

YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL

by Steve Zeisler

A discovery announced last week has excited the scientific world. Recently noted patterns of radiation have essentially ended the debate about the origin of the universe, indicating that the cosmos began as an infinitesimal speck that exploded, grew more complex, and eventually went from being opaque to being clear enough so that light might break forth. In describing these things, a number of scientists have said that they felt they were describing the handiwork of God. A discussion of the beginning (and by extension end) of the universe becomes a discussion of spiritual things, even for those who previously attempted to ignore them.

The very first sentence in the Bible announces that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and later we read of the Lord God saying, "Let there be light." So the scientific description of the "big bang" is consistent with what believers have known for thousands of years: The universe exists as it does because the Creator caused it to.

The Word Became Flesh

Now, biblical cosmology has another description of the beginning of things. The gospel of John also starts at the beginning: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Shortly after that it says, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." Our Lord Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, the Word of God, was in the beginning, at the explosion of the "big bang." He spoke it into existence ("all things came into being through him"). He was God, and yet he has become human. The bold announcement of the gospel is that we have in him a Savior who is committed to knowing us, loving us, understanding our circumstances, walking in the dust that we walk in, and understanding the fears that we feel---identifying with us completely in order to redeem us. The gospel speaks not only of creation, but of new creation--- the redemption of hurting, needy, and desperate people. That's the glory, not just that the infinitely large, indescribably complex, and magnificent cosmos is his creation, but that he is interested in us!

Let's return now to the little story, just four chapters long, tucked away in the Old Testament book of Ruth. It, too, is the story of the creative work of God. We see him building a family, bringing a child into the world, establishing hope where there hadn't been hope, giving joy to sorrowing people, and meeting the needs of two widows who had been overtaken by poverty.

Let's review the first two chapters. Two women end up connected by their circumstances: Naomi and Ruth her daughter-in-law. All of the men in their lives have died. They were poor victims of famine. Each of them will live a good bit of her life in a country that is not her own. In their poverty these two women decide to take on life together. But they do so with very different attitudes, and that's one of the things that makes this book so fascinating. Naomi, the older woman, is the kind of person who might be characterized by the statement, "What you see is what you get." When life is hard, her response is to become hard. In chapter 1 she says, "The hand of the Lord has gone forth against me...I should not be named Naomi, which means pleasant; I should be named Mara, which means bitter. When I'm treated bitterly, I get bitter. If tribulations befalls me, I'm going to tribulate!" Her attitude is that the circumstances dictate your response to life. She's willing to acknowledge God's, but if he doesn't act as she wants him to, then she feels free to decry the way she's being treated.

Ruth, on the other hand, having come from the spiritual darkness of Moab is so grateful to have been introduced to the living God that her stance in life is to believe and trust him even before she can see how he will act. She assumes that the Lord cares for her, that he can be trusted, and she responds to life on that basis.

At the end of chapter 2, we found Naomi's enthusiasm for life renewed. She says:

"May [Boaz] be blessed of the LORD who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead [their husbands]." Again Naomi said to her, "The man is our relative, he is one of our closest relatives."

Provisions for the Needy

There are some important Old Testament provisions that I want to clarify before we look at chapters 3 and 4. As we noted in chapter 2, the law established the rights of gleaners. If someone was poor, they were allowed to go out into the fields and pick up the grain that had fallen during the harvesting; the harvesters had to leave it for them. Thus, poor people could at least have their daily needs met. Ruth took advantage of this opportunity that God provided; and in the process of gleaning, she met Boaz. Jesus taught us to pray for "daily bread." God cared enough to provide in his law that the poor people should have a means by which a day's meal could be gathered. His law tells us something about his love for us.

Another practice is alluded to in Naomi's statement that Boaz is a close relative. This is very important to both Naomi and Ruth. The word for close relative at the end of verse 20 of chapter 2 is *go'el* in Hebrew. In Leviticus 25 the law established: If a family fell into poverty and they either had to sell their property or even sell themselves into slavery in order to survive, the *go'el* or kinsman redeemer was supposed to step in on their behalf and buy back the property so that nothing would be lost to the family. Naomi's outlook brightens because she realizes that on the horizon is someone who might care for them, someone they can hope in. Circumstances have improved, and she begins to praise God.

A third point of clarification concerns the Levirate marriage. If a married man died without children, either a brother or some other near relative (*levir*) was to marry his widow and father a child by her. The child would have the name of the man who had died, again so his property would not be lost to the clan ensuring that he would have progeny, so that memory of him would extend into the future.

Now, all these practices originate with God, and they say something about his character. He makes provision for daily bread. He provides a way to undo the tragedy of the past, and pay the price to buy slave's freedom. He also provides a secure home for the future even when death intervenes. All of these things point to spiritual realities in Christ. He is the one whose power gives us what we need each day. He is the one who has bought us out of slavery to sin, and He is the one in whom we hope for the future. The Christian message is that the Word has become flesh and dwelt among us; he has come near to us and he offers us life.

Even before the birth of Christ, God's people knew that their Lord was committed to meet their needs. It is on that basis that Ruth acts in faith. If the Lord cared enough to give these laws and to touch her heart, she will trust him to care for them, and her faith will be rewarded.

Let's turn to chapter 3. It seems apparent that, in the events of chapter 2, Ruth and Boaz have fallen in love with each other; there is a degree of intimacy in their speech and an attraction for one another. They would (we surmise) like to get married. Naomi hears of it, and she wants them to get married. In fact, everybody is for their getting married. God wants them to get married. There will be a great crescendo of joy when they finally do get married. But the question is, by what means will this marriage come about; what activity will take place to create it? Chapter 3, verse 1:

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."

Making A Marriage

Naomi's starting point is, "Shall I not provide security?" She is thinking that she needs to step in, and shape events before a golden opportunity is lost. "Boaz will be at a party tonight [threshing time was typically a time of festivity], and he's going to sleep out with the grain that's been harvested. Ruth, make yourself as attractive as you can. Bathe and put on a fragrance, and adorn yourself in your nicest clothes. [Her advice is very clear in this.] Wait until he has not only eaten, but he's drunk as much as he's going to. [It notes later that his heart was merry; he was a little tipsy.] Then when it's dark and you can be alone together, draw physically near to him, and wait and see what he says." Now, it seems to me that there's no way to read this except that Naomi was expecting Ruth's attractiveness to be the basis on which the marriage should take place. She should beguile him, fascinate him. In this moment of vulnerability he should find her alluring and delightful. With no reference to God's involvement Naomi directs Ruth to maximize his defenselessness and her desirability and see what happens. The account goes on in 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 [perhaps his feet got cold] 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."

Ruth asks Boaz in very clear terms, without nibbling his ear or attempting to beguile him first, to marry her. She says, "Spread your covering over your maid." There are other places in the Old Testament where that phrase is a description of marriage. The term sometimes has the idea of spreading wings over someone (the way a larger bird can spread its wings over a smaller one) or in some other way offering the protection of a relationship ("May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge." Ruth 2:12). She is saying to him, "Please marry me," but the basis of her request is that he is a near relative. It is God's law that calls forth this relationship. What she is asking him to do is not to respond hormonally or emotionally, but to respond to the call of God in his life. He responds in verse 10:

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.

Boaz is an older man; remember, we're assuming that he is probably widowed with a grown family. Most women as attractive as she is in her situation would have gone after younger men.

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.

A Woman of Excellence

His statement to her is not that he is taken primarily with her beauty, although he acknowledges it in saying she could have had a younger man and found a home and security that way. But what he says is, "You are a woman of excellence on the inside. You are the kind of person who has placed yourself [as he said in chapter 2] under the protection of God. You love God and his purposes first. You are somebody who has been renewed on the inside. And it is that about you which captivates me the most. It's your reputation for holiness, the beauty of your character."

Let me step back for a moment and talk about the implications that flow from this. We do young people today no favor when we teach them to act like modern politicians---saying what the polls tell them the electorate wants to hear. Relationships are sometimes built on a similar basis. Effort is expended to find out what a

partner wants you to say, what clothes to wear, what car you should drive, what's fashionable---what you can do to capture the short-term attention of the desired person.

The problem with that, of course, is that fashions, interests, and times change, and you're forever having to try to catch up with expectations. That's why there are so many temporary relationships today, why so many people are not even willing to attempt marriage anymore. A coupling exists for a while and then breaks up, and there's another after that, and another, because they are all centered on discovering short-term attractiveness without building a life that has a foundation.

What Ruth and Boaz decided to do before they ever met each other is to become a woman and man of God. They decided that their first allegiance was to the Lord and his purposes. So when they were attracted to each other and had hopes of spending their lives together, they didn't speak to one another of things that were only temporary. They appreciated what was best in each other, not just what was attractive in the short run. He sees in her a woman of excellence, and she appeals to him as to a man of God.

Now they must see how the matter will turn out. The rest of the night passes, and Boaz is concerned to make sure that her reputation isn't ruined, that no one should misunderstand what has happened. He sends her back before the dawn so no one will recognize her and gives her enough grain to encourage her mother-in-law, who pays attention to those things. Then he goes into the city the next day. I don't know how the degree of nearness of relation was measured, or what relationship Boaz had to the family of Elimelech, but there is someone who is a nearer relative, who should be the *go'el* and the *levir* before him. He must speak to that man, and that conversation will take place at the city gate.

Public Blessing

Let's move on to chapter 4, verse 1:

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."

Remember, Naomi been gone for ten years, and she and Ruth have come back poor, widowed, and without any protection. Presumably somebody else has been harvesting Elimelech's land since the famine had broken. Naomi has no standing to assert her right to property anymore---she's a widow who is elderly and poor. She can't fight for what is hers, and she's going to have to give up her rights to this field. So Boaz says to the near kinsman, "We need to stand up for her because we're relatives, kinsman redeemers. We need to save the property for her." The other man agrees to do it, thinking, "I'll get the property, and I'll provide for Naomi's remaining years. Eventually, I'll get the land for myself." Then Boaz informs him, "But that's not all. Elimelech had a son, and he has also left a widow behind who needs to be provided for. You're going to have to take care of two widows, and in fact, you have the responsibility to marry the young one and have a child who will inherit Mahlon's and Elimelech's name and property." Now the near relative says, "No thanks!" He already has one wife and family, and he doesn't think he can deal with another one. So then we're told Boaz speaks before all the elders who are listening. Verse 9 of chapter 4:

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"

I performed a wedding here yesterday for two delightful young people. During the final song the bride was in tears, facing the congregation, absolutely overcome by what God had done for her. The maid of honor was

also in tears, and so were the men; in fact, there were few dry eyes in the house! There was so much to rejoice about, so much to anticipate for the couple's future.

Public marriage that is honorable, in which a community gets to thank God for what is happening and looks forward to what he is going to do, is what the Lord intended for marriage. He never intended that arrangements be made furtively, with embarrassment, so that actions are taken that no one wants to comment on. Boaz chose to do good to the whole community, to build up the whole nation of Israel, as the people rejoice here-not to spend a night making love at the threshing floor, creating a secret bond, easing the near relative out of the way. He wants everyone to agree with him that God is good and that he has done something wonderful. And the whole city rejoices over the marriage that is to take place.

Naomi's Renewal

I want to make one last comment about Naomi. Naomi is a contrast to Ruth all through this story. She is hurt by her poverty, and widowhood, and when she is hurt, she lets the hurt seep into her heart. She's the kind of person who, when life is hard, grows hard in response. Ruth seems to be able to transcend it all. She is both outwardly and inwardly beautiful. You can almost hear the violins playing as she and the saintly Boaz are wed. A question occurs, "That's great, but how many people are like her? Most people are like Naomi. They take life as they receive it, and their emotional life is bound up with what's happening to them. Is Naomi going to be left behind as these two ride off into the sunset?" No, the end of the story is about Naomi. Verse 13:

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."

When Naomi came back from Moab and first walked into town, all the women welcomed her despite her reluctance ("call me bitter"). These same women now help her see God's hand in the child's birth. This baby is going to become a *go'el*. Eventually he will grow up, his elderly grandmother will live on the property that the family inherited, and he will be the one who will provide for her. The women continue:

"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 his Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

There's a very important line in there: "Your daughter-in-law Ruth has been better to you than seven sons would have been." The whole time that Naomi has been frustrated, angry with God, feeling neglected, crying out in her loneliness thinking of the men in her family she had counted on and lost, there's been a woman standing next to her who has loved her. Ruth has been better to her than seven sons would have been. Ruth never did and never would abandon Naomi. She has cared for her, fed her, and helped her find her way back home. She has never stopped supporting her. Naomi believed God's hand to be against her, but she was never neglected. God's supply of her needs came in a different form than she expected it to. It wasn't a husband, nor yet a son. It was a young woman. The Lord's provision was there the whole time; she just didn't see it.

Naomi gets to care for the baby at the end, and you begin to sense that her heart is changed as well. Nobody gets left out. It isn't just heroic Ruth and noble Boaz who get drawn in. They never stub their toes in the whole story. Their faith in God and love for people are unfailing. But they aren't the only ones who receive God's compassionate care. Naomi, with all her struggles, gets her needs met, too. The Lord doesn't abandon anyone in the story. He brings blessing to the whole city by what he does for this couple.

The final note is the genealogy:

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.

The book of Ruth is about farmers in a small town. This beautiful story of faith in God ends as none in Ruth and Boaz' day would have guessed. David, the greatest king in Israel's history, is going to be born to this family. None of us can see what God is going to do. We don't know how an encouraging conversation, an act of love or courage, care for a needy child, or a timely gift might affect the future. We don't know what's going to happen because of the choices we make. God may take something from our lives and magnify it a thousand times.

And yet, this story doesn't really end with David, does it? Obed bore Jesse, Jesse bore David, and who was David's son? The Son of David is the Messiah! The Lord Jesus came to earth as the great descendent of David. He is the Lord of all. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It's amazing that God has created the cosmos, but the most amazing thing is that he cares about us (heroes and strugglers alike), that he can be trusted with the future only he can see.

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