

CONSPICUOUS CHRISTIANITY

by Steve Zeisler

The words of Jesus in Matthew 5:16 call us to an important responsibility: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." In verse 13 Jesus calls for rejection of salt that has become tasteless. It's easy for hypocrisy, or having the appearance of being salt but not tasting salty, to be our condition. It's easy to hide the light of what God has done in our life under a peck measure, as Jesus warns against in verse 15. But the call of the Lord is clear. We are to live out our lives in such a way that others find themselves swept up by the activity of God, giving praise to our Father who is in heaven.

That's the circumstance that we come to now in the book of Ruth. Twice in chapter 4 we'll hear the expression of praise to God, in the first case by a group of men and in the second case by a group of women. They both speak aloud thanksgiving and recognition that God has been at work because of what they have seen in the lives of Ruth and Boaz. This is a wonderful example of the exact thing that Jesus spoke of. In verse 11 the men, the elders of the city, say, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel...." They declare, "God is at work. May the Lord continue his work through this woman as he has through others who have built up the house of Israel." In verse 14 we hear the women who are the friends of Naomi: "Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel." They praise God for what has taken place in the birth of a child.

GODLINESS ENCOURAGES FAITH IN OTHERS

How can we be like Ruth and Boaz, so that the way we live brings forth such comments from the people of our city, so that God is praised?

Let's read 4:1-12:

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."

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 witnesses. 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."

Let's review what happened the night before. Boaz and Ruth spent the night together under festive circumstances on the threshing floor. They spoke to each other and gained real freedom in their relationship for the first time. Boaz realized that his fear that Ruth was uninterested in him because of his age was unfounded. He was indeed someone that she would be willing to consider. With that knowledge he was free to pursue her, to take whatever steps were required in order for the marriage to take place. Ruth stepped out trusting that the word of God applied to her even though she was a Moabitess, an outsider. She trusted that God would be faithful to his word. She spoke of marriage forthrightly because she was a childless widow of an Israelite man. She had the right to speak of such things. Her status-poverty, widowhood, and foreign nationality-might have limited her, but she acted in freedom.

There was also a wonderful restraint in the lives of these two. They didn't take advantage of the darkness and the barriers-down condition of the night-time party to become physically intimate. They didn't make promises with their bodies that they weren't free to make with the rest of their lives. And they didn't hatch secret arrangements the way people nowadays "run off to Reno" and get married, then come back and present the world with a fait accompli. They realized that in order to be honorable they had to approach the man who had first responsibility to do the right thing.

I spent most of the day yesterday in San Francisco, primarily to serve as pastor at a beautiful wedding. And I was reminded that weddings can be moving, joyful occasions. They often renew hope. At such a wedding those of us who know the Lord often think of the wedding that is yet to come: "This mystery is great, but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). We can find ourselves longing for the Lord and the day to come when the church will be a bride fit for him. A wedding of godly people is inspiring.

But weddings can also be tawdry, can't they? Consider a shallow, phony wedding in which the guests listen to vows while thinking about former spouses, abandoned children, and prenuptial negotiations. If a wedding is self-centered, all show and no heart, it can have exactly the opposite response of that engendered by a beautiful wedding. It can put everybody off by its hypocrisy.

The wedding that Boaz and Ruth hope for, which is announced and which essentially takes place as Boaz receives the blessing of the elders of his city, is a beautiful wedding. But what makes it beautiful instead of tawdry? What makes the announcement of Ruth's and Boaz' relationship lead the men and the women of their city to praise God? What lights the fires of faith so that the godliness of these two envelopes their neighbors and friends?

Observers glorify God because of the choices Ruth and Boaz made in *private* and in *public*. Most of us can look salty, if you will, on occasions when we're with other Christians in a Christian environment, say at a Christian retreat, a Bible study, or a church service. We can sing the songs with gusto, pray with our heads bowed and wish our friends well.

What stands out about Ruth and Boaz is that in private, in the dark, when no one else sees them, they trust God. They don't engage in shortcuts and they don't serve themselves when no one else is looking. The fact is, whatever happens in private eventually comes out. Who you are in private is who people will ultimately regard you to be. Nothing really stays secret. We're given an opportunity to see this man and this woman when no one else is looking except God, and we see that they are righteous people.

Observers also read how we live our lives in the public square, how we treat others in business and in our neighborhood, who we are when we engage in our worldly affairs. And if we are servants of the Lord in private and in public, then people will see light and praise the Light-Giver. Our behavior in specifically religious settings can't make up for hypocrisy in the rest of our lives.

NUANCES OF THE CULTURE

Let's briefly consider a couple of nuances of the story in chapter 4. There are a number of references here to things that are unfamiliar-sandals being taken off, elders sitting in gates. The culture is different from ours.

Remember the history of the people of God: There were two important marks that were to distinguish the Israelites. First, those in the line of Abraham-Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's twelve sons, and the family that would fan out from there-had special promises made to them. So the family lines were of critical importance.

Second, when the exodus took place and God sent the people out of Egypt, he sent them back to a land that he had promised them. The promised land continues, of course, to be at the heart of international affairs today. This particular plot of land was to be the land of the Jews.

Provision was made in the Law for the way families were to protect themselves and their descendants, and for the land to be preserved; not sold, and passed into the hands of others. When Boaz speaks to the responsible relative, he raises both issues. The land is under threat of loss, it must be sold, and they need to act so it doesn't leave their family. And there is part of the family that is going to die out because all the men are dead and there is no heir.

Another observation that we need to make concerns Boaz' status as an old man without a wife. It was unthinkable in that culture that a man could live to the age that Boaz evidently is, by all references here, and never be married. He is an elder, a man of status who is able to call together this quorum of ten others to render a decision. He has standing in the community. So what has happened? The best guess is that he is widowed at this stage of his life. There is no reference at all to any other woman in his family. In addition, there is no concern at all on his part about a having child to take over his own property and preserve his name. We should assume, therefore, that he has one or more grown sons who are working the land, anticipating that someday when their father dies they will take it over. His affairs are in order.

We can also observe the way public business took place in those times. They didn't have courthouses, notary publics, or signatures on file in computers as we do. If the elders of the city made a decision, it would stand.

Let's return to the question of what it is that makes Ruth and Boaz the kind of people whose lives awaken faith in their contemporaries. We might distill two things out of this story that will tell us of that. First, the way they live is honorable. They have a consistency, a commitment to right living that begins in the heart and proceeds all the way out into everything they do. When observers see that they are honorable, righteous, and unhypocritical, they respond to that. Second, this is a story of redemption. Those things taken together cause both the men and the women of the city to express their appreciation of God.

THE HONOR OF BEING HUMAN

What do we mean by observing that they are honorable? I mentioned the day spent in San Francisco yesterday. In the process of getting to and from the church, I passed by a number of the wretched in the street-homeless, broken, drunk, lying in doorways, panhandling. A number of them were young people, and everything about them-the body markings, the color of their hair, the clothing, the attitudes-spoke of self-rejection, lack of hope for the future, and anger at life itself.

Remember the words of David in Psalm 8:3-4:

**"When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,**

**the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,**

**what is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?"**

David reflected on the heavens and said, why would God pay attention to human beings? I am an ordinary human born of ordinary humans. In the greater scheme of things, why would an individual like me hope to gain the attention of God or to live a life that has meaning? Yet David goes on to say, "But there is nothing greater to be than being human. We were made just a bit lower than angels, and crowned with glory and honor."

So the testimony in the public square of people who are hopeful, joyful, loving, merciful, and honest makes others long for the kind of meaning that they experience, makes them hope that it might be possible for them. The people of Bethlehem discover something in Boaz and Ruth that allows them to believe that there is hope for them.

REDEMPTION POINTS TO GOD

In addition to the hope that righteous lives encourage, this is a story of redemption. Our Father in heaven is not glorified when winners are praised, or beautiful people admired. People always praise winners and admire beauty. Our heavenly Father receives glory when the needy, forgotten, failed, and broken are raised up, when people who were set aside are put in the center of things, when lives that were coming undone are put back together by the gospel.

There's a telling implication in this story that begins in 4:1. The way the writer of this book treats the "close relative" is very interesting. He deliberately refuses to give his name. There is an odd word in verse 1 where Boaz says, "Turn aside, friend, sit down here." A better translation of the Hebrew would be, "Turn aside, (so-and-so), sit down here." The implication is that the author knew the man's name (and certainly Boaz did), but we are not told his name throughout the course of this story. I think it is significant as the story proceeds, that this man doesn't know Ruth's name. And because he doesn't know her name, the author is subtly saying that he isn't worth identifying either.

His decision to not accept responsibility for widows and property was not especially wrong. He knew Boaz would act if he did not. The women will not be left uncared for.

But the man's rationale is this: "I can gain the property, and the woman involved (Naomi) is too old to have children, so I don't have any responsibility to marry and provide children for this family. All I have responsibility for is to unencumber the property." Apparently Naomi and Elimelech leased their property during the famine years and someone else has control of its produce. A redeemer was required to buy the lease and retain the property for the family. So the unnamed man says, "I'll do that. I'll have more land, and financially I'll probably come out at least even, if not better off."

But Boaz tells him, "That's not all there is to this. There's not just an old widow, there's a young widow. You also have to marry the young widow and have a child by her, and that child will have the family name of Mahlon and Elimelech. No property will be added to your family. You'll have responsibility with no advantage." And so the man declines.

The striking thing in all that is that he didn't see Ruth. It wasn't even clear to him that the second responsibility was part of the deal. And it was probably because she was a Moabitess, an outsider. It didn't even occur to him that she was on the scene, or worth considering. That takes us back to chapter 2. When Boaz learned Ruth's identity, he said, "I've heard of you. You're the one who came from Moab, the one who loves your mother-in-law, the one who is trusting God." And in chapter 3 he says, "All my people say you're a woman of excellence." Before he ever met her, Boaz was moved by her faith. Boaz saw God's redeeming love at work in her life.

This other man didn't take her into account, because he didn't see redemptively. He saw only responsibilities and deals and land and property and families, all the things that were part of the ordinary course of affairs. He could think only in those terms. It didn't occur to him that a Moabite widow might be God's concern or his concern or anybody else's.

In chapter 1 we find out the name of the sister-in-law who never even made it to Israel, Orpah. This man, even though he's an Israelite, gets his name deleted from the story, because he didn't have the insight to see

Look at the difference between verse 5 and verse 10. In verse 5 Boaz says to this unnamed man, "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." But in verse 10 when the other man declines and Boaz himself takes on the responsibility, he says, "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...." What he adds here is a phrase that elevates Ruth. Not only will he take on the legal responsibility of having her in his home and fathering the child, but she is going to be his wife. There is a word of intimacy and lifting up, of redeeming. Ruth's was a story of someone whom many if not most of the people in that city ignore because she is poor and foreign. But God sees her and Boaz sees her, and she is lifted to a place of honor.

Righteous lives that testify to the redemptive heart of God cause others to "glorify your Father who is in heaven." The specific statement of blessing offered by the men of Bethlehem is very interesting: "May she be like Rachel and Leah and Tamar. May that child be like Perez." Those four were all spotted people. Rachel was childless for decade after decade of her life in a culture that condemned childlessness. Leah was the unattractive daughter, the unloved wife. Tamar was an outsider who had been treated terribly by Judah, her father-in-law, and was impregnated under false circumstances. It's a terrible story in many respects, but it's a story of how God brought back someone whom everyone else had thrown away. Perez was a twin who fought for a place in life from the day of his birth. Each one of the people mentioned in the blessing is a person who was an object of God's redeeming grace.

In summary, people praise God when they see honorable lives, when they're given hope again that human existence is valuable and worthy. And people give credit to God when they see the rejected ones raised up.

Both the men and the women of Bethlehem had words of praise to God to offer. Yet these public declarations didn't add anything to the walk of faith of Boaz and Ruth. The ones who offered the words of blessing received spiritual benefit themselves. In their prayers the Lord put his arms around the whole town and let many in on the good news.

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and glorify your Father who is in heaven."**

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