

*DIGGING FOR TREASURE*

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# **THREE FUNERALS AND A WEDDING**

**THE MESSAGE OF RUTH TODAY**

*Featuring contributions from*  
**JOHN M. HALEY & RUSSELL G. HERBERT**

*Edited by*  
**DEREK J. BALSDON**

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**The Message of Ruth Today**

Edited by  
Derek J. Balsdon

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# INTRODUCTION

*Derek J. Balsdon*

## **Development Worker, Methodist Evangelicals Together**

Our Digging for Treasure resource explores the rich depth of biblical books and themes. It greatly benefits preachers and small-group leaders, and is also helpful for personal study. In this edition, the contributors help us to understand more about the context and culture of the book of *Ruth* and bring through a message for us in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In his sermon, Russell Herbert highlights how it is a story which comes from deep tragedy which sets the scene for the whole book. Losing the 3 men within her family causes Naomi to feel bitter, and to go back to Bethlehem, and she returns at harvest time. Is returning to the ‘house of bread’ an indication that Naomi had hope that God could help her through? Russell invites us to turn our gaze away from our circumstances and on to God. He concludes with a prayer about fixing our eyes on Jesus when we are going through difficult circumstances.

John Haley, in his sermon on *Ruth 2*, explores the tension between the providence of God and human choice. Through Boaz, the ‘kinsman-redeemer’, God provided covenant-love for Ruth and Naomi and, through Jesus our kinsman-Redeemer, God provides covenant-love for us.

In his teaching on *Ruth 3*, Russell Herbert explores the task of enabling our congregations to encounter the engaging power of God’s word in a fresh way. Russell shares about seeking to find the strap-line in a particular passage, and how that helps guide his preparation and preaching. He writes about it being a ‘juicy’ chapter, including what might or might not have taken place at the threshing place and why the two women needed Ruth to have a husband. Through this he writes about the need for sermons to relate to real life today. In the last part he shares a personal story to bring the message of this chapter to a conclusion.

John Haley looks at the final chapter of Ruth. He writes about preaching being an art, and how he works at this art to prepare a sermon, yet also seeks to rely on the anointing of the Holy Spirit. He finds a structure for the sermon, mentions some helpful reference resources, and from them explains what was meant by a 'kinsman-redeemer'. He remarks that the biblical story should impact our story, and how this story invites us to experience more of God's lavish grace, his covenant-love, displayed through the birth of another son, born of the same line, Jesus the Son of God. He encourages us to experience God's covenant-love and to show it in the church and the world today.

Each of our contributors, in their own unique ways, help us to understand the Old Testament book of Ruth and to apply it to life today. Through their digging around in this ancient book, they enable us to encounter more of God in our lives today and to be enriched by the great treasure that God is.

# RUTH 1: SERMON - TRAGEDY AND HOPE

Russell G. Herbert

Superintendent Minister of the  
Gordano Valley Methodist Circuit

I want you to imagine yourself driving a car. As you travel along, there will be two very important things that you will be doing.

First, you will be looking ahead in front of you. You will be watching the road, various signs and turnings, looking out for other vehicles and anything else that could be hazardous or which requires caution. In other words, your gaze, and by that I mean the main focus of your attention across a general area, will be in front.

The second thing is that you will also be glancing behind you, looking in your mirror. That will not be your focus, but without that glancing, you would be driving dangerously.

Now, imagine you decided to swap those two habits, and gaze in the rear-view mirror while occasionally glancing ahead. You would soon be in trouble.

There is an old saying, 'glance at your problems but gaze upon God'. The reality is that we tend to get these things the wrong way round. Our gaze becomes fixed upon our problems. They become the focus of our attention. Yes, we might look at God too, but it is an occasional glimpse as we become all too readily preoccupied with our circumstances. Life then becomes like trying to drive a car while staring in the rear-view mirror.

If any of that resonates with you, then I think you will find that there is a lot of both challenge and encouragement to be found in the book of Ruth. It is a story that begins, not simply with problems, but tragedy; lots of it. So let us look at the first chapter which sets the scene for the whole story.

A striking literary feature of Ruth is its brevity. There is very little by way of reflective discourse. Rather, what we have is the telling of a story with an emphasis on direct speech between the characters. In fact, fifty-five of the eighty-five verses contain dialogue. The author wastes no time in getting to the facts. So, as we turn to Ruth Chapter 1, we see that the book plunges right on in with the crisis, talking about an awful lot of pain and hardship in a very matter-of-fact way. There is no detailed description, just a very blunt, staccato-like statement that tells it as it is:

*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. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name 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. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. These married Moabite women, one named Orpah and 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 (1:1-5).*

These opening lines are so abrupt, they are cold and brutal. There is no emotion, no feeling. Five verses sum up a ten-year nightmare. It was 'in the days when the judges ruled'. That was a period of Israel's history when everything was in chaos, for there was no king. One man is singled out - ironically, his name, *Elimelech*, can be translated as 'my God is king'. This man's family is driven by famine to a foreign land renowned for its immorality. Desperation sends them there. Suddenly, we are told that Elimelech dies. His widow, Naomi, is left stranded in this place in a highly vulnerable position. Her two sons then marry Moabite women - something that would not be looked upon favourably in Israelite culture, for Moabite history was one of notoriously shameless sexual depravity. Then these two sons both die, leaving no children. Just like that. We are given no explanation and no detail, just the bare, brutal facts. Naomi has lost everything - family, security and hope, and the starkness of the terse

account is made even greater by the way 5 concludes, *‘and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband’*.

It is little wonder then that, as Naomi makes her way back to Bethlehem, she cries, ‘call me Mara’, meaning ‘bitterness’:

*“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” (1:21).*

Who would not be feeling bitter? As we would expect, Naomi speaks as one who is expressing the deep reflections of her heart. She is broken, she is empty, she is in deep pain and grief, and she knows it. She is crying out something that she has clearly been meditating upon at length. Her gaze is fixed firmly upon her devastating circumstances.

But the chapter does not end here. Just as the scene of Naomi’s return draws to a close, there is one last part of the final verse before we enter Chapter 2: *‘arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning’ (1:22).*

Having begun with a famine, the chapter closes with a harvest. Indeed, there is something quite loaded about the place name ‘Bethlehem’, which means ‘house of bread’. There is more than a hint here that something just might be poised to change, and for the better.

There is a serious message here for those times when our circumstances would have us believe that things can never improve. When we find ourselves so totally immersed in the here and now that we cannot see beyond it, the God of hope challenges us to think again. When we turn our gaze in God’s direction, things begin to look different. The situation itself might not change straight away, but we start to see it in a new perspective.

I recently came across a really helpful illustration from Father Greg Boyle, founder and director of *Homeboy Industries* in Los Angeles, an organisation providing rehabilitation to former gang members. This ministry engages something in the region of 10,000 men and

women every year, supporting them in breaking the cycle of violent crime and prison. In one of his talks, Boyle refers to a funeral in which he heard it said that death is not a ‘period’ (i.e. a ‘full-stop’, as we say in the UK), but a ‘comma’. That is to say, it is not the end, there is more to come. Jesus brings this transformation to us when he walks away from the grave. Boyle develops this idea and says that it is something that can and should be applied throughout our whole lives. In other words, there are times when we are tempted to think that our circumstances are closed and final - like the full-stop at the end of a sentence. But when we replace that piece of punctuation with a comma, we can see things from a different perspective.<sup>1</sup>

You see, a comma is not an end - it is a pause. It says, ‘keep going, it is not over yet, there is more to be said’. Faith re-punctuates our understanding like this. We might think, ‘I have made a complete mess of that situation.’ Faith changes this to ‘I have made a complete mess of that situation, but with God’s help there are several things I can do to make it better’. Or we might be haunted with, ‘I have been a disaster as a parent.’ Faith has the power to set us free from the finality of that sentence, so that it becomes, ‘I have been a disaster as a parent, but that changes now.’ Whatever we feel we have become, faith allows us, no - commands us, to replace full-stops of condemnation with commas of grace. No matter how grim and despairing life might seem, the risen Jesus breaks the ‘closedness’ of our human conclusions and says, ‘Wait, we are not done yet, there is more to come.’

This is what happens at the end of the first chapter of Ruth. Up to now, everything just seems like one massive pile of tragedy. That is because it is. It is heart-breaking, and there is no getting away from that reality. Understandably, Naomi pours out her lamentation and her sense of her utter emptiness. But the sentence does not stop there. The reference to the ‘beginning of the barley harvest’ in Bethlehem, the house of bread, suggests that there is more to be said. And indeed there is, as we shall later find out - not just in the story of Ruth, but in the wider biblical message of salvation. The

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-ha\\_t8DhW8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-ha_t8DhW8)

book of Ruth is a story within a story, pointing to the one who ultimately saves us.

It is this salvation story which connects Ruth to us, today, right now. So how might this enable us to see things differently? In what sense might famine be changed to harvest in our own lives? How might we start re-punctuating our lives by replacing some of those full-stops with commas? In short - how can we turn our gaze away from our circumstances and on to God?

I will not pretend that there are easy answers to be had. There is no off-the-shelf formula, and we should be suspicious of those who suggest otherwise. But let us not underestimate the depth and power of God's word when we allow it to land in our daily lives. What do I mean by that?

Here is what I mean. The Bible is not a human book about God: it is God's book about humanity. It presents to us the promises of God which are truly living and transforming. So when we are reading it, we are not just reading a book - we are exposing ourselves to something, or rather someone, that can at times stand in radical contradiction over the circumstances of our lives. Now those life circumstances might be telling us one thing, but the promises of God will often tell us that we need to wake up and see things rather differently.

In the early 1960s, Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones, minister at Westminster Chapel, London, preached a series of sermons. Those sermons were eventually published as the book, *Spiritual Depression*. It became something of a classic.<sup>2</sup> At the centre of Lloyd-Jones' message is the following conviction: we spend too much time listening to ourselves, and we need to spend more time talking to ourselves. Or to be more precise, we need to listen less to personal circumstances and the state of our emotions, and more to God's word.

At face value that may sound rather simplistic. But actually, it is not. To talk to yourself in this way is not about denying the reality of your situation, but opening yourself up to greater perspectives

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<sup>2</sup> D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, (Pickering and Inglis, 1965).

that only faith in God can bring. If you follow Jesus, that is not just about subscribing to a set of theological propositions or accepting certain doctrines. It is something much greater and deeper than that. It is about being born into a new relationship - what Lloyd Jones referred to as a very peculiar relationship with God - in which you are given a new identity as God's child. And when that relationship is brought to bear upon your circumstances, it shrinks them down to size. God becomes the object of your gaze. Life problems will almost certainly always be there, but we learn to glance at them, because we learn to gaze at God.

### **Prayer:**

*Lord God, thank you that you transformed Naomi and Ruth's lives, meeting them in their brokenness, emptiness and bitterness and leading them to hope and new beginnings.*

*Forgive us for those times when we allow our gaze to become fixed upon our circumstances. Help us instead to turn our gaze upon you. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

### **Questions for reflection...**

1. Why do you think we have a natural tendency to gaze upon our circumstances rather than the promises of God?
2. How might gazing upon the promises of God help us to get a different perspective on our circumstances?
3. Can you think of any particular stories or passages from the Bible that express God's promises, and which you might share with someone who is struggling to lay hold of hope?

# RUTH 2: SERMON - GOD'S COVENANT-LOVE

John M. Haley

*Superintendent Minister of the  
Torbay Methodist Circuit*

**“May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (Ruth 2:12).**

It is reckoned that the shortest National Anthem in the world is that of Japan - with just four lines. This compares with the National Anthem of Greece - which has 158 verses. The official version of ‘God save the Queen’ has two seven-line verses and with music used by Beethoven, Haydn and Brahms. I happen to think that it’s not so bad.

When I was a Law student, I was supposed to spend a lot of time in research in the library. The trouble was that there always seemed to be more interesting books on the shelves than the ones on my reading list, including *The Guinness Book of Records*. It is now some time since I was able to look at it but, unless something very long has been written since, the longest hymn was the 30 verse, 240 line, *The Sands of Time are Sinking* (MHB 637) (they certainly were by the time she had finished writing it!) by Anne Ross Cousin (1824-1906), which was based on the writings of the Scottish Puritan, Samuel Rutherford. Typically me, this was one of the hymns that fascinated me when I was a teenager - not least the verse:

*With mercy and with judgment  
My web of time He wove,  
And aye the dews of sorrow  
Were lusted with His love;  
I’ll bless the hand that guided,  
I’ll bless the heart that planned,  
When throned where glory dwelleth  
In Immanuel’s land.*

In this verse, the hymn-writer offers an exploration of God's purposes working out in life - 'With mercy and with judgment / My web of time he wove'. Do things happen only according to God's predetermined plan? Would that make us robots? Or does everything simply happen by chance? Are we in the hands of God or simply fate? The Bible teaches that God has total sovereign control over all things - but also teaches that we must choose. If we are simply robots, that would mean God causes us to do evil - and that can't be right. If everything simply happens by chance, then God is not in sovereign control - and that can't be right either. Although it might not seem like it at first, the story of Ruth also explores these themes. Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, was married to a man from Bethlehem named Elimelech. Because of a famine in the land, they and their two sons journeyed to Moab, where they lived for a time. When the sons grew up they married Moabite women - but Elimelech and the two sons died, leaving Naomi, and the young Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth, all widows. When Naomi heard that things were better in Bethlehem, she insisted that Orpah and Ruth return home to Moab, but Ruth resisted and went back to Bethlehem with Naomi.

When Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, it was the barley harvest. The law of Israel took widows into consideration. It was laid down in the law that at harvest-time a man must not reap his land to the very border of the field, nor should he pick up what was left after the reapers went through (Leviticus 19:9, 23:22), therefore leaving scraps. If he forgot a sheaf and left it in the field, he was forbidden to go back for it (Deuteronomy 24:19). This left grain for gleaning. It appears that Naomi and Ruth were extremely poor, so Ruth said to Naomi, "*Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour*" (2:2). An interesting question must now be what role God plays in the unfolding story: Is he in sovereign control? As the story continues it appears that God's providential hand is at work. There seems no doubt that God has a plan for Naomi and Ruth and will provide for them. In this we see:

## 1. The sovereignty of God

*Ruth* 2 opens by introducing a relative of Naomi's husband, Boaz, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelech. Boaz appears to be a good citizen, a man of influence and integrity. Therefore, he was a man who was likely to follow the law, so that his land was not entirely reaped but something was left for the poor people to glean. Some landowners would not be keen on gleaning. A hostile landowner could make it very difficult for even the poorest of people to glean on his land. When Ruth decided to go to the fields and glean behind the harvesters, success was not guaranteed but, '*As it turned out*' (2:3), she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz - who was related to Naomi. The Bible phrases this '*as it turned out*', which is a good way of expressing what the writer wants to say. There is no overt plan of God revealed. What may be commonly called 'luck' or 'chance' or 'fate', believers call 'providence'. The writer of *Ruth* is not pushing any particular point of view but simply uses a neutral expression, '*as it turned out*' - but this is still different from 'luckily' or 'by chance'.

Unlike our fields, the land around Bethlehem was not divided into small parcels with different owners. Instead, there would have been a much larger field that was not divided by a fence or hedge only a boundary of stones. Ironically, as Boaz has already been introduced, Ruth was gleaning on his land. God, who is constantly working behind the scenes, was providentially directing and controlling this situation. Then, just at the right time, Boaz arrived - for Ruth and Boaz it was a coincidence, but not for God. We might carelessly say 'fortunately', 'luckily', 'as chance would have it' but in reality God is at work. The world at large may attribute this to random events in a complex universe producing a coincidence, 'but the eyes of faith are able to perceive the hand of God in these apparent coincidences'.<sup>3</sup> Boaz did not know or recognise Ruth but God was at work through his faithful servant as Boaz enquired as to the identity of the woman gleaning on his land. In this we see:

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<sup>3</sup> K. L. Younger Jr. *Judges and Ruth*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, p. 452.

## 2. The service of God's people

The foreman told Boaz, "*She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi*" (2:6). Ruth had been gleaning with permission and had worked steadily with only a short break. When Boaz spoke to Ruth he called her "*my daughter*" (2:8), suggesting that he was rather older than her. There was an obvious issue about a young woman working in the fields among the working men. Boaz told Ruth not to go anywhere else but to work along with his girls and to drink their water. Boaz has guarded her against any unseemly behaviour and provided for that most basic need - a drink. This was a complete reversal of the customs of the time for foreigners normally drew water for Israelites and women drew water for men. The way Boaz provided for Ruth was extraordinary - a practical application of 'covenant-love', something that had been introduced in chapter one.

For her part, Ruth received the generosity of Boaz with humility, wondering why she has found such favour. Boaz had clearly heard about Ruth's kindness and loyalty to Naomi, his relative Elimelech's widow. Did Boaz have his great ancestor, Abraham, in his mind when he said: "*how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before?*" (2:11). It is impossible to say but it seems likely that the author of the book did.<sup>4</sup> Boaz added, "*May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge*" (2:12). Interestingly enough, this prayer would eventually be answered by the one who offered it. Boaz, by the generosity of his spirit, offered Ruth covenant-love and commended Ruth to God. What Ruth had done required such a debt of gratitude that only God himself could pay it off. Ruth had fled to Israel to take refuge under the wings of the LORD, the God of Israel. 'The image is of a tiny bird snuggling under the wings of its mother'<sup>5</sup> (cf. Deuteronomy 32:11). This pictures God as the Protector (Psalms 36:7, 57:1, 91:4), but the

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<sup>4</sup> A. E. Cundall & L. Morris, *Judges and Ruth: an introduction and commentary*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968, Vol. 7, p. 262.

<sup>5</sup> F. B. Huey Jr. *Ruth*. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, Vol. 3, p. 530.

word for ‘wing’ is also the word for the ‘skirt’ or ‘robe’ of a man. There will be more about that in chapter three. In this we see:

### 3 The salvation of God’s People

Ruth’s gentle and appreciative reply gained her even more favour from Boaz, who invited her to eat with the harvesters. She was able to eat all that she wanted and still some remained. So Boaz granted her more favour going beyond the legal rights, allowing her to glean among the sheaves and asking his workers to pull out some stalks from the bundles so that there was more to pick up. Covenant-love transformed an ordinary midday meal into a demonstration of compassion and grace. Ruth continued to work until evening came and then threshed the barley she had gathered. An ephah was about four gallons - enough for a woman to live on for about a month. Apparently, such an amount is large for a gleaner and there are many more days of harvest to come. Boaz treated Ruth like a member of the family and yet his true identity was hidden from her. Only later did Naomi reveal, *“That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers”* (2:20).

The ‘kinsman-redeemer’ is an important part of our understanding this book of *Ruth*. As a hyphenated compound ‘kinsman-redeemer’ translates an Old Testament word with a variety of meanings. The basic idea is fulfilling your family (clan) obligations. These included purchasing property sold from economic necessity (Leviticus 25:25-30; cf. Jeremiah 32:1-15) and redeemed relatives whose poverty had forced them to sell themselves into slavery (Leviticus 25:47-55). So Boaz was now revealed not simply as a man of standing in the family clan, but as someone with duties. Naomi’s earlier bitterness seems to have turned to joy - she had food and a generous benefactor - but even the generosity of Boaz is the generosity of the Lord who had not stopped showing ‘kindness’. This ‘kindness’ (Hebrew *hesed*), this ‘covenant-love’ is ultimately the work of the Lord. Having received such generosity and goodwill, it would not be good for Ruth to go to another field. In any event she was protected in the field of Boaz, so it would be good for her to stay there.

The idea of the sovereignty of God in today’s world is a difficult one, especially when people do not believe in a divine Creator - after all,

as far as the received wisdom is concerned, 'Life is what we make of it'. We may feel that we are 'free agents' in control of our destinies by a determination of our wills,<sup>6</sup> but that is not the way in which the Bible sees it. The Bible portrays God as having an eternal plan, an eternal plan of salvation for his errant people, a plan revealed in a most unusual way, in Jesus. While, in her desperate circumstances, Ruth took positive action, she was not to know about Boaz. She did not arrange to end up in his field, neither could she know she would be blessed by his kindness.

Our regular pattern of life does not involve not harvesting our fields to the edges or meeting foreign widows. Few, if any, of us will be able to express kindness and covenant-love in the way that Boaz did. But it is the responsibility of the church to express the service of God's people - and 'the church' is 'us'. For the service that we offer to the world is a reflection of the service God in Christ offers to us. Expressing 'covenant-love' is the responsibility of us all - not simply of a select few. This will often require us to take the initiative rather than wait for someone else to do it.<sup>7</sup>

Later Boaz will be revealed as an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ. In time, the readers of *Ruth* would see, through Boaz, this ancestor of King David, a shadow of the one who would come to be the Messiah-King. When they were in desperate need of kindness and of covenant-love, how they would long for a 'Boaz'. For the Christian believer we first look back to see the one who came to be the Messiah-King - Jesus. When we were in desperate need of kindness and of covenant-love, it appeared in Jesus. Similarly we can look forward to the one who will come again as Messiah-King - Jesus.

Most of us are familiar with the illustration about the two sides of the tapestry. The outward side is the beautiful picture but the reverse side can be an impenetrable tangle of threads. I don't know whether that illustration pre-dates the lines of Anne Ross Cousin, 'With mercy and with judgment / My web of time He wove,' but probably many of us can testify to catching at least a glimpse of the beautiful picture even when the reverse side of daily living presents

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<sup>6</sup> K. L. Younger Jr. *Judges and Ruth*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, p. 453.

<sup>7</sup> K. L. Younger Jr. *Judges and Ruth*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, p. 451.

us with things that we do not understand and find impossible to unravel. However, in early September, I was following my morning routine of walking my dog in the woods not far from home when, hanging from the branch of a tree, I saw two bright headlights dazzling me, as if the driver coming in the opposite direction had not selected 'dip' and I was being blinded by the main beam. On closer inspection, these intense lights turned out to be two small raindrops clinging to a twig, the late summer sun powerfully refracted by them. So these were the 'dews of sorrow lustred with His love' I thought. It's not always easy navigating through the joys and sorrows of life but as we journey on we do so in the hope that if not sooner, then certainly later:

*I'll bless the hand that guided,  
I'll bless the heart that planned,  
When throned where glory dwelleth  
In Immanuel's land.*

### **Prayer:**

*Gracious God, help me to see your love working in and through things that happen that I find difficult to understand. Use me, in your purposes, to fulfil your perfect will. Help me, by your grace, to show the love of Christ to others, for the glory of his name. Amen.*

### **Questions for reflection...**

1. Are there times where you can look back on your life and realise now that God was working, even if you did not know it at the time?
2. Are there occasions where you realise now that God used you to answer the prayer that you offered?
3. What ordinary everyday things could we transform by 'covenant-love' or 'Christ-like love'?

4. Rather than waiting for someone else to do it, is there a new initiative that you could take that would enable you to show 'covenant-love' or 'Christ-like love' to others?

**Abbreviations:**

*MHB: Methodist Hymn Book* (1933), London, Methodist Publishing House.

# RUTH 3:

## ITS MESSAGE AND HOW I WOULD PREACH IT

Russell G. Herbert

*Superintendent Minister of the  
Gordano Valley Methodist Circuit*

I have a confession to make. Actually, I have quite a few, but I have got a limit on my word-count, so I will just share this one with you. I have been preaching since 1990, and in that time, almost 30 years now, I do not think I have ever preached a sermon on the book of *Ruth*, until now. I guess you might say I have been thoroughly ruthless in my ministry!

So, as I begin to write a few words for preachers to preach about how to preach about *Ruth*, not only do I have that feeling of cooking for Jamie Oliver, but feel like I am demonstrating a recipe that I have never actually tried before. My apologies in advance if what I offer seems a bit half-baked.

### **First encounters**

That said, I am hoping that there might be something that is beneficial to all of us in the fact that I am approaching this as a 'Ruth novice' rather than a 'Ruth expert'. That is because what I hope to share with you is not some ground-breaking piece of Old Testament scholarship, but simply how as preachers we might go about the task of enabling our congregations to encounter the engaging power of God's word as we seek to unpack, in a fresh way, what was written centuries ago and through which God continues to speak right into our lives today.

I happen to be a guitar player. One thing I love doing is learning fingerstyle pieces from YouTube. Now there are thousands of guitarists on there who have uploaded tutorials from which you can attempt to learn just about any piece of music that takes your

interest. Some of these players are among the best in the world, yet I often find that the most helpful tutorials are those offered by the relatively inexperienced who have only just become familiar with the piece of music themselves. Why? Because the encounter is still quite fresh for them. They still understand the challenges of the piece - what is hard, and what you need to work at in order to make it really come to life. And so, as I share with you my own process of wrestling for the first time with this particular passage of scripture, I hope there might be something in the newness of my own experience that might expose something that is fresh and helpful for you.

### **What is it all about?**

Before we start to look at *Ruth*, Chapter 3 specifically, let me say something about how I approach preaching in general. For some years now I have pretty much defaulted to what I would refer to as ‘themed preaching’. Throughout the entire year, the larger of the two churches where I serve as a minister will follow themed series material, with specifically chosen subjects and Bible passages in the Sunday services and accompanying resources for midweek small group study. While I recognise that this has its disadvantages as well as its strengths, a side-effect of the practice is that it has got me into the habit of approaching every sermon I preach with the question, ‘what is the strapline here?’ In other words, even if I am not given a sermon title by a series programme, but instead might be preaching from the lectionary, I still find it helpful to focus in on a caption, whether that be a question or a statement. It forces me to identify what the ‘heart of the matter’ is that I am going to be inviting the congregation to explore.

As I am writing this right now, I only have ‘*Ruth* Chapter 3’ for a title. So for a strapline to emerge, I have got to read the text through to see what leaps out. I find that sometimes this happens really quickly. Other times, not so. It’s at that point that I might try looking at a few different translations and paraphrases, maybe something like Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*. Sometimes it only takes a slightly different turn of phrase here or there to ignite the spark. When it does, it is usually around that point that I get out the commentaries and begin looking at the original Greek or Hebrew

words that have been processed into English. I should point out that I am no expert in that department but that is okay - we do not need to be. The important thing is that we are asking, 'what do these words really mean?' and if we do not have the linguistic know-how ourselves, are unafraid to go to the commentaries and interlinear translations to unearth some answers.

So then, in looking at *Ruth* Chapter 3, what sort of themes start to emerge?

### **The suggestive ambiguities of Ruth Chapter 3**

Let us be honest about this - it is a juicy chapter.

If we think of it as a play, the chapter breaks down into three scenes. The first scene shows Naomi briefing Ruth with a scheme for securing a future with Boaz. The second scene shows the implementation of the scheme in the middle of the night at the threshing floor, before Ruth returns to Naomi to tell her the results in the third scene. So the central event in this chapter is the meeting of Ruth and Boaz on that threshing floor.

Well then, let us cut to the chase. Is this scene a *sex scene*?

We are not told that it is. But neither are we told that it is not. And it is the ambiguity of the description that has generated no small amount of discussion among commentators over the years.

There is certainly no getting away from the suggestive nature of Ruth's actions. She jumps in the shower, slaps on some perfume, puts on her best clothes and makes off in the darkness of night to lie down at the feet of Boaz after he has been eating and drinking. She then wakes him up by pulling the covering away from the lower part of his body. What are we to conclude?

Well it is not exactly the first biblical scene that comes to mind when you are trying to think of an idea that might work well as a puppet sketch in an all age worship service. But the truth is that ultimately, we do not know and cannot know whether Ruth and Boaz had more than a conversation on the threshing floor that night.

The scene carries more than a hint of something sexual going on. In fact, when we look at the ancestry of both Ruth and Boaz, it is hard not to see two pretty stark parallel stories to this one, both of which were in fact rather more sordid...

Ruth was a descendent of Moab, the son of Lot and Lot's daughter. You may recall that story from Genesis 19:30-38. Both of Lot's daughters were childless. With no other men to be found, they resorted to getting their father drunk on two successive nights and taking it in turn to sleep with him. Nine months later they each bore a son, one of whom was Moab. If Ruth had ever attempted to write out her family tree, she would have had an interesting time drawing in that part.

As for Boaz - he was a descendent of Perez, the son of Tamar and Judah. Genesis 38 tells us that Tamar was widowed and without children. According to the levirate code of the day, her late husband's brother was charged with the responsibility of marrying her and ensuring that he gets her pregnant. He was not happy about that, and so withdrew himself from her every time they had intercourse. He was struck down dead. But Tamar was determined. She took off her widow's garments, put on a veil and, disguising herself as a prostitute, seduced her father-in-law, Judah accepting the pledge of one goat as payment for services rendered. She gave birth to twins as a result, one of whom was Perez, to whom Boaz's lineage is traced right at the end of Ruth 4.

And so we have two tales of childless women going to desperate measures to lay hold of the only type of social security that their historic context offered them. They needed to get pregnant and were willing to do whatever was required to make that happen. These accounts form the ancestral backdrop for the story of Ruth and Boaz. As such, when we picture Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor in the early hours, there is no getting away from the echoes of Genesis 19 and 38. Ruth too would seem to be on a mission to get pregnant, and so she goes to Boaz in order to have sex.

But is that actually what happens?

I will say it again - we do not know, and cannot know. But I want to run with the suggestion that it is not in fact what happens. I think that is too simplistic. Sure, Ruth is on a mission, but I believe it is more complex than a matter of simply seeking to get pregnant right there and then on the threshing floor.

I find it more plausible and compelling to think of this story as one of risks. From a human perspective, each of the key characters can be seen to be taking different kinds of risks. Each has a lot to gain but also much to lose. There are so many delicate issues at stake and the potential for disaster is enormous. But for all that, the risks turn out to be worth taking. Let's unpack that.

First, Ruth takes a huge number of risks. Having already risked an uncertain future by leaving her homeland in order to accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem, she presents herself to Boaz in such a way that risks being radically misinterpreted. At the core of her scheme, Ruth is hoping that Boaz will honour her act of making herself utterly vulnerable towards him, and in telling him that he is her 'kinsman-redeemer', effectively proposes a marriage that she hopes he will want to accept. But in doing all this in the manner that she does, she risks being shooed away by Boaz as an immoral woman with whom he wants nothing further to do. On the other hand, she risks being taken advantage of by him, or indeed, anyone else whose path she might cross on her way to and from the threshing floor.

Boaz also undertakes no small measure of risk. His response to Ruth is positive - he expresses to her that she is indeed a '*woman of noble character*' (3:11), and that his desire is to marry her. But the tension is not resolved yet. Boaz honours the customs of his day and he is aware that he does not have an automatic right to Ruth's hand. And so it is that the next day Boaz goes down to the gate to instigate a meeting in which he puts his own hope and desire on the line through a sense that he must act openly, honestly and with integrity.

And let us not forget Naomi in all this. After all, she hatches the whole plan and in so doing she puts Ruth's welfare and reputation at stake. Let us be blunt - she gives some pretty risky advice. Imagine you have a girl in your church youth group who confides in a youth leader that she has a bit of a crush on one of the lads and want some

advice as to how she might find out whether the feeling is mutual. You wouldn't expect the leader to suggest she makes herself pretty, sneaks round to his place in the middle of the night, breaks into his bedroom while he is sleeping, wakes him up and then does whatever he tells her to do. But that is not very different from Naomi's instructions, and any risk for Ruth represents a risk for Naomi herself.

So it is a story of risks. But these are not the sort of risks that involve placing faith in chance. No. They are risks that have to do with faith in the providence of God. There is a lot of tension in the air in *Ruth* Chapter 3, tension that is not fully resolved until Chapter 4. Each of the risks undertaken serves to remind us that every experience of uncertainty confronts us with the question of where we place our trust, and presents us with an opportunity to grow in our dependency on God.

### **Moving towards a strapline**

That, then, is the central thematic thread that I would preach from this chapter. Now, I said earlier that I often find it helpful to think about what sort of strapline might be used when preaching a message. That does not mean it literally needs to be a title that will be disclosed to anyone else - it is just that I find it helpful to form one as part of the planning process because of the focus it gives. So, given the overall theme that I have identified - namely, taking risks in faith - what sort of strapline might come to mind?

Let us think a bit more about straplines themselves. I think it is really important that we pay close attention to the question of who we are seeking to engage. Hopefully, it is everyone. As preachers we should be aspiring to connect with anyone who might ever listen to us - not just those who usually listen to us - but also those who we have not reached yet. That might not seem obvious, so let me spell it out more explicitly, by asking you a question: When you are getting a sermon ready, who do you imagine might eventually be listening to you?

I ask that question because I think it can genuinely bring the planning process to life if we have a picture in our minds of the people who

are going to be sitting in front of us as we preach. But I also want to flag up what I think is an enormous danger - if we are not careful, we can think only of our 'usual, typical Sunday congregation'. The reason I think that is dangerous is because it means that we will almost certainly end up speaking in a way that is very specifically targeted towards those who we might refer to as 'churched'. That is problematic, because we can too easily default, albeit unintentionally, into a mode of communication that is unlikely to engage anyone who does not fall into that category. That is to say, we slip into a way of talking which uses language that only tends to get used in church culture, and we make all sorts of assumptions that our listeners are familiar with various references that we might make, whether to biblical stories, theological terms or a whole host of other Christian stuff.

This opens up a really important and fascinating set of issues. How might we preach in a way that avoids 'Christianese' language but without diluting the depth and substance of the Gospel? Indeed, is it realistically possible to engage those who are unchurched *and* feed committed disciples simultaneously?

I think it is.

## **Deep and wide**

It is precisely this tension that Andy Stanley grapples with in his book *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*.<sup>8</sup> As the title conveys, churches face something of a dual challenge. On the one hand, in seeking to nurture those who are committed Christians, we aspire towards a preaching ministry that has spiritual depth about it. If disciples are to grow then we need to be fed, and so substance is required. But we are also seeking to reach those who have little or no experience of church - and so we need to be thinking wide. Stanley's conviction is that depth and breadth are not mutually exclusive. We do not have to choose between

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<sup>8</sup> Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*, Zondervan, 2012.

growing existing disciples or reaching out to make new ones. Ministry can be, and should be, both deep and wide.

For all the cultural differences that might exist between our experience in the British Methodist church and the American mega-church that Stanley leads, the challenge he identifies is pretty much the same as ours. If we are serious about growing in both depth and numbers, we need to be serious about both substance and breadth. And so it is that Stanley sets out a vision for what he calls *double-barrel preaching*. We have not the time to go through all this right now - although I sincerely believe that every preacher should. There is, however, one particular value that is at the core of this vision, and which I would like to highlight here. It is all to do with being deeply aware of big life questions that *everyone* is carrying. Whether we consider ourselves Christian or not, we are all human and all face the joys and challenges of 'doing life'. Stanley says that we should preach in such a way as to make it clear that nobody in our congregations is the 'odd one out'. Whether they are totally new to church, or have been part of it for years, we should avoid making sharp distinctions but instead talk in a way that openly recognises that everyone wrestles with the same sort of life issues because of our common humanity. Christians and non-Christians actually have far more in common than we tend to recognise. After all, everyone knows what it is like to worry, and we all tend to worry over what are at least, in the broadest sense, similar things - whether that is relationships, family life, money, decision making, health, forgiveness or whatever. These are neither 'Christian' nor 'non-Christian' issues. They are just issues.

This means that in preaching, our starting point should not be our message, but the questions, issues and struggles that are part of life. That is to say, rather than beginning with whatever it is we think we need to present, we should instead start at the place where all of us, Christian or not, struggle for a sense of direction, where we all shrug shoulders and wish someone could give us some answers. In order to point to biblical texts that speak into these things, our preaching needs to go first not to the texts but to the experience, to the place where the shoulder-shrugging happens. Only when we establish where that place is do we have somewhere that we can meaningfully connect.

## So then, what is our strapline?

Let us get back to Ruth now. Specifically, in searching for a strapline, my first thought might be to frame something around what I have identified as the theme of *taking risks in faith*. But whilst that might convey something of the message that I am thinking I might want to share, in and of itself it doesn't express very much of the experiential reality in which the opportunity to take such risks might present themselves. We need to rewind, to back-up to the place where ordinary human struggle is lived out, where we all find ourselves asking deep questions and shrugging our shoulders. Only when we start to engage with that reality can we start to talk about taking risks in faith. In other words, if we want our preaching to connect with some answers, we first need to engage the questions. So what are they?

Well, let us revisit the situations in which Ruth, Naomi and Boaz find themselves. Ruth's away from her homeland. She is bereaved. She is without any lasting social security. But she is beginning to frame the possibilities of a future in which her life just might turn around.

What about Boaz? Apart from his ancestry to which we've already alluded, we do not know much about his personal back story. He is described as '*a man of standing*' (2:1), but for all his wealth, we are given the impression that he continues to work hard. His character is one of honesty, integrity and kindness - he is someone who not only 'does the right thing', but is notably generous. But beyond that we do not know much about his circumstances. One thing we can say though, is that in his encounter with Ruth in Chapter 3, we see a man whose vision for the future is stirred. He appears to be very attracted to new possibilities that he was not expecting, yet unsure as to whether they will become reality.

As for Naomi, while she might be back in her homeland, she has lost her husband and both her sons. Little wonder we see her asking others not to call her '*Naomi*', which means 'pleasant', but '*Mara*', meaning 'bitter' (1:20). Her preoccupation is, understandably, the most overwhelming sense of *emptiness* (1:21). But if that was her preoccupation in Chapter 1, in Chapter 3 we see her mustering some resolve as she tells Ruth, "*Should I not try to find a home for you*

*where you will be provided for?"* (3:1). That is where she is at - completely devastated but daring to imagine how things just might take a turn for the better.

As I think about these situations, they all seem to be defined by uncertainties. All of the characters are surrounded by circumstances in which they long for a sense of clarity, but are in that place where anything could happen. So that is where I would want to take the congregation as the starting point.

My strapline then, would be something like, 'How can we be sure and certain when life is not?' I may or may not actually share that as a title - I might be the only one who knows that's my strapline. But it is there to give me some focus. So let us now have a think about what the message itself might look like.

### **The message - 'How can we be sure and certain when life is not?'**

I have heard it said many times that, when exposed to a speaker, most of us, whether we are aware of it or not, decide whether we are going to listen or switch off within a matter of seconds. If that is true (and I think it is), we need to pay very close attention to the way we open up our message. We need to find a way of connecting with our listeners right where they are.

It is for this reason that I always try to start with some kind of attention-grabbing story that will take us to the area of human experience with which I am trying to connect. Comedy works really well here but if we're using it, we need to be mindful of why we're doing so. The danger is that we find a really great story that is interesting or funny but does not actually do much to connect the listeners to the experience that we are looking to engage. We are not simply joke-tellers or story-tellers. We are not doing this to entertain - we are seeking to engage. So it is important to be continually asking, 'What is the relevance of this story? What does it illustrate?'

As I approach this particular message, I am wanting to take the listeners to the experience of feeling in the dark about the future.

The following example of an opener comes to mind - in fact it is one I have used in the past:

*I do not want you to think any less of me for what I am about to share with you, but there is something I sometimes get up to when I am on holiday that might shock you. In fact, it is only when I am on holiday that I ever do it, and maybe it is for that reason that I find it really indulging and addictive every time I start. But it is not the sort of activity that I tell people about, because I am not proud of it.*

*I am talking about jigsaw puzzles.*

*There - I have said it. Please do not judge me.*

*Most of the holiday rental cottages I have ever stayed in have had a stock of jigsaws piled up in a corner somewhere. It is not normally that long after we have unpacked and settled in that one of these - usually a 1000 piece one - gets opened up onto the coffee table - and there it remains for the next seven days, each member of the family doing a little bit here and there. The problem, well, my problem, is that once I start, I cannot stop, especially if it is in the evening. It is not uncommon that everyone else will have gone up to bed and several hours have past, and I am totally lost in the thing.*

*There was one occasion where I was genuinely lost...in that I simply could not get the puzzle started. All the family were baffled with it. Nothing seemed to make sense. No matter how hard we tried, none of us could get anywhere with putting anything together. At first it was just annoying. Then it became really annoying. Eventually it went from really annoying to downright infuriating. The emotional temperature started to increase and some heated words were spoken. I felt I was actually starting to lose my faith not just in this particular puzzle, but puzzles in general.*

*The lid of the box, bearing the picture that the puzzle was supposed to look like once assembled, spun through the air*

*as I tossed it across the room in a temper tantrum. I eventually picked it up where it had landed, which was right beside a couple of other puzzles. One of them looked like it was in the same series, as the design and logo on the box was the same. Then I noticed it was also exactly the same size and shape. A few more moments passed before the penny dropped.*

*I opened the other box. Suddenly everything made sense. The lids had been muddled. The picture did not match the puzzle inside.*

*As we look forward to the future, we all naturally do so with a picture in our minds as to what that future might look like. We imagine where we will be, who we will be with, what sort of things will be happening - what life will be like. In fact, the picture that we have in our minds will shape the way we live now as we walk towards that future.*

*But have you ever been in a situation where it just seems impossible to imagine your way out of the present - where circumstances overwhelm you and you cannot see beyond them? I'm thinking of those times when everything seems to be going wrong; everything seems up in the air and unresolved. Times when so many hopes have been dashed and we are left confused and dumbfounded as to how we might ever move forward...*

I would then go on to expand this illustration by offering a few concrete examples of situations in which we find ourselves struggling with uncertainty and unresolved messiness in life. The central point I would be eventually seeking to make is that Christian hope is all about living with the vision that God gives us, but at this point in the message I am trying to take my listeners to a place that I am sure we're all familiar with - namely the experience of feeling in the dark, not knowing where life is going.

Then, and only then, would I start to turn to the book of *Ruth*, and assuming that the biblical text has already been read in the service, I would sketch a bit of a picture of each of the key characters and

the uncertainty that is surrounding them - along similar lines as I did earlier.

Now, our focus right here is expository preaching and the book of *Ruth*. The word *expository* means to *explain* and *describe*. So, if we're seeking to preach an expository sermon on *Ruth*, we're looking to explain and describe what that book is saying. My conviction is that the most effective way of doing this is also to explain and describe the personal human experience that this connects with - to engage the life issues that our listeners are living with. As such, as we develop the message and highlight various passages of the text, pointing out the characters, their circumstances, their words and their actions, I think it is vital that throughout we make connections between the text and the life themes we are dealing with. Stories and illustrations are really essential here, not simply to hold the listener's attention (although that is important), but because that is what engages the imagination and enables the listener to really internalise the message for themselves.

Perhaps the most helpful way of sharing how I think I would go about doing this with *Ruth* Chapter 3 is to share with you, in this last part, the sort of thing I think I might say in bringing the message to a conclusion.

### **Presenting a challenge...and expecting a response**

I always aim to finish with some sort of opportunity to respond in a personal way. Here is one suggestion for the text we are looking at right now, and with which I will round off:

*Facing the future and the uncertainty that it presents us with can be really difficult. Often that is because there is nothing left for us to do but wait. But with God, when we wait, we do not do so alone. We may not know the future but God does, and He calls us to wait not in fear but in confident hope. That is what we see at the end of Ruth, Chapter 3:16-18:*

*'When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?" Then she told her everything that 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.”*

*Notice that Boaz’s parting words to Ruth are not narrated to us directly from Boaz himself, but through Ruth, as she tells Naomi what he has said. I think that is important, because it connects the words of Boaz more closely to Naomi. It means that as listeners to the story, we only hear Boaz’s words, ‘Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed’, as they are spoken to Naomi. The reason that is important is because it points back to the beginning of the story - specifically 1:21, where Naomi, drenched in grief, says, “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty...” So here she is now, with more than a hint that God is meeting Naomi in her emptiness and is about to turn her life around.*

*It is from Naomi that we hear the closing words of Chapter 3, as she says, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.” This is actually the last time we hear Ruth and Naomi speak. The curtain closes on the two women waiting.*

*How often do our lives share a lot in common with this scene? We’ve experienced sadness and loss, and find ourselves in a place where we long for some certainty over the future, yet struggle to find it. We know the future will come, but we just do not know what it will hold. All we can do is wait.*

*But is it? Well, sometimes, yes, and that’s all Ruth and Naomi can do right now. But let us remember that their waiting is not passive, because they’ve done all they can do. They’ve stepped out in faith and taken some serious risks, in the faith that God will provide. And indeed, God does provide. God meets us in that place of emptiness, and calls us to be unafraid to take some risks as we lean into Him in faith.*

*Let us also not forget that God Himself seems to be something of a risk-taker. He gives us freedom to make our own choices, knowing that we might not always make the best ones. He never forces Himself on anyone, but allows us the freedom to accept the relationship with Him that He offers us in Jesus, all the while knowing that we may not, and often do not accept this offer. Indeed, in reaching out to us in Jesus, God shows Himself to be the ultimate risk-taker for the sake of love. We see this most clearly on the cross. He reaches into the murky waters of death, where we can see no future at all, to pull us right out.*

*In August 2010, 33 Chilean miners found themselves trapped 700m below ground level. They had no way of getting themselves out. After 17 days contact was established with them as a note was found taped to a drill bit that was pulled back to the surface. The world watched in suspense as the rescue attempt went under way. Eventually, an escape shaft was drilled, and a rescue capsule built, barely half a metre wide. On 12 October, the first rescuer, Manuel Gonzalez, stepped into the capsule and was then lowered through the shaft, a descent that took 18 very long minutes. Then, one by one, each of the miners was brought back to surface, having been trapped for 69 days. I can barely imagine what it must have felt like to be the first rescuer stepping into that capsule and being lowered down. The risks were enormous, but proved to be life-saving.*

*Like those miners, we cannot save ourselves. We may at times feel so overwhelmed with the uncertainty of life that we wonder what will happen to us. But thankfully, God is a risk-taker and, in Jesus Christ, he comes to our rescue, reaching out to us when we are trapped in a place from which we cannot pull ourselves out. On the cross, God reaches into the depths of death itself, holds out a hand and offers to pull us back, not simply to a place of safety but to everlasting life in all its fullness.*

*And that's where we too are called to take a risk. When we find ourselves feeling trapped, facing a future with no sense*

*of certainty, God invites us to grasp His hand in trust - to take a few risks in faith. That is what we see going on in the lives of Ruth, Naomi, and indeed Boaz. What about yours right now? Are there areas of uncertainty where you really long for a greater sense of clarity? Are there things that keep you awake at night because they are messy and unresolved?*

*Maybe, just maybe, God might be opening up the situation in which you find yourself right now as an opportunity for you to take a hold of His hand, even though you might not be quite sure as to where it might be leading you, and to take some risks in faith.*

*My guess is that we may not know what it feels like to be trapped underground like those Chilean miners, but we probably do recognise some of the brokenness, grief and uncertainty in the lives of the characters in the book of Ruth. They remind us that even when life is uncertain, God is there and can be trusted.*

*And in case you are wondering, I did complete that jigsaw puzzle. It was not easy but then they are not supposed to be - that would be boring. But one thing I learnt on that particular occasion is that it makes all the difference when you are working to the right picture. For all the uncertainty that we face each day as we live out our lives, in Christ, God offers us an ultimate picture - a vision - of what our eternal future will be like. Ruth's story gives us just a glimpse of the difference that it makes when we trust in God, daring to take some risks as we stand on His promises and walk forward in faith.*

### **Prayer:**

*Lord, thank you for Ruth, Naomi and Boaz, for their story, and for how they each show that in the midst of uncertainty, you can be trusted.*

*In the stillness of this moment, we hold before you our own uncertainties...*

*Help us, like Ruth, Naomi and Boaz, to be ready and unafraid to take some risks, to step out in faith and trust in you.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*

### **Questions for reflection...**

1. Think of one or two situations in which you have found yourself facing a difficult uncertainty. How did you feel? Why is waiting so hard?
2. In what ways does believing that God knows our future help?
3. What sort of risks might God call us to take?
4. Why might we not feel comfortable with taking risks?
5. What might be some of the differences between taking risks in faith and simply being reckless?
6. How might Ruth's story inspire us with a greater level of confidence in taking risks?



# RUTH 4:

## A GUIDE TO SERMON PREPARATION

John M. Haley

*Superintendent Minister of the Torbay Methodist Circuit*

Methodist ministers are familiar with the process of arranging appointments to circuits by invitation and re-invitation. When this was done with a directory, commonly known as the ‘Yellow Book’, in which short profiles of up to 50-words submitted by the ministers were printed, I always ordered a copy whether I was moving or not. For some reason, it always seemed to arrive on a Saturday morning. As Saturday is supposed to be my day off, I would lie in bed flicking through the profiles, occasionally yelling at the top of my voice, “Janet, you’ll never guess who this is!” Of course, I don’t know how many of my colleagues were doing something similar with my profile which always began, ‘aims to offer Biblical preaching and teaching’. That to me is the basic work of all Methodists preachers, whether ministers or local preachers. The historic distinction was simply meant to be the geographical scope of our work. Consequently, when my re-invitations have been due, I have remarked to my circuit stewards and people that although my sermons are reckoned to be longer than average, I like to think that my people are better taught than average.

The Church of England and the Methodist Church both have model sermons as part of their doctrinal statements or standards. The Church of England has the *Books of Homilies*, [www.anglicanlibrary.org/homilies/](http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/homilies/) which are two books containing a total of 33 sermons (see Article XXXV of the *Thirty-nine Articles*). The first volume was largely written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (published in 1547) and the second volume was written by Bishop John Jewel (published in 1571). The Methodist Church has the Sermons of John Wesley (sometimes called the *Forty-four* or *Fifty-three Sermons*), [en.wikisource.org/wiki/Forty-four\\_Sermons](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Forty-four_Sermons), these

being required reading for Methodist preachers, many of whom have remarked, 'surely the preaching of John Wesley that gathered congregations the size of football crowds cannot have been this dull.'

In theological college, we used to have to preach in sermon classes - it is a legend that I made an appeal (what some people would term an 'altar call') at the end of the sermon class and that three students and the tutor came forward - it would have been good were it to have been true but it is only a legend. It reminds me of another colleague's trial service which was conducted in a local church. "How did he get on?" I asked. "Not bad," came the reply. "Four were saved, three were healed, two were exorcised from demonic oppression and one was raised from the dead. We're giving him a "D" because he had the intercessions before the sermon."

If I understand it correctly, preaching is rather like 'Mozart', who incidentally died the same year as John Wesley, the accidental founder of the modern Methodist movement. While the music of Mozart, or any great composer, or the work of a different kind of artist (painter, sculptor), can be subjected to critical analysis, there is something personal, individual and subjective about our appreciation of music, art, literature - perhaps preaching too.

When I was a little boy, like many other boys, I wanted to be a great footballer. I was delighted when a short coaching series was going to be presented by one of the greatest players of all time, Manchester United and Northern Ireland footballer, George Best. The series was something of a disappointment causing my Dad to remark, "the trouble is, he doesn't know how he does it."

So, with all those provisos in place (we must have adequate time, we must expect God to be at work, there is no sermon recipe, even some of the great preachers don't know how they do it, and what really counts is the Holy Spirit's anointing), it is Friday morning and you are preaching on Sunday, worse still it is Saturday evening and you are speaking the next day and you have one word written on

your note pad in big letters - four big letters - not the Biblical *Tetragrammaton*, rendered in English as YHWH (Yahweh or old English, Jehovah) but four other letters: HELP. I do not claim to be the preaching equivalent of George Best but I hope that my feeble endeavours here might at least give some insight into how someone has been having a go at preparing sermons and studies for 40 years.

The task is to present something meaningful on *Ruth* - in this session we are looking particularly at Chapter 4. These days I prepare all my sermons on the computer, so the first thing I do is get the whole of the scripture passage under consideration onto the computer screen. In days B.C. (before computer), I would sometimes enlarge the scripture passage on a photocopier and before the photocopier (yes, I've been preaching that long), write it out by hand. That enables me constantly to focus on and refer to the text - and to mark or emphasise the text without necessarily defacing my best Bible - though having a working Bible to which you might feel able to do that is also a good idea. So, this is the first really significant thing to say, 'constantly focus on and refer to the text'. So let's do it!

*Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down.*

*Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. Then he said to the kinsman-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech. 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 and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property."*

*At this, the kinsman-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it."*

*(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 legalising transactions in Israel.)*

*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. 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."*

*So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. 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, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."*

*Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap 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.*

*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 (4:1-22).*

Now that I am able to use the computer, I often remove the signposts from the text (chapters and verses which help us find our way around but are not part of the Word of God). That leaves me with 585 words - which I would judge a relatively long passage on which to speak. Whatever the length of passage, I ask some preliminary questions of the text. What kind of writing is it?

Probably the first thing that many of us would say is that it is 'Old Testament'. The great Bible teacher, preacher and writer, Dr Alec Motyer, would have said:

*There is no special mystique or approach to preaching that has to descend on preachers when the Lord leads them to minister from the Old rather than the New. There are no special tricks of the trade that I can share with you.<sup>9</sup>*

The good practices that we follow when considering a New Testament passage will stand us in good stead as we look at the Old Testament. Nevertheless, we need to recognise that we are dealing with a different kind of writing from what to most, if not all, of us will be the more familiar passages of the Gospels or New Testament letters. The concluding genealogy suggests that we are meant to

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<sup>9</sup> J.A. Motyer, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, in *Preaching the Living Word, Addresses from the Evangelical Ministry Assembly*, Fearn, Christian Focus, 2012, p.99

read *Ruth* as history but we should not forget that, while we readily regard books from this part of the Old Testament as ‘historical books’, in the Hebrew canon they were seen as a collection of ‘former prophets’, books through which God speaks to his people.

You already have the advantage of the first three chapters of this book. The background of any scripture passage is important. *Ruth* is set in the period after the death of Moses but before the time of Saul, the first king (1:1). This is the era of the ‘Judges’. The Bible book of *Judges* gives a rather damning description of the state of the nation, ‘*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit*’ (Judges 21:25). There is no indication as to the author of *Ruth* or as to when the book was written. The female perspective is undoubtedly strong but we just do not know the identity of the author. It is important to be aware first, in general terms, of the whole book and then what comes immediately before and immediately after the passage that we are studying with a view to preaching. Only then is it time to look at the text under consideration more closely, perhaps marking it as we go.

The dominant theme of *Ruth* is God’s care, His covenant love for one ordinary family from Judah, but underlying themes include the expression of covenant love and the extraordinary descendant from this family. For the original reader this will have been David. For the Christian this will continue to be great David’s greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The story opens with Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons leaving Bethlehem, in a time of famine, for Moab. The irony of leaving Bethlehem meaning ‘house of bread’ in a time of famine is plain to see. In Moab, the two boys marry Moabite women but then, without further explanation, we learn that first Elimelech and then the two sons, Mahlon and Kilion died - leaving three widows, Naomi, Orpah and Ruth (and all that by chapter 1, verse 5!). This is ‘the major problem the story will address and resolve’.<sup>10</sup> Naomi was left

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<sup>10</sup> F.W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther (Word Bible Commentary)*, Dallas, Word, Incorporated, 1996, Vol. 9, p.68.

alone without her husband and her two boys in a world where life depended upon men. Only Ruth determined to cling to her:

*“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” (1:16-17).*

The Christian faces the challenge of reading the story of *Ruth* with New Testament knowledge. As ‘*all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*’ (2Timothy 3:16), we should find the Christian message here, but not read into the story something which is not there. However, in time, Ruth receives a glimmer of hope through the words of Boaz, “*may you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge*” (2:12). Encouraged by her mother-in-law, Ruth explores her hope in Boaz further by going to him privately at night saying, “*I am your servant Ruth ... spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer*” (3:9). There is no doubt that this passage is both highly charged and mysterious. It seems to me more like a proposal of marriage than an illicit liaison. It is dangerous to jump to conclusions that are not made specific within the text.

As with any passage, we might want to look up any interesting words in an analytical concordance (*Strong’s* or *Young’s*) and see if the original words were used anywhere else (*Young’s* gives a transliteration of the word so we can read the Biblical word in English script, *Strong’s* gives each word a number which helps us along the way). The idea of a ‘kinsman-redeemer’ (some newer Bibles render this ‘guardian-redeemer’) is clearly worth investigating.

The ‘kinsman-redeemer’ is an important part of our understanding this book of *Ruth*. As a hyphenated compound, ‘kinsman-redeemer’

translates an OT word with a variety of meanings. The basic idea is fulfilling your family (clan) obligations. These included purchasing property sold from economic necessity (Leviticus 25:25-30; cf Jeremiah 32:1-15) and redeemed relatives whose poverty had forced them to sell themselves into slavery (Leviticus 25:47-55). Boaz is now revealed not simply as a man of standing in the family clan, but someone with duties. Naomi's earlier bitterness seems to have turned to joy - she had food and a generous benefactor but even the generosity of Boaz is the generosity of the Lord who had not stopped showing 'kindness'. This 'kindness' (*hesed*), this 'covenant-love' is ultimately the work of the Lord. Having received such generosity and goodwill, it would not be good for Ruth to go to another field. In any event she was protected in the field of Boaz, so it would be good for her to stay there.

If we are giving a basic or introductory sermon or study in an area where we are comfortable and sure-footed we might be able to pass quickly over this next section but, more often than not, this is the stage at which I would consult at least two Bible commentaries. I do that because I think it will either confirm the direction I am taking or, if I am going in another direction completely, cause me to question it seriously. I have been preparing this working through the process, trying to tell you what I would normally do and doing it along the way - it's a bit painstaking for me as Friday morning at my desk with HELP in big letters on the computer monitor has given way to Friday afternoon. Happily, I am at the commentary stage now.

The problem with the one volume commentaries is that they often do not have the space to give more detailed answers to the questions that someone preparing a sermon or a study might want to ask. They are useful but we must be reasonable in our expectations of what they can include. For me, two of the best series of books are *Tyndale Bible Commentaries* (now available on the whole Bible on CD-ROM or digital download) and *the Bible Speaks Today* (New Testament volumes available on CD-ROM or digital download), both published by IVP, - *Tyndale* in a new edition (2009). These are moderately priced, sound in scholarship, evangelical in emphasis and the kind of

books any Christian with the capability of doing A-levels or the Local Preachers' Course ought to be using. However, some years ago I managed to get a cheap CD-ROM of Frank Gaebel's, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, and later supplemented that with a CD-ROM of the *NIV Application Commentary* (both are now available as digital downloads, the company I use is *Logos*) and I find that these give me some very welcome help both to dig in the text and to think about how a passage can be applied.

A fairly accessible book on *Ruth* is *The Message of Ruth* by David J. Atkinson, a retired Church of England bishop. Bishop Atkinson gives some helpful information as to why Chapter 4 opens at the town gate. He navigates through the various responsibilities that would go with the purchase of Naomi's land and shows how the would-be purchaser ends up in a predicament. Bishop Atkinson helps us understand how Boaz 'has cleverly placed the nearer kinsman in a situation in which he can do nothing other than offer right of redemption to him, Boaz, the next in line' (4:6).<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, Lawson Younger's volume on *Ruth* in the *NIV Application Commentary* emphasises application. Professor Younger says that Christians can learn much from Boaz, a man who knows the law and is obedient to it, living with integrity before God. 'Covenant love' (*hesed*) will 'cause us to act with loyalty, love and compassion'.<sup>12</sup>

After this basic spadework has been done, we are ready to get to the heart of the text - what is the text addressing and will we want to preach on a verse or two or on the whole passage? It's always a temptation to rush headlong into application but often that just gives us the opportunity to speak ourselves (often our own blinkered prejudices) instead of allowing the Word of God to speak through us by our faithful exegesis, exposition and application of the text, with God's anointing of our ministry and the Holy Spirit working in the

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<sup>11</sup> D. Atkinson, *The Message of Ruth: The Wings of Refuge*, Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011, p.115.

<sup>12</sup> K. L. Jr. Younger, *Judges and Ruth*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2002, p.491.

heart and life of those who are listening. In short, we must never neglect addressing three questions: What does the Bible say? What does the Bible mean? What does the Bible mean to me/us today? When we do that we might find that the dangerous parts of the Bible are not the passages that we don't understand but the passages that we understand perfectly well and are challenged to apply.

In his helpful book, *Teaching Ruth & Esther: From Text to Message*, Christopher Ash gives some guidance on two practical challenges for preachers. The first is 'Preaching and Story-telling'. He comments, 'we must do something that is more than story-telling but not less than story telling'.<sup>13</sup> Our hearers have to be gripped by the story too, but it is not the preacher's task simply to tell the story and nothing more. The narrative must be related to the whole Bible story, 'so that we understand how this story engages with us, and that we sense the impact this story should have on our story'.<sup>14</sup> The second is what Christopher Ash calls, 'Faithful translation and faithful elaboration'. Our speculations must be faithful and not fanciful. We need to 'work at faithful translation into contemporary idioms but resist fanciful elaboration, no matter how much fun it may be for us'.<sup>15</sup>

The question I want to ask at this stage is whether I can find a manageable and memorable structure that will form a framework for my sermon or study. It is important that the framework comes from the text. For me, this is often the hardest part of the process and yet I think this is a significant stage, otherwise the work done so far will become a 'plate of spaghetti' - it does you good at the time, but it is hard to unravel and rather forgettable. What is the passage about? This could be an overall theme - but from *Ruth 4* I have chosen a text. That is not, of course, to forget that, in the words

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<sup>13</sup> C. Ash, *Teaching Ruth & Esther: From Text to Message*, Fearn, Christian Focus, 2018, p.23.

<sup>14</sup> C. Ash, *Teaching Ruth & Esther: From Text to Message*, Fearn, Christian Focus, 2018, p.24.

<sup>15</sup> C. Ash, *Teaching Ruth & Esther: From Text to Message*, Fearn, Christian Focus, 2018, p.25.

often quoted by Canadian Bible commentator Don Carson, ‘a text without a context is a pretext’:

*“Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel!” (4:14)*

The story of Ruth depends on an understanding of the ‘kinsman-redeemer’. It is possible that today our families feel more fractured than they did in the world of the Old Testament but nevertheless, the popularity of internet sites offering us the opportunity to research our ancestors shows that many of us are still interested in our family tree.

Through the work of my late father’s cousin, Bill Haley (unlike his namesake not known for his singing career), I know quite a lot about my family tree, certainly in the ‘Haley-line’. One of my great-grandmothers was born in County Cork and in the autumn of 1998 I visited the house in which she was born. Receiving a warm welcome at the house, I stood in the place where she was born, having often stood at the family grave in Plymouth, where she is buried. Despite the beautiful coastline, the family history would not hold out much interest to anyone, except me (and my family). The following year, further details of my family tree in the Haley-line revealed that my ancestors had for many years been born, lived and died in the adjacent parishes of Braddock and Boconnoc, near Lostwithiel in Cornwall. Within weeks of my knowing, we were there.

My period of sabbatical leave in 2014 gave me opportunity to travel in Europe. High in the hills of the former East Germany is the town of Herrnhut - home of the Moravians. After the martyrdom of the reformer, Jan Hus, who was burned at the Council of Constance in 1415, Protestants in Bohemia faced stern Counter-Reformation measures and some sought freedom in Saxony. Consequently, the leader of the refugees, Christian David, met with German nobleman, Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf who invited them to settle on his land at Berthelsdorf and in 1722 Christian David built the first

home of what was to become Herrnhut, which means ‘under the Lord’s watchful protection’. It was the Moravians who had such a profound influence on John Wesley during his trans-Atlantic voyage to the American colonies.

On the Sunday evening of my visit to Herrnhut I toured the cemetery and found the graves of those whose names I knew so well. At the head of the graves I sang a hymn - Count Zinzendorf, *Jesus thy blood and righteousness (Hymns and Psalms 225)*; August Spangenberg, the Moravian missionary who had met the young John Wesley in Georgia, *What shall we offer our good Lord (HP 807, StF 671)*. The following morning, I went down the hill to the parish church of Berthelsdorf where Johannes Rothe had been the minister. It was Rothe’s hymn, *Ich habe nun den grund gefunden (Now I have found the ground wherein,)* (HP 684, StF 561) to which Wesley gave the title ‘Redemption Found.’ On the Saturday I went to Tomislaw in modern Poland and found Rothe’s grave at the south-east corner of the churchyard, once Lutheran and now Roman Catholic. It might sound crazy but what does it all say? It says, both the natural and spiritual family are of interest to me - because these people are my people!

And so to Bethlehem - even the name resonates with the Christian - this is Royal David’s city - and to the story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. The story that began with the deaths of Naomi’s husband and their two sons, ends with the marriage of her daughter-in-law, Ruth, to a gracious member of her late husband’s clan - her kinsman-redeemer. Why should this be of any interest to us? Because, for the Christian, these people are our people, for as the brief genealogy at the end of the book reveals, this family is part of the ancestry of Jesus. The God of these people is our God; the family of these people is the family of Jesus. In many ways they are ordinary people, struggling with the ups and downs of life, but they are also extraordinary people and when other names are long-forgotten, their names are remembered, not least because of the out-workings of ‘covenant love’ unfolding in *the providence of grace, the perseverance of grace and the provision of grace*.

## 1. The providence of grace

The reader has journeyed with Naomi through the sadness of life. In a time of famine in Bethlehem, her husband, Elimelech, had taken the family to pagan Moab. In Moab, their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion had married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. For the sons of Israel to intermarry with pagan women was not what God intended for his people and things took a worse turn when not only Elimelech but also Mahlon and Kilion died. Years passed and eventually the famine in Bethlehem was over - Naomi decided to return home. If she had not left Bethlehem in the happiest of circumstances, at least she had her husband and sons, but now they were all dead. No wonder she summarised her return by saying she had gone away full but returned empty. Then what of the two younger widows, Orpah and Ruth? Naomi suggested they should go home too. Her home in Bethlehem was not their home, so Orpah elected to return to her family in Moab. Only Ruth clung to Naomi, but significantly not just to Naomi, but to Naomi's God, our God - a decision that would have consequences far beyond anything she might have hoped for or imagined!

In Bethlehem the story unfolds as Ruth meets Boaz and, through a tender incident on the threshing floor, our hopes are raised that maybe the honourable Boaz will marry Ruth, the Moabitess, who also believes, and that, according to the custom of the time, their marriage might raise up heirs for the men who died. Yet there is an obstacle to the plan for which the reader is quietly rooting. There is another strong possibility. According to the laws of the time, land that was sold could be bought back (redeemed) by a member of the clan. Such business was normally conducted at the town gate (a public forum) as everyone had to pass that way. This final chapter of *Ruth* begins with Boaz sitting at the town gate and, in God's providence, the kinsman-redeemer came along - we can only call him 'Mr So and So', for his name is not given.

## 2. The perseverance of grace

Legal transactions had to be witnessed - not in our sense of signatories on papers, but by the elders. It is impossible to say whether 10 was of particular significance though it was, as we say, 'double figures'. The issue at hand was simple enough, Naomi, who had come back from Moab was selling the piece of land that belonged to her late husband Elimelech. It seems to have been the case that a family member would be given 'first refusal' on any such land and in this there would have been an order of precedence and 'Mr So and So' had first refusal ahead of Boaz.

It is curious that Boaz talked about the land before mentioning Ruth. Had Boaz made a clever tactical decision? In any event Boaz called on the kinsman-redeemer to take Naomi's rights over the land by redeeming the field. At first sight this looked like a pretty attractive deal as Elimelech had no descendants or heirs, so the land would pass into the unnamed purchaser's estate and on to his descendants. Even care for an elderly widow would be offset by the value of the field itself - so Mr So and So agreed. Only then did Boaz introduce the subject of Ruth - the redeemer of the land must also take responsibility for her. As the custom of the time meant that he should marry her and raise children and heirs with her, this was a different prospect altogether. Consequently, the kinsman-redeemer, fearful for the integrity of his own estate suddenly changed his tune showing no concern for the family line of Elimelech and no concern for Ruth. In the end, Mr So and So turns out to be a 'so and so'. His role in proceedings is simply self-interest and he remains nameless. Ready to give up any rights he has, he demonstrated this in the traditional manner by giving a sandal. In contrast, when Boaz agreed to redeem the field and take responsibility for Ruth he does so from covenant-love. It would have been possible for Boaz to have rejected Ruth at the threshing-floor - he was not the nearest of those in the clan with rights and responsibilities - but he showed the perseverance of grace.

### 3. The provision of grace

Once Boaz and Ruth were married, Boaz knew that he and Ruth must raise an heir in Elimelech's line. Their first son would have been reckoned as Mahlon's descendant, though the people clearly hoped that the couple would be blessed with many sons and heirs. In time, Ruth gave birth to a son - an occasion of rejoicing for Naomi and the women. God is only explicitly said to do two things in the story - to end the famine and to bless Ruth with a son - but now, for a moment, the focus of the story returns to Naomi. Naomi was in the story from the beginning, the one who went away from Bethlehem full and returned empty. Through her concern for Ruth and the covenant-love showed by Boaz, Naomi finally has an heir, an heir she takes in her lap and for whom she cares. This heir will renew her life, and sustain her in her old age - and it is also by the covenant-love of Ruth, who loves Naomi and is better to her than seven sons. Yet this blessing is not simply for one family. It is interesting that the name the women suggest, 'Obed' meaning 'servant', is accepted.

The book of *Ruth* ends with a genealogy. The son that resulted from such faithfulness and covenant-love will be the grandfather of Israel's great King David. This is not now simply a family story. It is a story for the nation and for the Christian it is an anticipation of the birth of David's greater Son. Perez was reckoned to be the most important descendant of Judah - the line is summarised to David. It does not necessarily include every name - but it moves us towards the great fulfilment of covenant-love that is revealed in the line that Matthew sets out, from Abraham to Jesus (*Matthew* 1:1-17). In this, God is shown to be working out his purpose in generation after generation. It is hard for us to understand that in the course of one lifetime - but God sees the bigger picture. The purpose is not haphazard. There is purpose in it all - the purpose of God.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> A.E. Cundall and L. Morris, *Judges and Ruth: an introduction and commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968, p.307.

Bible commentator Lawson Younger writes:

*In some ways, God hardly seems present at all in the story of Ruth. He directly intervenes only twice—he gives the Israelites in Bethlehem food (1:6) and gives Ruth conception (4:13). Closer inspection, however, reveals that God is very much present. Though hidden behind the scenes, his sovereign hand is quietly guiding the events of the book.*<sup>17</sup>

The story of Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer of Bethlehem, the one who showed covenant-love to two widows, anticipates one born in Bethlehem of that line, the one who will show covenant-love and, even at the price of his own life, will redeem the world. There is also a lesson for the church. Perhaps ‘Mr and Mrs So and So’ are here, looking out for themselves. In time their names will soon be forgotten but there are people around us who need covenant-love. This is God-given love that enables his people to act with faithfulness, loyalty and compassion. This love of God, this love of Christ, should cause us to see the world in a different light. Seeing the big picture is impossible for us, but it should not stop us believing in the providence of grace. Things which are both welcome and unwelcome have to be seen in that light. The believer is genuinely able to say, ‘with mercy and with judgment my web of time he wove’ (Anne Ross Cousin, *MHB* 637), and yet, it would be foolish to contend that it is always easy to say as much. There are times when we simply have to be committed to the perseverance of grace. Things don’t always immediately work out just as we planned - but we keep going, believing ultimately in God’s provision of grace - seen most clearly in the death and resurrection of Jesus. If the role of Redeemer was costly for Jesus, we ought not to expect that it will not be costly for us. To show covenant-love in today’s church and today’s world is the real demonstration of God’s grace.

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<sup>17</sup> K. L. Jr. Younger, *Judges and Ruth*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2002, p.487-488.

Most preachers want to begin with an illustration that captures the imagination of the listeners - this can be topical, insightful, humorous or perhaps a combination of one or more of these. It became, at the time, the highest-grossing British film to date, receiving Academy Award nominations. Hugh Grant won the Golden Globe Award for Best Actor - it was, of course, the 1994 film, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* - I vaguely remember seeing it and vaguely recall I didn't like it. The only thing that struck me as memorable was the title. It is because the title was memorable - but otherwise I think it is a very different story - that I am giving the Bible book of *Ruth* the subtitle *Three Funerals and a Wedding*. The last challenge is how to end - particularly as the ending is often the part where we want to press a particular application. The book ends rather tantalisingly - 'and Jesse the father of David' - surely we can do little else than press on to an even greater story of Bethlehem covenant-love, from David to his greater son our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

**Prayer:**

*Lord God, through your dealings with your servants and in the Scriptures, we see your gracious and loving hand and the unfolding of your providential way. We live in uncertain times. Help us to find our strength in your grace, our rule in your Word, our guidance through your Spirit, that our end may always be the glory of your name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## Questions for Reflection...

1. In what ways does this study on Ruth 4 ‘constantly focus on and refer to the text’?
2. How is the teaching about the kinsman-redeemer relevant for us today?
3. What is covenant-love? How can you show more covenant-love towards those within your human family and/or church family?
4. How effective is the structure, ‘the providence, perseverance and provision of grace,’ in helping our appreciation and application of Ruth 4?
5. In what ways have you experienced God’s grace working within your life, especially in helping you through the difficulties of life?
6. The ‘happy ending’ to this story does not replace the loss, hurt and grief that Naomi and Ruth experienced. How do you think the good that God brought into their lives helped them live out the rest of their lives?
7. Through Boaz, Ruth and Naomi experienced redemption. What is your experience of Jesus’ redemption?

## Abbreviations:

*HP: Hymns and Psalms*, London: Methodist Publishing House, 1983.

*MHB: Methodist Hymn Book*, London: Methodist Publishing House, 1933.

*StF: Singing the Faith*, London: Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2011.

*DIGGING FOR TREASURE*

# THREE FUNERALS AND A WEDDING

## THE MESSAGE OF RUTH TODAY

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This book adds to our Digging for Treasure resources for expository preaching by exploring the book of Ruth. Russell Herbert's sermon on Ruth 1 provides a great example of an expository sermon, focusing on tragedy and hope, and his chapter on Ruth 3 looks at how he would preach it. John Haley, in his sermon on chapter 2 explores God's providential covenant-love. The book ends with John Haley opening up Ruth 4 through sharing a guide to sermon preparation. All these contributions help us to explore the book of Ruth, and how to share its message in this 21st century.



**John M. Haley** was born in Plymouth, and ordained in 1985. He has served Methodist Circuits in South London, Wales, Scotland, Cornwall and Devon. He is currently Superintendent Minister of the Torbay Circuit. He likes collie dogs, various music and Plymouth Argyle. He is married to Janet and they have four grown-up children.



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