
A Christmas Story

Ruth

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Introduction “In you go. Pull your blankets up. Scoot over, Dad needs a place to sit. Tonight we are reading a Christmas story. Okay... where shall we start...?”

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king (Matthew 1:2-6). And David was the many times great grandfather of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

The sun is beginning to sink behind the hills of Bethlehem. Young men are unbundling the sheaves of wheat stalks that have been carried from the fields to the hilltop threshing floor. The air is thick with chaff from the flailing and winnowing of the wheat harvest and the angle of the light is such that the dust has given the slight breeze a visible texture. Just down the hillside, near a grove of trees, stands a young woman. This evening, unlike most evenings, she is not dressed for the work of harvesting. Instead she is wearing a cloak. Beneath the cloak her skin is clean and perfumed. Her hair is neatly combed.

Awkwardly, she is trying to appear casual as she wanders among the trees. She does not want to be noticed, but she must keep in sight of the master, standing among his workers on the hilltop. Though she is not among the workers this evening, her body seems to think that she is. Her mouth feels full of dust, her heart is pounding, and her whole body feels several degrees too warm.

The threshing has ended and food is being brought to the hilltop. The sun’s light is now fading quickly. The workers and their master enjoy, more so than usual, their food and drink. The end of the barley and wheat harvests has finally arrived and the work has been accomplished. There is a decidedly settled sense of satisfaction that seems to descend upon the place. This hilltop of peace and rest, *she thinks to herself*, is different from all the rest of Israel. Being a Moabite, she knows something about how deep the darkness of sin and evil is. Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, required the sacrifice of children¹ – a memory that makes her sick. Israel, however, was not as different as she had thought it would be. Everyone seemed to do what was right in their own eyes².

Sensing that the darkness around the hillside was sufficient she begins to move closer, testing each step to be sure that she does not slip as the heavy dew descends. Carefully, one

¹ 2 Kings 3:27

² Judges 21:25

step in front of the other... carefully one step in front of the other. *She remembers* this is exactly how she and her Hebrew mother-in-law had returned from Moab. The journey was not a long one, only several days, but it was perilous given that they were women who were alone travelling in a country where men did as they pleased. They had no choice, however. They had lost everything, protection, provision, love, hope, their future... They needed to go now where they could at least find food.

Saying that they had lost everything felt like an understatement. This Hebrew family that she had married into seemed to be cursed by their god. They had left their homeland in desperation, fleeing a famine. They came to Moab and all seemed well at first. But soon after, the man of the house, who would have been her father-in-law, died. It was sometime after that, that she had met the eldest son. Technically, the Hebrews had declared the Moabites to be off limits – and considered them worthy of no attention³. But this Hebrew family was not living in Judah, they were living in Moab. Somehow, the prohibition did not seem quite as important being miles and miles away from Israel. So the eldest Hebrew son married her, a Moabite woman. Soon after, her husband's younger brother also married a Moabite woman. They were now a family of five, a Hebrew mother-in-law, two Hebrew sons, and their Moabite wives. But their hardships were far from over... both men died. Leaving the three women alone and without means... compounding this triple tragedy was barrenness. Neither Moabite woman had conceived. And all of this in 10 short years.

She sighs as she remembers how desperate they had become after the death of the remaining two men of the family. Times had gotten very bad indeed. Her mother-in-law one day declared that she was returning to her hometown of Bethlehem in Judah. She had heard that her god had given food again to her people, the famine was over, and her deceased husband still owned land there which could be sold for much needed money. Her mother-in-law had instructed her and her sister-in-law to go to their own Moabite families, arguing that to return with her to Bethlehem was a hopeless venture destined to end in a life of futility. She had to make a choice. Stay in Moab or return with her mother-in-law to a foreign land and a foreign people who would likely scorn her presence.

"Ow!" She slipped and her knee collided with sharp rock sticking up from the hillside. She had to stop replaying this whole situation in her mind and pay attention to the task at hand. She had to make a choice now as well. The only lights in the dark night now were the moon and the stars. All the torches had been extinguished and everywhere around the threshing floor, propped up against heaps of grain, were men's bodies wrapped in cloaks and blankets. She had done her very best to keep sight of the master – to pinpoint where he lay down. But it was difficult to tell one bundle of man from another. Her mother-in-law had given her explicit instructions on how to go about this strange custom. She had to uncover the feet of the master as he slept and lie down at his feet. Could she do this? It felt so risky, so open to misinterpretation, so vulnerable... all she had was her reputation for being an extra-ordinary daughter-in-law and a hard worker. If she lost these, she would have nothing.

³ Deuteronomy 23:3-6

Risky, vulnerable, even crazy! *She mused*, these were the exact same thoughts that plagued her mind when she first realized that she was being irresistibly drawn to the God of her Hebrew husband. And those words she blurted out to her mother-in-law in the moment of decision, to stay or go, Moab or Israel... Those words that confirmed her own destiny, blurted out in the hotness of tears and anguish as her mother-in-law tried to convince her to go back to her own people and her own gods and not to follow her to Bethlehem, she whispered them to herself now, “Don’t ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us! (Ruth 1:16,17). This was her oath.

What had brought her to this? Her dead husband’s family had fled a famine in the land of their god, her mother-in-law was convinced she had been cursed by this god and had told her to go back to the Moabites and Chemosh. When she arrived in Bethlehem, the welcome was one of astonishment and her mother-in-law proclaimed that all was bitterness and that she had gone away full and come back empty. Apparently she, the strange Moabite daughter-in-law, did not count for much. From an earthly perspective, there was nothing but pain and hardship for her here in Israel and with this Hebrew god... why had she come?

She knew full well why she had come. This Yahweh, Elohim, the Hebrew god had set upon her heart. And though she did not know much about Him, she knew that she must, by any means necessary, pursue him with her whole self. The almighty God had chosen her, Ruth. And Naomi, her mother-in-law, was her only connection to his people, his ways, his words. Even if Naomi’s faith was wavering, her spirit disillusioned, and her future destitute, Ruth had to follow. There was no way she could live in Moab and be a follower of Yahweh. There was no way she could break clean of her past life and past culture if she did not bind herself to people who were walking, or even stumbling, toward Yahweh. She was convicted and convinced. Death in Moab was better than life in Moab, hence the high stakes oath – give me Naomi’s God, Naomi’s people, Naomi’s land or end my life.

All or nothing. That had become a mantra in Ruth’s heart and now as she stood over the bundle that she adamantly hoped was Boaz, the master, she felt her fear creep up all around her. She was breathing hard and almost felt paralyzed. What would he want with her? She was Ruth, the Moabite banned from Israel by the Hebrew law, the widowed, the barren, the descendant of incest, the one who worshiped Chemosh as children were sacrificed, the daily reminder to Naomi of all that she had lost. She was nothing. But as much as all of that was true, Boaz, the unmarried wealthy farmer, had made it ever so clear that she had found favor in his eyes.

When she and Naomi had arrived in Bethlehem, their need was immediate. Naomi was in a very bad way. On top of Naomi’s utter despair and sadness was the shame and embarrassment of having left with a husband and two sons and returning ten years later empty-handed with a Moabite for a daughter-in-law. Ruth, however, could not waste time being embarrassed. They needed food. In faith, she simply set out to doing what she knew how to do – and that was field work, ignoring the stares and whispers which undoubtedly fol-

lowed her everywhere she went in this small town. In fact, in the short four months she had been in Bethlehem she had become well known for two things: her ability to work hard and work long and her remarkable commitment to her mother-in-law.

She will never forget her first meeting with Boaz. His graciousness and generosity, his protection and provision, were almost disorienting. He was the first person in Bethlehem to put into words what was going on in her heart – it was at the very end of a blessing he had pronounced over her... “the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” (Ruth 2:12). That was it exactly – why had she come? She had come to find the protection and provision given to those who both know and are known by God... To come beneath the wing of God. Boaz had seen in Ruth the marks of a true believer⁴, and for all practical purposes, had become the wing of refuge to her. He saw to it that Ruth’s gleaning was productive, her cup full, her plate filled, and her person safe from harm. He even beckoned her to his table from which she enjoyed abundance. Boaz had not kept her afar off, no, he had brought her near.

And he certainly had every reason to keep her far off and simply show the generosity required by the Hebrew law to a sojourner or poor person, to allow her on the corners of his field to gather that which the reapers had missed. Yet she knew that Naomi was hoping for more than the simple obligatory law-keeping, she was hoping that Boaz would take it upon himself to fulfill the role of kinsman redeemer... an undertaking far greater than anything the law demanded. Naomi had explained to Ruth that under the Hebrew law, if a woman were to lose her husband to death, the husband’s brother was required to marry the woman to carry on the name of his dead brother lest he be shunned from the community⁵. The only problem was that Naomi had lost both of her sons. Ruth’s husband’s brother was dead. There was not kinsman redeemer, no one obligated to treat Ruth and Naomi as anything but poor, cursed, and tainted. Yet there was Boaz, who, as a more distant relative could step into this role, though Ruth and Naomi were certainly in no place to demand it. Ruth simply had to be chosen, to be looked upon with favor.

A man groaned in his sleep – she froze, her mind yanked back to the present moment. She prayed that he would not open his eyes. She had to make a decision, she could not keep standing here, it was too risky. “God had been faithful. God would be faithful. All or nothing.” She lowered herself to the threshing floor and uncovered the feet of the man she hoped was Boaz. In uncovering his feet, lifting the corner or “wing” of his cloak or blanket, as it was also known, she was openly and humbly requesting that Boaz would take her under his wing – that he would become her redeemer. She slept not a wink, time seemed to crawl by as she lay there wondering what would come of this. She had placed all her hope in this contrite act of pleading and submission. If it did not go well, she would be full of shame. But if it did go well... To be redeemed by Boaz would be to become his bride, set apart, made pure, without spot, wrinkle or blemish. She would, in an instant, have all that she needed and would ever need. She ordered her heart stop degrading God with this wor-

⁴ Ruth 2:11-12

⁵ Deuteronomy 25:5ff

ry and doubt. Naomi had told her that the purpose of this venture was to find rest... not anxiety. Rest for their bodies and their souls in this hoped-for redeemer.

He basically kicked her. She gasped, he jumped. “Who are you?” She could feel his legs draw up and prepare for action. “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant for you are a redeemer.” There was a very pregnant pause. It was pitch black, she could see nothing. He wasn’t even breathing.

“Isn’t that a beautiful story? Oh, I know you’d like to hear the rest, but I’m sorry, it’s time for bed. We’ll have to finish another night. Alright, alright, I’ll give you the very condensed version, but I’ll be leaving out a lot of details. And since we are going to wrap the story up, I’m also going to point out a few things I want you to learn from this story.”

In this moment of deafening silence, she remembers Joshua, the great military commander that Naomi had taught her about. He was just about to lead Israel into the great promised land, the land of the redeemed, that they had waited for so long, and God spoke to him saying, “Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” Whether into obsolescence as an impoverished foreigner in Israel or into the rich and plenty of Boaz. She was trembling.

Then she sensed something in the air change, she heard a warm exhale and she could almost hear Boaz’ face broaden in the most delighted smile. “May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask... as the Lord lives, I will redeem you...”

The rest, quite literally, is history. Boaz redeems Ruth. He saves Ruth. He does for Ruth what she absolutely cannot do for herself. And he shows his favor out of his own good and free will – he owed Ruth nothing yet he gave her everything. At the city gates, in one swift transaction, Boaz purchases Ruth and Naomi out of their miry pit⁶. In what is likely a very short time, Ruth becomes pregnant and bears a son.

The person who wrote the book of Ruth is shows us a scene at the very end which has some striking similarity to a scene at near the beginning. We only briefly mentioned that earlier scene. When Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem with Ruth from Moab, the women of the town asked, “Is this Naomi?” Now Naomi’s name meant pleasant. Naomi admonished the women, “Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara (which means bitter), for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me... Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (Ruth 1:19-21). Naomi was thinking about anything but redemption, all she saw was curse and abandonment. But when Boaz and Ruth’s son, Obed, is born the women of the town are again present and the message is quite different, they say: “Blessed be the Lord who has not left you [Naomi] this day **without a redeemer** and **may his name** be renowned in Israel! **He shall be to you** a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for *your daughter-in-law* who loves you, who is more

⁶ Psalm 40:2

to you than seven sons, *has given birth to him*" (Ruth 4:15). Oh how things had changed when the redeemer stepped in.

Now son, here is a question to see if you were listening closely. Did the old women just infer that Obed, the baby, was Naomi's redeemer? [listen again] They did. How is that? Wasn't Boaz the one who redeemed Naomi (and Ruth). He was. So what is happening here? Boaz is a shadow – his character and conduct teach us something of the real thing – yet he is not the real thing, and the old women foreshadowed this in their blessing on Naomi. But Obed, for that matter, is not the real thing either. Obed represents one generation closer to he who would be the true redeemer – the real thing. Remember where we began in Matthew – Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, Jesse fathered David, and in time, David fathered Jesus of Nazareth, Christ the Messiah. That's how the story wraps up.

Now I'm hoping you have been making connections to Jesus, to God, to his plan, to yourself, all the way through as you have been listening, but just in case you haven't, I want to point out a few things that will benefit both you and me.

How is this a Christmas Story?

So I said when we started that this was a Christmas story... but we didn't talk about snow, cutting down trees, time with family, roasted chestnuts... But you are pretty smart and you know that there is much more to Christmas for the Christian. So... did we talk about a savior⁷? Did we talk about someone who redeemed those who could not redeem themselves⁸? Did we talk about someone who redeemed Jews and Gentiles⁹? Did we talk about Bethlehem¹⁰? Did we talk about a marriage between the redeemer and the redeemed¹¹? Did we talk about provision and protection? Did we see a gentle savior who longed to gather the lost under his wings and was willing to do whatever it took to make it happen¹²? Did we see an invitation to the Redeemer's table¹³? Did we see the humble condescension of the strong and mighty¹⁴? Did we talk about the royal lineage¹⁵? You tell me son – was this a Christmas story on par with what we read in the gospels? You see my son, all the best Christmas stories point us straight to Jesus as our Savior. Frosty's gonna melt – the good news of the Gospel, however, has been around forever and not even the fires of hell can bring it down – yeah, I know, you don't hear dad use that word very often.

⁷ Luke 2:11

⁸ Galatians 3:13

⁹ Ephesians 2:17-18

¹⁰ Matthew 2:1

¹¹ Ephesians 5:25-33

¹² Luke 13:34

¹³ Revelation 19:9

¹⁴ Philippians 2:6-8

¹⁵ Matthew 12:23

What Do I Learn About My Redeemer, Jesus?

But I want to go a step further here – you are getting old enough to get some of these bigger ideas. What did Boaz do for Ruth, and ultimately Naomi too? He showed them favor, which you can think of as a kind of grace. And what did this look like specifically? Well, it looked like Boaz giving strict instructions to his young men to not harm or hinder Ruth, and to Ruth to stay in his fields. In short, Boaz *protected* Ruth. But he didn't stop there, he told her to drink from the water his men had drawn, he invited her to his table and gave her the privilege of sharing his bread and his wine, he gave her more food than she needed over and over. In short, Boaz *provided* for Ruth. Jesus does the same for us son – just in much, much, greater ways. I could say so much about this, but I can see you are getting sleepy. Here is the most important thing – Jesus protects us from the consequences of our own sin by taking our holy God's punishment for us. He died on the cross in our place, making God's forgiveness of us possible. And Jesus provides for us in making his righteousness our own, making God's adoption of us possible. From this protection and provision, dear son, comes everything you or I will ever need. When you get to a point in your life where you come face to face with desparation, the realization that you are very lost sinner with no way out of God's condemnation, you are going to find this story wildly beautiful because it will bring sweet succor to your soul. I know you don't know what that means. That's okay.

What Do I Learn About My God?

Just one more thing and we'll call it a night. Remember how we've talked about God's providence and his sovereignty? His plan and his power? Well, this is one story where it is on the big screen. Remember, Jesus didn't come from an egg. He had to have parents, and his parents had to have parents, and his grandparents had to have parents... etc. And Jesus had to arrive on the scene at just the right time – and have just the right pedigree. In other words Jesus had to descend from Abraham because way back in Genesis 12, that's where God promised he would come from. So God is perfectly orchestrating everything in history to ensure his plan comes to pass. Famines, deaths, poverty, wealth, seasons, crops, and even romance, everything!

So my dear son, all Christians can rest in the Redeemer's loving-kindness and almighty power, whether starving in Moab among godless people with hearts teetering on despair or resting in the protection and provision of Boaz' field, God is with them – in control and working out his plan. He will always save them through the Redeemer, his son, Jesus Christ. Knowing this is why your mom and I can sleep at night. We love you so much. God save you. Sleep tight. Good night.

[Pray]