

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 3 February 2014

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. 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. Ruth 1, verses 1 and 2.

Welcome back, friend reader, and let's go at this a bit differently. We're going to walk through the book of Ruth this time. I have a number of reasons for selecting Ruth, but the biggest one is simply that it's where God led me. Now that we're here, I'd like to ask you to look at it through a few different prisms.

First, look at it as a time capsule. This is how people lived centuries ago. In the days of ancient Israel – in the Bronze Age years of the most advanced civilization on earth at that time – this is how people lived. The book of Ruth captures their habits, their social mores, and their common practices. People really did observe the kinsman-redeemer relationship. People really did thresh grain by hand. People really did die of famine. Yet there are still places in our world today where Ruth seems timely, even contemporary.

Once you've done that, look at it as a family history. For some, Ruth is simply a fable, and a saga, and a morality story. It's also history. It's the ancestral history of Jesus Christ, whose earthly ancestors were Ruth and Boaz; you'll meet them in the days to come.

Then, look at it as a love story. It's the story of a family's love. And the love of strangers. And it's the story of a man and woman falling in love. More than that, maybe think of it as a picture of how God selflessly loves us.

Finally, read the book as relevant to today. A four thousand year old morality play may not seem very applicable to us in this oh-so-modern twenty first century. If you stopped reading there, however, you'd be both wrong and short-sighted. Even today, when outsiders come into our fold, aren't we still skeptical? If a person of a different nationality or race marries into our family, don't even the most inclusive and loving of us still feel twitches of hesitancy? Don't we still need to know that a loving God provides for all of us, and that some of the most important lessons He teaches us come from the most unexpected places? All that happened to Ruth and in the book that bears her name.

This is one of my favorite books in the Bible, and I hope and pray that you enjoy reading through it as much as I hope to enjoy unfolding it with you.

Lord, open our eyes to the story of your servant and ancestress Ruth.

Read Ruth 1, verses 1 through 5.

Have you heard the story of Ruth before?

What do you know of ancient Canaan and Israel?

What is God telling you today?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 4 February 2014

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. 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. Ruth 1, verses 1 and 2.

Have you ever moved to a new place? Because they might die, Jesus' ancestral family did and it made all the difference in the world.

The days when Ruth lived were before the time of King David. This was the time in the centuries after God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Back then, Canaan/Israel was a savage place, a land where the conquest of a hostile people by powerful invaders was fresh in the memory of all. And Moab wasn't some ski area in Utah: it was populated by people who hated the Israelites who had come to live there. People actively hated each other over a piece of land; isn't it ironic how that hasn't changed, especially over that same piece of ground?

Elimelek and Naomi were the great great grandparents of King David. They were most likely commoners, shepherds or farmers or people familiar with gleaning their living from a harsh land. And they were starving. The ancestors of the kings of Israel, of the King of Kings Himself, were starving to death. Not unlike the famines in sub-Saharan Africa in our time, there was a famine in Israel and the people who lived there had no food. When you get hungry, you eat; if you're in America, Europe, or developed Asia, food is usually plentiful. Not so in most of the world, though. Most of today's world still lives like Naomi and Elimelek lived. Their next meal may or may not happen, and ditto the dozen meals after it.

What did Naomi and Elimelek do? They moved. Now, I've moved 27 times in my life. Just this past weekend, I moved my mom out of her house into an assisted living facility near my Texas home. It isn't easy to pick up and move, cutting your ties with your home. When Elimelek and Naomi decided to move, they took all they could with them, including their family, and moved to a different country, one that openly hated them, their God, and their way of life. It was no easy decision, but they had no other choice. If they didn't move, they would die.

So they moved to Moab and made their life there. There, they remained faithful to God, but they constantly lived as strangers in a strange land. This is the setting for the story.

Lord, thank You for providing so much. Please provide even more than You do for me for those in hunger and starvation. Teach me how I can help.

Once again, read Ruth 1, verses 1 through 5.

If you've ever moved, how did it feel to live in a place strange to you?

Have you ever been hungry, or starving?

What can you do to help those who are hungry in our world today?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 5 February 2014

Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. Ruth 1, verses 3 through 5.

The Lord's ancestors moved to a new land where the inhabitants didn't love them, and then several of them died. What kind of cruel god allows that to happen? Answer: our God. He tolerates terrible things to occur in our lives that we might draw closer to Him, lean on Him, love Him, and grow in Him. Does not this same tragedy play itself out in our lives as well? Good people die every day and our media fawns, instead, about twerking celebrities, the latest political scandal, and how badly global warming isn't happening. Don't you think that, if there were mass media in Ruth's time, the same thing would have happened? I do.

I know a young man, not even forty, who is suffering from Alzheimer's Disease: a death sentence. I'm sure you've heard about young mothers whose husbands never came home from war; you may even know someone. In Africa, today, thousands of young men will die of disease, starvation, and war, leaving behind young widows. In all of this, God stands by, watching it happen, yet providing comfort to us in the face of a world of murderous sin. We don't have to put up with sin, but we do. We allow it. Through it, we can grow in God.

So it was with Naomi as well. Through no fault of her own, her husband died. We don't know how old she was when this happened, simply that she was a mother. At some later time, her sons grew up and married foreigners. Perhaps this caused grief for Naomi; perhaps it would for you or I because it means a difference in cultures. Perhaps it didn't; it's another thing we don't know.

What we do know is that, in days of old, sons provided for their widowed mothers. There was no Social Security survivor benefit, no Salvation Army. Naomi couldn't rely on extended family, or the members of her congregation, or even on an Israelite patriarch. All she had were her sons, who started families of their own, and this must have been a feeling of security for Naomi...until, that is, her sons both died. Now, without means of support and with new widows of her own, Naomi was left with few good choices on her hands. The men who would provide for her were dead and gone, and Naomi found herself, even more, as a stranger in a strange and unfriendly land.

She had no idea she was never alone, that the Lord would soon provide for her, starting in the most unlikely person.

Jesus, thank You for my family. Thank You for providing people to love me.

Once again, read Ruth 1, verses 1 through 5.

Who provides for you?

Who do you provide for?

Have you ever lost a spouse or a child?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 6 February 2014

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Ruth 1, verses 6 and 7.

Usually, it takes awhile to move. If you remember the beginning of the story, Naomi and Elimelek just moved. I assume it took a little while to prepare, but in truth we don't know that. The story says they simply left. Not so now. Now that she is a widow with widowed daughters-in-law, she prepared to return home, to Bethlehem, from Moab. That takes time. For most people, it takes weeks, maybe even longer, to pack up and get ready to go.

Do you think it was bittersweet? It must have been. Her husband and sons were buried in Moab; it must have been difficult to leave their graves, knowing they would likely never rest together there for eternity. And it was hard work for single women to do anything back in those days; hey, it isn't easy today. Think, then, of a Bronze Age world in which women had no status or power. Then consider them taking a journey, on foot, of a hundred miles or more without protection or escort. It took planning, preparation, and prayer because they knew they would be making the journey all by themselves.

That is, until you consider that they had all the protection and escort they needed in the Lord. The specific reason Naomi had for moving was that she heard how God had provided for his people by sending food.

We are in the same situation.

You mean God will send us food? Perhaps; it's up to Him, not me. You mean God will protect us in times of need? Absolutely. In spirit and in physicality, God will do whatever He deems necessary to protect us where it matters most. Whether we're frozen cold in the latest winter storm or deep in trouble in which we've left no path for exit, God will always protect us and provide for us. True, it may not be what we think it will be, but that doesn't mean it isn't for the best because God's provision, in whatever the form, is always for the best. All of it starts with trusting Him, believing Him, putting faith in Him. Naomi did, and what came next were words worth living for.

Lord, protect and provide for me even in ways I don't always understand.

Read Ruth 1, verses 1-10. This is the whole story of Naomi moving to a strange place, then deciding to move back home.

Who depends on you for their provision?

Have you ever made a move of faith, 'a leap of faith?'

How has God provided for you already today?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 7 February 2014

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." Ruth 1, verses 8-10

'When you love someone, you set them free;' we've each heard that old canard. And when they love you back, amazing things happen.

But I have to tell you the obvious truth: it's rare to find someone who won't desert you. Someone who is truly a 'forever person;' someone who will stay with you no matter what. Four years ago, my wife left me. It wasn't a matter of me setting her free: she left me. She set me free, for our own good. I was a down, dirty dog with the way I had acted, the things I had done. She couldn't take any more of my lies, my dysfunction, and my lack of devotion. So she left. In fact, I helped her pack. I helped her move furniture out, get the kids and herself set up, and then she left. Without compare, it was the worst moment in my life.

Several months later, she came back. Through up's and down's, many days of talking, and simply trying to get to know each other again, she came back. Things had changed; she had changed; I had changed. God had changed us by being there all along. Counseling helped, and so did friends, and so did she, mostly by praying and showing me that God wasn't done with me, or us, yet. It took me awhile to see that she never really had abandoned me. She never wanted to, and had only gone away to be whole, to show that she was worth more than the terrible way I had treated her. That our relationship was worth more and she would do anything she could to prove that, whether we (as a couple) survived together or not.

Why say all this? Because Naomi found people like that in her in-law daughters. Naomi found women who thought she was worth more, worth everything. They loved Naomi and were devoted to her. She must have been an extraordinary person. More than that, they must have been extraordinary women because, when set them free and implored them to go home and be loved, they tried to stay. Pretty soon we find out how that turned out.

Isn't that a picture of what God does for us? We should be imploring Him to stay, yet we drive Him away consistently. And He doesn't leave. Jesus doesn't give up on us. When we beg Him to leave us alone, even when He sometimes stands by silently, He still stands there beside us. And wherever we go, He goes there as well.

Jesus, thank you for never giving up on me.

Read Ruth 10-18.

Have you ever given up on someone? Why?

Has someone ever driven you away?

What do you think of how God sees you?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 10 February 2014

But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!" Ruth 1, verses 11-13.

We like "The Walking Dead." In my house, it's a twisted Sunday night staple. The second half of the fourth season began last night, and my wife and I were watching it, raptly on the edge of our seats as the survivors battled the zombies. As soon as the show ended, I went to my computer to write these words and I found a link.

Naomi is like a zombie. Can you blame her? A few years before, she left everything she knew because she and her family were starving to death. Then her sons married foreigners. Then her husband died. Then her sons died. By this point, Naomi is the poster child for PTSD. Her life has become unreal, a living nightmare of going through the motions while existing in a world of shock.

That is, except not really. Through it all, she remembers her daughters, who are imploring her to let them accompany her back to Israel. Through it, she remembers God. She knows the score: that she's widowed and penniless, and that it seems God has abandoned her. Through it all, she recognizes that she has nothing to offer her daughters, and that they have a future while she thinks her life is over.

She's like the walking dead. A zombie.

Here's your shocker: so am I. So are you. Without God in our lives, we're nothing but living dead in an existence that never ends. Without Him, we live meaningless lives of murderous antipathy towards all that is good and right. We're Naomi, enduring this post traumatic stress terror that doesn't seem to end. When somebody comes along to help us out of our predicament, we react in shock. It can only get worse. Go home...I'm beyond help. I can do this on my own.

I can do this on my own: that's the ultimate zombie fatalism. It might seem easy to survive on your own but there is still safety in numbers. Start with number one: God, then number two, yourself. Accept where you are and where you believe you're being led to go. Then follow God and watch Him line things up, including other followers for your journey. I'm betting you'll find life is more than just some zombie walk.

Lord, I believe in Your leadership. Lead me today so I might do Your will where I am and where You're taking me.

Read Ruth 10-18.

Do you sometimes feel like a zombie in your own life?

Do you ever feel like you're going through the motions?

Has anyone ever implored you to let them stay in your life?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 12 February 2014

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." 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. Ruth 1, verses 14-16.

Verse 16: remember it. Even if you aren't a follower of Jesus, remember these words: "where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

Nowhere in any kind of human literature will you ever find a more beautiful statement on selflessness, determination, and the human spirit. Then remember that none of it was possible without God. Nothing is.

Here was Naomi, despondent and destitute. She had nothing to offer her daughter-in-law except loneliness and privation. Instead of self-preservation, Ruth's reply is to respond in selfless love. "I love you and you need me. Your God will provide for both of us. I trust you. If you love your home then I will love your home because I love you."

I'll confess something: I don't know why the people who love me actually do. It's not self-deprecation or even a lack of self-esteem for me to say that; not self-loathing, or false humility. I simply don't know why. I don't deserve it. Yes, I'm special in my own ways, in the ways God made me special. We all are. But I've caused real hurt. I sometimes really don't know why my wife sticks with me because she could have anyone she wants, yet she wants me. She chooses me.

It makes all the difference in the world. She chose me and I choose her. Someone chose you. Ruth chose Naomi; Orpah chose her family. God chose all of them. God – Jesus – chooses you and me today, just like He did them. Reflecting that choice, Ruth then confessed to Naomi the ultimate expression of self-sacrifice and selfless devotion. "You're a stranger in my land, yet let God guide us both so that I may be a stranger in your land. Just let me abide with you, reside with you, and love you." Unconditionally.

The only way that is possible is for the Spirit of the Lord to live in someone's heart. The only way it works is when God Himself indwells our hearts and makes it so. We're strangers in this land of hostility, you know. Or is it that we're strangers in the land of God's grace? Maybe it's a little bit of both. Yet wherever you go, let me go with you. Wherever we go, let God guide us together. Always.

Lord of love, Your love makes all the difference in the world. Guide me forever in Your ways.

Read Ruth 14-16 again.

When was the last time you loved unselfishly?

Have you ever been Naomi? Or Orpah? Or Ruth?

What is Jesus telling you in this story today?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 13 February 2014

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. Ruth 1, verse 17.

Here the deal is sealed. In Naomi's greatest time of need, God reaches out through Ruth to show her selfless love. Then He seals the deal. "Naomi, I love you and want to be with you always, even when I die. God please curse me forever if this is not true." She, family but stranger all at once, said she would rather die than be with anyone else but Naomi.

That blows me away.

When was the last time I seriously considered words like Ruth's? God considers them every day. In the worst of my sins and in the moments when I am most depraved, He still considers me worth dying for...because He did. Wherever I go, He wants to be with me. Wherever I go, He wants me to want Him to be there always. Whatever I do in life, Jesus wants me to know that He died for me so that those million worries wouldn't have to worry me anymore. Jesus wants me – and you – to know that in every moment, He was more than willing to be murdered so that the Holy Lord God Almighty would see Him in me when the time comes for my life to be reckoned with. Jesus wants me to know that EVERY moment is our time of reckoning and that, in them all, He wants to be with me until I die because He wants me to be with Him forever.

It totally blows me away. Paul said that, every now and then, we would meet good men who would be willing to sacrifice for us, maybe even die, for us. Naomi met such a person. In Ruth she found the one who would love her unconditionally. She didn't know this same woman would bear the family that would, directly, one day birth the Savior who would do much more than Ruth could.

Yesterday morning, I woke up early. Between the dream I can't remember now, the cat sleeping on my feet, and just being done sleeping, I woke up early. When I wake up that early, it's easy to let a million thoughts stream through my too-active-too-early mind. Worries about work, about traveling in-laws getting in safely, about grandchild, money, getting a new light bulb for my car, how will I get all my work done today, losing weight; worldly stuff, none of it really urgent but all on my mind all at once. Every day the worries of this world crowd me in and try to drown out the simple, amazing fact of Jesus' sacrifice. How refreshing it is, then, to read of other people who emulate what Jesus did without ever having known Him. It blows me away.

Lord, thank You for your sacrifice. Your grace is everything, and I praise only You for it.

Read Ruth 14-16 again.

Have you ever met someone who would die for you?

Who would you die for?

What do Ruth's words make you think?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 14 February 2014

When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. Ruth 1, verse 18.

I don't know about you, but it's tough for me to let someone help me. At home, I plan my days so full that there is no room to breathe and I want help, but I'm too proud (and dumb) to ask. Then I get exasperated if nobody offers. When I am carrying too many boxes, people ask "can I help" and I reply, "I've got it." In reality, I could use a hand. If I'm having a rough time, I usually answer "I'm ok" when people ask how I'm doing because I'm too vain to give them the answer that maybe I need a shoulder to lean on.

Dave, face the music.

Naomi might have found it hard as well. Whether it was love, obligation, grief, independence, or pride that drove her to do it, she urged her daughters-in-law to leave her be (basically to die). Ruth had other thoughts, though: thoughts motivated by love. Ruth convinced Naomi that she was in earnest and that she would accompany her. Then Naomi consented.

Did Naomi give in to the inevitable? Did she see the writing on the wall? Did she begin to grasp the love of God that was rooted in Ruth? Perhaps it was a bit of all those things; someday, in heaven, let's ask her. One thing became clear through it: God taught Naomi a lesson. He wants us to let others help us. He wants this because it's one of the ways He lets His love shine through.

Think about it. All of the miracles that Jesus performed: weren't they to help others? In doing things for others – feeding them, healing them, demonstrating His power for them – wasn't Jesus acting out to help them in ways they couldn't help themselves? What better illustration of how God wants to help us?

What's more, in letting others help us, we help ourselves AND them through God's way. To admit need is to be humble; one can't say "help me" without admitting that one can't do it all alone. In doing that, we open ourselves to God and to others. Additionally, when we help others, we share Jesus' agape love. Sure, sometimes we do things to enforce or fulfill obligations. But isn't it true that, most times, even when we do something as small as holding the door for others, we do so without expectation of anything in return? That's selfless. That's agape. That's Jesus at work in us.

That's where Naomi found herself, tacitly admitting that she needed help and that her loved one wanted to provide it. When that happened, the help – in God's providence – really went into motion.

Lord, please help me. I need help only You can give. And I want to help others today. Make me Your instrument to do for others what You want done.

Read Ruth 1, 18-22.

How can you help someone today?

What help do you need?

What's keeping you from asking for it?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 17 February 2014

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?" "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 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." Ruth 1, verses 19-22.

Confession: when I read these verses, my first reaction is, "Naomi, get a grip." How quickly we forget. After all, she didn't go away full: she left Bethlehem starving. The Lord did indeed allow bitterness in her life, but He provided a way home for her AND the unexpected love of a daughter. The Lord did indeed bring misfortune into her life, but He did so because He was painting a bigger picture than just the scene in which Naomi found herself.

Now is a good time to look in the mirror. Friend Reader, look there and see Naomi. I did. It's unavoidable. You and I, we often find ourselves weeping at our own pity party just like Naomi did. We think the world is ending around us; perhaps it is. Yet in the middle of every problem, other things are in motion; other work is being done. It becomes so easy for us to forget that we play checkers while the Lord plays chess. We live our lives one move at a time while God already has the end of the game in motion.

Yes, misfortune happens to us as well. Let's also be fair and admit that, sometimes, God deliberately brings it into our lives. I like to think that God only allows bad things to happen to us, but sometimes He causes them, too. Usually, I can't see the difference when I'm in the middle of my crises, but it's there. The really tough part comes in realizing that God's overall plan is bigger than our single misfortunes. That He's working through them. That is NOT to say that those misfortunes don't matter because they do. They matter because we matter, especially to God.

But what God teaches us through them is the same thing He was teaching Naomi. "Rely on me." "Come to me for all your rest." "I am always here with you." "My grace is sufficient for you." My heart goes out to Naomi for the bitterness that was indeed part of her life, yet at the same time I also think she needs to get a grip, stop, and back up a few steps. Look around and see the bigger picture of what might just be happening in front of the eyes that she refuses to see with. So it is with us.

God, forgive me when I'm short-sighted and don't see how You are providing for me and teaching me. Praise be to You.

Read Ruth 1, 18-22.

What misfortune plagues you?

How is God working through that?

Do you need to get a grip?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 19 February 2014

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. Ruth 1, verse 22.

When we return home, we rarely do so empty-handed. Yes, there are many times when folks move into back into our lives, or our homes, seemingly with nothing in hand. Have you ever had one of your children move out, only to move back into your house later? My wife and I have; it has happened several times in fact. On the surface, you could say the person who returns comes back with less than they left, but that simply wouldn't be true. Even if the only thing they return with is memories and knowledge, they return with more than they left.

That's an important concept to remember for several reasons. Most obviously, it was true with Naomi. Yes, she returned home without her husband and sons, but she did have Ruth. As we are learning, that means she returned with a treasure. Yet the larger picture, I believe, is that we always return with God. It is God who provides us with experience, knowledge, wisdom, mistakes, memories, hopes, wishes, challenges, and all that we return with even when we return without physical possessions.

In one sense, we can never 'go home.' The first time you return to your birth-home, or the place from where you departed when you started life on your own, you realize that things have changed while you're gone. That's the nature of things, and it's a blessing of living in a world of God's motion. Yet in the larger sense, wherever we are, when we journey with Jesus, we are always home. When we return to where we started, we're bringing back the richness of all He has taught us in the intervening time. And Him.

This week, I spent a day with my father-in-law at my parents' home in Oklahoma. We were getting things out of the house because my mom has moved into assisted living; we're readying the house for sale. As I was walking through the place, in-between asking myself "how am I ever going to get this ready" I realized again that, once we leave, we can never really go home because home is wherever we make it. Home is wherever Jesus is because that's where love is. The longer I live, the more I see that home is anywhere we share that love, especially when it is with family. That God provides for us at the proper time wherever we are and wherever we go. In the verses to come, this is a truism that Naomi is about to learn.

Jesus of home, You are my home. Wherever You are is where I am at home. Thank you for providing me with family, a place to live, and memories. Guide us now in these days up ahead.

Read Ruth 1, the whole chapter one last time.

How did you feel the first time you returned home after moving out?

Have you ever returned home feeling bitter?

What do you bring with you when you go back home?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 20 February 2014

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. Ruth 2, verse 1

February 20 is an important day in my family. My son's girlfriend, Kelli, turns 18 today. My Aunt Sally, Dad's sister, turns 78 today, and she's one of the neatest folks you'll ever meet. And today is also my mother's birthday.

I think it's fitting on this day that the verse which hit my calendar was verse 1 of Ruth chapter 2. In it, we learn about Naomi's family. Elimelek, Naomi's deceased husband, had a relative named Boaz, and Boaz was a man of standing. He had done something, likely agricultural, to achieve wealth and position in Israel.

All three of the women who I mentioned above are wise and worldly, but (naturally) it's my mom I'd like to talk about. Today is her 85th birthday. She's not just the woman who gave me life: she's a living link to a world that no longer exists. Like Naomi, she is a widow and living in a new place. Grace Terry is also a woman of standing, and she'd probably be the first to tell you that. Born when Calvin Coolidge was still president, she has seen World War II, lived in seven states as well as both Germany and Japan, and raised two successful children (as well as presiding beside six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren). She has always insisted on being treated as an intelligent equal. Long before it was common, she earned bachelors and masters degrees, and succeeded outside the home.

I look at Mom's life, however, and consider that her greatest achievement is knowing Jesus. Both of my parents were diligent church-goers yet it has only been in the last 15 years or so that she has dug deeper into what it means to believe in Christ. What's more, she's done it in plain view of us all. Mom's morals and tastes seem to be leftover from that bygone era, and she perseveres because of them. Indeed, she lives by showing that the reason for those morals is because of Jesus.

Now in advanced age, like Naomi, Mom is learning to rely on family. We are the ones who will disassemble the room-choking collections with which filled every inch of her house. And we are also the ones who get to regularly include her now in family events, and call her to ask "do you want to go out for ice cream," and we get to drop by for visits. It's work to be in a family; for Naomi it was hard to learn to rely on others. It was hard for my mom to do the same, yet Jesus is glorified because of it. Happy birthday to all the women I'm celebrating here today, but especially to my Mom.

Lord, bless these good people and grant them love, health, and prosperity in their next year just begun

Read Ruth 2.

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 21 February 2014

And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek. Ruth 2, verses 2 and 3.

Jesus doesn't do coincidences. How many times in your life have things worked out so good that it almost seemed as if someone designed it that way? And have you ever had a time when everything seemed to just fall into place? Most of us have. Yes, prior planning prevents poor performance, and much of what we do is the result of hard work and good choices we made before. But even the most worldly and agnostic of us must honestly admit that there are some times when things just go well as if someone intended for it to be that way.

It's because Someone did. I like to think of it as "the Jesus Factor."

That's how it was for Ruth. She and Naomi needed food. They needed it so badly that she, a 'hostile' foreigner, was willing to walk behind the harvesters, picking up the scraps and pieces of barley or grain that fell off their harvest. They were willing to eat what was trash, left behind. I don't know about you, but I've never been THAT hungry, willing to eat out of the bad food that nobody else wanted. There are parts of the world where this is common practice, and there are many, many parts of the world where picking through the garbage for food is commonplace; perhaps there are more of those than there are places where mankind is well-fed.

But that's the predicament in which Ruth and Naomi found themselves. When that happened, their lives were multiplied by that Jesus Factor. Out of selflessness, Ruth volunteered to glean the fields and, by 'chance,' she found herself in the field of Naomi's wealthy kinsman, Boaz. At any time in history, that could be dangerous for a single young woman, and it must have been even more so during the savage time in which Ruth lived. Yet volunteer she did. She trusted Naomi's God, her new God, to take care of her and provide someone 'in whose eyes I find favor.'

She trusted. God provided. God provided by multiplying her life by His Jesus Factor and placing her in a place where she could find both food and favor. Very soon we'll see that she found all she could have ever hoped for. That's no coincidence.

Lord, you are lord over all the world. Your work is no coincidence and Your hand in my life is not by chance.

Read Ruth 2.

Have you ever had a time when things simply fell into place?

Do you ever feel as if your good days are 'touched by an angel?'

What is your opinion about coincidences?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 3 March 2014

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The Lord be with you!" "The Lord bless you!" they answered. Ruth 2, verse 4.

That's quite a greeting. To me, it sounds a little old fashioned. If you hang out around Christian churches, especially those that are 'old school,' on Easter morning it's customary to say to each other, "He is risen." To which you might well get the response, "He is risen indeed." It's a greeting, like Boaz's, that is antiquated, dating back to ancient days when the Apostles first, shall we say, Christened it. Old fashioned.

Shame on you, Dave.

You see, the Lord never goes out of fashion. There is no fashion for God: He is the fashion even as He exists outside of it. To be candid, I'm a little envious of Boaz. He's comfortable with God. We aren't always that way. I'll take any kind of greeting that's given in friendship, but I'd really like it a lot if someone started a conversation by saying, "the Lord be with you." Maybe I should take it up sometime.

Maybe I should take it up because maybe we could use a little 'old fashioned' these days. Old fashioned ethics and work are still required when you need to get a job done. For example, over the weekend, I procrastinated in finishing an overdue task. I have been pulled in other directions for most of 2014. As a result, the task went unfinished until this weekend, when it had to be finished. With the help of my wife, we got it done, and even then she was left with the long task of making and binding copies. But the point is this: when you hit a deadline, it still takes old fashioned work to get it done.

New recipes are prepared with the old fashioned things called "cooking," "technique," and "ingredients." New airplanes are flown using the old fashioned (and naturally unchangeable) idea of 'lift.' Despite thinking to the contrary, our economy still functions according to old fashioned economic laws. And worship at most churches still flows according to the old fashioned order of service, traditions, customs, and creeds established over the last two thousand years. Old fashioned works.

Just ask Matthew McConaughey. Last night, when he accepted his Academy Award for Best Actor, the very first thing he did onstage was do the old fashioned thing and thank God for what God had given him. That's a pretty gutsy thing to do in front of Hollywood elite, who seem to fashion themselves as not needing God. But old fashioned was still best.

So maybe Boaz's greeting isn't so old fashioned after all. Maybe in this so-called modern age we could do with some old-fashioned kindness that invites the Lord into every conversation we have.

The Lord be with you today.

Thank You Lord for being with us. Be with us every time we speak today.

Read Ruth 2.

Have you ever greeted someone like Boaz did?

Do you think Biblical traditions are old fashioned?

Do you think modern traditions are better or worse?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 4 March 2014

Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, "Who does that young woman belong to?" The overseer replied, "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter." So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." Ruth 2, verses 5 through 9.

Word gets around in a small town. If you think about Bethlehem at the time of Jesus, it was a small town, not far from Jerusalem but not exactly a suburb either (especially the way we think about suburbs today). Now consider that same small town, hundreds of years before, even smaller. That's where we find Ruth and Boaz.

Word had obviously spread to Boaz that his cousin was back in town, and that a guest had returned with her. You could say that Boaz was interested, and (from the research I did on the verses) some might even say that Boaz's desire to have Ruth glean in his fields was the same desire that any man would have

But if we looked at it that way, I think we'd lose the meaning. You see, Ruth didn't just show up in Boaz's field: she was led there. She was led there because she followed and served Naomi, who had been led to Ruth's homeland of Moab. It wasn't a random meeting: it was arranged by God Himself, sort of like divine matchmaking. Boaz wasn't some horny fourth cousin: he was genuinely interested in the young woman and extended to her more than just common courtesy.

Sitting in 'the West,' it's difficult to discern Bronze Age Israelite customs without help; that's a given. Yet I read the verses and read something intensely romantic about them. Ruth is a humble but strong and willing servant, lovely and foreign yet faithful. Boaz is faithful as well, modeling God for this stranger in his strange land. Boaz provides food, water, honor, vocation and protection...he does it on God's behalf. What's more, think of our world today, thousands of years after Ruth and Boaz. Doesn't God still provide for us in the same way? Doesn't he still provide those same things Boaz did? Doesn't God still match-make our circumstances? You know the answer.

No coincidence, indeed, because word gets around in a small town. Sometimes, they're even good words.

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for these beautiful words and the story of a young man and woman.

Read Ruth 2.

What do you picture when you read these verses?

Do you think Boaz was acting in his own interest or in God's?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 5 March 2014

At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?" Ruth 2, verse 10.

If you have read this blog for awhile, you'll know I'm an American. I'm proud of my country, and thankful for the undeserved blessing of having been born American. It is my belief that America is the greatest human force for good in history, and that representative republican (little r) democracy, coupled with free markets and limited government, is the greatest earthly force for the advancement of liberty, economy, and the good of the individual. I believe God has uniquely blessed the United States and that we, as Americans, are in a unique position to help others in ways nobody else can. And we do.

If you aren't an American, that may just mean diddly squat to you. Don't believe me? Put yourself in Ruth's position. Walk around in her shoes awhile and you might just see how little things have changed in the three thousand years between her time and now.

Ruth is a foreigner. Back then, being a foreigner in a strange land could be dangerous, especially for a woman. If that wasn't the case, why would Boaz have told her that his workers wouldn't harm her? Yes, it could be downright dangerous. Yet Ruth demonstrates great courage because she is serving Naomi and because she is hungry. More than either of these things, though, Ruth has found Naomi's God and is following His lead. Because of this, she is moved to be humble towards Boaz.

Tell me: what would your reaction be towards someone like Ruth today? Would you look down on her, maybe think she's just another illegal alien living here on someone else's dime? Would you or I be, at least, suspicious of her, or wary around her? She may only be one woman, but would you be welcoming and open to her, or would you help her with one open hand while the other is fisted behind your back?

Tell me, too: is that how we react to foreigners in the USA today? Let's be honest: in our lives, the answer is yes. It was the reaction of most of the men of Bethlehem. Thank God for Boaz, who steps in and treats Ruth with kindness and respect. Accordingly, she is humble to him. She isn't defiant or even frightened: she's confidently submissive. Ruth realizes that the kindness of this stranger is a gift from God, and that by being polite and submissive to him, she is being submissive to God.

It's a question for all nations of the world, but I'm not focusing on all nations at the moment. I'm focused on my own. America, are we submissive to God? Answering 'no' means we need a gut check.

I submit to You, Lord.

Read Ruth 2.

Are you submissive to God?

Are you suspicious of people not like you?

Are you wary of foreigners, and how would you feel in their homes?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 6 March 2014

Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants." Ruth 2, verses 11-13.

I'm going to admit something no manly man should publicly admit: I'm a sucker for romance. Chick flicks? Don't mind them. Happy endings? I get teared up. "Here's lookin at you, kid?" Gets me every time. I've written several novels where romance is part of the story, and I'm in love with the idea of being in love.

So I'll make my un-macho confession here, saying that I'm a sucker for the dance Ruth and Boaz are doing. They're in the getting-to-know-you stage of falling in love. It's not infatuation: it's "I really want to know you better." They are gliding around each other, treating each other with curious deference but also caring honor. Taylor Swift couldn't even sing this. I don't think either of them could honestly say at this point that they're in love, but there's something there that could be the spark of wanting to know the other person more and maybe falling in love with them if things go just right, you know.

Ok, I'll go back and read that and admit it sounds like it could have been written by a 16 year old girl with a crush. But think about it: it's a beautiful exchange that they've been having, something to be desired, something to model when it happens to you. Here's the kicker, macho men (and women): we ALL want to fall in love. Each of us really, really, really, really, really and, yes, really wants to fall in love. And we want love in our hearts to guide everything we do. Even the hardest among us wants this.

Want to know an even bigger kicker? God really, really, really, really, really and, yes, really wants us to fall in love with Him. It's part of the reason for the story of Ruth and Boaz. They are a picture of God wooing us, providing for us, caring for us, and falling in love with us. He is so crazy in love with you and me each that He willingly volunteered to die a gruesome death so we would never be separated from Him. He did it to share perfect love. Maybe God is a sucker for romance too.

I love a good love story, Lord, and I love this one You wove in these two people's lives. Thank You for loving them, and me.

Read Ruth 2.

Do you love romance?

Have you ever really fallen in love with someone?

What are your thoughts about Ruth and Boaz?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 7 March 2014

At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar." When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Let her gather among the sheaves and don't reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her." So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. Ruth 2, verses 14-18.

Love preserves dignity. Love cherishes dignity. Love enhances, grows, celebrates, encourages, and fosters dignity. Do we?

I really enjoy different kinds of music. Not so much today's music, though some of that is good as well. So I have a challenge for you. After you're done reading this, go out and listen to a few songs on popular radio. The genre doesn't matter: listen for what the lyrics say. When you're done, ask yourself this: were the lyrics dignified?

Now, this isn't the old "my music is better than your music" thing that parents argue with their kids; the parents are usually right. Undignified music is as old as the Marriage of Figaro, maybe older. But have we sunken even lower, even in some of the tamer music in today's pop culture? Miley came in like a wrecking ball; what did she wreck? You know.

What would Boaz think? He was interested in Ruth, impressed with her, and favorable to her. If he wasn't in love, he was on his way there. What was his reaction? It wasn't some hip hop mess of libidinous savagery. It wasn't some country bumpkin lovin down by the river. It wasn't rock star bad boy metal crashing. It wasn't even a melodious classical sonnet

Boaz treated Ruth with dignity. Maybe he even sang to her. Most popular lyrics are poetic in nature, or at least they try to be. The more you read the book of Ruth, the more it sounds like a story poem to me. It's rhythmic in nature, almost musical in the way it romantically flows. Woven into that rhythm is the subtle dignity with which Boaz courted Ruth. He did nothing to shame her, or to make her feel obliged, or to make her feel uncomfortable.

Tell me, even when God is harsh with us, doesn't God still treat us in ways that preserve our dignity? Seems to me that everyone on the radio could learn something from Boaz.

Lord, I praise You for the dignified way in which you treat us.

Read Ruth 2.

In your own relationship, do you treat your partner with dignity?

Do you expect dignity in return?

What have you done to merit that?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 11 March 2014

Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said. "The Lord bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers." Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'" Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else's field you might be harmed." So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law. Ruth 2, verses 19-23.

Sometimes I feel so different, so distant, from people like Ruth.

Are you as amazed as I am at Ruth's trust? She who is 'the foreigner' seems almost naively trusting in the land, culture, and habits of Naomi's hometown. But it isn't naïvete: it's faith. She has faith in Naomi's God to provide for her, and in Naomi because she loves her. Let's get real here: I don't trust like Ruth does, and I suppose that means I don't always have her kind of faith. It's hard for me to think that God so blindly provides even as He does. And it's even harder for me to trust other people the way Ruth does.

Three cheers, too, for Naomi. Some people buckle when the pressure is on. Not Naomi. She says "one of OUR guardian-redeemers." She wasn't speaking in third person: she was talking about herself and Ruth as family. She trusted her family and her God. Shame on us when we don't stand by those we love: praise for Naomi for not caving.

Finally, what is the 'kinsman-redeemer' thing all about? It's an antiquated Canaanite cultural practice that really isn't too antiquated after all. A little internet research said the kinsman (guardian) redeemer was "a male relative who, according to various laws of the Pentateuch, had the privilege or responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who was in trouble, danger, or in need." Tell me: do we still practice that even in our so-called modern world? Even today, most families still feel responsibility for those who fall on hard times. Extended families all over the world do an especially fine job of providing for those in need, and faith organizations do much more to reach out to the needy than any government could even begin to try.

Maybe we aren't so different after all.

Lord, help my unbelief, help me to trust, to have faith in You and others, and to fulfill my responsibilities to others.

Read Ruth 2.

For whom are you responsible?

Do you have any kinsman-redeemers in your family?

How deep is your faith?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 12 March 2014

One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for." Ruth 3, verse 1.

I must make a confession: I'm harboring some resentment. Right now, I'm in the middle of cleaning out my parents' house. This isn't unusual; millions of people do it every year. Dad is gone and Mom is now living in an assisted living home. Their house sits full of possessions that someone has to get rid of. Being 'that someone' has logically fallen to me because there's really nobody else who can at the moment.

That's not the part I resent. What I resent is that there is so much of it and so little time. Mom is a collector, and has spent 70 years collecting all kinds of stuff, some of it valuable and some of it not. All of it needs to be sorted and either given away or trashed. I resent having, for years, implored my mom to rid herself of the clutter. On the other end of those years, the clutter is still here so someone has to unload all of it. It's a big order, and I find myself talking more with God and others about it, venting my frustrations and hoping for guidance.

Notice how Naomi didn't do any of that?

She didn't fart around whining about all the work she had to do. She didn't fuss about details that didn't matter. She didn't build up resentment over what she had to do, or about her responsibilities, or about how it was so unreasonable to expect one person to do all this stuff. Naomi simply got down to business, namely the business of survival.

Naomi realized that her she needed to find a new home for Ruth. Ruth was her daughter in law and Naomi saw how it wasn't fitting for a beautiful young single woman to be constrained by an unwed future with a middle aged widow who would likely not remarry. Ruth could have a family of her own; Ruth could have children, and a home, and a husband, and a life beyond what Naomi could provide.

More than that, Naomi reflected her duty to God, understanding how she must entrust Ruth's future to Him AND that she,

I need to focus on that. We're working to put the house up for sale by May, and to make that happen there is much work. I've already spent days getting rid of trash and there are more days of that ahead. It's going to take lots of faith, but I know that God provides what I'll need to get the work done. Now I need to do a better job expressing that faith and letting go of the resentment that doesn't really matter.

Father, forgive my failures and accept my apology. I believe in You and that You will provide all I need.

Read Ruth 2.

Are you holding on to any resentment?

What kinds of things are clouding your heart?

What can you let go of to grow your faith?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 13 March 2014

One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do." "I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. Ruth 3, verses 1-6.

Poor Boaz doesn't know what's coming. Let's be honest: only a man could say that; I'm a man, and I did. Admit it: from a superficial glance (meaning my comment is also somewhat superficial) it looks like Naomi and Ruth are conspiring to put a whammy on poor Boaz. They're going to seduce him, wait on him, and make him feel good because they're husband hunting.

Um, not really. Some context please. Keep in mind that they're going on faith, that Ruth and Naomi are living out their faith and trusting God to provide a way for them. They were in desperate straits and needed help, and there weren't SNAP payments or Medicaid and they couldn't save a bunch of money by switching to Geico. It was Bronze Age Judea and they needed help.

So Naomi urged Ruth to turn to family, to go to Boaz and signal her interest, to confide in him that she desired to become his wife if he would be willing to have her. Ruth put on her best clothes, cleaned and made herself as pretty as she could, and followed Naomi's directions. To us, the customs seem odd, antiquated, out of place. Lie down on the ground where the men have been separating grain, stay at a distance, uncover Boaz's feet? Strange. Yet not really. It's almost poetic, if you read the story again. Ruth made herself submissive in a public yet dignified and intimate way. She uncovered Boaz's feet and lay there so that he would notice her when he woke up.

Sure, our courting rituals are different today. But I'm not so old now to forget how it matters or how wonderful it can be when young couples dress up, be humble to each other, and signify their intentions. Relationships are so much more than cheap flirting or sex. Today's hook-up culture is demeaning and undignified. How beautiful would it be, instead, to court someone with the intention of submitting, humbling, and devoting yourself to them the way Ruth and Boaz did.

Lord, thank You for the beauty of this story, for the courtship of couples falling in love.

Read Ruth 3.

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 14 March 2014

When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet! “Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.” Ruth 3, verses 7 – 9.

So much to unpack here.

Don't be mistaken: it wasn't a party on the threshing floor. 'Eating and drinking' does not equate a Snoop Dogg kind of party. It would have been mostly men working there, mostly young men, farmers or farmers' sons. After a hard day of beating grain from stalks, then collecting, sifting, sorting, and bagging it, they would have been dirty and tired; some things about farm work never change. Anyway, they ate a farmer's dinner and had a farmer's drink of beer or wine. But it wasn't a party. It was a typical night.

Spread the garment over me; what a beautiful picture of being covered in God's grace. On that threshing floor, those same young men were, well, young men and both virile and familiar with taking pleasures from women as they saw fit. Yet Ruth goes confidently, faithfully but humbly to Boaz and asks for both his protection and his devotion in this simple symbol. When we pray to God even today, don't we ask for the same thing? And He gives it. Just as Ruth understood Boaz would honor and protect her, we can always know that God will honor and protect us, even when He does things we don't expect or even want.

Finally, let's talk 'servant.' It wasn't that Ruth was wanting to become Boaz's slave, and it wasn't as if she was signaling her intention to wait on him constantly. She was submitting herself to another person in humility. She, who had already lost one husband, known privation, and lived in sad desperation, found hope in humble submission. Ruth wasn't signing up to become Boaz's slave: she was submitting herself to her husband's love. In my opinion, no word in Scripture is more misunderstood than "submit." It's not slavery or compulsion: it's an act of giving and devotion. That's what Ruth did. Boaz understood this and didn't press his advantage. As we'll soon see, he did the right thing.

So should we.

Father, thank you for being our guardian-redeemer

Read Ruth 3.

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 17 March 2014

"The Lord bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. Ruth 3, verse 10.

Fred Phelps. Do you know the name? You may not know his name but, if you live in the US, you know of his church: Westboro Baptist Church. They're the people who rabidly protest gays and soldier funerals (because soldiers defend a government that allows gays to have rights). If you've ever heard of these people, 'crazy' or 'insensitive' or 'unGodly' might be good words to describe their approach, and maybe them, and maybe even Fred Phelps himself. Phelps is dying; media reports say he's near death. Before you respond further, let's talk a little Ruth and Boaz.

In verse 10, Boaz is talking with Ruth after she signaled her intentions to him that she wished to become his wife. Both of them were acting in faith, acting upon the innermost wishes of their hearts in response to very real needs and choices in their lives (hers to live, his to prosper). How does this segue with a dying, ranting minister famous for spewing anything but the Gospel?

Both need forgiveness. Both can get forgiveness ONLY from God, from God the Son incarnate as Jesus Christ.

"Bless you," said Boaz to the woman who looked at him in choosing kindness. "God hates fags," spewed Reverend Phelps and his band of protesting parishioners. Rumor has it that, when the Freedom Riders prevented them from protesting a soldier's funeral in McAlester, OK (my mom's old hometown), all the tires of the WBC vehicles were slashed. Rumor has it further that they had to go many miles to find an open tire store during the middle of a busy work day.

Despite the love story they were writing, the real truth is that both Ruth and Boaz were sinners living in a fallen world. Her predicament, and his curious quandary on how to respond to it, are evidence of that. The Westboro people act out their own sins in so callously inflicting emotional pain, they say, to spread Jesus' hard gospel truths. The folks who slashed their tires are sinners too.

I've said it before here: you and me: we're Westboro people as well. We're sinners. Without Jesus, Ruth and Boaz were damned. Without Jesus, Fred Phelps is damned. Without Jesus, you and I and everyone we know are damned, cut off from God's eternal saving love forever. It's not for punishment's sake: it's to preserve the holiness of that beautiful love.

One way God imparts that love to us is through forgiveness. Forgiveness given at Calvary for Ruth, who showed her love in choosing Boaz who didn't need it. Forgiveness for anyone who does wrong, even me, you, or Fred Phelps. I pray he realizes that before it's too late.

Lord, forgive me because I have sinned against you. Only You can forgive.

Read Ruth 3.

Why are your sins better than Fred Phelps'?

Have you taken your burdens to Jesus lately?

Who do you need to forgive?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 18 March 2014

And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. Ruth 3, verse 11.

It doesn't take much to destroy a reputation. Ask me; I know. I've built, destroyed, and re-built my reputation several times over. Not everyone knows me well, and those who do sometimes wish they didn't. I work hard these days to live out my faith, but I don't always live it well, especially if you get me talking about politics. That hasn't always been the case because the cliché is true: a good reputation takes a long time to build while it takes only a few minutes to tear it down.

My grandfather (himself a man who had strong good and bad sides) used to say that you should always tell the truth because then you never have to worry about what you told someone. Perhaps he spoke from experience. He worked hard all his life to build a family and a business, yet in some of his weaker moments, he dove head-first into tearing that down. It took him many years to recover from that; in some cases he never did, and he was still one of the greatest men I've ever known. Yet he strived to be honest, to be no-nonsense while being just himself. That isn't easy.

He was a far cry from Ruth. Since her arrival in Judea, she had worked hard to be known as a follower of God. Ruth's reputation was solid. Her words and actions aligned; she lived out her faith. That isn't an easy thing to do, especially when you're dealing with abject poverty as Ruth was. She had stood by Naomi; she had worked hard. Ruth had lived honorably and had done nothing to bring shame on herself, Naomi, or Naomi's family. Word gets around in a small town, even if it's a good word. Boaz knew about Ruth, and he understood her to be a woman of good, Godly character. A decision to marry is hardly a 'no brainer,' but it's made much easier when you know your prospective partner to be the kind of person you can admire.

Like Ruth.

Not so much me. Or my grandfather. Or most people, maybe even you at times. Admit it: we have good points, but we aren't Ruth. We usually work hard to develop character, and we struggle with the things that could derail it. I can't picture Ruth struggling with feelings of hatred, or temptations to steal, or to lie, or sleep around or shoot heroin. But she was a sinner too, and she had her own pet temptations that we don't know about. She found strength to stand in her new-found God. So can we.

Lord, I thank and praise You for giving me another day on Planet Earth to build a reputation for following You.

Read Ruth 3.

What are some kinks in your reputation?

Would people have a hard or easy time believing you are a good follower of Christ?

Who do you need to forgive?

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 19 March 2014

Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. Ruth 3, verse 12.

Selflessness. Boaz was selfless. One of the things I like most about the Book of Ruth is how the two main participants, Ruth and Boaz, are selfless, and in this verse we get to see an example of that. Boaz is attracted to Ruth, and has said he wants to marry her. If you've fallen in love and ever wanted to spend the rest of your life with someone who you just couldn't get out of your mind, then you know the feeling; you remember where Boaz is in this verse.

And he's willing to give her away to do the right thing. The code of the Israelites was that the closest family kinsman redeemer always had first say in matters such as this. In Naomi's family, there was someone closer. Boaz knows this and, despite his growing feelings for Ruth, he upholds the code, the honor, his faith to God through his faith in this system, by telling her he might have to let her go. That's selflessness.

We need more of that in our lives. Today, we aren't going to pound on my character or yours; I think we get it. We aren't Jesus. Instead, what are some ways you and I could become more selfless where we are? There are plenty of ways we can show that we put others, put God, before ourselves. What are some of them that you could do today? You and I might not have to give up a potential spouse, or maybe your way is something just as serious. That's between you and God.

How can we learn from Boaz's words to Ruth, the way he was willing to selflessly give up something he had grown to love? Tell me – better yet, tell Jesus – what are some ways we can become more selfless for Christ?

Lord, please show me where I can become more selfless, act more for You and less for myself.

Read Ruth 3.

Daily Proverbial, from Ruth, 21 March 2014

“Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.” Ruth 3, verses 12-13.

Obligations. Is it just me or does our society today sometimes seem obsessed with finding ways to skirt our obligations? It makes me long for simpler times. Just the other day we talked about how Boaz' words (in verse 12) showed selflessness. Now he adds to that quality a good dose of showing that he's willing to fulfill his obligations. Boaz is willing to accept his culture's guardian-redeemer norm, and he does so in the context of staying between the white lines of his faith walk. He's not just going through the motions: he's willingly submitting to traditions that reaffirm his relationship with God as well as his duties to his fellow man.

But notice that fulfilling one's obligation comes with several catches. One is renewing a vow. "As surely as the LORD lives" isn't a phrase you turn on a whim. It's a pretty strong vow, and it's a phrase you hear in various places throughout the Old Testament when those who invoked it wanted to really make a point of affirming their vows. I'm pretty sure I've never said those words in reaffirming my word to people at work, or in my personal words even as I have renewed my vows. Perhaps I should.

Another catch is accepting choices. Boaz demonstrates he's willing to go along with choices other people make that affect him. He doesn't whine about it, or try to deflect responsibility. He accepts what is, and replies to Ruth based on that. "I'm falling for you, but you may not be mine to fall for." It's a Godly thing, and a kindness to her to deal so honestly with her heart.

Finally, Boaz brings us back to faith. Boaz has faith in this system. He conforms his behavior to the kinsman-redeemer tradition, and lives within the norms of his society. He has faith that these norms are the best way to live in giving God His due. He lives out that faith in what he says and does.

All this to fulfill obligations. Boaz had obligations. So do you and I. Every day I'm reminded of my obligations just by looking at my Outlook calendar. Or my wedding ring. Or family pictures, the clothes I wear, and the list of friends on my Facebook page. These are obligations of the law and obligations of the heart, which means they are the obligations God Himself sets before me. I don't HAVE TO abide by them. Like Boaz, I get to...just like you.

Lord, thank You for my obligations, choices, and faith.

Read Ruth 3.

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 24 March 2014.

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor." Ruth 3, verse 14.

Yesterday at church, our worship leader, Anthony, led a confession time based on the Fourth Commandment. "Honor your father and mother." One point he made was that honoring our parents is a way of honoring God, which is part of the reason why the commandment says what it says. What of honor?

I've read a lot of books about the Confederacy and why the South started, fought, and lost the Civil War. One of the canards easily dispensed across most books I've read was that Southern fighters fought for and with honor. They fought for anything but honor. Honor isn't Crips and Bloods shooting each other because of perceived slights (or murders). Honor isn't murdering your daughter because she kisses a non-Muslim boy. Honor isn't something the Don enforces through his consigliere, and honor definitely isn't between thieves.

If that's what it isn't, then what is honor?

Webster's defines honor (in the context we're discussing) as "high regard or respect; good reputation; something done or given as a token of respect." If you read the story of Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor, you learn a lot about honor with which Webster might agree. Boaz says and does things to protect Ruth's honor (and chastity as a young widow). Boaz also allows the ruse of protecting Ruth's identity and presence on the floor so that he might honor her.

So that he might honor her. So that Boaz might give her respect by ensuring nobody would insinuate Ruth had gone to meet him with impure intentions. So that Ruth's integrity would be preserved in all cases. So that she would know he respected her and might fall in love with him. So that love might increase.

So that God might be praised.

When we truly honor someone, whether it be the person we want to marry or the man and woman who raised us, we are giving honor and praise to the God who is Lord of all. That's why the commandment says what it says. It's why Boaz acted the way he did. It's how we should honor as well.

Lord, help me to honor You in everything I do. Remind and teach me to honor You in how I honor others.

Read Ruth 3.

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 25 March 2014

He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town. Ruth 3, verse 15.

Do we try to be generous?

Do you remember "ER" the TV show? My wife's favorite character was the doctor portrayed by Anthony Edwards; you know 'Goose' from "Top Gun." On ER, he died of cancer. The episode in which he died was filmed in Hawaii, where he took his wife and children to live out his final days in the place where he had been happiest. Shortly before he died, his character was talking with his daughter, trying to put her at ease with the inevitable. One of the lines from his final words stuck with me: "be generous with your love."

I know that's just a tearjerker line from a TV show, that it's only make believe. But the question isn't made up at all. Are we generous with our love? Please understand, I'm not here to guilt you out, or give you one of those corny Jesus-loves-you 'but you know' gotcha moments (though Jesus really does love you). I am here to ask you if we're being generous with our love, and if we really try.

Boaz was generous with Ruth, giving her much more food than her gesture of kindness merited. Yes, he was falling in love with her, and yes God led him to do this. Don't lose sight of that because it matters. Yet so does the generosity of his act. He didn't have to give as much as he did, but he gave it anyway. It was kind for Boaz to give Ruth any grain, but he gave her six times what he could have, knowing it would be food she and Naomi could put to good use.

God the Father, Son, and Spirit doesn't have to give to us generously every day, but He gives anyway. If you don't believe me, or if times really are hard for you, then please take a breath and say a silent prayer thanking God just for getting you through yesterday. To complete a day, even if it was a tough one, is a victory for you and a generous gift from Jesus.

And He gives that generous gift to dumbasses like me. And you. And even to Anthony Edwards and his dying character from ER. Spoiler alert: the guy died on the show, and his daughter turned out ok, and the show completed its final run even without Anthony Edwards or George Clooney. That's a gift from God as well.

Father, thank You so much for all Your generosity, for all the gifts You give us, for giving life everlasting.

Read Ruth 3.

Are you generous?

Does your heart jump to giving or taking?

When was the last time you really talked with God about this?

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 31 March 2014

When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?" Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'" Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today." Ruth 3, verses 16-18

"For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today." Have you considered that another way of saying this is "there's no time like the present." In fact, that statement is true of every time, of every day because the only day we are guaranteed is today. We've already lived through yesterday and tomorrow is not guaranteed. But we are here and now, right now. You and I live in the present, in today. So does God.

Boaz understood this, and so did Naomi. Ruth is learning it. She's learning it because her mother in law advised her that her prospective suitor lives in the present and won't let the sun set on his task at hand. Live in the present and be patient.

That's good advice for us as well. Boaz and Ruth are dancing a romantic dance, and they have signaled their mutual intent to marry. They have spoken about obligation, honor, faith, commitment and tradition. Now Ruth is being implored to be patient and trust God (by trusting Boaz). When was the last time someone implored you to be patient knowing that a resolution was actually close at hand?

Heck, I think my wife implores me every day to be patient about something. She's usually right, too. And she's usually right when the solution to whatever is vexing me is right around the corner. Sometimes, in the throes of impatience, it's difficult to keep calm and carry on.

We need to live proactively in today, to not count on tomorrow but, instead, take advantage of where God has us today. Where He has each of us is exactly where He intends us to be. He intends for us to use the gifts He gives us to the betterment of His kingdom, which in whatever way means the betterment of ourselves.

And then He intends for us, asks us, desires for us to trust Him and be patient. To do our best, then to do our best to let Him take the wheel. To let things play out as they will.

Lord, thank You for the challenges of today, for letting me live in today, and for modeling patience for me.

Read Ruth 3.

Do you struggle with being patient?

Do you struggle with letting God take control?

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 1 April 2014

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. Ruth 4, verse 1.

I'm thinking of writing a management book. In truth, I think management and self-help books are dreadfully boring. Usually I don't read them, preferring to rely on the Word, experience, mentoring from good coaches, and advice from friends in how to deal with various situations. So it may surprise you when I say that I'm thinking of writing a self-help book on good management principles. This book would be centered on management principles found in the Bible. One of them is contained in verse 1 of Ruth 4: Interaction.

If you want to manage an issue, interact. Don't just communicate. Don't just become informed. Don't just be friendly. Interact. Actively interact in a Godly manner. Get down in the dirt, get real, and get busy.

That's what Boaz did. He's seeking out information on the status of his prospective bride. As was the custom of his people, he wanted to preserve Ruth's dignity (and his own) by deferring to another potential suitor if, in fact, that suitor was interested in Ruth. Boaz didn't get on Facebook to dish about the other guy. He didn't hang out at Starbucks looking like some west coast coffee house stereotype. And he didn't play hard to get, or get bent out of shape that he had to put himself out in public.

Boaz interacted. He put himself into a situation and then participated in it; he put forth effort to do something he wouldn't otherwise have done, something unusual dictated by unusual circumstances. Boaz acted rather than reacted, and he did so to avoid conflict. What's more, he sought out the other man in friendship. There were matters to be discussed; serious matters of the future and peoples' welfare. Boaz got involved, got his information, by getting interactive. In the verses to come, we get to see how well he succeeded.

And that's why I'm thinking of writing a book about people like Boaz and how Biblical principles and practices are good management advice.

Jesus, show me where You want me to interact today. Put me in front of people, and in situations, and wherever You want me to be so that I might be Your ambassador.

Read Ruth 4.

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 2 April 2014

Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. 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. 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. 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." Ruth 4, verses 2-5.

Spell things out. Don't operate from a hidden agenda. Where possible, lay your cards on the table. Yes, these are more management clichés. They're effective.

This week, my project in Minnesota got dealt a harsh blow. In fact, all ICD10 projects in the country were dealt a blow. Some smart guy in Congress attached an amendment to the annual SGR bill that funds the Medicare gap. That amendment delayed ICD10 for at least a year, much to the happiness of the snarky Congressman, his lobbyist friends, and the lobbyist's sponsoring group. Much to your dismay, it means that your already expensive health insurance and healthcare costs will increase more so that insurance companies and hospitals can pass this write-off cost on to you as soon as possible. Those cards are on the table now for you to read.

Just like the things I've spent the last few days telling my team. Something is going to change on our project but we don't know what because our sponsors haven't had sufficient time to digest this change and decide on an appropriate response. What our team leadership is doing is communicating as plainly and honestly. We can't make commitments or promises we aren't authorized to make; we can't guarantee things when we don't know what even the simple ramifications of the change will be. Yet people are (rightfully) worried about their jobs, and their worries are our responsibility, myself and the other project leaders.

The best thing we can do is what Boaz did: confront the issues, take them to the people affected, and spell things out plainly and simply. There isn't some 'I've got a secret' game to win, and while knowledge may be power, that power is only granted to those who must not abuse it. The best way to alleviate peoples' worries is to tell them the score and listen.

Lord, help me be Your instrument to help others face tough situations. Put the words in my heart – and on my lips – then teach me to listen and help this way too.

Read Ruth 4.

What message is God giving you today?

What can you do to help others understand that message?

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 3 April 2014.

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, verse 6.

Common sense is reflected all throughout the Bible. Sure, there are the stories of miracles, and of things that, in the Western world, are difficult to understand. These are dazzling things, yet the more you learn about God the more you learn that these are par for the course. Of course they are miracles: He's God. It makes sense that He gives His people the common ability to perceive and judge things that are clear just by themselves because He makes Himself fully known through all He is and does.

We don't know the name of the guardian-redeemer with whom Boaz met; we don't need to know his name. In fact, we don't know much about either Boaz or this other man except that they met according to custom at the gate in Bethlehem. And they interacted with common sense.

The other man understood what Boaz was offering. Not just property: property and a wife. Perhaps he was already married; perhaps he already had arrangements made for the disposition of his inheritance. Perhaps there was another reason. We don't know. What we do know is that the two men acted in common sense. If one couldn't redeem the customary obligation, he said so. He said so and acted on it. The other, Boaz, would then be free to act as he would. No agenda; easy to understand; action and not procrastination. It was plain for all to see; common sense.

Do you act in such simple, no-nonsense ways? I sometimes find it hard to. It makes me wonder what I, as a so-called modern man, am doing so wrong that a man born thousands of years ago could live simpler than me and act with more common sense. So little of what I read in the news today smacks of common sense; so little of the news I share contains common sense. I don't act in ways that are plainly simple; I judge far too much and too often.

Jesus said "let your yes be yes and your no be no." THAT is common sense. The guardian redeemer who spoke with Boaz understood this. "I'd like to help you Boaz but I can't." No hemming and hawing, or endless Facebook debates, or pointing out a thousand reasons why. Yes and no. God you Are and I am not. Simple. Common sense.

Lord thank You for living and speaking in common sense terms. Teach me how to better serve You in common sense ways.

Read Ruth 4.

How can you make your actions more common sense?

Do you value common sense?

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 7 April 2014

(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.) So the guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." And he removed his sandal. Ruth 4, verses 7-8.

Strange customs seem to be a hindrance in understanding the Bible. Let's be honest: that's just the way it is. There's this whole thing about taking off a sandal and exchanging it as a legal transaction. Or there's that thing about marching around Jericho 7 times and blowing horns so the walls would fall down. There are the Urim and Thummim, which were stones (dice, or possibly stones marked with the Hebrew symbols for 'yes' and 'no') used by priests to make some decisions (divining God's will). We can talk about funeral customs, wedding traditions, the meaning of rank, and status, and even using the words "I am" and how, even today, Jews don't write the word "God" but, instead write "G-d" because it would be blasphemy to write God's name (or even a representation of it).

Strange indeed.

Yet how many of our customs seem strange? The other day, I was watching "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." Do you remember the movie? In it, aliens make contact with humans. They communicate via simple musical tones and hand gestures, the point of them being to convey the message 'we want to be friends.' Do those gestures seem strange? They shouldn't. There are areas of the world where even a handshake is not understood even though it's a common greeting in the West. What would aliens think about today's customs?

Saying "OK" isn't a universal thing. People even 20 years ago (and many senior citizens today) don't communicate via heads-down text the way so many young people do today; if you go to Azerbaijan, I'm sure people communicate differently. Two thousand years from now, perhaps people will look back on 2014 and, in piecing together how we lived, talk about customs like taking off your hat for the national anthem, putting your hand over your heart when you say the Pledge of Allegiance, holding the door for a lady, or our other quirky customs and traditions to help explain how we lived.

What's the point? The point is that it isn't always easy to understand what the Bible is saying. The best way to interpret Scripture is to use other parts of Scripture first and foremost. If you don't understand something, seek out an answer first somewhere else in the Bible. I don't know where the unique Hebrew custom with the sandal came from, but I do know that my concordance points me to several other verses to explain it. Using God's word to explain itself is the surest way to seeking understanding of things that, on the surface, may seem difficult to discern.

Lord, help me to understand.

Read Ruth 4.

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 8 April 2014

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. 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!" Ruth 4, verses 9-10.

Let's not get all wrapped around the axle about words that don't easily translate or old customs that don't fit in our so-called modern world. Our definition of marriage is changing. The idea of someone 'acquiring' someone else seems antiquated to us. In fact, in the context of today's verses, where Ruth is lumped into all the other property Boaz acquires from the estate of Naomi's husband and sons, the use of the word seems almost savage.

Like I said, don't get wrapped around the axle. First, notice the subtleties of language. Boaz buys physical property, but 'acquires' Ruth as his wife. It's one thing to buy but a completely different thing to somehow acquire. And acquisition does not necessarily mean a derogatory thing. It certainly doesn't in the context of these verses.

Things and possessions are inanimate. They have no life; they are just objects, things, property, and, in the large scheme of things, worthless; yes, I said worthless. Sure, they can carry great monetary and sentimental value for now. You and I each own things that are valuable, or meaningful. My house is full of things I have bought or been given; heirlooms, family treasures, and things I enjoy and would like to share with others. They don't mean a thing. When I die, someone else will acquire or buy them. Just this week, in fact, I'm in Oklahoma, readying my mom's house for a large garage sale that will sell most of her remaining possessions. It's just stuff. It means something, but it doesn't mean everything. If it did, then please tell me when was the last time you heard of, saw, or touched any bit of property that Boaz purchased from Elimelek's estate? Yeah, I thought so.

People mean something, though. People were created to reflect God's image, to share Him and His amazing love. We pass on memories, stories, and that divine love as a way to keep alive the people who came before us. Boaz didn't marry a piece of land or a table: he married Ruth. How we interact with each other matters. How we interact with each other should mirror our relationship with God. Boaz knew this, and he knew that, by marrying Ruth, he would preserve both his name AND the name of her first husband (and his family) longer than just his own years. In this way, when he 'acquired' Ruth, he also acquired a future for her past.

Lord, help me to better reflect You in how I live.

Read Ruth 4.

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 9 April 2014

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. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." Ruth 4, verses 11-12.

Be careful what you wish for...you just might get...the Messiah.

If you've jumped ahead in our story, you know that Boaz married Ruth, and Ruth bore him children. One of those children had a son, who had a son, who had another son named David. David became the greatest king Israel ever had. His descendants also continued for centuries all the way down to Jesus of Nazareth, the forever King of Kings.

How ironic is it that the Jews, who even today deny the Messiah who is Jesus Christ, blessed Jesus' ancestor that He might be born. I suppose you could be skeptical and say, "that's not the case at all. They were simply doing a customary thing. They were just blessing Boaz on his marriage." True, but, you know there's more. The Jews of way back then had no way of knowing that King David would become one of Boaz's descendants...or that Jesus would as well. And God did it anyway.

A lesson for us is, then, is to remember our blessings. To realize that Jesus is hard at work in EVERYTHING we do, in every minute, in ways we don't always – or maybe ever – recognize. I think of the analogy of a ripple in a pond. A pebble drops in the water causing ripples that, eventually, roll all across a much larger body. So it is with how God is working in our lives.

Last night, I was looking at old pictures, some of which I don't think I've ever seen before. They were pictures of when my parents graduated from college, and ancient (I mean that) family photos, and pictures of people who have been gone for decades. At points in time long ago, someone took photos of them; many years later, they blessed me.

Consider, then, that there are 7 billion of us on the third rock at this moment in time, and many billions more who came before us. All we say and do affects others, and in all we think, say, and do, Jesus is hard at work in all 7 billion lives, touching each other, laying the ground for future blessings. Some of those will be tough, and some will be outrageously loving. Just like the Jews of Boaz's day, how we bless others now may just be the catalyst through which the God-man Jesus blesses so many others in the time to come.

Lord, thank you for Your blessings, Your actions, in our lives here. Let them be a blessing to others.

Read Ruth 4.

How does what you do bless others you know right now?

What are some ways you see Jesus working in your life?

How can you help that along?

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 10 April 2014

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. Ruth 4, verse 13.

This verse is pro-life. Now, I'm not going to harangue you with my views on abortion, conception, pre-marital sex, venereal disease, or anything like that; if you'd like to talk about those, call or email me. No, I'm going to talk about life as a whole, about living.

Boaz married Ruth and they made love, just like almost every other couple does. They did it as a reflection of love, as a reflection of blessings, as a reflection of their happiness as a couple, for the fun, and as a reflection of God. God in sex?

Think about it. God gives us this extraordinary thing. Biologically, like all species, it's how we maintain the population. But, more than that, sex is intimate. It isn't animal: it's spiritual. It is as intimate as two people can be, sharing their most vulnerable emotions and personal behaviors. You wouldn't get naked with just anyone; not even Hugh Hefner would do that (although I wonder). Sex is too good to simply share arbitrarily.

I know teens who are graduating high school and are still virgins. But I also know folks who use sex as a weapon. And I know people who could count their sex partners only with the help of an adding machine. When I was younger, I put sex on a pedestal, thinking it was the most important thing in a relationship. Chalk that up to being a horny young man...but not really. Instead, chalk it up to being spiritually immature (as well as physically awkward).

Boaz and Ruth weren't. Ruth, at least, had been married before. They understood physical compatibility, passion, and the bond between a naked man and woman who shed their inhibitions. They understood these things because they understood being joined by God in something wonderful. God made marriage to be a personal, public representation of His own personality, a way we could experience Him communally but also in an intensely personal way.

God made sex to be about life, about living. Rocks don't have sex. Air and water and light don't have sex. But living things do; people do. God made the reproductive act to be a shared blessing of both biological primacy and personal interactive pleasure. It's no mistake that two people making love can produce children. Jesus made this gift for people to draw closer to Him by being as close to each other as they can be. He gave sex to us for us to enjoy when we are in union not just with our bodies, but also in union with Him in our spirit.

Lord, Your gift of sex is wonderful. Thank You and encourage me to use and enjoy this gift only in ways to bring glory to You.

Read Ruth 4.

How do you value sex?

When you're with someone, have you ever prayed "God bless our lovemaking?"

Have you ever considered God is involved when you're having sex?

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 15 April 2014

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!" Ruth 4, verse 14.

More praise. Like the men who Boaz met with when he announced he would marry Ruth, the women of Bethlehem chime in with their say. It makes sense that there should be praise to God for blessings, for how He provides for those in need, and for the increase of His glory that manifests itself in the simple transactions of our lives.

But notice who the women were discussing. It's not Ruth. In fact, there are only a few more verses in the book, but none of them mention Ruth even though the book itself is named for her. The women praise and thank God for Naomi's provider. They are giving praise to God for what Boaz did and how it affected Naomi. I find that odd.

Now, I suppose it's natural that the women of Bethlehem would speak of Naomi first. After all, it was Naomi who grew up, lived, and married there. It was Naomi who returned home with a stranger in her family. People are clannish. We stick first by the people with whom we're most familiar. If you go to a party, if you're mulling around church, if you're in school, we tend to stick to our cliques, talk with familiar faces. I'm not reading this verse as an endorsement of cliques. The habit is simply the truth.

But this verse hit me when I was in a somewhat sensitive mood. I'm glad the women praise God any time and for anything. I simply find it strange that they wouldn't mention Ruth because, without Ruth, the kinsman-redeemer relationship put into effect here might have turned out quite differently. Why didn't they mention Ruth?

In the end, I guess it really doesn't matter. What really does matter most is praising God, being ready for Him now.

That is timely to remember since it is Holy Week, and since it is the week of the Blood Moon. I've read all kinds of prognostications about how the world is ending, and how the moon is a sign of Christ's second coming. Now, a few hours after the eclipse of the blood red moon (a sign, by the way, that was forecast for after, not before, the tribulations that herald Christ's return), I wonder how many people will still continue to praise God. How many will praise Him unconditionally that He is still OUR guardian-redeemer, and that we can't forecast when He will return to end the angst and sin that blanket the third rock in blood red sin? The women of Naomi's day would have taken the eclipse to be a sign. Perhaps it should be a sign for us, too, to simply praise God in all blessings, and be ready to meet Him whenever He arrives.

Lord, I praise You.

Read Ruth 4.

Are you clannish?

What cliques are you a part of?

Do you praise God 'just because' or just because of certain blessings?

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 16 April 2014

"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." Ruth 4, verse 15.

"Daughter-in-law, who loves you:" that's quite an admission for the women of Bethlehem. We really have to give them props, some serious kudos. You see, I think it takes a big heart to see someone the way the women see Ruth. Just the verse before, they were giving praise to God for the blessings He brought to Naomi; not the stranger: their friend. Here, they do a roundabout acknowledgement that the blessing is given through Ruth. Ruth isn't mentioned by name. They only see her as a blessing to Naomi, given by God.

Ham handed? Not really. Think about it. It would have taken great courage to open one's heart to a stranger, but that's who Ruth initially was. She was accepted in Bethlehem because she was with Naomi. After a time there, she won the heart of (perhaps) the town's most eligible bachelor, something that even the local women hadn't been able to do. In how she conducted herself, Ruth also won the admiration of the women who now complimented her and that isn't easy to do, especially in a small town. Especially in a place where you're raised to be wary of, to mistrust, the foreigners around you. Especially since the folks of that area still do.

Do you think we're any different? I'm reading a Duck Dynasty book, the one written by Willie and Korie Robertson. Did you know that, years ago, they adopted a bi-racial child? That they consider an Asian extension student who stayed with them to be another adopted child? It takes some very real courage to see past the differences we all have and simply love another person for who they are: as a blessing from God and someone who needs love and care. That really takes guts in the deep South. Recently, the Robertson's have been, in pop culture and the media, popular punching bags as much for Phil Robertson's comments as for their displays of Christian faith. Detractors say it's all staged for the TV, yet this is the family who doesn't care what color or race you are.

Tell me: when did you or I last open up our hearts and homes to strangers who are different from us but just might be a blessing?

Maybe the women of Bethlehem would have accepted the Robertson's more readily than some of the people in America. "Daughter-in-law, who loves you;" may we each be so blessed to meet people who see us in that light.

Lord help me to love people more the way You love them.

Read Ruth 4.

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 17 April 2014

Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Ruth 4, verses 16 and 17.

I'm a grandfather now. You've heard me briefly mention my grandson, who was born January 23 of this year: Thomas Nolan who, in my humble opinion, is the cutest grand-baby ever. My wife and I are finding that it's more fun to be a grandparent than it was to be a parent. There are many reasons for that, I'm sure, but it simply is what it is.

Thomas is my son. Now my daughter and son-in-law may take issue with that statement, but he's my grandSON. It's a blood relationship and it's an emotional bond. Being a generation removed from him doesn't mean he is less of a son to me. He is my direct descendant. We are family, just like Sister Sledge sang. And we are more than that.

Get ready to be blown away.

You are my son. You are my daughter. You are my brother, sister, father and mother. You and I, we are family as well. Words like "I believe" and "I do" are enough to bind us together in our Father. He created us. We alienated ourselves from Him. He lived, died, and rose to adopt us. And we say "I believe" to accept the bond He freely extends outward to us. We are adopted back into His family and we are family together.

When Ruth married Boaz, she was already family to Naomi. When she married Boaz, that bond deepened even more. And when she bore her son, the bond became even stronger. It was no longer just vows that bound them (as if those vows were not enough). Instead, blood tied them together. What God brought together with words of affirmation was solidified in an act of love that bore God's miracle of life. Family.

Jesus's family, his physical lineage stretched back to the baby Naomi held in her arms, yet Jesus' blood makes us family. We are adopted into Jesus' family simply by His resurrected love. That makes Ruth, Obed, Boaz and Naomi our family as well. Obed grew up to be King David's grandfather, and King David was the forebear of the King of Kings Himself. Next time you got to church, take a look around you. The people seated there aren't just your friends. They are family. Sunday morning is a family reunion. This coming Sunday will be an extra special one.

It'll be special, in part, because it's Thomas Nolan's first Easter. Next year, he will be able to go to church and clap along, to hunt chocolate eggs, and to talk up at dinner. He's my family. You are too.

Jesus, thank You for family. Thank You for ALL my family, even those I don't yet know.

Read Ruth 4

Practical Proverbial, from Ruth, 18 April 2014. Good Friday

This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David. Ruth 4, verses 18 through 22.

Here ends our journey through the book of Ruth. It's fitting we should end this journey here, today, on Good Friday, talking about genealogy. The Bible spends quite a few pages listing peoples' genealogies, both to identify legitimacy and to prove Godly origin. Knowing that, it's a good thing to remember where Jesus came from.

He came from forever. True, a few people can claim a biological ties to the king of Israel and the King of Kings, but that's nothing special; really, it isn't. Where are those people today? Not even Dan Brown can tell you. It's for our edification that God included Jesus' family tree in His instruction manual for life. Maybe it helps us see Jesus as both man and God. But the people listed in Scripture aren't His only family. We are His family too because He adopted us. He is our ancestor, creator, brother, father, and descendant; wrap your noggin around that concept for awhile and let me know if you can figure it out. I'm still trying.

But all my trying inevitably leads me back to the only conclusion possible (or desirable, even). Jesus is God from forever. He Is the I AM. He didn't descend, evolve, or simply be born in ways we can fully comprehend. We get the human part, but the rest of it is the mystery of the ages and the only mystery that matters. He proved it to Ruth. What happened today proves it forever.

The writer of Ruth recorded the lineage of Obed from Perez, Obed's ancestor, down to King David, Obed's grandson. He recorded the story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz as a poetic way of describing God's relationship with us. That relationship is based on more than just family bloodlines. It is based on undeserved love, unquestioning loyalty, and unending beauty. The writer gave us this story forever because God's love is forever...because God, the creator yet physical descendant of Ruth and Obed and David, is forever.

This story, how Jesus loves us and is loyal to us even when all else fails, also goes on forever. While one book of the Bible ends, others remain. All of them are Jesus' gift to us in how He reveals Himself to us. He revealed Himself to a poor girl from Moab, and to a destitute family from Judea, and, in time, to us all.

Jesus, thank You for Your story of Ruth. Thank You for revealing Yourself to us, and for remaining for us forever.

Read the story of Good Friday found in the four Gospels, then read the Easter story found just after.