

When God Seems Absent

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Shadows of the Cross Series

Ruth

Almost every one of us can recount a time in our life when we felt utterly alone. You think back in life and you can probably recall a time, or maybe long stretches of time when the people that you depended on the most simply were not there for you. When people that you hoped would stand up for you were too caught up in their own problems, too busy with their own careers, too consumed by their own romances to be there for you; when the people you needed the most seemed utterly indifferent to you. And for people of faith, there are even times in our life when we tried to find strength and comfort from God and it feels like he is nowhere to be found either.

Today we're going to be looking at one of the loveliest little books in the Bible, the Book of Ruth. It's a little book of only four chapters in length, and it takes place at a time of great political, economic, and social change; a time of famines and wars and invasions. When you read Ruth one of the striking things is that there are no prominent people featured in the book – no great kings, no charismatic judges, no gifted prophets, no apostles, and no miracle-workers. It is a plain story about two widows, a widow named Naomi and a widow named Ruth, and a farmer named Boaz. One of the widows, Naomi, feels utterly alone, abandoned by all who can help her, abandoned by God.

We live at a time of global problems, national debates about healthcare and declining educational standards and persistently high unemployment rates, to say nothing of the Master's Tournament in golf, and national championships in basketball. It is very easy for an individual – a single mom with a child, a young man who is thinking about getting married, a woman who is starting her own business, a person who has a crucial decision to make at their job, a couple who is facing an empty nest, a child who has lost a parent to death – it is very easy in a world of massive problems and important sports stories to feel like my little world and my little problems could hardly catch the attention of God; I'm by myself in figuring out life.

When we're talking about problems and stories of national significance, it is very easy for a person to feel overwhelmed by a sense of insignificance. We say to ourselves, "God, how could you possibly take notice of little me and my tiny little problem at work, or my desire to lose weight, or the problem I'm having with my kid, my car, or my cataract surgery, or my loved one with cancer?" The book of Ruth is a great shout of protest to the lie that God leaves anyone alone who wants to be with him, or

abandoned to their own devices – the senior citizen, the widow, a divorcee, a single adult, a fatherless teen, a married couple, a worker, or a Christian leader.

In the day of the Judges when the whole world was in upheaval and the Middle East was suffering from a massive famine, God puts a microscope upon one particular family, two widows and a farmer, and God brings this family under his fatherly care.

In preparation for Holy Week, for Good Friday that is coming up next Friday, and Easter I've been doing a little mini-series called Shadows of the Cross. I mentioned to you that there is a way to understand the Old Testament, what Jews call the Hebrew Bible. There is a correct way to read the Hebrew Bible and that is that the whole Hebrew Bible, the whole Old Testament, is a signpost pointing ahead of itself to Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. And in particular, it points to Jesus' death for the sins of the world. The Old Testament is God's rough draft; it is God's model of the perfect One who is to come, namely Jesus and his perfect sacrifice on the cross.

To understand the Old Testament, I think it is helpful to be reminded of an old Sunday School rhyme that goes this way:

*The New is in the Old concealed
The Old is by the New revealed
The New is in the Old contained
The Old is by the New explained*

The New Testament is concealed. It is hidden in the Old Testament. The Old Testament with all of its strange sacrifices is revealed, it is explained by the New Testament. The theological term by which we understand the Old Testament in terms of the New Testament is called typology. We find a correspondence between a person, an event, a thing in the Old Testament and a person, event or thing in the New Testament – typically Jesus in the New Testament.

How does the book of Ruth point ahead to Jesus Christ?

We're going to see that in Jesus Christ, we have someone who deeply emphasizes with our feeling of abandonment and aloneness – feeling abandoned by everyone you're leaning on including God himself. And in Jesus Christ, we see the answer to this sense of abandonment. For in Christ, God is with us. As we prepare for Holy Week – Good Friday, the day Jesus died, and Easter Sunday, the day he rose from the dead, I've called today's talk "When God Seems Absent." Let's pray

Ruth 1:1–5 (NIV)

1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. 2 The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name

was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

3 Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons.

4 They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Ruth 1:19–21 (NIV)

19 So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

20 "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 21 I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

There are some powerful stories of men and women in the Bible, who felt utterly alone and abandoned by people they depended on most for support and help. Here we read about a woman named Naomi. Naomi's family came from the city of Bethlehem. Famine and hard times forced Naomi and her husband and their two sons to leave the Promised Land and travel east to the land of Moab where they heard there was food. But then in quick succession – first her husband, and then both of her sons died. Here is Naomi left alone, a stranger in a strange land with no relatives, no one she knows, accompanied by one of her widowed daughters-in-law. Naomi decides she has no choice but to return to Bethlehem and throw herself on the mercy of her family. In a patriarchal society, dominated by men, with almost no economic opportunities for women, Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, wander back hundreds of miles with no male protector or provider.

Naomi gives voice to the profound emotions and feelings she has of abandonment when we read:

Ruth 1:19–21 (NIV)

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20 "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 21 I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

Naomi: A person who complained to God

So many people in the Bible felt themselves to be utterly abandoned, alone, in an unfamiliar environment thrown entirely upon their own resources. I think of Moses. Fearful that his murder of an Egyptian would be discovered, he takes off into the wilderness. I think of the shepherd boy, David, who is hunted day and night by a paranoid king named Saul. David runs for his life. I think of the prophet Elijah, who is forced to flee from the rage of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. He finds himself absolutely alone out in the wilderness. He says to God, "God, just take my life." Have you ever been in that place? Have you ever felt so alone and abandoned that you said, "God, take my life. I don't want to live anymore?"

Being left alone, having to completely depend on ourselves in the face of overwhelming hostility and unfriendly people is the stuff of nightmares. But what makes it worse for people of faith is when we find that it is not just fellow human beings that aren't there when we need them, but it seems like God is not there when we need him. We ask: Where is God in all of this? Why is God not intervening for me? I thought the Lord at least would be on my side when I went through this.

Naomi complains saying:

Ruth 1:20–21 (NIV)

20 "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 21 I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

There is in the Bible a kind of literature that many people would be surprised to find in a book that is designed to encourage faith in God. The kind of literature that surprises many first-time readers of the Bible is something called a "lament," or a complaint in which the person in the Bible communicates their outrage to God, their upset, their protest to God. That God has abandoned them; God hasn't been there for them; God who promised to be faithful has left them alone. Many people are surprised to find so many laments, so many complaints in the Bible written by believers about the seeming indifference of God, the fickleness of God, the absence of God when we need him most. The Bible is not afraid to authentically communicate the full range of human experience – even when they don't seem flattering to God.

We can find laments in books like the book of Job, and the prophet Jeremiah. But they are most common in the worship manual for the people of God, for the Jews as well as for Christians, the book of Psalms. You see laments everywhere in the book of Psalms. Psalm 31:11-13 captures the internal feeling of someone who feels abandoned, cut off from God.

Psalms 31:11–13 (NIV)

11 Because of all my enemies,

I am the utter contempt of my neighbors
and an object of dread to my closest friends—
those who see me on the street flee from me.
12 I am forgotten as though I were dead;
I have become like broken pottery.
13 For I hear many whispering,
“Terror on every side!”
They conspire against me
and plot to take my life.

People have turned their backs on me. Even God seems uninterested in me. And in those dark times we feel utterly useless, forgotten, almost dead.

The feeling of being abandoned by God is stated even more explicitly in Psalm 74:1:

Psalm 74:1 (NIV)

1 O God, why have you rejected us forever?
Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?

Psalm 10:1 (NIV)

1 Why, LORD, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Sometimes it feels that not only is God away, but he is deliberately hiding from us. He is deliberately hiding his face. Sometimes when we have those feelings we can begin to believe that we are losing our faith. Am I thinking things that a Christian shouldn't think? Am I experiencing feelings that a person who is full of faith would not feel?

The fact is, friend, sometimes we are exercising the greatest degree of faith we ever will when we honestly and authentically complain to God. Far from being a sign that you are abandoning faith, or that you are feeling things that no faith-filled person will ever feel, complaining to the Lord, lamenting like Job, Jeremiah, or the Psalmists in so many places, complaining to the Lord is one of the most faith-filled acts you can ever engage in.

Naomi's complaint of being abandoned pointed a thousand years ahead to Good Friday, to a time when God the Son became the utterly abandoned one, stripped naked, spit on, mocked, left utterly friendless, abandoned by all of his followers, surrounded by hostile soldiers and religious leaders, bruised and bleeding on a cross. And Jesus sounds like Naomi and quotes a psalm of lament when he complains to God saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

When you take your feelings of abandonment, of aloneness, feelings of being betrayed by God, betrayed by others and you communicate them to God, like Naomi, like the

psalmist, like Jesus on the cross, that is one of the most faith-filled things you can ever do. Because complaining to God communicates that you take God seriously; that you believe with all your heart that God is good, that God rules, that God is in control, that God wants good in the world and he wants good in your life. And when you don't see good, and you don't see intervention, and you don't see any end to your suffering or to the suffering of a loved one, a faith-filled person communicates a sense of outrage to God, to communicate frustration to God.

See a person who doesn't take God seriously lives with the attitude, "I don't expect much from God. I don't expect God to be good to me. I don't expect God's help. I don't really expect answers to prayer. Most of the time, I don't think there is anyone out there at all. I think I'm basically on my own all the time." That person never complains to God.

But when you take God seriously, you are faced with two choices when you feel abandoned – either just chuck your faith and say, "I knew it wouldn't work," walk away from the church, walk away from God, plunge yourself into some kind of an escape – substance abuse or an affair, or your work. Or honestly and authentically complain like Naomi and Jesus.

Let's look at a second person in this story, Ruth.

Ruth: A person who commits to others

Ruth 1:14–18 (NIV)

14 At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

15 "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

16 But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." 18 When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

The word "clung" is the same word used in Genesis 2:24:

Genesis 2:24 (NIV)

24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

The old King James Version said:

A man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.

In the original Hebrew, it means to be glued to, stuck to, and adhered to. Ruth is glued to her mother-in-law. Naomi says, go back, your sister-in-law went back to her family, to her gods, you go back. Naomi is pushing her away. Family is calling Ruth back. Her culture is calling Ruth back. But she makes this covenant commitment when she says in Ruth 1:16-17:

Ruth 1:16–17 (NIV)

16 But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

I’ve always had a tender place in my heart when I read Ruth 1:16-18 because this was the wedding vow that Marlene made to me on our wedding day nearly 39 years ago: where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried.

Ruth’s commitment involves the whole of life; it involves going and staying. The only two possibilities in terms of your place is you’re either going or staying. It involves all relationships horizontally. Your people will be my people. Vertically, your God will be my God. It involves not only life until the end, it involves the end: where you die, I will die.

And then she makes the covenant statement where she calls a curse down on herself: not only till death us do part, but may the Lord himself deal with me ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.

We live in a time where people, in the words of therapists, have become commitment-phobic. I remember sitting down some years ago with a young man who was considering making a marriage proposal. He had made up his mind to ask his girlfriend to marry him, but every time he got close, his throat would close up. He would break into a sweat, he felt slightly woozy, and he would have the kind of feeling some of you have when you’re standing on the roof of a tall building looking down – especially if you have an extreme fear of heights. He told me that the thought of marriage made him feel like he was going into a jail cell, and he could just hear the metal doors clanging in back of him.

The idea of a life-long commitment made him feel like he was trapped on an elevator that was heating up – a feeling of claustrophobia, of being trapped, strangled. Every time he got close, he felt like, “I gotta get outta here, I gotta break free.” I remember talking with this guy about his girlfriend’s qualities. He was a Christian and so was she –

a deeply devoted Christian. Both of them were. He was very positive about the girl. They got along great, he thought she was very attractive, he enjoyed her company, and they came from similar social backgrounds. People around them thought they made a great match. They shared a lot of common interests together. They were intellectually compatible. She seemed to love him. They had a lot of the same goals, and even as we talked, he could rationally try to talk himself into asking her. At an emotional level he absolutely froze up every time he got really close to going for it, and he nearly blew up the relationship. He came just a hair's breadth away from losing what for him would have been a great gift of God. It was an offer of a really good life with a good woman, but he was afraid of making a commitment.

Now, how many of you know men and women have dated 5, 6, 7 or more people? I don't mean just casual dating – recreational dating – but 5, 6, or 7 long-term relationships, some of these lasting for years. For one reason or another, the relationship broke down because one person could not bring himself or herself to walk that last 50 feet to the altar. They may have discussed marriage with their boyfriend or girlfriend on numerous occasions. They may have talked about it at length. They may have thought about it, prayed about it, even gone into counseling concerning it, but there's always something that came up in each of the relationships which kept them from taking that final plunge.

With one of the relationships, it was the job situation. It was a really bad time to get married because they were in school or graduate school or transitioning out school. Or there was a time when they really needed to focus on that first job – give lots and lots of time to the firm or the company. Another time it was financial problems. Their finances are just in an upheaval and uproar. They're just climbing out of debt or coming through bankruptcy. Another time it's her parents. Another time it's his parents. Then there's a former boyfriend or girlfriend that they haven't quite resolved their feelings over even though it's been years since they broke up with them. But they're still struggling with the past feelings and they need to work through all that and see whether they need to get back with their old boyfriend or girlfriend. Or it's her kids by a former marriage or his kids or the ministry commitment to something God is saying or the miraculous intervention by God – they got a sign or a circumstance – that says, "Don't do this." It's always something to keep the person from saying YES to a marriage commitment and sticking with their Yes.

Am I speaking about anyone that any of you have ever known? Am I getting personal enough yet or do I need to describe a little more the pattern of life that I've been discussing? The feat of making a commitment is not just a marriage issue or a romance issue. It's a career and job issue. Over the years I've been in the position of hiring for lots of different staff positions here at Vineyard, and even years ago at my former job as an OSU Professor. I can remember serving on several faculty search committees and reviewing some people's resumes that you get if you're in the position of hiring, and some of you who are managers or employers, you've seen this. Some people's resumes simply scream at you the message that even if you make the mistake of hiring this

particular person, it won't be a long term mistake, it won't be a devastating mistake, because they'll probably be gone, quit, or get fired from this position in less than a year.

I can remember getting a resume for an open staff position where the person had served in seven different churches over a 10-year period. These seven churches were in several different states. The person had attended five different colleges at various points in his life, but still hadn't received a degree. There were also a number of other employers listed between the ministry positions held. I handed the resume back to one of the pastors and said, "Tell me, as you look at this resume, if you can spot a pattern in this person's life. It's going to take a lot of intuition, a lot of discernment, maybe a prophetic revelation, but just look at this resume." He looked at the resume and in just about 20 seconds said, "It seems to me this person is having a problem making a commitment."

One of the problems that people have with commitment is this idea that life will go better if we keep our options open. I just don't want to be trapped in a relationship or even a commitment to things. I just want to be available to God so I can leave at a moment's notice. But almost always that person who must keep all options open has something deeply rooted that is unspiritual – an unwillingness to be relied upon and be reliable. So they break commitments to roommates or they can't buy a home because they have to keep their options open, so they rent everything. They can't be pinned down on a dating relationship because, you know, someone better might come along.

Keeping options open is appropriate for one stage of life – when you're young, when you're just beginning, when you're starting to explore. But when a person is no longer young or just starting out or just beginning or just investigating, and they still have to keep options open mentality, something is flawed in the person's thinking. The fact is, that true happiness comes when you start closing the door on certain options, when you narrow the range of choices, when you put roots down, when you deliberately say NO to certain things so you can fully say YES to one good thing. Keeping options open comes down to saying NO to everything except this illusion of freedom, this fantasy that you will be happier in continuing to search rather than in finding. The purpose of a search is not to continue searching. The purpose of a search is so that you will find and embrace.

Second, some people have a problem making a commitment because they have a deep need to make a perfect decision. Perfectionists, or people with perfectionistic tendencies, often really struggle in making a commitment – a romantic commitment, marriage commitment, job commitment, or church commitment because they are always seeing the flaw. How this particular person, who has 40 good qualities, falls short of their ideal (whatever that is). The perfectionist is always afraid of settling, of compromising. So instead of having a realistic view of finding a really good partner in life or a really good job or a really good church, they're always looking for the perfect partner, the perfect job, the perfect church, the perfect ministry, the perfect match, the

perfect fit. And in the end, sadly, they may end up with nothing – no marriage, no kids, no good church, no good job. The perfectionist is not willing to see that life in a fallen world involves some trade-offs. The person who wants to keep their options open has to understand that as well. In order to find lasting happiness, I must be willing to trade-off my freedom to do anything. I've got to get narrow in order to be happy.

How does Ruth's commitment point ahead to Jesus? In a multitude of places in the gospel, Jesus promises to be with us through thick and thin, in good times and bad times, whatever we face, Jesus promises to be with us. In the last words in the gospel of Matthew that Jesus spoke to his disciples after he was raised from the dead read this way:

Matthew 28:18–20 (NIV)

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

On the very night that Jesus was betrayed, Jesus said:

John 14:18–20 (NIV)

18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

And Jesus said not even death would separate us from him.

John 14:1–3 (NIV)

14 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

As he was dying on the cross, he said to the so-called penitent thief, who was dying by his side:

Luke 23:43 (NIV)

43 Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Perhaps, the most frightening human experience in which we fear being abandoned and along, is the journey that we make from this world to the next. Maybe Jesus is enough

for us when we are healthy, well, productive and surrounded by our family. But what about that time in life when we make a journey and we're not surrounded by family or friends – when we make the journey that everyone must make alone – the journey away from this world. Will Jesus be with us then, on that lonely journey of dying?

Nearly 500 years ago the famous Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter, wrote about death and said this:

*Lord, it belongs not to my care
Whether I die or live:
To love and serve Thee is my share,
And this Thy grace must give.*

*Christ leads me through no darker rooms
Than he went through before;
He that unto God's kingdom comes
Must enter by this door.*

*My knowledge of that life is small,
The eye of faith is dim;
But tis enough that Christ knows all,
And I shall be with him.*

We read about a third person in this wonderful little book of Ruth, a man named Boaz, who is a farmer.

Boaz: A person who comes alongside his family

Before we get to Ruth 4, let me remind you a bit about the background. A Jewish man takes his sons and his wife to the land of Moab during a time of famine in Bethlehem. And while he was in Moab, his two sons married two Gentile women from the land of Moab. And then the man dies. And then his sons die. Three funerals in the land of Moab. Three women are left, Naomi and her two daughters-in-law. One of the daughters-in-law leaves. That leaves two women, Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. But Ruth doesn't return to her family. She makes a commitment to her mother-in-law to not leave her, to cling to her. Not only does she make a commitment to Naomi, she makes a commitment to Naomi's God. Ruth turns her back on the pagan culture she was raised with.

So many of you did that when you became Christians. You turned your back on the non-Christian culture you were raised in. Some of you had to turn your back on friends. Some of you had to turn your back on your boyfriend and break off a relationship, or on a girlfriend. Some of you actually had to turn your back on your families. Some of you

were raised outside of church. Some of you were raised like me, entirely outside of Christianity. And so your commitment to Jesus put a strain on your family relationships.

Ruth broke away from her pagan religious background and became a follower of the Lord. Ruth and Naomi traveled back to the Promised Land. And by the overarching providence of God, they bump into one of Naomi's relatives, a man named Boaz. And Boaz agrees to fulfill an Old Testament duty to take Ruth as his bride so that, first, her dead husband would have a son and his name perpetuated throughout the generations, and second, Ruth would be provided for, and third, that the land that Naomi's husband owned would not be lost.

Boaz wasn't the brother-in-law of Ruth. He wasn't the brother of Ruth's dead husband. There was no legal obligation on Boaz's part to marry Ruth. He was a relative, but he wasn't a brother. The act of taking Ruth as a bride as pure grace. Here is what we read:

Ruth 4:1–6 (NIV)

4 Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat down there just as the guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along. Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down.

2 Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so.

3 Then he said to the guardian-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. 4 I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line."

"I will redeem it," he said.

5 Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property."

6 At this, the guardian-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it."

Ruth 4:9–12 (NIV)

9 Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. 10 I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!"

11 Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. 12 Through the offspring the LORD gives you by

this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

When Boaz married Ruth, he was acting as an Kinsman-Redeemer, or what in Hebrew is called the Go’ El.

Go’el = Kinsman Redeemer

The kinsmen redeemer is an avenger of blood

In Numbers 35:16-21 we read this:

Numbers 35:16–21 (NIV)

16 “ If anyone strikes someone a fatal blow with an iron object, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death. 17 Or if anyone is holding a stone and strikes someone a fatal blow with it, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death. 18 Or if anyone is holding a wooden object and strikes someone a fatal blow with it, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death. 19 The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; when the avenger comes upon the murderer, the avenger shall put the murderer to death. 20 If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at them intentionally so that they die 21 or if out of enmity one person hits another with their fist so that the other dies, that person is to be put to death; that person is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when they meet.

In the Old Testament there was no professional police force or FBI or Sheriff’s departments. A family member, go’el – the kinsman-redeemer, assumed the responsibility to pursue a murderer and seek justice. Being the avenger of blood was one of the most solemn responsibilities of the go’el, the kinsmen redeemer in the Israelite community. The role of the avenger underlined in a most remarkable way, the family groups’ collective responsibility for a weak and oppressed member of their community. We will stand up for one another to the point of avenging one another’s death.

That one role Boaz took on when he married Ruth. And Boaz points ahead to Jesus who is our Kinsmen Redeemer, our avenger of blood. I think one of the reasons why it is so hard for us to forgive many times is because it sounds to us like our abuser, our offender, just gets off the hook. You or someone you love may be a victim of sexual abuse, or physical abuse, or ongoing verbal and emotional abuse. You hear that as a Christian you are supposed to forgive. You pray the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” and you think, “I must forgive.” But it is so hard because it seems like we are sweeping all of the abuse under a rug and the person gets away scott free.

We forget that we have a Kinsmen Redeemer in Jesus, an avenger of blood. The reason why you can forgive and let people go is because of what we read in Hebrews 10:30:

Hebrews 10:30 (NIV)

30 For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.”

The apostle Paul links our forgiveness and reconciliation with another person with the promise that God does see injustice and will avenge. We read in Romans 12:18-19:

Romans 12:18–19 (NIV)

18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.

Forgiveness does not mean justice is forever denied. It simply means that you don’t have to take justice into your own hands. God will vindicate you when you have been unfairly accused, lied about, or betrayed, someone slandered you in the community, God will vindicate you. And because you will be vindicated, you don’t have to become vindictive. You don’t have to plot how to get even because our Redeemer, the avenger of blood, sees and will repay. Does that encourage you? There is justice in this world. God sees and God will repay.

The kinsmen redeemer is our advocate in court

One of the roles of the kinsmen redeemer, the family protector, was to defend weaker family members in court proceedings. That is why Job said in Job 16:19-21:

Job 16:19–21 (NIV)

19 Even now my witness is in heaven;
my advocate is on high.

20 My intercessor is my friend
as my eyes pour out tears to God;

21 on behalf of a man he pleads with God
as one pleads for a friend.

What does it mean that Jesus is our Redeemer? It means that he is our advocate. We read this in 1 John 2:1-2:

1 John 2:1–2 (NIV)

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He

is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Jesus is our advocate, our defender in God's court. What kind of advocate, what kind of defense attorney do we have in heaven? It says in 1 John 2:1:

1 John 2:1 (NIV)

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

Jesus is not some shyster lawyer who finds a loophole through which he is able to get us off on a technicality. He does not strike some back-room deal with the Father. He is the Righteous One. He upholds the righteous standards of God's law. As our representative, he fully obeyed the law of God in all respects. He is absolutely truthful and completely innocent and draws himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Friends, do you understand that you do not have to plead your own case with God? Why God should bless your life? Why God should be merciful to you? Why God should bless your family? You don't have to come up with your own reasons for blessing. Do you understand that you have an advocate who is pleading for you and he is doing it in a righteous way, no shredding of evidence, no evasive responses, no cover-ups, no plea-bargains. Do you understand that you have an advocate who is defending you before the bar of justice. And in eternity you will have an advocate named Jesus Christ standing by your side, your Kinsmen Redeemer, showing his wounds to the Father saying, "Father, this one is covered by my blood. Forgive her. Forgive him."

The kinsmen-redeemer is our family protector

In the Old Testament, the go'el was a family member whose duty it was to act on behalf of other family members who were in need. The go'el was the family protector, the family defender, the family champion. The go'el was the big brother who all of us wished we had had, a brother who doesn't taunt their little brother or sister, but who protects them, the brother who watches out for their little brother or sister and beats up on every bully that tries to hurt them.

The idea of redeemer in the Old Testament is rooted in the biblical understanding of family and family relations. The family in the Old Testament functioned like a traditional Asian family where the highest value is not individual self-expression, or individual achievement, but the well-being of the whole family. See, the family that we find in the Old Testament was not the American individualistic family in which every family member is running in different directions. The child is texting mom saying that after soccer practice she is going to grab a meal at McDonald's with a few friends; grandpa and grandma live in a retirement community in Arizona; sister has taken a job with a

global corporation and is working in Hong Kong; mom is stays late at the office; dad is on the treadmill at the gym. That is not a picture of family in the Bible. In the Bible, families were connected; they looked out for one another; they protected each other's interests. Self-fulfillment as the goal for life was not a concept that would have been meaningful to people living in Bible days. Supporting the whole, being part of a family bigger than you, something that provided you with a sense of place, a sense of belonging, a sense of rooting, a network of relationships, security for the future – that was the biblical understanding of family.

And so Boaz, the go'el, the kinsmen redeemer, or family protector gives us a little bit of insight to what it means that regarding Jesus is our Redeemer. As we look forward to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, what does it mean that Jesus is our Redeemer? We read for example in Hebrews 2:11-15 these words:

Hebrews 2:11–15 (NIV)

11 Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. 12 He says,

“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises.”

13 And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again he says,

“Here am I, and the children God has given me.”

14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

Or how about this in Romans 8:29:

Romans 8:29 (NIV)

29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he [Jesus] might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Jesus entered a family relationship us that he might be our Go'el, our Kinsmen Redeemer, our family hero, our big brother that looks out for us.

I don't know if you ever saw the movie, “A River Runs Through It.” It is the story of two brothers who grew up in Montana. The older one was studious and hardworking; the younger one was great fun, but kept getting into trouble and brawls. He was finally killed in a brawl. His older brother couldn't help him. The brothers grew too far apart. The saddest thing about the story was that the older brother saw what was happening

to his younger brother, but there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't reach him. There was no way for the older brother to rescue his younger brother.

What Hebrews 2 and Romans 8 are saying, what calling Jesus our Redeemer is saying is that Jesus is our older brother, who was able to come to the place where we as younger sisters and brothers are; we're wallowing in sin; we're getting into all kinds of scrapes and brawls; we feel like we're alone, relying entirely on our own resources, and Jesus comes to us not shaking his finger at us as a critical older brother, but in love and mercy and kindness. He comes and rescues us as a family member.

At the beginning of the book of Ruth, Naomi felt completely alone and abandoned by everyone, including God. But then the Family Protector came. Boaz intervened, and now here is the end of the story.

Ruth 4:13–17 (NIV)

13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. 14 The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! 15 He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

16 Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. 17 The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

God intervenes in the lives of these two insignificant widows, who felt abandoned by God, no protector, alone in the world, forced to rely on themselves. God took the lives of these two widows and wove it into his great plan of salvation. It was through the line of Ruth that King David was born. And then further down-line, a thousand years later, David's greatest son, Jesus the Messiah, the ultimate Family Redeemer, was born.

God didn't abandoned Naomi; and God has not abandoned you and me, either. Even when we feel alone, even when we wonder what God is up to, God is at work in our lives weaving us into his great plan for us and for the world. Jesus will be with us always, even to the end of the world. Let's pray.

When God Seems Absent

Rich Nathan

April 12-13, 2014

Shadows of the Cross Series

Ruth

- I. Naomi: A person who complains to God
- II. Ruth: A person who commits to others
- III. Boaz: A person who comes alongside his family
 - A. The Kinsman-Redeemer is an avenger of blood
 - B. The Kinsman-Redeemer is our advocate in court
 - C. The Kinsman-Redeemer is our family protector