

The romance of redemption (Part 2)

In our first session we saw the story of Ruth from its eternal perspective in the throne room of heaven (Revelation 5). Today we are introduced to Ruth herself.

Question to consider

The dictionary says that redeeming is the action of regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment. In Revelation 5 we saw that our redeemer made the payment with his blood. But which is it? Did he redeem us so that we could regain something, or so that we would gain something new?

Ruth 1.1-5 (NIV)

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. ² 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. ³ Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

v1 In the days when the judges ruled

As is seen in the last verse immediately before Ruth (Judges 21:25), this was a period when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes", which tended to mean not doing what was right in God's eyes.

v1 there was a famine in the land

In Deuteronomy 11.13-17 God promised to bless Israel as long as they remained obedient. Instead of flowing with milk and honey, there was famine in the promised land.

v1 So a man from Bethlehem

Bethlehem means 'house of bread', but there was no bread in the house of bread.

v1-2 they went to Moab

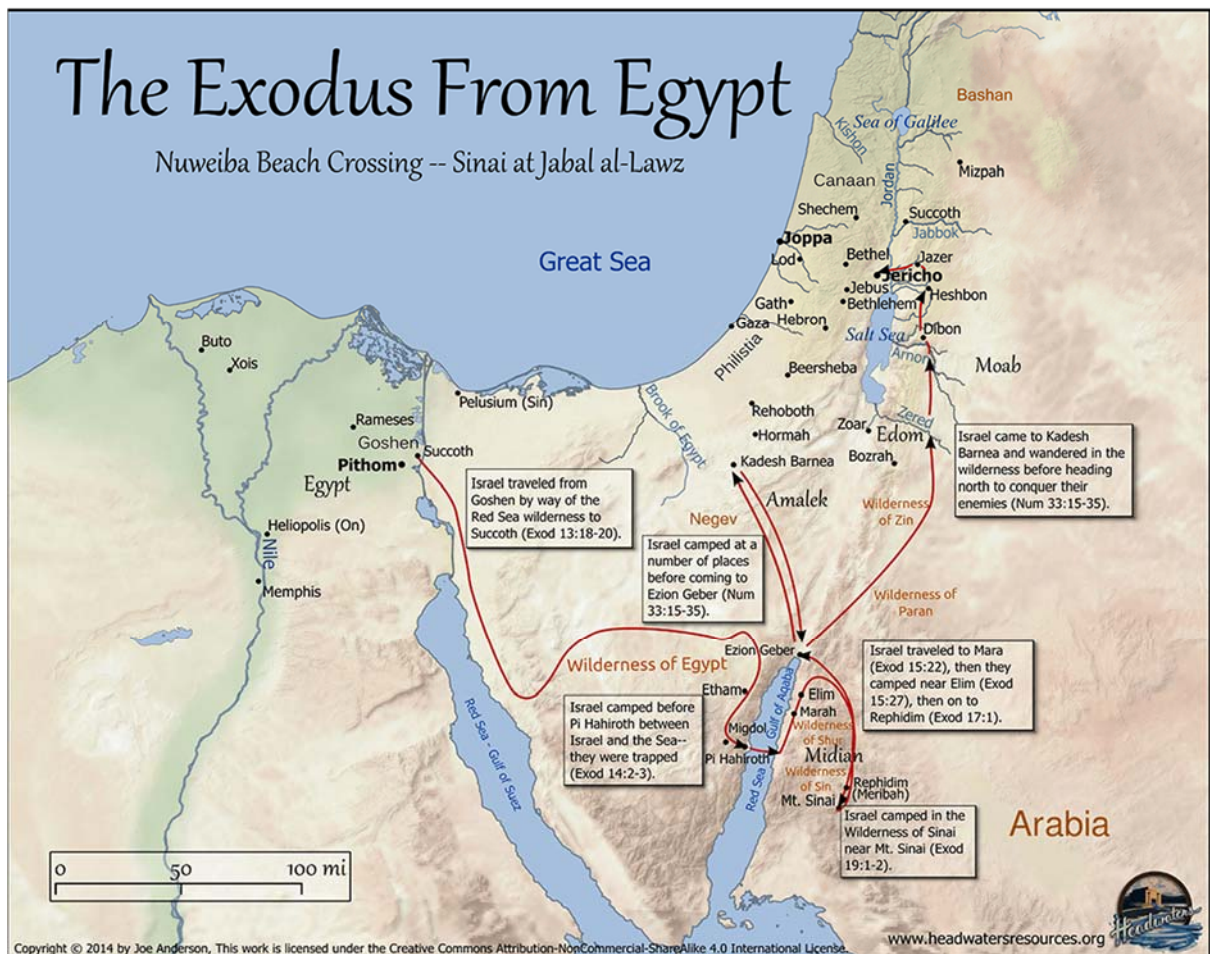
To do so they had to go through the Jericho pass. Recall the destruction of Jericho, as the people of Israel entered the promised land. All in Jericho were killed except "Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent." (Joshua 6.17). Matt 1.5 tells us that Boaz, who marries Ruth, is the son of Rahab. This also tells us that the story took place early in the period of the Judges.

v2 They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah

Bethlehem in Judah is where Jesus, our redeemer, was born.

Micah 5:2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."

Courtship takes time. God has been courting us from everlasting (Micah 5.2) to everlasting (Revelation 5). He loves us, has pursued us, and has been redeemed us to himself!



v3 Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons
Why did she not return to Israel at this point? My wife Gill came to Australia with her husband as missionaries, with their two daughters. They had a son here and 10 years later her husband died. Many people expected her to return to the UK. But her kids went to school and had friends where they lived. Her eldest daughter was dating the boy she would later marry. Gill didn't want to uproot her children from the place that felt like home. Perhaps that was Naomi's motive for staying as well? Perhaps this choice to stay indicates that she was a loving mother?

v4-5 The two sons were married 10 years and died.
In v1 it was to be "for a while" and ended up being over 10 years. It would have been unusual in those days to be married 10 years and not have children.

Balak, the king of the Moabites, joined with the Midianites in hiring Balaam to curse Israel (Num. 22:1-20); God's blessing was turned from the nation when their men took foreign wives and worshipped their idols. In Numbers 25.1-5 Israel intermarrying with Moab is condemned.

God loves for us and woos us. His love is constant and unchanging, unlike ours:

1. ***The nation of Israel*** – they did what was right in their own eyes.
2. ***Elimelek and Naomi*** – they went backwards, the opposite way to God's direction.
3. ***The sons*** – they married Moabite women who did not worship Yahweh.

Romans 5.8 “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”. Even when we are unfaithful to him, he loves us! One of the main messages of this book is that God is at work in the worst of times. Even when (as Naomi) you think he is far away from you, or has turned against you, he never leaves you. He is faithful, even when we are not.

Ruth 1.6-18 (NIV)

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.”⁹ 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 aloud¹⁰ and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”¹¹ 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?”¹² 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—¹³ 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!”¹⁴ At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.¹⁵ “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

v6 Bethlehem means ‘house of bread’ and Naomi heard that there was ‘bread’ there again. This point is reinforced in v22: “arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning”.

v7-10 Naomi decides to return to her home town. We can imagine she would fret over how she would be received, since she left home to live in a country with often hostile relations with her own, and then lost everyone. Her former neighbours might have considered her losses predictable, even just.

Her mother’s love, first hinted at in v3, is seen here again. She tells her daughters-in-law to return to their mother’s homes. That is an unusual phrasing. That was a patriarchal society, and we would have expected her to say “to their Father’s homes”. Perhaps this focus on “mothers” helps us to see Naomi as a loving ‘mother’, not just as a ‘childless widow’? She knows what faces them in Israel; Moab was an enemy of Israel, did not worship Yahweh, intermarriage was condemned. Her daughters-in-law would face persecution, stigmatising, ridicule. She loved them and didn’t want them to experience that.

All three women were grieving the loss of their husbands and sons. Furthermore, to be a childless widow was to be among the lowest and most disadvantaged classes. There was no one to support you, and you had to live on the generosity of strangers. All three women were in this position, but it would be even worse for the daughters-in-law, as foreigners in Israel.

v11-13 If the husband died, one of his brothers could marry the widow and their first son would be deemed the son of his dead brother. But Naomi was too old to have more children.

The near-kinsman redeemer law is found in **Deuteronomy 25.5-6 (NIV)**

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. ⁶ The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

Recall the first question from our previous session. How could David and Jesus be born into a Jewish line, if Ruth was not a Jew and Jewishness is passed through the mother? Here we have the answer. Boaz married Ruth in fulfillment of the law of redemption. As the near-kinsman redeemer their first born son, Obed, was deemed to be the son offspring of Elimelek.

Note: There is some debate about when “Jewishness through the mother” started. That was definitely the case after King Solomon, however King Solomon had children by foreign wives who were considered Jewish children. Hence when Ruth married Boaz, their children were probably considered Jewish. But the Deut 23 passage holds, even if Obed was Jewish through his father. To the 10th generation the descendent of a Moabite could not enter the assembly of God. Obed and David were well within the 10 generations, but did not break this law because they were deemed to be the descendants of Elimelek and Naomi through the near-kinsman redeemer law.

v14-18 The speeches of Naomi and Ruth here are unique in all of Scripture. This is the only dialogue between two women that does not concern a man (father, husband, son), but one another's welfare. It reveals Ruth's love for her destitute mother-in-law:

- She was leaving her own family and land, and would never return home, not even when Naomi died: “Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried” (v17).
- We know how the story ends, but at this point Ruth did not. As far as she knew, this commitment to her mother-in-law would mean a life of widowhood and childlessness, because Naomi has no man to give, and if she married a non-relative, her commitment to Naomi's family would be lost.
- She was going to an unknown land with a new people, new customs and a new language.
- “Your people will be my people and your God my God” (v16). “will be” – in the 10 years to this point Ruth had not worshipped Yahweh. Naomi has just said in v13, “the Lord's hand has turned against me”. Naomi's experience of God was bitterness. But in spite of this, Ruth forsakes her religious heritage and makes the God of Israel her God. Ruth will worship the God that Naomi believes has abandoned her.

From everlasting to everlasting, our redeemer has loved us. Each one of us, Naomi, Ruth, you and me. Even in the worst of times when, as Naomi, you think he has turned his hand against you, the truth is that he is laying the foundation stones of greater blessing in your life.

Near the end of the book, the women tell Naomi what has been evident all along. That Ruth's love is worth more than seven sons. Grace is walking right beside Naomi, unseen, yet refusing to leave her.