



I have never been one to read romance novels until my mom wrote one. My mother actually published four Christian romance novels in her writing career and she made me read each one of them with a red pencil in hand. She wanted each of us to critique them before she sent them to her publisher. So I actually learned a lot about romance novels more than I ever wanted to know. Can you imagine how hard it is to read through a romance scene when you know it was written by your mother? In one of her books she based the lead guy's character on me. It took years of therapy to get over that one! Her first novel was written about a relationship that formed in pretty ordinary circumstances, around a guy who ran a construction company and a girl he worked with. I actually understand what it takes to write a good romance novel. It takes a heroine, someone you are rooting for. The heroine needs to be someone you can identify with and actually like. It needs strong secondary characters that are complex, or more than one dimensional.

You need a hero, not someone who is perfect, but someone you admire and want to be like or at least get to know. A romance novel needs a good story. It needs tragedy, relational tension, courtship, a moral foundation of right from wrong, some kind of redemption, some kind of defying the odds. A Christian romance novel needs faith, hope and love, and a picture of God who is working in circumstances. And you know what? In my pathetic opinion, because I have read a lot of romance novels, and sadly my opinion matters because I have read a lot of them, the book of Ruth is the greatest romance story ever written.

When Benjamin Franklin was the Ambassador to France, he occasionally attended the Infidels Club, a group that spent most of its time searching for and reading literary masterpieces. On one occasion Franklin read the book of Ruth to the club, but changed the names in it so it would not be recognized as a book of the Bible. When he finished, the listeners were unanimous in their praise. They said it was one of the most beautiful short stories that they had ever heard, and demanded that he tell them where he had run across such a remarkable work of art. He loved telling them that it came from the Bible! And, because this love story is in the Bible, it's more than just a romance novel. Romans 15:4 says, *"For everything that was written in the past was written to reach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."* Paul is referring here to the Old Testament, including the book of Ruth. That means we'll be taught, we'll be more able to endure tough times, and we'll be encouraged as we learn together. In the process, we'll grow in hope.

*"In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his*

*wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab"* (Ruth 1:1). The man and his wife were named Elimelech and Naomi. Now just imagine you're living happily in your hometown of Bethlehem, got a good job, two beautiful sons, and then famine, or economic depression hits. Your husband loses his job, you survive for a while by cutting back. It continues to get worse, you sell things, anything valuable to buy food. You're worried. What is going to happen to you, your kids? So in a desperate attempt to get a better life, you move to a foreign country that's strange and different. You move to Moab. Why? Because there is food, there are jobs.

You remember Moab, the land to the east beyond the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. The Bible reveals to us that these people were bad, they did unspeakable things in their pagan worship. But there was food in Moab. So the man and his wife and two sons made the 90-mile journey and moved to Moab. *"Now Elimelech, 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"* (verses 3-5).

So here's Naomi. She has lost everything that she loves. Over 10 years ago she lost her husband and two sons. She finds herself in a foreign land, an aging widow with two Moabite daughters-in-law, and no means to support herself or them. With each loss a little of Naomi dies. With each loss, more hope dies. In her darkness she laments, "God, this isn't how it supposed to happen. We are not supposed to outlive our children. What am I going to do?" She is trying to survive emotionally, but there is also economic struggle. There is no Social Security or life insurance. In those days without a family name that comes through marriage or a son, there was no one to take care of her. Couldn't she remarry? She saw herself too old. Who would want her? She had nothing.

In the midst of her heartbrokenness, Naomi heard that the famine was over in Judah so she made plans to return home alone. She told her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab. She urged them, "You're young, go to your parents' homes, may the Lord show you kindness." Notice she hadn't lost all faith. The Hebrew word for kindness is *hesed*. It refers to God's loyal and committed love to his people. Then she wept and kissed them good-bye. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye and returned to her parent's home. But Ruth clung to her and spoke some of the most beautiful words ever recorded in literature. *"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. Where you die I will die, and there I will*

*be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me!"* (verses 16-17).

Something in this young woman just explodes with commitment. She clings to this *hesed* love of God. Mother, I am going with you. Mother, I am willing to die with you. Naomi had to be thinking, How will she survive? It's not just about getting enough to eat, but how will this foreign woman survive in the time of the Judges? She can't even be out at night! She has no idea! But the message for them and for us is, Don't sell God short in dark times. God's purposes won't be stopped even where sin abounds. As Paul says, where sin abounds, grace abounds more.

When they got to Bethlehem the whole village was talking because of them. One of the chatter boxes said, "Can this be Naomi? She looks so old, so tired." "*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'*" (verses 20-21).

The story of Ruth is unique to the Bible. There are no dreams, no overt miracles, no prophetic word, no burning bushes, no wet or dry fleece, just people, ordinary people trying to survive. Could God be up to something in ordinary people? Ordinary people like you and me trying to survive? One example of something beautiful that is being revealed is this incredibly loyal love that Ruth has for Naomi on this journey of faith. They aren't happy, but they do life together. They accompany one another. Accompany isn't just tagging along, it's entering into life together, sharing the experience, helping to carry each other. It's a reciprocal friendship, a two-way street. They take turns initiating, they take turns being the strong one. They take turns offering wisdom, insight and encouragement. It's how life is to be lived. It's what community life is intended to be. It's honesty.

Notice what Ruth doesn't say. She doesn't say, "Naomi, you're not that old. Just work a little more dye into your hair and exercise more." She doesn't try to correct her bad theology about God. She just walks with her; maybe says a few words to her. Ruth just trusts. Deep down in Ruth's heart she trusts God and therefore can be patient and see where the road would take them together. That's community. Do you have someone you can be honest with? Look for someone, it may be someone in your community group or on a ministry team. We won't grow unless we put ourselves in honest community. Life is too hard to not live in honest community.

God is showing grace to them in the darkest times. It's revealed in 1:22, "*As the barley harvest was beginning.*" We are about to see that God works under the surface and behind the scenes. We are about to see why we should never lose hope because God is doing things for his glory and our good, even when he appears to be absent and not listening. "*Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite 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 2:1-3). Imagine that! She "found herself" in Boaz's field. Shall we call it luck, or in this case lady luck? Not hardly because we know the truth. We're living in a world where God is in charge and the people like Ruth who say, "your God is going to be my God" then come under his protection. We call this God's providence. God looks after the needs of his people.

Enter Boaz our hero. I see him as middle-aged, big personality, a big guy, even rotund, well loved by the people in his village. I see Boaz kind of like Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*. "*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'*" (verses 11-12). Boaz tells Ruth that God is protecting her. And I believe Ruth sees that too. In verses 13-18 Ruth is invited by Boaz to be included and eat with the work crew, and he told his workers to pull out some stalks from the sheaves and leave them for her. That night she returned home with 25 pounds of barley.

She knows because of his reputation that Boaz is a righteous man. But now she sees that he is also kind. He gave way more to this poor foreign woman than the law required. He poured out grace on her. That night after the big day Naomi and Ruth talked. "*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 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 kindness to the living and the dead.' She added, 'That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers'*" (verses 19-20).

Kinsman-redeemers. Naomi just throws out that term like any reader of this romance story should automatically know what that means. What is a kinsman-redeemer? Remember from a prior chapter in the story that God has assigned each family of each tribe a section of land. This land was extremely important and still is to Israel. In order to make sure it stayed in the family, the kinsman-redeemer law was instituted. If a man died and leaves a widow (Naomi or her daughter-in-law Ruth) and no sons (or her sons died), she likely would have to sell the land to survive. God made a provision to get the land back. The dead man's nearest relative would be given the opportunity to buy his land and marry his widow (or the widowed younger daughter-in-law). Not only does this mean survival, money for the land and a husband, it also meant that her deceased husband's name could continue on the land and be passed on to her children. The kinsman-redeemer would be obligated at his own expense to buy back the widow's family property, marry the widow, and let the sons that he has with his new bride inherit the property.

If the nearest male available and single relative refused to become the kinsman-redeemer, then the next closest available

relative would take on the role. There was a catch however. The kinsman-redeemer couldn't make the decision to redeem on his own, he had to be asked by the widow to buy back her husband's land. That background will help us understand some of the strangeness of Chapter 3.

Now Naomi is all over this and thinking of Boaz as a new son-in-law, and she is thinking "grandson" by Ruth. I can picture Naomi deep in thought trying to make a match. She sees Boaz is paying her extra attention. Maybe one day they can call me Naomi again and not Mara. I see God's hand in this!

My experience is that God's sovereignty and providential care is not revealed from a burning bush extraordinary experience. My experience is that God's reminder of his control and daily provision come through ordinary events of life. It takes patience and time to see it. He lets us look back later and we see the sacred meaning behind it.

I heard a scientist explaining the mystery of the "black holes" in the universe. They are stars which have collapsed and so do not emit light but nevertheless are a powerful force although not visible. The scientist likened it to a dance floor, with the ladies in white dresses and the men all in black. If the lights are turned down all that can be seen is the white of the ladies and yet we know the men are there because of the pattern of the ladies' movements; there are unseen partners leading them. Life's problems are much like this. In the dark times of life, it seems the lights have been turned down and we can only see part of what is taking place, yet faith in God believes his unseen hand is still controlling events. One day the lights will be turned up and we'll understand.

In his book, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, John Piper offers these thoughts about God's providence: "Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback. And the point of biblical stories like Joseph and Job and Esther and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ."

*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" (Ruth 3:1-5).*

It all seems so odd in our day and age. As awkward and nervous as I imagine she felt she did exactly what Naomi told her to do. *"In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered 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 kinsman-redeemer'" (verses 8-9).*

Remember back in 2:12 when Boaz blessed Ruth by assuring her that she was now under the wings of the God of Israel? That word "wing" is the same word as "garment" here in 3:9. Ruth is saying back to Boaz, "Boaz, you are God's wing protecting me. You are a kinsman-redeemer." With that said, Boaz knew that Ruth was requesting marriage. She was requesting Boaz to exercise his right and asking him to sacrifice to be her kinsman-redeemer. *"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. And now daughter, don't be afraid!" (verses 10-11a).*

Boaz, somewhat older than Ruth is taken by Ruth's love and commitment. Boaz treated her right that night. She had to be taken by him being such a gentleman by protecting her dignity and reputation. When we think romance, we don't usually think of the terms loyalty and commitment. We don't think *hesed* love. We think passionate love. It's an important reminder that good marriages, marriages that have passion, are not built on passion; they are built on *hesed* love.

A picture came out in the news a few weeks ago. Maybe you saw it. I think it illustrates *hesed* love beautifully. A customer at the In-and-Out Burger in Fremont snapped this picture and then tweeted it out. In the picture is a man named John Silva. He is a widower and he is dining by himself. If you notice on his table is a framed and faded photograph. It's a picture of John and his deceased wife, Hilda. She was eating with him so he wouldn't feel like he was eating alone. John and Hilda met in 1944. John was a minor league baseball player and a teammate threw him the ball, and he missed it and the ball rolled to the feet of a beautiful dark haired woman. John picked up the ball at her feet and when he rose up, he said to her, "I'm going to marry you." He didn't see her again for 10 years. That was when John was on a delivery for his boss and he entered the store to make his delivery and saw Hilda. They remembered each other and a year later they were married and eventually they moved to the Bay Area. John still takes their picture along when he dines at their favorite restaurants. There is a plaque with John and Hilda hanging in the Olive Garden in Fremont. This struck me as a beautiful picture of loyal and committed *hesed* love. A family friend said, "In the electronic age, there's just not a whole lot of romance unless it's on TV, and then somebody like this comes along and reminds you. I hope I got even half of what they had."

So our hero Boaz goes to the town gate and he meets with Naomi's deceased husband's closest relative. Boaz gathers 10 elders around and then explains the situation. He tells the man that Naomi is selling and this guy has first rights to buy the land and care for Naomi and Ruth. He says to the man, "tell me what you want to do. I am next in line." The man wants the land until he finds out that Ruth would become his wife. *"So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, 'Buy it yourself.' And he removed his sandal. Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people,*

*'Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, 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 the town records. Today you are witnesses!'" Then the elders and all those 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 house of Israel.' ..."The women said to Naomi: 'Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law loves you, and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.'" Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap and cared for him... And they named him Obed" (Ruth 4:8–11, 14–17).*

Naomi was empty and now she is full. Naomi was bitter and now she is sweet. Some of you can totally relate to Naomi this morning. You could say, "God has left me empty too." But right in front of your nose could be your Ruth, your hope, the greatest avenue of blessing in your life. We are often blind to the incredible things of God because we have an agenda that isn't God's. And we forget that God likes to work through the ordinary. CS Lewis once said, "The things that you think are salt deserts in your life right now are really overflowing wells of grace." God's grace flows through his agenda, not our own.

John Ortberg, back in 2011 wrote an article in *Leadership Journal* called, "Don't Waste a Crises." Here is what he said. "Imagine you're handed a script of your newborn child's entire life. Better yet, you're given an eraser and five minutes to edit out whatever you want. You read that she will have a learning disability in grade school. Reading, which comes easily for some kids, will be laborious for her. In high school, she will make a great circle of friends, then one of them will die of cancer. After high school, she will get into her preferred college, but while there, she will lose a leg in a car accident. Following that, she will go through a difficult depression. A few years later she'll get a great job, then lose that job in an economic downturn. She'll get married, but then go through the grief of separation. With this script of your child's life and five minutes to edit it, what would you erase? Psychologist Jonathon Haidt poses this question in this hypothetical exercise: Wouldn't you want to take out all the stuff that would cause them pain? If you could erase every failure, disappointment, and period of suffering, would that be a good idea? Would that cause them to grow into the best version of themselves? Is it possible that we actually need adversity and setbacks—maybe even crises and trauma—to reach the fullest potential of development and growth?" Ortberg contends that God doesn't always erase all our stress and pain before it starts. Instead, God can use the failures, disappointments, and periods of suffering to help us grow. Ortberg writes, "God

isn't at work producing the circumstances I want. God is at work in bad circumstances to produce the me he wants."

Have you ever wondered why a man like Boaz would marry an outsider, a Moabite? Because he had learned that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob came to bless all peoples. If you look back in Boaz's family history you will find Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, who helped the spies before the battle of Jericho. Boaz was a descendant of Rahab. Outsiders like Rahab and Ruth were redeemed into the family of God by grace through faith. It's God's way. Not only that, these women along with Boaz were direct ancestors of King David and then King Jesus. Check out these excerpts from Jesus' genealogy recorded by Matthew in his gospel. "**Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David**" (Matt. 1:5). "**And Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ**" (Matt. 1:16).

I've heard it described that Jesus is our kinsmen-redeemer. Thirty-four years ago I called out to Jesus to save me, to rescue me from my sin, to forgive me, to show me grace. And when I read Ruth and I see what she said to Boaz, I see that I asked Jesus to spread his garment over me. But Jesus didn't have to spread his garment over me. Jesus, my kinsmen-redeemer, was under no obligation to buy me back from certain death. But he did buy me back. Not with money but through his death on a cross. The decision that rerouted me to an eternity with Jesus in heaven was not made at a city gate, it was made in a garden where my kinsmen-redeemer sweated drops of blood as he prayed for strength to show me *hesed* love. The deal wasn't finalized by a sandal being exchanged, but by his shedding of blood. He didn't get my land in exchange, he got the wrath for my sins in exchange. The town didn't rise up and bless him; they spit on him, whipped him, and then crucified him to death, and the devil danced on his grave for three days. And on that third day, he rose again. Because he rose again I was assured that I would go from foreigner to family, from orphan to a child of God, from spiritually poor to spiritually rich in Christ.

In a moment we will be singing a song titled, *I Will Follow*. There were times in my life when I couldn't, with honesty, sing this song. It's a song of commitment. But it's commitment that can't be forced. It isn't easy. Something inside each of us has to see God's great purpose in Jesus Christ and then say, "Your cause will be my cause. My future will be what you want my future to be. I'll go where you want me to go. I'll be the kind of person you want me to be." Then the phrases "God is sovereign" and "God's providential care" become not just theological terms, they become anchors for our soul. It's when times are the toughest that I am called to trust in his *hesed* love. It's only under *hesed* that "I will follow" makes any sense. From the place of safety under his garment, I have nothing to lose by showing others the grace and love he showed me. So under the banner of God's *hesed* love, let's go where he goes.

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Catalog No. 1404–9N

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, November 16, 2014 at Central Peninsula Church North  
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