

Things Don't Just Happen: *You're a Part of Something Bigger*

Ruth 4

People in almost every culture throughout history seem to love stories with happy endings. All week, I've been asking people here at Lake about whether they have any favorite movies with happy endings. Here are the ones that have been mentioned most often:

- Kids: Inside Out, Home Alone. Winner: Beauty and the Beast
- Women: All Hallmark movies. Winner: You've Got Mail
- Men: Rudy, Remember the Titans. Winner: Lord of the Rings
- Christmas: It's a Wonderful Life. Winner: Christmas Carol

Today at church, I'll tell you that the Bible has the greatest happy ending story. Revelation 21-22: All things will be made new – no tears, no pain, no dying. And, within the Bible there are stories like the story of Ruth. It has a great ending. And that's what we come to today.

Because we have more of our kids and students with us today, I want to pause to tell you of a word that has been important to us as we have been studying the Book of Ruth, i.e., the Hebrew word "hesed". Say it with me: "hesed." Hesed is the word in the Bible that captures the many attributes of God, especially those that speak about how he treats people -- like his kindness, faithfulness, grace, mercy, love, and loyalty. It's the way that God treats you. It's the way I want to treat people. And, I want you to be that way too.

In the Book of Ruth, we see two people who live their lives showing hesed to other people and, when they do, their lives have a beautiful impact on everyone around them. So, let me review the story before we come to the happy ending.

Reviewing the Story

- Episode 1 - *No food and empty* -- A Jewish family moves from Bethlehem, God's promised land, to Moab because there is no food in Israel. But the father and sons die leaving an old widow named Naomi and her two daughters-in-law without any men in a man-dominated world. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, goes back to her people and God while the other, Ruth, makes Naomi's people and God her own and, in support of Naomi, heads back to Bethlehem (<https://st-takla.org/Gallery/var/albums/Bible/Illustrations/Bible-Slides/OT/08-Ruth/www-St-Takla-org--Bible-Slides-ruth-692.jpg>) just as the barley harvest was beginning. There would be food in Bethlehem again.

- Episode 2 – *Food but no future* -- The young, immigrant named Ruth cares enough for Naomi that she goes out into personal danger and works the harvest fields. God leads her to the fields of a man named Boaz who sees her need, provides for her, protects her from harm and helps her to belong. (<http://c8.alamy.com/comp/C8N4P9/bible-stories-illustration-of-ruth-working-in-boaz-barley-fields-C8N4P9.jpg>) But, the harvest only lasts 7 weeks. At the end, Ruth and Naomi have food but no future.
- Episode 3 – *Hope but uncertainty* – Naomi and Ruth plot together to find a place of lasting belonging. In that culture, the only way for these widows to find a place of belonging would have been for Ruth to marry. In a challenging and dangerous moment, Ruth and Boaz demonstrate what Pastor Jeff called “unwavering integrity.” (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/Book_of_Ruth_Chapter_3-3_%28Bible_Illustrations_by_Sweet_Media%29.jpg) Going against all cultural norms, Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz – and he says, “Yes, but...” Like a modern-day romance movie, there is another man who may get in the way of Boaz and Ruth marrying. And, deep inside, we all know that guy is not the right man for Ruth, don’t we? But that’s the way it is -- there is someone else who has the legal right to marry Ruth and to keep Boaz from doing so. But, Boaz has a plan.
- Episode 4: Heseb Triumphs

1. The Decision (4:1-10) *So-and-So, the closer guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy the property yourself.” And he removed his sandal (4:8).*

When I read Ruth 4:1-10, I feel as if I’m there, watching Boaz go about his work. This first act in the final episode takes place at Bethlehem’s city gate. The city gate was the place where big town decisions were made. Or, as one scholar told me, “It’s the place where men sat, talked and made big decisions while the women did all the work!” That may be a bit extreme – but the society that Ruth lived in was so fully male-dominated that she had little choice about her husband. To think that a group of men sitting at the city gate would discuss and determine her future husband is a bit offensive to our Southern CA sensitivities. But, the law of the time was that, when a property-owning man died, his widow or, in this case, his son’s widow was to be brought into the family of the nearest kinsman. The property would continue to remain in the name of the man who died – in this case, Elimelek. Ruth, as we saw in episode 3, wanted to marry Boaz and he wanted to marry her. However, there was a nearer kinsman.

So, Boaz comes up with a way to navigate this. He approaches the closest kinsman, a man who is left unnamed in the story. Boaz calls him something like “Mr. So-and-So” in v.1 – and then calls 10 of the city elders to listen in to their conversation (<http://www.goodsalt.com/view/boaz-at-the-city-gate-GoodSalt-Ifwas1809.jpg>.) Boaz says that Elimelek’s widow Naomi is home and needs money -- so Elimelek’s property is available to the nearest kinsman who wants to buy it. Mr. So-and-So probably knows that Naomi is too old to have children so he thinks that, for very little money, he can acquire the valuable piece of property and put it in his own name. So, Mr. So-and-So says, “Of course, I want the property.”

Then, in v.5, Boaz delivers his masterstroke: “*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.*”

As soon as those words are out of Boaz’s mouth, Mr. So-and-so says, “*Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate.*” By that, he meant that he would have to pay money to get the property, he would have to take care of Naomi and Ruth. He would have the problem of an additional wife. And, if Ruth gave birth to a son, he wouldn’t even be able to keep the property. So, he says, “*You redeem it yourself, Boaz!*” Before all the elders of the city, Boaz agreed.

Then, Mr. So-and-So took off his sandal (their way of signing a real estate document) and gave it to Boaz to seal the deal – and then the celebration erupted!

2. The Celebration (4:11-17a) *Then all the elders and 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... May you... be famous in Bethlehem (4:11).”*

The happy ending is as good as any you’ll find in any book or movie. It starts right there is the city gate when the elder shout out blessings for Boaz (4:11-12). Tradition says that Boaz was a widower who had no children before he married Ruth. The elders pray a blessing that Boaz and his new wife will have a family that will become as important to Israel as were the children of the greatest patriarchs of Israel. They speak the blessing to Boaz that all he does will prosper and that his name will never be forgotten.

Ruth was certainly a part of the blessing in vv. 11-12 too. They said, “*May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah (who also had an immigrant heritage), who together built up the family of Israel.*” In doing so, they were pronouncing that she, a Moabite immigrant, fully belongs to the greatest of the women of their people.

But, when the scene moves at least nine months forward – to when Ruth gives birth to a son -- I especially love the fact that the Jewish women in the town break out in effusive blessing upon the Moabite Ruth in v. 12. They call her, “*Better than seven sons!*” I think they were saying something like, “Take that, you men who sit around the city gate and talk endlessly! This one woman has done more than the perfect number of men could do.” It was something that the men of the town needed to hear -- and we do too. And, to complete the story, Naomi is blessed by receiving a male heir through her line and that of her husband. It’s so touching to read, “Then Naomi took the child, laid him on her lap and cared for him.” The bitter and empty old woman we saw at the end of episode 1 is empty and bitter no more.

Indeed, the entire town is blessed with great joy. It’s a celebration. God loves a celebration. Happy endings always have celebrations. But, it doesn’t stop there just with the little town of Bethlehem. God had a bigger plan in mind than anyone could have seen.

3. The Shocking Ending (4:17b-23) *They named the child Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David* (4:17).

This ending seems to come out of the blue. Who could have expected this? I think the author puts it here to take people’s breath away. All these small decisions that, in the eyes of the world seem so coincidental and insignificant have led to something much bigger! This immigrant woman from the worst of countries, but who had become committed to God, gives birth to the one in the line of their greatest king, King David. The message of the Book of Ruth is that God rescues his people from the deep dark days of the time of the judges (1:1) not so much through superheroes like Samson or Gideon but through normal people like Ruth and Boaz being faithful to show hesed in daily relationships and choices.

And, of course, you and I know something that even the writer of the Book of Ruth could not have known. All these decisions led not only to David – but to Jesus. Yes, this child born to Boaz and Ruth was in the lineage that led to the Savior of the World. Read the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 and you’ll see it, i.e., Ruth, Boaz and their son Obed are all there. These ordinary people were a part of something bigger – much bigger. God used them to be a part of his blessing all people. And the same can be true of each of us.

Things to Change Our Lives and Our Church

1. Things don’t just happen

God is always present and at work. When things aren't going the ways you want them to go, God is still at work. Learn to trust him when you do not understand – even as Ruth did. Things don't just happen. There is no God-forsaken place in God's universe. God is always present and wanting us to learn to trust him. When things are horribly bad, as they were for Ruth at the beginning of ch. 2, it's hard to believe this. But, the whole of the Bible declares that this is true. God will ultimately make all things new and will establish a kingdom in which all is just and right.

2. Live a Life of Hesed -- God calls us all to make the kinds of decisions that reflect his ways to our world. Again, the word that I do not want you to forget from this series is the Hebrew word “hesed”. Remember how this looked in the story of Ruth:

- *Orpah v. Ruth* in ch. 1: Orpah made the choice that made sense in the eyes of the world while Ruth did not. Ruth's was simply based on wanting to support and be faithful to Naomi and to honor God. And, she kept living that way.
- *Boaz v. Mr. So-and-So* in ch. 4 – Mr. So-and-so made the decision that would have made financial sense. If he had redeemed Naomi and Ruth, he would have lost money and then would have lost the land too! Of course, the same was true of Boaz. But, Boaz made the decision that meant treating others as God treats him, the way of personal sacrifice to bring hope, help and blessing to others.

I want to remind you of how Boaz showed hesed to this Moabite woman that no one else even seems to notice. Ruth was an immigrant out in the field living the life of a beggar. What did Boaz do? (Put the graphic here): 1) He saw her as God sees people. 2) He provided for her. 3) He protected her. 4) He helped her to belong.

Ruth and Boaz did not act according to the wisdom of the world. They didn't do what people would usually do. They didn't ask, “What's in it for me? Will it fulfill me?” Both Orpah in ch. 1 and Mr. So-and-So in ch. 4 did what most “how to” books would tell them to do. But, the decisions Ruth and Boaz made involved personal sacrifice to bring help and bring blessing to others. It's the way God acts toward us. The act of hesed always calls us to be related to those in need and the heart's desire to help. It's not a duty but an act of love.

3. Let's Be a Church of Hesed

Next week, we begin our campaign to end our calendar year financially in the black. That's always a challenge for us – just as it is for every church and non-

profit each December. Human wisdom would tell us simply to focus on that and on nothing else. But, at the same time, God has put the crisis in Puerto Rico after the hurricane on our hearts and we want to send a recovery team there. And, with the massive migration of people in the Middle East and the effectiveness of our mission team in Lebanon that we reported today, we want to send another team there and continue that ministry. So, after much prayer, we have chosen to step out by faith both to challenge us to meet our budget as well as to find funds for those two outreach ministries.

I'd like Pastor Jeff Mattesich to come up to share with you how we will take steps in that direction.