

“Restorer of Life” (Ruth 4)

December 25, 2016

Brian Watson

It’s Christmas Day, and that means we should talk about a baby born thousands of years ago in Bethlehem. His origins story is an unlikely one. It’s really a wonder that he was ever conceived. But he was. He was born to a virtuous woman of faith and raised by a virtuous man, one of the few in the Bible that doesn’t have his failures displayed for the world to read about. This boy brought great hope to his family. His birth brought great joy to many and he was even called a “restorer of life.” His name is famous because it is written in the Bible. If you haven’t guessed it, I’m talking about Obed. Yes, we should talk about his birth today.

Okay, I realize that when you think “Christmas,” you don’t immediately think “Obed.” In fact, you may never have heard that name before. But without Obed’s birth in Bethlehem over three thousand years ago, we wouldn’t have Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago. And, in a way, Obed’s birth foreshadowed the birth that we celebrate today.

Of course, usually at Christmas, we often read accounts of Jesus’ birth in either the Gospel of Matthew or the Gospel of Luke. Both biographies of Jesus feature genealogies, lists of Jesus’ ancestors. They have different focuses. It seems that Luke’s genealogy is a biological one, and traces the line of Jesus back to the first man, Adam. Matthew’s genealogy traces Jesus’ royal heritage. It contains a list of kings. And it starts with these words: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1).¹ Matthew then begins his genealogy and lists many of Jesus’ ancestors, including David. Though forty-two different men are mentioned, we should ask: Why does Matthew highlight Abraham and David?

Abraham was the one to whom God said, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2–3). Long before Abraham walked the earth, which was about two thousand years before Jesus walked the earth, and about four thousand years ago, the world came under a curse. God, the Creator and the Giver of life, made a good world. And he made people to multiply, fill the world, and rule over it. All they had to do was first come under God’s rule. They were made to worship God, reflect his character, serve him,

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

and love him. But the first human beings turned away from God, and we've been turning away from God ever since. So, God put a partial punishment on the world. He put a curse on it, so that life would be difficult and our lives would end in death (Gen. 3).

But God didn't leave things that way. This was only part of his plan. He promised that one day his creation would be restored. When he called Abraham, he said that the whole world would be blessed "in him." Later, God said, "in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). Abraham would then go on to have a child named Isaac, who would have a son named Jacob, who would have twelve sons who would go on to be the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. And we can trace a line from Abraham through one of those tribes, Judah, all the way to Jesus.

David is important because he is often depicted in the Bible as the ideal king. Though he was clearly flawed, he was also known as a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). And after David had come and gone, prophets promised another David who would come to rule forever. This would be a perfect king, God's anointed one, the Messiah. He would bring about justice and peace and righteousness. We see this in passages like Isaiah 11:1–5:

- ¹ There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
- ² And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
- ³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
- ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

David was the son of Jesse. But the real seed of Jesse, the one who judges with righteousness, is Jesus. He is often pictured as the true David, the real King. We see something similar in Jeremiah 23:5–6:

⁵ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved,

and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called:
‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”²

Jesus, the better David, the true King, was a descendant of David. And David was Jesse’s son. And who was Jesse’s father? Obed. And where did he come from? That’s what we’ve been learning as we’ve studied the book of Ruth together this month.

The real reason we’re looking at the book of Ruth is not because it mentions some people in Jesus’ genealogy. If that was our goal, we could have looked at passages in almost any historical book of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Nehemiah. But Ruth is special because not only does it tell where David and his grandfather, Obed, come from, but it also shows how God brings hope into bleak situations. In fact, it shows how God brings life out of death. And this points us towards the birth of Jesus and what Jesus came to do.

Before we start to look at the fourth and final chapter of Ruth, I want to remind us of where we’ve been. The story begins with a family in Bethlehem. There’s a man named Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, and they have two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. The story is set in a dark time in the history of the nation of Israel, about twelve hundred years before Jesus was born. And during that dark time, there was a famine in the land, so Elimelech moved his family to a neighboring nation, Moab. And after they arrived Elimelech died. Naomi was a widow, but she still had her sons, and they married Moabite women and they all lived in Moab for ten years. But then both sons died. Naomi was left with her daughters-in-law. Then she heard that the famine in Bethlehem was over, so she decided to go home. One of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, decided to go with her, even though she had no family there and even though she probably had better prospects of remarrying in Moab. She did this to take care of Naomi.

In chapter 2, we see Ruth coming up with a plan to feed Naomi and herself. She goes to the field of one of Elimelech’s relatives, a man named Boaz. He allows her to collect grain along with his workers. In fact, he gives her an abundance of grain. That takes care of their food problem. But in this world, widows were vulnerable. And, more than that, they had a more significant problem: In Israel, if you didn’t have male heirs who would carry on the family name, it was as if the family never lived. Their name would be wiped off the pages of Israel’s history. Naomi needed someone who would carry on Elimelech’s name. And she needed someone who would take care of the family estate.

² See also Jer. 30:9; 33:14–16; Ezek. 34:23–24; 37:34–28.

In chapter 3, Naomi decides to take the initiative. She tells Ruth to present herself to Boaz in such a way that he thinks of her as a potential bride. Ruth does this and she Boaz to marry her by saying, “Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer” (3:9). He says he will do that, but realizes there is a closer relative who has the right to “redeem” Naomi by buying Naomi’s land, marrying Ruth, and giving her a child. Boaz says that if this redeemer will marry Ruth, then so be it. But if he refuses, then he will gladly step in and assume that role.

All of that leads us up to chapter 4. The question is, will this relative of Elimelech agree to buy the family land and marry Ruth or not? Will Ruth have a child who can carry on the family name? To find out, let’s read the first six verses.

¹ Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, “Turn aside, friend; sit down here.” And he turned aside and sat down. ² And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, “Sit down here.” So they sat down. ³ Then he said to the redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. ⁴ So I thought I would tell you of it and say, ‘Buy it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people.’ If you will redeem it, redeem it. But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you.” And he said, “I will redeem it.” ⁵ Then Boaz said, “The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.” ⁶ Then the redeemer said, “I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.”

Boaz went to the gate of the city, which is where legal decisions were made. And while he was there, he saw this redeemer, the man who was a closer relative of Elimelech. Maybe he was a cousin or a nephew. We really don’t know. It’s interesting that he doesn’t even have his name mentioned. The ESV says that Boaz called him “friend.” The Hebrew literally means something like, as one commentator puts it, “Mr. So-and-So.”³ Boaz calls him over and he also calls ten elders of the city. (Elders helped decide legal disputes.) And then Boaz tells the man first about Naomi’s land. He wonders if the man is willing to buy it from Naomi. I assume that Naomi would sell it so she would have money to live on. In this case, if the redeemer bought the land, Naomi could continue to live on it. The redeemer would then assume the costs of taking care of this widow. So, the man says he will redeem it. He may have been thinking, “Well, it

³ Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 232.

won't cost me too much, and Naomi may not have too long to live. And she has no children. So, after she's gone, I can do with the land as I see fit."

Boaz's tactic here was quite shrewd. He first mentions the land. But then he mentions Ruth. He tells Mr. So-and-So that when he buys the land, he also must marry Ruth and give her children 'in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance'" (v. 5). The dead, in this case, was Elimelech. Naomi was too old to have children, so Ruth, the widow of Elimelech's son, would have to provide the special child to carry on the family name. When Mr. So-and-So hears about Ruth, he changes his mind. Buying the land, providing for Naomi, providing for Ruth, providing for their children, and then losing the land to their child, who would inherit it, would prove to be too costly to this redeemer. He wasn't willing to sacrifice so much to redeem Elimelech's family. So, he backed out of the deal.

This shows that redemption is costly. The price to restore Elimelech's family was great and Mr. So-and-So, the alleged redeemer, wasn't willing to pay it. But Boaz was. The redeemer was sort of like Orpah, Naomi's other daughter-in-law. She wasn't willing to sacrifice her own well-being to take care of Naomi by giving up her life in Moab to go to Bethlehem. Ruth was the one willing to give up her own dreams to take care of Naomi. And Boaz was willing to pay a great cost to bring wholeness to Naomi's family.⁴ There's a reason why we remember Boaz's name but not the redeemer's, whose name was not perpetuated in Israel because he was unwilling to redeem.

In the next few verses, we see the deal ratified: The redeemer gives up his right to redeem Elimelech's family to Boaz. Let's read verses 7–12:

⁷ Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. ⁸ So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself," he drew off his sandal. ⁹ Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. ¹⁰ Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 860: "Mr. So and So is willing to buy Naomi's field when it enhances his fame and enriches his fortune, but he exposes his self-centered motives by being unwilling to sacrifice financially (though he has the money) to save the name of Elimelech and Mahlon and to protect their defenseless widows. As Orpah is to Ruth, Mr. So and So functions as a foil to Boaz."

native place. You are witnesses this day.”¹¹ Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem,¹² and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman.”

I must admit the whole business of taking off one’s sandal and giving it to another is a bit strange. But perhaps one day people will look back at handshakes and think they’re strange, or perhaps people will think it’s strange to sign a name on a contract. What seems to be clear is that the transfer of the sandal from Mr. So-and-So to Boaz symbolized the rights of redemption. Mr. So-and-So was giving up his rights to Boaz, and the sandal symbolized that fact. It’s like saying, “Here, the land is yours to buy.” Perhaps that’s because setting one’s feet or sandals upon a land symbolized owning it. For example, God told Joshua this (in Josh. 1:3): “Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses.”

After the transfer of the sandal, Boaz made the elders and the other people who watched this scene testify that they were witnesses to this event.⁵ And they pray that Ruth would be like Rachel and Leah. These were Jacob’s two wives. Jacob was the father of the twelve sons after whom the twelve tribes of Israel were named. In a way, these witnesses recognize that Ruth will produce a child who will build up the house of Israel. That’s quite a claim. They also liken her to Tamar, who was the mother of Perez and the son of Judah. I’ll explain the significance of this in a moment.

But first let’s see what happens next. We’ll read verses 13–17:

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. ¹⁷ And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Boaz married Ruth and they consummated their marriage. And she became pregnant and had a son. Here are some interesting details in these verses:

⁵ Cf. John 24:22.

First, we're told "the LORD gave her conception." This doesn't mean it was a miracle. After all, we were just told that Boaz and Ruth consummated their marriage. The author of Ruth knows where babies come from. But he also knows that, ultimately, it is God who gives life. Christians recognize that there are primary and secondary causes of all events. Often, we talk about the secondary causes: Boaz and Ruth had a baby the way all babies are conceived. But, ultimately, it's God who is one who ensures that a baby was conceived. God has ordered and arranged the universe to be the way it is. He is the one who sustains all of life at every moment. We can truly say that every breath is directed by God. So, on one hand we can talk about the laws of physics that govern everything and say that the earth orbits around the sun because of gravity and so on. But we can also say that God is at every moment governing the motions of every planet.

Second, the women of the town say that God has given her a redeemer. The name of this redeemer will be renowned and he will be a "restorer of life" who will take care of Naomi in her old age. And this redeemer is a baby. This is stunning. And they say Ruth is better than seven sons. This is quite a statement in a book that stresses the importance of male children. What's interesting is that back in chapter 1, we're told that Naomi "was left without her two sons" (v. 5). The Hebrew word translated as "sons" literally means "boys." And now, in verse 16, we're told that "Naomi took the child." The same word is used here. I think this means we are supposed to see that this baby has in some sense replaced her sons. When the child is born, he is presented to Naomi, who will be his nurse. This means that she had an active role in raising the child. He would be like her own child. That's why they say, "A son has been born to Naomi," when in fact it was Ruth's son. It's as if this baby boy and Ruth have replaced Elimelech and his sons.

What is also interesting is that the women, and not the boy's parents, name the boy. They call him Obed. That means "one who works" or "one who serves." But it could be a shortened form of Obadiah, which means "servant of Yahweh." In other words, the boy will be a servant, of Naomi, but also of God.

And, finally, we're told that Obed was the father of Jesse, the father of David. And this leads us to the last few verses of the book, another genealogy. Let's read verses 18–22:

¹⁸ Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, ¹⁹ Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, ²⁰ Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, ²¹ Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, ²² Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

What is the importance of this genealogy? There are at least two important truths communicated by this genealogy. One, it contains ten names. That might not mean a lot to you, but ten is a perfect number in biblical thought. And royal genealogies often had ten names in them. In other words, this genealogy shows that David will be a king. This may sound strange, but it's the same thing we see in Genesis 5. The tenth man in that list is Noah. And in Genesis 11, we see another ten-name genealogy that leads up to Abraham. It seems that these lists were created carefully so that they included only ten names. There is evidence that in these genealogies, generations were skipped in order to keep that perfect number of ten. The tenth name is the decisive one: Noah, Abraham, David. It's no accident that God made covenants with each of these men. Covenants were basically promises of what God would do for his people.

And, of course, that leads us to the second truth that this genealogy teaches us. The true offspring of Abraham would come through this line. In Genesis, it becomes clear that the line of blessing runs from Abraham to Isaac and not to Ishmael; through Jacob and not Esau; through Judah and not his brothers. Back in Genesis 49:10, Jacob prophesied:

The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.⁶

Then, later in the story of the Bible, we're told that the line runs through David. When God made a covenant with David, he said:

¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12–13).

And, of course, David is the ancestor of Jesus, as Matthew tells us so clearly in his Gospel.

And what is the point of all of this? This story of Ruth is an interesting little story of how God provides for a family that was on the verge of extinction. God provided a special child through unlikely circumstances, and this child would bless the family and ensure that it would have a future.

And that is the Christmas story. The Bible begins with God creating a good world. But then a great tragedy occurs: The first people turn their backs on God and the result is death. And

⁶ See also Num. 24:17.

the story of the Bible shows how devastating our sin can be. It destroys us and it destroys God's creation. We may wonder if we can be redeemed.

But then God's plan to restore the world starts to unfold. He makes incredible promises to an old man named Abraham, whose wife was barren, unable to produce children. And they have a very unlikely child, Isaac. And from Isaac emerges Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. And this line of descent from Abraham continues to unfold across the centuries, leading us to David. David is a brave, godly king, one who can conquer giants. But even the best human king has sins of his own. David was an adulterer and a murderer. He was not the offspring of Abraham who would bring blessings to the whole world. And if Abraham or David, both great men, couldn't do that, then we might start to wonder just who could.

Across the pages of Israel's history, found in the Bible, we read of many other men who followed in David's line of descent. Most of them were very, very flawed and even evil individuals. And yet, God had not given up his plan to bless the world through a child of Abraham, a child of Judah, and a child of David. God is faithful, even when we can't see what he's doing right now and even when his timeline seems long and his pace seems slow.

And this long plan of God's, which took so long to unfold, resulted in another special child, also born in Bethlehem. And this, of course, is Jesus. Like Obed, Jesus was born to common people. Both the story of Obed's birth and the story of Jesus' birth show that God often works through ordinary people, people no different than you and me. Like Obed's birth, Jesus' birth was unlikely, and how strange it is to think that a baby could be a redeemer. And like Obed, Jesus brings a restoration that is greater than the loss he came to redeem.

In the story of Ruth, none of the main characters, as great as they are, can reverse the fall. None of them could destroy death. Naomi and Ruth and Boaz and Obed would all die. So would David. Only Jesus can reverse the curse of sin and destroy death. When Jesus died, he died to pay the penalty for our sin, to redeem us from condemnation. And when he rose from the grave, he struck death a fatal blow. But death won't be totally destroyed until Jesus returns and all the dead are raised back to life. And at that point, there will be a judgment of everyone who has ever lived. All who have put their trust in Jesus will live in a new world, a paradise, with God forever. We're still waiting for the fullness of that redemption. We won't see it finally until Jesus returns and eradicates all sin and all the bad things that come with it, including death itself.

And until that time, God is still unfolding his plan. Sometimes, we can't tell what God is doing. We don't see his work. Sometimes, we feel as if our lives are lived in vain. Sometimes, it feels like our work is meaningless.

Yet with God, nothing is meaningless. Nothing is wasted. Everything fits into God's plans. The lives of Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, and Obed are not remembered by many people today, outside of Christians and Jews. To the world's eyes, they were old people living in a small city. They were, so to speak, a bunch of nobodies. When Jesus began his ministry, he also was thought to be a nobody. We'll see that next week, when someone said of Jesus' hometown, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). How could God bring about salvation through someone born in very humble circumstances, to a young, poor couple, over two thousand years ago?

But the story of Christmas is that is exactly what God did, because unlike Obed, Jesus wasn't merely a human baby. He was also God, the God who descended to earth by through a miraculous conception. This is a miracle of the greatest proportions. But so is the creation of the universe out of nothing. And all the best science points to that reality. The universe had a beginning, and all of time, energy, matter, and space came out of nothing. Who or what could cause such a thing other than God? And if God can create the universe out of nothing, he can certainly enter into the story that he wrote a long time ago, a story that is being acted out right now on the world's stage.

And all of us are part of that story. It's true that the Savior of the world won't emerge from our descendants. He has already come. But we all play a significant role in life, just as Obed and Jesse did. We know very little about them. But if it weren't for them, there would be no David. And if there were no David, there would be no Jesus.

Each one of us is a link in the great chain of events in the drama of history. We all have important roles to play. Even when we can't see how God will make things right in our lives, even if we feel like failures, we are told in many different ways throughout the Bible that everything has meaning in God's world. Everything matters. Our lives matter.

The story of the Bible is that God brings life out of death. He takes broken situations and makes them whole. We may not see that restoration until Jesus returns. But we must trust that God is good and he will fix everything that is broken. He will wipe away every tear. He will turn

deserts into gardens. He will end all wars and create peace. This is something that only he can do.

And in the meantime, we do our best. We try to be faithful to God by loving him and loving others in the ways that he has told us to. And we must trust that the things we do will produce fruit one day.

Just this past week I was emailing back and forth with a professor I took classes from in seminary. He asked me how I was doing and I told him that it had been an up and down year, and that I was hoping to see more fruit from what I was doing. I said that I suppose I have to continue to persevere. He affirmed the need to persevere, and then he wrote, “We will never know how much we helped until eternity.” That’s true. We won’t know until it’s all said and done what our lives have meant. But we must trust that they matter, and we must trust that Jesus will take everything and make it new one day.

One last thought: Boaz says of Ruth, “I have bought [her] to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead” (v. 10). Boaz redeemed, or bought, Ruth to be his bride, to give her family a lasting legacy. But Jesus has done something greater. He has bought his people to be his bride, to give them eternal life. To be a part of God’s people, all we need to do is trust Jesus, to live a life of faith. That life of faith will lead us to be like Boaz and Ruth, and not like Mr. So-and-So and Orpah. It will lead us to give and not just receive. That life of faith follows Jesus, and he is our only hope. He is the only “restorer of life.”