

Fellow Heirs Of The Grace Of Life -- Part 2

by Steve Zeisler

For centuries men and women have sought to know God. Some have done so by opening their Bibles to the New Testament and reading these words:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. To Abraham was born Isaac; and to Isaac, Jacob; and to Jacob, Judah and his brothers; and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king.

In attempting to come to know Christ, people who begin with the Book of Matthew encounter him first by meeting his family, those whom God prepared and preserved and chose specially as the family tree for the Messiah. Holding important places in the list are the names of Boaz and Ruth, the principals in our study this morning.

We have already met Ruth, a young widow who was utterly destitute and living far from home. Yet she was a woman of tremendous graciousness and hope. She had a servant's heart, having learned that life was best lived serving others. She learned those things because of the work God had done in her, although she had grown up worshipping idols. So, having come to know the Lord God, she was so filled with gratitude that she spent her time serving others.

We have also met Boaz, an older man whose circumstances required that he live alone. He too had a great love for God and a servant attitude toward others. He was concerned that everyone around him receive God's best in their lives.

One important lesson we can learn in the lives of these two people is hinted at in Matthew's statement where it says that Boaz was descended from Rahab. Rahab was the Canaanite harlot who helped Joshua and the children of Israel during the conquest. But one of the striking features about Boaz, despite this heritage, is his easy and natural manliness. He stands as an impressive, helpful example of what it means to be a real man. Ruth too has a beautiful aura of femininity about her and an ability to appreciate and encourage Boaz.

To demonstrate how far the human race has fallen from what God intended, here is a quote from a book I read recently which describes the terrible condition of our society:

"I've played the field," said an advertising copywriter of twenty- three with navy- blue eyeshadow, raspberry lipstick, and an already despairing sensuality. 'Forty-- six-- year-- old father figures, eighteen-- year-- old freshmen, bachelors who are desiccated at thirty-five. None of them likes dirt, smells, blood, agony, eccentricity, or bad haircuts on women. Some of them don't even seem to like sex. Their main goal is to stay out of the rain.' She told of her young colleague at the advertising agency, 'driving that dumb white Peugeot his dotting mother bought him, all sealed up in the front seat, wearing seven safety belts, to get across town.' Then she spoke with some affection but without much hope of the person she would see that evening. 'He's a nice friend. He's the sweetest friend. And at least he'll walk through a blizzard. But he isn't a man, you know.' By then I knew. She knew. We all knew. 'It's the decline of the best,' she said. "

We have a great deal to learn from the non- ego sensitivity of Ruth and Boaz. Boaz is not uptight, dominating, or defensive; neither is he timid and uncertain of himself. Ruth, for her part, has an ease and facility with which she could respond to him, respect him and appreciate him. The beginning of their love relationship consisted of this kind of impressive reciprocal encouragement.

The end of chapter 2 records that in the days following their meeting, Ruth (and Boaz apparently) continued to spend their time harvesting in the fields of Boaz. It is very easy to believe that as the days went by they began to care for and appreciate each other and be attracted to one another. That produced a kind of turning point in their experience, however.

Each of them loved God and had lived by faith in God, trusting their Heavenly Father to provide for them, but suddenly they both faced what sociologists call, "The revolution of rising expectations." It is possible for an individual, a family, or a nation to live under difficult circumstances for a long period of time, but once hope is interjected that these circumstances might change, they soon become unbearable. C. S. Lewis wrote of the experience he and his wife shared when she had cancer. They expected that she would die and they prepared themselves for that, but then the cancer went into remission it seemed that she had been healed, and all of a sudden their expectations and their hope of a future together grew. When the cancer returned, however, it was much more difficult for them to deal with it than it had been in the first instance.

In a way, that is where we find Ruth and Boaz now. They did not expect to fall in love; they had learned to trust God with what he had already given them, but now that their hopes have been raised it becomes much more difficult to trust God because they have plans for their future. At this stage also, Naomi, Ruth's mother -- in-- law, will interject herself to make life difficult for them. She is a servant of the flesh and she adds to the temptation they were probably feeling by encouraging them to follow through on it.

So, with that as our background, let us take up our story again. Chapter 3,

Then Naomi her mother-- in-- law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? And now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. And it shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do." And she said to her, "All that you say I will do."

We would have to be fairly naive not to understand the suggestion that Naomi is making at this point. She is saying, in effect, "Ruth, make yourself as physically attractive as you possibly can. Wash yourself, anoint yourself, dress in your best clothes and then, when Boaz is at his most vulnerable, when he has eaten and drank and his defenses are down, snuggle up next to him and let's see what happens." We can almost detect a kind of knowing wink by Naomi. I believe at this point that Boaz and Ruth wanted to marry each other, and Naomi also desired this. They have a positive, righteous goal in mind, but the very difficult issue they are faced with now is whether the goal, the end, can justify the means, as they are tempted to employ wrong means to accomplish a valuable end. Naomi positively encourages them to use the means at their disposal to do so.

Verse 6:

So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain, and she came secretly, and uncovered his feet and lay down. And it happened in the middle of the night that the man was startled and bent forward; and behold, a woman was lying at his feet. And he said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative." Then he said, "May you be blessed of the Lord, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence. And now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I."

It is not clear why Ruth went along with the plan as far as she did. Perhaps it was out of respect for her mother-- in-- law. But it is obvious as the story unfolds that she has not bought Naomi's program; she is not

going to carry out what her mother-- in-- law implied. When Boaz awoke and realized that a woman was at his feet, he begins to question her, and instead of snuggling up to him and seducing him while his defenses are down, Ruth, essentially, reminds him of scripture. She appeals to a responsibility that he has under the law of God.

In Deuteronomy 25 there is a provision in the law that if a man dies without a son to inherit his property, then his brother has a responsibility to marry the widow and to father a child who will bear the name of the deceased man and inherit his property. That is a very foreign-- sounding concept to us, but it made much more sense in a tribal culture that was tied to the gift of the Promised Land, where property was crucial to their sense of nationhood, and where continuing the name of the family was very important. Ruth 1; saying, in effect, "My husband died without an heir, so his kinsmen have a responsibility before God to provide him one." She is appealing to Boaz's responsibility before God, not appealing to his physical interest in her.

It is obvious here again that they really were the servants of God in each other's lives; each made the other's faith stronger. Ruth speaks to Boaz of his responsibility, now Boaz responds with a beautiful word of encouragement and gratitude: "Thank you for not going . after young men. Your interest in me is an honor,"

But now a problem arises. Because Ruth believed that doing things as the Lord had outlined them was the proper procedure, rather than trusting to her feminine wiles, a problem has cropped up. There is a kinsman who is closer to Ruth than Boaz. Boaz says, "Unfortunately, I am not first in line. There is another man who ought to face this responsibility and take up this need, if we are going to make decisions in line with what the Lord wants." So they might lose one another; the love they have for each other might continue all their lives but the marriage they hoped for might not come about if this other man is willing to do what he ought to do.

It is easy to give in to the temptation that the end justifies the means. It is easy for us to want something that is good, something that is valuable, something that even people around us agree is good, so much that we hedge the bet. We trust God on the one hand, but we also act on our own behalf on the other; we add our impetus to the program.

Most Christian hucksterism, when it is not a blatant rip-- off, has this problem about it. People who are genuinely concerned for the gospel, who want to see people come to know Christ, use pressure tactics, lies, false promises and phony facades in order to see the gospel advance. They are so anxious to achieve that good end that they will resort to any means to achieve it. Marriage too has this "end justifies the means" problem: "Well, my husband really doesn't know what's good for him but I do, therefore I'll twist his arm and pressure him and badger him and do whatever it takes to get him to go to church,. or act the way he ought to, or whatever." Husbands, of course, do the same thing: "My wife doesn't really know that what I have in mind is in her best interest." Or it may even be a very little thing. Perhaps you never quite get around to correcting your boss's false impression that the reason things went well was because of you: "As long as he thinks I did it why should I bother to correct his misapprehension? It is good for the boss to think well of me, therefore, even if it is deception, the end justifies the means. "

But Ruth and Boaz did not go that route. God had been faithful to them up to this point so they would choose to do what was right, to follow God's prescription for them, and let him take care of them.

Chapter 4:

Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there, and behold, the close relative of whom Boaz spoke was passing by, so he said, "Turn aside, friend, sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down. Then he 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. So 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.' " And he said, "I will redeem it." Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the

deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance." And the closest relative said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I jeopardize my own inheritance. Redeem it for yourself; you may have my right of redemption, for I cannot redeem it."

In public, before the elders of the city and without any behind the scenes machinations, Boaz approaches this closest relative, and says, "Naomi is a poor woman. She is finally to the point where she has to sell her family's property. Will you buy it?" The relative says, "Great. Terrific. I'll add a little to my own acreage. She's a widow getting on in years. I might even be able to beat her out of a pretty good price."

But Boaz reminds him, "No, that really isn't the point. You're not allowed to add this property to your own. It belongs to the heirs of Elimelech and Mahlon. Your responsibility is to tend the property and to marry the widow and have a child who will grow up bearing Mahlon's name, not your own." The man then begins to have second thoughts. "This will not add to my situation. On top of it all, I will have the problem of two wives bickering. Who knows what jeopardy this will put my own children and my own inheritance in? No thanks. On that basis I'll pass." The elders of the city were there to witness what had happened, so Boaz is allowed to redeem the property. Verse 7:

Now 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. So the closest relative said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself." And he removed his sandal. Then 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. "Moreover, I have acquired Ruth the Moabitess, 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 may not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his birthplace; you are witnesses today." And all the people who were in the court, and the elders, said, "We are witness. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem. "Moreover, may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the Lord shall give you by this young woman." So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-- in-- law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. And the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi!" So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

What happens after the public statement of Boaz that he will take Ruth as his wife is really important for us to understand. There is a universal acclaim, respect and honor paid this couple by the elders and by the men and women of the city as they speak to Naomi later There is something tremendously attractive about being honored and respected by people, by the recognition that you did not sell out that you did not use seduction in the late night to accomplish your goals, that you were willing to lay your case before the Lord and allow him to solve it.

Last week there was a big spread in the San Francisco Chronicle with a detailed picture of Chappaquiddick Island; the road, the bridge and water- way where a car driven by Ted Kennedy went off the road. The events of that night will undoubtedly be recalled many times between now and the election in November. I have no comment to make on whether Ted Kennedy should be the next President of the United States. But if we compare him to Boaz and Ruth he is a man who will live all of his life without honor, without the respect of people who love the truth. He might be a great president, but he will never command the kind of respect paid to Boaz and Ruth.

Richard Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover at the height of their career; were among the most powerful and influential men of our time. The y had greater opportunity to do more things to shape the course of history than all but a

handful of people who have lived in this century. Yet both of them, for whatever good they did, will not be remembered with respect, will not be remembered with honor.

Ruth and Boaz could have sold out. They could have chooser to make things happen, to serve their own interests. They might have succeeded in getting married as a result, but they would not have had the character that resulted from choosing to trust God.

Following the instincts of the flesh may make you rich, it may give you short-- term success in relationships, it may even keep you alive longer, but it will never produce character, respect or honor so that even your enemies have to say that you are a person of value and depth and godliness.

In chapter 1 Naomi insisted, "I am bitter. God has turned against me." But her voice is finally drowned out at the end of the book. All the women around her remind her that God has not abandoned her. "You were angry because you had no husband and no son, but you totally undervalued this young Moabite woman. She has been better to you than seven sons would have been. God has not left you alone. Do you realize how valuable Ruth is? Do you realize how thoroughly she contradicts your bitter, manipulative, faithless spirit?"

The final verses remind us that not only were Boaz and Ruth a powerful influence on their own time, but that God did something very critical through them:

Now these are the generations of Perez: to Perez was born Hezron, and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed, and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David.

And the Son of David is the Messiah. Ruth and Boaz could not have known that through them God would bring King David to earth and that through his line would come the Lord. They had an opportunity' to serve themselves or to trust God in an issue that seemed to pertain only to themselves, and they made the choice that they would serve God and let him to meet their need. As a result, the most important event in the history of the universe, salvation, came about with their direct participation.

None of us can know how important a relationship can be, what opportunity we will have to influence people, that our children will not end up in some very important place in the plan of God. As a result, we must trust that God knows what he is doing, even though it is scary and even though we may not get what we want. This means that we will not hedge our bets; we will not trust God and the flesh at the same time. We will choose instead to leave it open to him to meet our needs.

We thank you for your ministry to us, Lord. We ask you to make us real men and women, like Boaz and Ruth, whole people given over to the service of others, willing to trust you even when it is frightening and dangerous. Lord, we know that requires faith and that you are the author of faith. We ask you to create that in us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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