

RUTH 4 “NAOMI HAS A SON”

How long do you want to live?

I read recently of a researcher at the University of California, who is a specialist in studying the genetic makeup of worms. She said she had found a gene in worms that might slow or even stop the process of aging.

At last word, she had moved on to mice, with the hope of someday developing something to arrest the aging process in people.

She is said to have said, “If our company could make a pill, everyone would want it.”

Would you? Would you want a pill that would let you live 5-hundred years on this earth, or even longer, or even forever? How long do you want to live?

How long do you want to live...here?

This Christmas season, we are following the trail to Jesus, by entering the story of the book of Ruth.

We have learned that Jesus enters a world of...

* Bitterness. In his sovereignty, the Lord has ordained bitterness in this world, but he has also ordained Jesus to come, to offer help in the bitterness, and to give hope for a day of no more bitterness.

* Lostness. In his grace, the Lord has sent Jesus to find lost people like us, and to lavish his favor upon us.

* Fear. Because of Jesus’ goodness, we need not fear God. Because of Jesus’ greatness, we need not fear people.

Now, as we finish the book of Ruth and make the final steps along the trail to Jesus, we discover that Jesus enters a world of death.

The story of Ruth is a story of death. Her husband has died. She will someday face death. But the Lord has a wonderful purpose for Ruth, so he will provide a new husband for her, who will allow her to give life. Then this new life, will give life to all who look to him for life.

So do you want that pill?

Maybe not. How long do you want to live in a world of bitterness, lostness, fear and death?

But maybe so, because you long for true life. As we finish the story of Ruth, we discover this true life - not through a pill, but through Jesus.

How does life come, in the midst of the death in the story of Ruth?

It comes first, through life. Most of the verses of this final chapter, simply tell the story of God’s hand bringing LIFE THROUGH LIFE. God will bring more life, through the lives of Ruth and Boaz.

Let’s enter back into the story. Ruth needs a husband, so she can give life, but *THE MATTER* is not yet settled. Boaz might marry her, but he is not the nearest relative - he is not the closest “kinsman-redeemer.”

Boaz goes to the gate. In even a small town like Bethlehem, there was a gate to enter and leave the town, and town business was done at the gate.

Boaz gathers the witnesses. In this culture, they don’t have laptops, databases, and clerks to record it all. Ten of the town elders, along with some of the people of the town, will watch as the matter is resolved.

Boaz presents the problem. There is land, and there is a widow. The “kinsman-redeemer” must buy both, to resolve the matter.

Now that the matter is presented, we learn of *THE DECISION*.

The other man, the other relative, the one who could be the kinsman-redeemer, declines. He will take the land, but not the widow.

Why not? We don’t know for sure, but we read that he believes he may endanger his “estate” if he purchases both. A good guess is that he was not able to bear the financial burden of taking the land and caring for Ruth.

So after the man declines, the men confirm. It’s an odd custom. One of the men takes off his sandal, and gives it to the other man. We would shake hands. They took off their sandals!

Then after the matter and the decision, comes *THE BLESSINGS*.

We first read of the blessing of the witnesses. They proclaim their hope that Ruth will be like Rachel and Leah, who bore a total of 12 sons for Jacob. They look for the family of Boaz to be like the family of Perez, an ancestor of Boaz who was also born to a widow.

Then we read of the blessing of the women. Boaz marries Ruth, and they indeed have a son. The women announce that this child is, in a real way, a son of Naomi, for it is her family that will now continue. They proclaim that Obed is better than seven sons. This is a great word of joy, because in the

culture of Naomi, seven was a number that represented perfection, and you never got a greater blessing, than the blessing of seven sons.

The matter is resolved. The decision is made. The blessings are given.

So what's the point?

This may be interesting, if you like trivia. We have learned all sorts of things we didn't know before, about these people and this culture.

This may be heartwarming, if you like romance. Couldn't you just feel Ruth and Boaz bonding throughout the book, and isn't it good to know they seem to have lived happily ever after?

We know a little more. We feel a little good. But is that all?

Not quite. Listen again to a few of these verses.

* Verse 11: "May the Lord make this woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah..."

* Verse 13: "The Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth..."

* Verse 14: "Praise to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer."

As we have seen throughout this book, the hero of this book is not Boaz, and the heroine is not Ruth. The hero is the Lord! He is the One who wove this plan to give life, through the common actions of common people like these people. He did it with them, and he does it with you and me.

Life through life. He brings new life, through our lives.

Maybe you have seen something like this:

"Aoccdring to a rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the lttteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat lttteer be in the rjhith pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it...Tijis is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe."

That is an amazing testimony to the power of the human mind! Yet it is also a helpful image for the rule of the sovereign Lord.

We live in a world of death. It brings confusion. It brings desperation. It brings unbreakable heartbreak. Sometimes it all seems like a total mess.

But just as the first letter of those words is in place, the first and only Lord of the universe is still in place, even in a world of death.

And just as the final letter of those words is in place, the final plan of the Lord of the universe is still in place, even in a world of death.

Life goes on, because of the ruler of life. Even when all seems to be full of death, the first and only Lord is still carrying out his plan, even as he still ordains death to continue for a season.

Do you believe this? Maybe you believe this for the lives of Ruth and Boaz and Naomi, but what about your life?

The season of Christmas and New Year's is a season of reflection. We see people we have not seen. We hear from people we have not heard from. We remember people we have lost. We look at people with fresh eyes. We look back, and we look ahead, and we try to make sense of it all.

Are you aware of the Lord's sovereign hand upon the events of your life?

How does he do this? It is a mystery! We do not understand this. But the book of Ruth reminds us that he is not...

* Distant. He cares about the world he has made.

* Distracted. He tends to the world he has made.

* Defeated. He rules over the world he has made.

He is still the Lord of all, and he is still working out his purposes, in your life, even through events as common as the events in the book of Ruth.

Has God given you even a glimpse of how his sovereign hand has been upon your life in the past year?

Maybe you have mourned, but you look back and see his steady help.

Maybe you page through the calendar, and you look back and see how the mess of February or April or June, is slowly being resolved.

Maybe you remember in your heart, and you realize he gave you wisdom you know you could not have had on your own.

Maybe your mind rushes to the worst, and you are starting to see some purpose, in what seemed so meaningless.

God brings life through life. He brings life, as he orders our lives.

Yet is that all? Is this the only lesson of the book of Ruth? Is it just that the Lord watched over them, and he watches over you, too?

No. The Lord brings life through life, and he brings LIFE TO LIFE. He brings life, for the

purpose of bringing another life, who gives true life.

As I have said, the story of Ruth moves us along the trail to Jesus. He is the end of the story of Ruth.

But how? In the last several verses, we read a simple genealogy. This shows us that the life that comes from the book of Ruth, leads to more lives, and ultimately to real life.

It leads, first, *TO THE LIFE OF DAVID*.

Ruth is the mother of Obed. Obed is the father of Jesse. Jesse is the father of David.

David is the man after God's own heart. David is the man who becomes king of God's people Israel by God's sovereign appointment. God blesses him, and God promises that his kingdom will endure forever.

In 2 Samuel 7, the prophet Nathan declares to David, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever." David will die. But his sons will succeed him, from generation to generation.

But then you read the story, and it becomes ugly. David's son Solomon is the next king, but when he is gone, the kingdom splits. The kingdom of Israel becomes two kingdoms called Judah and Israel. The kingdoms fight. Some of the kings are godly, and some are not. Eventually God judges the rebellion of his people, and the people are taken into captivity.

Yet there is that promise: "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."

Will God continue to bring life?

Yes, because after the trail of Ruth takes us to the life of David, it takes us *TO THE LIFE OF JESUS*.

The book of Matthew begins as the book of Ruth ends: with a genealogy.

"...Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David..."

Then name after name after name, until...

"...Eliud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

As we learned when we began our study of Ruth, the trail seems to be lost at points, but there it is. The trail of Ruth ends with Jesus.

Life leads to life. The life of Ruth leads to the life of David, and the life of David leads to the Savior who proclaims, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life...I am the resurrection and the life."

Jesus is life. Jesus gives life.

Jesus has lived eternally with his Father. He has come to be born and live as we live, yet without sin. He has come to die for the sins of sinners, and to be raised to new and everlasting life.

Jesus has done this, to secure joyful, eternal life for us.

Jesus enters a world of bitterness. Jesus enters a world of lostness. Jesus enters a world of fear. Jesus enters a world of death.

It is Christmas Eve, and maybe you don't want to think about death. But you know you will.

Maybe you will think of the death of the loved ones, who have died in the past year, or in past Decembers, or even many years ago.

Maybe you will think of the death of your dreams, or of the depth of your disappointments - even from the past year.

Maybe you will think of the death of your spirit, as you must face again, how empty you really are.

In this season where we celebrate the life of Jesus, and the new life he gives, how is death seeking you out? How are you longing for life?

Maybe the death that seeks you is spiritual death.

As we have learned this year in the book of Romans, we are all spiritually dead. That means we cannot relate to the God who made us, because our sin creates a separation between God and us. God made us for life with him, but we cannot live with him, when we are spiritually dead.

Yet Paul writes to the Ephesian Christians, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions..."

We are dead in spirit, but through Jesus, we are made alive in spirit! By his death for our sins, Jesus removes the sin that has separated us from God. He puts his Spirit into our hearts, so that we believe in him, have a new heart for him, and want to live for him now, and with him forever.

Are you living in spiritual death today? Are you dead to God?

Don't tell me you go to church. Don't tell me you are a pretty good person. Don't tell me you are sure God loves everybody.

Have you dealt with the sin that separates you from God? Have you gone to God in humility, and asked him for forgiveness and new life, through his Son, the son of Ruth, born in Bethlehem, who suffered for the sins of sinners?

Charles Spurgeon once proclaimed,

“I now in spirit take you by the hand with a firm grip. Do you feel my brotherly grasp?...Why will you die? Will you not give your soul a thought? Will you perish through sheer carelessness?”

“Oh, do not do so, but weigh these solemn matters and make sure of eternity! Do not refuse Jesus, His love, His blood, His salvation.

“Why should you do so? Can you do it? I beseech you, do not turn away from your Redeemer!”

How else does death seek you out today? How else do you long for life?

Maybe the death that seeks you is emotional death.

Christian writers Dan Allender and Tremper Longman tell the story of a woman named Maria. Last week we pondered rejection, abuse and shame in the story of Ruth. Maria suffered from all three, first from her brother, then from her mother.

Allender and Longman write,

“Maria illustrates what is at the heart of despair - a flight from desire. Desire so often proves fruitless. Disappointment has answered hope so many times that it seems utterly absurd to continue to hunger or yearn for anything any longer. To hope is to become vulnerable to more pain.

“The best solution, therefore, seems to be to completely shut down, become robot-like, and expect absolutely nothing out of life.”

Can you relate? What rejection, abuse, shame, sadness, disappointment, weariness, loneliness or other cross of the heart, leads to emotional death in you, this Christmas season?

Only Jesus can restore life.

Only he will never betray you, or slander you, or ignore you, or attack you, or steal from you, or dispose of you.

Only he will care gently for you, and make you strong to stand against the evil that would destroy you.

Only he will diminish the pain of the past, fill you with the grace of forgiveness, and give you the courage to love again.

At Christmas, it’s all magnified. Our emotions can reach the suburbs of heaven, or plunge to the gateway of hell.

Look to Jesus. Learn from Jesus. Love Jesus. In our emotional death, only this child of Ruth, born in Bethlehem, brings life.

But maybe death seeks you in another way today. Maybe you long for life in one more way.

Maybe you want the pill that woman is trying to invent, because you face physical death, either in your body, or in the body of one you love.

How often do I hear this! “My mother died in December...” “My sister died around Christmas...” “My husband was diagnosed at Thanksgiving...”

Or maybe it’s you. Maybe you have an appointment in early January at the doctor, and you don’t know what you will hear. Or maybe you seem okay now, but you worry over tomorrow.

Young people, maybe it all seems so distant right now, but maybe even in the days to come, you will be reminded of the reality of physical death.

Christian writer Anthony Esolen says, “Paint a spangled sky above his cage and the canary is happy, but man is a sort of creature who suffocates without infinity.”

The prospect of physical death is suffocating! We really aren’t sure we want that pill for this bitter, lost, fearful, dying world, but we surely don’t want life to end, when this life ends.

Where is hope? It is in Jesus, the son of Ruth, born in Bethlehem to provide the hope of eternal life. The One who gives us new life with God in conquering spiritual death, and who gives us new life with others in defeating emotional death, also gives new life with God and God’s own forever, because he has risen from the grave and triumphed over physical death.

Spiritual death. Emotional death. Physical death. Life is in Jesus.

We are on the trail to Jesus. Where are you on that trail? How might he be pursuing you on that trail?

Christian writer Ravi Zecharias writes,

“Almost thirty years to the day after my surrender to Christ, my wife and I were visiting India and decided to visit my grandmother’s grave. I had only vague recollections of her funeral, the first funeral I had ever attended. I had a challenge trying to tell the cemetery manager the year of her death. We finally arrived at the year--as I recalled I was probably nine or ten when it might have happened.

“After thumbing through old registers that were bigger than his desk, we eventually found her name. With the help of a gardener, we walked through the accumulated weeds and dirt and rubble in the cemetery until we found the large slab of stone marking her grave.

“No one had visited her grave for almost thirty years. With his little bucket of water and small brush, the gardener cleared off the caked-on dirt and, to our utter surprise, under her name, a verse gradually appeared. My wife clasped my hand and said, ‘Look at the verse!’ It read, ‘Because I live, you shall live also.’

“...He was on my trail long before I knew it.”

Is Jesus on your trail today? Are you on the same trail as Jesus?

If so, you don’t need a pill for life. You need only him, for in him, is life. You need him, and you have him, for as those women declared, “Naomi has a son.” David has a son. God has a Son. You have a Savior from all sorts of death, and a Savior for true, forever life.

In him, is peace. In him, is comfort. In him, is joy. In a world of death, we praise the son of Ruth, born in Bethlehem, the One whom God brought through the lives of common people, that we might have life.

Since all that I meet, will work for my good,
The bitter is sweet, the medicine food;
Though painful at present, will cease before long,
And then, O! how glorious, the conqueror’s song!
And then, O! how glorious, the conqueror’s song!

Begone unbelief, the Savior is here...
Though cisterns be broken and creatures all fail,
The word he has spoken will surely prevail...