

THE KINSMAN REDEEMER

by Steve Zeisler

There is probably no news that is more delightful to receive than a birth announcement. Getting a card in the mail saying that a long-awaited child has been born is an occasion for joy. And yet birth announcements are very routine things. They tell you a few standard bits of information, and there is only a small range of possibilities for most of them. The child is either a boy or a girl, usually weighs between five and ten pounds, is probably between eighteen and twenty-two inches long, and was probably born within three weeks of the due date. But the announcement is thrilling nonetheless, because a child whose coming was eagerly anticipated has finally entered the world. The announcement is even more thrilling if the child is the longed-for only child of an entire family, finally given by the Lord after many years.

We're going to read such a birth announcement in the last paragraph of the book of Ruth. This is a long-awaited child, on whom the hopes of an entire family rest. Ruth 4:13-22:

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. And the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi!" So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

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.

Obed's birth so wonderfully transformed the life of Naomi that the women proclaimed that a son was born to her.

Once again we are invited by the text to differentiate between Ruth and Naomi. A son was born to each of them, in effect, although it was Ruth who gave birth to him. Each of these two women had her life changed by the birth of this child. But the differences between the younger, whose faith filled everything about her, and the older, who struggled to trust God, will once again be instructive to us. They were bound together by love, but they experienced life differently.

The book of 2 Peter contains this benediction upon believers: "...But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." It's encouraging to know that we can grow in grace—that we can take steps that lead to maturity, make decisions to form character, become men and women of greater Christ-likeness. Grace offers us an environment for growth. God honors the choices we make, and we become the people we allow God to make us.

That is the story of Ruth's and Boaz's life. They were apprehended by the grace of God early on, and they grew in grace. Verse 13 tells us how Ruth's story turns out, and it's no surprise at all. What happens to her is what we would have expected to happen. The wedding wasn't called off at the last minute because it turned out that she was a tramp, or Boaz a scoundrel, or both melted into a puddle of insecurity and couldn't go forward. The marriage took place, and they became parents. All of that was in line with their growth in grace. Maturity is not an arbitrary stroke of luck that happens to some people. Maturity comes

because of our willingness to learn from and follow the Lord, to "trust and obey," in the words of the old hymn . That's what Ruth's story presents to us, and it's an encouragement.

But that is not the only way that grace takes over a life. Sometimes we are captured by it. Sometimes the grace of God overtakes us, and embraces us despite every effort we make to run from it. As fast as we run, God chases us faster. And as stiff-necked, rebellious, fearful, and unstable as we are, God is greater. So on the one hand we have the good news of the woman who grew in grace, and on the other hand we have the good news of the woman who was captured by grace.

GROWING IN GRACE

Let's first look at verse 13, the one verse devoted to Ruth in this account. It doesn't give us much detail, but we don't need much. Verse 13 makes five short statements, one right after the other: (1) Boaz took Ruth, (2) she became his wife, (3) he went in to her, (4) the Lord enabled her to conceive, and (5) she gave birth to a son.

The first announcement is that Boaz took Ruth. The point of saying that is to make it clear that Ruth was able to leave her past behind. Ruth began this story as an idolater, a daughter of Moab. She proceeded into childless widowhood, an extremely difficult circumstance that landed her in poverty. She was a foreigner. She had a past that was filled with personal struggle; Boaz took her from it. The past didn't dominate the future. She became the honored wife of an honorable man, a daughter of Israel, a progenitor of Messiah.

Second, we are told that Ruth and Boaz were married. I touched on that point last week. The law required that someone in the family acquire the widow, bring her into their home, give her an honored place there, and have a child by her. It was not required that loving marriage take place; the law could have been fulfilled in some sort of external, legal fashion. But in Boaz' and Ruth's case, he loved her, and she became his wife, and she walked through the city on his arm. She was given the highest possible status in his world. He didn't just do the minimum of fulfilling the law, he did the maximum of embracing the woman.

Third, we're told that they were lovers. That is clearly what this phrase "he went in to her" means. It is used that way many times in the Old Testament. And that may be obvious; after all, they were married. But once again, it seems to me, we are told that part of the story because we are supposed to think of them as intimates, as near one another. We're supposed to reflect on the fact that though he was older and she was foreign and there might have been barriers between them, there were none for these two.

We'll skip the fourth of these statements, that the Lord enabled Ruth to conceive, and come back to it in a moment.

Fifth, it says that Ruth bore a child. Now taking a wife, getting married, intimate love-making, and having a child all fit with the progress we've seen in Ruth's and Boaz' life. God prepared them for each other, he brought them together, he taught them to speak to one another, they took risks trusting him, and he honored their risk-taking. It's a wonderful crescendo.

But what we're told in the fourth statement, which we skipped, is that it was God who was doing all these things. They made choices and took actions, and results followed, but the one who was behind all this was Yahweh , the Lord God himself accomplishing his purposes. The use of the name Yahweh, God's personal name, tells us he is the God of personal knowledge of the individuals involved. And supremely, we are to take note that it was God himself who enabled Ruth to conceive. It was not routine; she had been married once and hadn't had a child. Boaz was an older man. That they should be able to conceive was not necessarily to be expected.

I would suggest that there is no such thing as routine, human-engineered conception. God calls into being everyone who ever lives. We live in a day and age in which the science of conception is well-enough known that it is assumed that we're in charge of it. If this story were being reported in modern parlance, it might be said that the doctors, the labs, or test tubes enabled Ruth to conceive, rather than that the Lord enabled her to conceive. But no matter how well we understand the science of conception, the Scriptures say life comes from the Lord. He is the one who calls into being humans who will bear his image and have

spirits that can respond to his Spirit. He is the one before whom we must make decisions about whether children will come into the world.

It's tragic to read the cynical discussion of laws that might permit or prohibit partial-birth abortions. Mostly what's reported is which side has more political clout, and who will be impacted in the next election for having voted this way or that way on such a decision. There's no humility, no broken heart, no bowing of the knee before the Lord, the God who calls into being human life, who loves persons before they draw a breath. Hardly any in the public arena are living their life consciously in the presence of God, wanting to please him, seeking his mind.

But Yahweh is also the Creator-Redeemer. He is the one who, on the cross, allowed for the forgiveness of the sin of abortion. There are people among us, men and women both, who have made decisions to end the life of a child by abortion. If it is true that Yahweh gives life, he forgives on the same basis, because he values his children so much. If we believe that he is at the heart of giving life, we must believe that he is at the heart of redeeming life. His words call all of us Beloved. Our world too much exalts human choosing, which will do terrible things and then will live with the guilt of them.

CAPTURED BY GRACE

We've talked about Ruth's story. But a son was also born to Naomi. What is Naomi's story? As we might expect, Naomi's story requires a little more discussion. With Ruth, what happened was completely in line with everything else that happened to her. But Naomi had been struggling through this entire account, wrestling with God, railing at God, managing God, measuring God, asking for help, and refusing help. Yet a son was born to her as well, and that is great good news.

The women in chapter 4 spoke a word of blessing to Naomi that was the exact counterpart of Naomi's own words in chapter 1. These are the same women in the same town, probably sitting in the same public square. When Naomi came back from Moab she had said to them in 1:20-21, "Do not call me Naomi [Pleasant]; call me Mara [Bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?" And now at the end of the story the same women were there and Naomi was quiet. This is the first time for that, by the way. It's significant that Naomi ends up in this story holding a baby but not saying anything. And the women spoke to Naomi in direct reply to her earlier complaint: "Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today. You said his hand had gone forth against you, but it never did. This child will be a restorer of life to you, and he will be the provider of your future, the sustainer of your old age. This boy will grow up someday and his grandmother will never have to worry about where she will have a home or who will care for her." Obed would sustain her in the future and be a life-restorer in the present.

Is there anything that is more life-restoring than having your grandchild toddling around, laughing and discovering things? You can hardly be depressed with that little one there, that little hand holding yours, that discovery for the first time of colors and shapes and music and all the things that happen to kids. There's nothing like it.

The rays of light were breaking through the darkness that Naomi had surrounded herself with, because she had this baby. But these women added another word to their speech. They said, "Look back at the past. It's not just holding a baby now, it's not just knowing the baby will someday be a man. All of the time you spent being discouraged, calling yourself Bitter, accusing God, concluding that you were empty instead of full, that he had forgotten you, that he had turned against you, do you know who was standing beside you? The woman who is better than seven sons. She didn't just show up at the end. She was there before your sons died, before Elimelech died. She loved you in the midst of it all. She loved you on the way back to Israel from Moab. She gleaned to provide for you. She loved you every day. You wanted men-a son, a husband, a brother, somebody-because you thought life could be secure only if there was a man there to take care of you. Do you know what God did? He gave you a woman, and you couldn't see it. She was better than seven sons would have been. God was there for you the whole time, and you never gave him credit for it." So here was Naomi with the gift of God in her arms, a life-restoring son, a future being provided for her. So she looked back at her past and said, "Yes, God was good to me then too." The

women of the town made her conclude what she had struggled to believe the whole time.

And so Naomi had nothing to say. Instead of complaining, giving advice, manipulating, or calling anyone to account, she sat there with the biggest smile in the world on her face, I imagine, holding that baby. For the first time she let God be good to her.

I recall times when our kids were little, they would resist and fight against my proposals. And I'd be trying to take them for ice cream! They didn't know I was acting to bless them and they fought against their own best interests. I was convinced that if I had to put them under my arm and carry them bodily out to the car to bless them, I would do it.

And Naomi was like that. She was fighting against the Lord's love, but he was big enough that he put her under his arm and make her the recipient of blessing. That's the great news about grace. If in fact the phrase "a son is born to Naomi" was a nickname, as many commentators believe, I'm sure it must have been a source of great joy to Naomi that little Obed spent his youth being Ben-Naomi because the women of Bethlehem insisted that she be reminded every time she saw him of how good God had been to her.

HOW GOD USES OUR OBEDIENT CHOICES

The other reference in this passage, which both the men (verses 11-12, see [Discovery Paper 4546](#)) and the women make, regarded the future of Israel. The men said to Boaz, "May your house expand in Israel's history." The women said, "May this boy's name become famous in Israel." And those prayers were answered in spades. The progeny of Boaz and Ruth included the greatest child of Abraham's line, the most remarkable king in all of Israel's history, David. Their son Obed had a son, and they named him Jesse. When Jesse grew up, another boy was born in Bethlehem, the eighth of Jesse's sons, who went almost unnoticed in that family. Remember the story of how Samuel came looking for a son of Jesse, and the first seven were paraded by him. The eighth one, the forgotten one, was left in the field with the sheep and was fetched only because Samuel insisted. But the little boy David would become one of the most remarkable human beings in history.

But it doesn't end there. This book ends with a genealogy, and you can almost hear a drumbeat in it and a crescendo building: "Now these are the generations of Perez: to Perez was born Hezron, and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed, and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David." And who was the greater son of David who would one day be born in Bethlehem? There is another name on this list. It doesn't end with David, as great a king as he was. David would have a son who would be infinitely greater than he. This genealogy that ends the book is an ascent; it's telling us that there was one coming who hadn't been born yet, the Messiah. And one day there would be one last birth announcement in Bethlehem. In a stable two people, rejected and unknown, would welcome a newborn. That child would be the Savior of the world.

The thing each of us is the least expert about in our own lives is knowing what's important right now. How God will use the things that we're doing, the choices we're making, is completely unknown to us. If you work up the courage to invite someone to the Billy Graham Crusade to hear the gospel preached, it might lead to new life, which might in turn lead to a redeemed family, which then might lead, a generation or two from now, to the world being changed. There are men and women teaching children in Sunday School, telling them Bible stories, praying with them, answering their questions, and they have no way of knowing what God is going to do with those children, and whether in the next generation or the generation after that a remarkable teacher may come into the world because they were faithful today. The same is true when someone offers a cup of cold water in Jesus' name, visits a prisoner, or cares for the poor.

Ninety percent of the things that we now regard as important will be forgotten ten years from now. And yet our trust and obedience, our acts of surrender, our willingness to serve can be shaped by God in the same way he used the choices of this very ordinary couple, Boaz and Ruth, to change the world. We have no way of knowing what the future holds, but we know the one who holds the future. God can use ordinary people who are yielded, grateful, engaged, who step into the good works that he has prepared for us, to accomplish his saving purposes.

So in summary there are two wonderful lessons that come from this last paragraph of the book of Ruth. One is that you can either grow in grace or you can be captured by grace, but grace is bigger than all of us. We have the opportunity to live lives of productivity like Ruth, or we can fight that all our lives, and either way God is still going to love us. And the other lesson is that simple, obedient, yielded, honest, caring people who can't see significance in themselves, their world, or their choices can be picked up by the hand of God to create the future, to change the world.

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