; or I wish I could go back and do it again; or, the loss that I suffered still really hurts. God desires to redeem those parts of your life – not undo what cannot be undone, but to heal the past memories and give you a future that will have eternal significance.

In the story of Ruth we can see the work of the Triune God – the love of the Father calls us to Return to Him; the power of the Spirit helps us Respond – He helps us to want to do His will as well do His will; and it is the Son who willingly paid the ransom to Redeem us from the enemy. God is inviting people to Return to Him, He is asking us to respond to His offer, and He is offering to Redeem our lives, now and for eternity.

Naomi and Ruth returned home to find refuge in the Lord God Almighty. They responded, and they were redeemed. They came home – Moab was not really home. You might say that God is calling you home. Maybe you like Ruth were not raised in a family that believed in God, but, like for Ruth, God is your true home. We will never be satisfied until we are in a relationship with Him. We are not truly home until we are with him after we die. When someone like Ruth Graham dies, we say they have gone home. The fact that our bodies are dying, shows us that this is not really our true and permanent home – there is something more. When we go to our true home, we will never face death again. We will be in a loving safe place forever. That is truly home.

I would invite you to respond to God this morning. Maybe you need to return to the Father who has been calling to you to come and walk with Him again; Or maybe you need to ask God that by His Spirit He would cause you to want to do what is right and the power to do what is right. Or maybe, you need God to redeem your life – maybe you have never accepted His offer to buy you back from the power of Satan and to give an eternity safe with Him, or to have an area of your life that has been a failure to be restored, or to have hope for the future restored. There will be someone to pray with you after the service.