

## **“Redemption” (Ruth 3)**

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What do you really want to buy this Christmas? I’m not asking what you’re going to buy, or what you already bought. No, I want to know what you *want* to buy. What if money were no object? What if you could buy something that isn’t normally for sale, something that is impossible to obtain? What—if the usual rules didn’t apply—would you buy? Would it be more time with loved ones? Would it be a trip around the world? Would it be a trip into the past to do something differently? Would you pay to erase mistakes you’ve made? Would you pay to erase painful memories? What is lacking in your life that you would purchase?

Just yesterday morning, I read an article in *The New York Times Magazine* about a scientist (more specifically, an astrophysicist) and a professor at MIT named Sara Seager. She searches for exoplanets, which are planets that orbit around stars other than our Sun, that could possibly support life. She is a highly-acclaimed scientist who won a “Genius Grant” from the McArthur Foundation in 2013. McArthur Fellows are awarded \$625,000 with no strings attached. By any measure, Dr. Seager has a very, very successful career. But what caught my eye in the article wasn’t the scientific issues or her successful career. What interested me was her family. The article said that she had married a man named Mike, and that they had two sons, who are now 13 and 11 years old, respectively. The article said that Mike was a freelance editor who managed everything at home, leaving Seager to pursue her career obsessively. She never bought groceries or cooked.

But their lives changed when Mike was diagnosed with a rare intestinal cancer in 2009. In 2011, he died. At first, Seager felt relief. The two-year bout with cancer was over. After a time, Seager met another widow who told her that the sense of relief was normal, but that it would soon be over. She said “there would be a moment, as inevitable as death itself, when her feelings of release would be replaced by the more lasting aimlessness of the lost. Seager walked back outside, and just like that, the world came out from under her feet. She fell into an impossible blackness.” She even thought of quitting her job, though a dean at the university talked her out of that decision.

The part of the article that moved me the most were the words that Seager herself said about her marriage. She said, “I had worked so hard. I had all the years I called the lost years

with Mike when I ignored him. We had little tiny kids. I was working all the time, exhausted all the time. But I was like: We'll have money some day. We'll have time some day. . . . I wanted to make it up to him, and I never did." She has since remarried, but I get the sense that she would gladly trade in that McArthur award of \$625,000 to get those "lost years" back. But no career achievements and no amount of money can redeem those years.<sup>1</sup>

What have you lost that you would like back? It's worth examining what we want most, what we would buy if it were possible to buy it. It's worth thinking about what we value most. Because this points us to what we think our greatest problem is.

In Christianity, we talk a lot about purchasing something because we use the language of "redeem" and "redemption." This is one definition of redemption: "Finding its context in the social, legal, and religious customs of the ancient world, the metaphor of redemption includes the ideas of loosing from a bond, setting free from captivity or slavery, buying back something lost or sold, exchanging something in one's possession for something possessed by another, and ransoming."<sup>2</sup> In the Old Testament, the great act of redemption was the exodus, when God delivered the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Redemption always comes at a cost, and the cost was not something that the Israelites were able to pay. They couldn't buy their own freedom. But God could, and he freed them through a series of devastating plagues. The last one killed a great many Egyptians.

In the New Testament, God's great act of redemption was secured through Jesus, whose birth we celebrate each Christmas. Before I talk about Jesus' redemption, I want to turn our eyes to another part of the Old Testament, the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth is really a story about redemption. It's a story about a dark time in the nation of Israel and a dark time in one family. Over the last two weeks, we've looked at the first two chapters. I can't summarize all of what we have seen so far, but I will set up what we're about to read. The story begins with a famine in Israel. One man from Bethlehem, named Elimelech, moved his wife, Naomi, and their two sons to a foreign nation, Moab. When they got there, Elimelech died. But the sons married women from Moab and Naomi and her children lived there for ten years. Then her two sons died, and

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Jones, "The Woman Who Might Find Us Another Earth," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 7, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/magazine/the-world-sees-me-as-the-one-who-will-find-another-earth.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/magazine/the-world-sees-me-as-the-one-who-will-find-another-earth.html?_r=0), accessed December 17, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> R. David Rightmire, "Redeem, Redemption," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 664.

they didn't have any children. This left only Naomi and her two daughters-in-law. One of them, Ruth, decided to return with Naomi to Israel even though she had no family there.

In the second chapter, we saw that Ruth went to glean in the fields, to get food for Naomi and herself. She went to the field of a man named Boaz, a relative of Naomi's late husband, Elimelech. Boaz treated Ruth kindly, giving her plenty of food to eat. When Naomi found out, she said, "May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead! . . . The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers" (Ruth 2:20).<sup>3</sup> What does this mean, that Boaz is a redeemer? Who or what was he able to redeem?

To understand what Boaz could redeem, we need to understand something important. In the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, two things are very important: people and place. Everyone needs a group of people that they belong to, a family, a community. And everyone needs a place to live. This is still true today, of course, though I think we don't value these basic things as much because we have so many broken families and we tend to move more frequently. So, our attachments to people and places are more fluid now. But these things were more important in ancient times, particularly when there were no nation states with government welfare programs and when people were farmers and made their living off the land.

By the way, this shows that Christianity affirms the value of the physical world, which makes it different from some other religions and philosophies. In the beginning, God made a good world. But right now, things are not the way they should be. Because humans have turned away from God, our relationship with God is fractured and our relationships with each other are fractured. And one consequence of our rebellion against God is that the whole creation is under a curse. It is now groaning for the day of redemption, when God will rid it of natural disasters and droughts and famines (Rom. 8:18–22). But God will restore his creation, and his people will have a place there, and they will be God's people (Rev. 21:1–4). During this time, between the two advents of Jesus, we are waiting for that day.

To get back to the story, Ruth didn't have land of her own, and she didn't have a husband or children. Naomi didn't have a husband or sons anymore. It's possible that she would not be able to continue to own the family's plot of land. They might need to sell it to survive. If Ruth and Naomi didn't have land and they didn't have descendants, they wouldn't have an inheritance to leave to anyone, and they wouldn't have heirs. It would be as if they never lived. Their

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

families would die off with them and become extinct. Their lives would be without meaning. They would be insignificant.

Because that was considered a terrible thing, the law that God gave Israel had provisions for people who lost land or who didn't have heirs. The law talks about redeemers who could buy back land that was lost and provide offspring for those who didn't have any. Let's first look at the land issue. Before the land of Israel was divided among tribes and clans, Israel received laws that ensured that a parcel of land would stay with a family. If a family went into debt and had to sell the land, every fifty years, in the Year of Jubilee, the land would be returned to its original owners (Lev. 25:13–17). And if someone had sold land because they were poor or in debt, then another family member could redeem it, or buy it back (Lev. 25:23–34).

As for people, if someone was poor and sold themselves into slavery, which in that time was basically indentured servitude, a relative could redeem that person, or buy them out of slavery (Lev. 25:47–55). And if a man died without leaving his wife with sons, his brother was supposed to impregnate her in order “to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel” (v. 7). Otherwise, the man's name would “be blotted out of Israel” (v. 6; Deut. 25:5–10). This may seem very, very strange to us, but the importance of carrying on a family line was very important, both in terms of inheritance of land, but also in terms of legacy.

I once asked a non-Christian friend what would make his life significant. He said two things: He wanted to perform work that benefitted society and he wanted to be part of a family legacy. The first thing didn't surprise me, but the second one did. It seems he thought it was important to be able to look back and see his ancestors and to look forward to a line of descendants who would emerge from him. I guess that was his way of having significance beyond his lifetime, of having his name written on the walls of history so that he wouldn't be forgotten.

At any rate, it's important to grasp this if we are to understand the story of Ruth. So now, let's read chapter 3 of this short book. I'm going to read the whole chapter and then explain the significance of it.

<sup>1</sup> Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? <sup>2</sup> Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. <sup>3</sup> Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. <sup>4</sup> But when he lies down, observe the place where he

lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.”

<sup>5</sup> And she replied, “All that you say I will do.”

<sup>6</sup> So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. <sup>7</sup> And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. <sup>8</sup> At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! <sup>9</sup> He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” <sup>10</sup> And he said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. <sup>11</sup> And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. <sup>12</sup> And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. <sup>13</sup> Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning.”

<sup>14</sup> So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, “Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” <sup>15</sup> And he said, “Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out.” So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city. <sup>16</sup> And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, “How did you fare, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her, <sup>17</sup> saying, “These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, ‘You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’” <sup>18</sup> She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.”

The chapter begins with Naomi telling Ruth that she wants to find “rest” for her. That’s a significant word in the Bible. In this world, in its broken state, it’s hard to find rest. That was particularly true for Ruth, whose life was very uncertain. But Naomi has a plan. She wants Ruth to present herself to Boaz in such a way that he proposes marriage. She knows that Boaz is a relative, a possible redeemer, and a man of good standing in Bethlehem, which is where the story is set. Boaz gave Ruth a lot of grain to eat in chapter 2, but he didn’t seem interested in marriage. So, now Naomi wants to make sure that Boaz notices Ruth.

She therefore comes up with a very unorthodox plan. She tells Ruth to find Boaz on the threshing floor at night. Ruth should wash and anoint herself, dress up, and then “uncover his feet.” What does this mean?

Now, for the next couple of minutes, you may think I’m crazy. That’s okay; it probably won’t be the first time. But what Naomi is telling Ruth is very provocative. First, threshing floors were sometimes associated with illicit sexual behavior (Hos. 9:1). Second, the language of

“uncovering” was sometimes used with respect to sexual immorality. Usually, the phrase is “uncover nakedness” (Lev. 18:6–19; 20:11, 17–21; Deut. 22:30; 27:20). Third, “feet” could be a euphemism for another part of the male body below the belt. So, on the face of it, it looks like Naomi is asking Ruth to seduce Boaz.

Now, I doubt that Naomi was asking Ruth to do something immoral. There’s no real hint that she’s doing that. I think she wants Boaz to notice Ruth and see her in a different light, as a possible wife and not just a woman who is gleaning his fields. But I think it’s very possible that the author of Ruth wants us to wonder whether Ruth will use an immoral tactic in order to secure her future.

Think about this: Ruth is from Moab. The Moabites could trace their ancestry back to Lot, who was Abraham’s nephew. Abraham was the father of all the Israelites, the man that God called to himself, the man to whom God said, “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). All Jews can trace their lineage back to Abraham. Ruth couldn’t do that. But she could trace her lineage back to Lot. Lot and his family lived in the city of Sodom. God destroyed the city because of its immorality, and the only ones who survived were Lot and his two daughters. This is what we read in Genesis 19:30–38:

<sup>30</sup> Now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in a cave with his two daughters.

<sup>31</sup> And the firstborn said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth. <sup>32</sup> Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father.” <sup>33</sup> So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father. He did not know when she lay down or when she arose.

<sup>34</sup> The next day, the firstborn said to the younger, “Behold, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine tonight also. Then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father.” <sup>35</sup> So they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose and lay with him, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. <sup>36</sup> Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. <sup>37</sup> The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. <sup>38</sup> The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-ammi. He is the father of the Ammonites to this day.

In case you missed it: With no other men around, Lot’s daughters were afraid that their father wouldn’t have male descendants who would preserve his name. So, they hatched a plan: They got their father drunk on successive nights, and each one had a turn with him. Because they

were afraid that no one could redeem their situation, they resorted to some very unethical behavior. One of them had a son named Moab, the father of Moabites. This is where Ruth's people came from. That's why it's surprising that she's in Israel, with an Israelite mother-in-law, finding favor in the eyes of Boaz, another Israelite.

But they weren't the only ones who resorted to this kind of tactic. Later in the book of Genesis, we see something similar. Abraham had a son named Isaac, who had a son named Jacob, also known as Israel. Jacob had twelve sons, and one of them was Judah. Judah had two sons. The first one, named Er, married Tamar. But Er died before giving Tamar a son. Then Judah's second son, Onan, had sex with his brother's wife, but he intentionally "spilled his seed on the ground" (Gen. 38:9). Onan died, too, without giving Tamar a son. Judah had a third son, named Shelah, who was younger. Judah told Tamar that Shelah would give her offspring when he was older. But when Shelah grew up, he didn't marry Tamar. So, Tamar did something very tricky. She disguised herself as a prostitute and had sex with Judah. And she became pregnant and had twins, Perez and Zerah, to carry on the family name.

I mention these stories not to get your attention, though I'm sure some of you are thinking that the Bible is more interesting than you once thought. I mention them because they are stories of people seeking redemption and trying to secure that redemption through immoral means. And both events are in Jesus' ancestry. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, through Perez, on of Tamar's sons. And Ruth is also mentioned in Jesus' genealogy, which means that Jesus' ancestry can be traced back to Lot and one his daughters. The Bible doesn't condone these acts, but it shows how these acts can be redeemed.

The question readers of Ruth should be asking is: Is Ruth going to be like Lot's daughters and Tamar? Or is she going to be virtuous, perhaps more like Mary, Jesus' mother? After all, Mary's situation looked rather shady. Here was a young woman who had become pregnant before being married. Yet we know from the Bible that neither she nor Joseph, to whom she was betrothed, did anything wrong. In the case of Ruth, which is it going to be?

And what we see is that Ruth is virtuous. She does what Naomi tells her to do. She snuck off in the middle of the night to the threshing floor, where Boaz was. Perhaps he was there because he was working overtime, separating the kernels of barley from the chaff. Perhaps he was there guarding the grain. We don't know. What we know is that Ruth went to him in the middle of the night. She uncovered his feet, perhaps his legs, in order to wake him up. And when

he woke, she said, “Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer” (v. 9). Earlier, in chapter 2, Boaz told Ruth that God should repay her, because of what she had done for Naomi, in taking care of her. And he said that Ruth had found refuge “under [the] wings” of God. Now, Ruth is asking Boaz to spread his wings over her. In other words, she is coming under God’s protection by coming under Boaz’s protection. And what Ruth is doing is basically proposing marriage (cf. Ezek. 16:8). We know this because of other language in the Bible, but also because of how Boaz responds. He says that this act of kindness is greater than her first act, which was to take care of Naomi. He says this because he is an older man. Ruth could have gone after a man her age, but she didn’t. She went to a good man, a noble man.

Before we continue with this story of Ruth, I want us to see something very important. All of us want redemption of some kind. We want our lives to have meaning. We may not find meaning in being in the long lineage of a family. But we all try to prove our worth, through our jobs, our relationships, our achievements—through something. And when we are desperate to redeem ourselves, we will be willing to do immoral, unethical things. We will be willing to lie, cheat, cut corners, and hurt people in order to achieve what we think will redeem us. This is obviously problematic.

But another problem with that approach is that, even if we’re willing to do immoral things, it simply doesn’t work. According to the Bible, we don’t just need redemption for things like land and offspring. We don’t just need redemption out of debt and slavery. The Bible says that the real slavery we have is a slavery to sin, to an evil power that is in us that causes us to do things that master us, that are destructive and addictive. The shocking message of the Bible is that we aren’t free. All of us will be mastered by something or someone. That’s part of what it means to be a human being. So, the Bible tells us that if we’re not slaves of Jesus, we’re slaves of sin (John 8:34; Rom. 6:16; 2 Pet. 2:19), slaves to evil spiritual forces (Gal. 4:3), or slaves of some religious law that we must obey in order to prove ourselves (Gal. 4:8–10). If we’re always trying to prove how good we are, or how righteous we are, we’ll be enslaved by a set of rules and by our own performance. Any one of these things will destroy us.

But if realize that we cannot redeem ourselves, and we find refuge in God, then things will go well with us. That’s what Ruth does. She realizes she can’t fix her situation. So, she turns to the one who can. In her situation, that was Boaz. He could provide food, children, and land.

But, really, she was finding redemption in the God of Israel, who was working through Boaz to take care of her physical needs, and who would one day take care of her spiritual needs.

Let me now explain the rest of chapter 3: The good news is that Boaz tells Ruth he will do what she is asking of him (v. 11). But there is some potentially bad news: Boaz tells Ruth that there is a “redeemer nearer than I” (v. 12). He means there is a closer relative who could marry her, provide children for her, and secure the family estate. Boaz says that he will talk to this man. If the man wants to redeem Ruth, then so be it. But if not, Boaz will redeem her.

Then Ruth stays the rest of the night, and we have no reason to believe anything immoral occurred. However, Ruth and Boaz were taking a risk. If they were caught together, people would assume they were committing adultery, and the penalty for that was the death penalty (Deut. 22:22). Ruth also risked being rejected. This shows her great faith. She was taking a risk in order to provide for Naomi and to secure her own future. Fortunately, she left before daybreak; she did not bring dishonor upon Boaz or herself. Boaz gave her another large amount of grain, and Ruth returned to Naomi.

We’ll have to see how the rest of the story resolves when we look at chapter 4 next week. But we can say this right now: Boaz was able to redeem Ruth’s situation in terms of her temporary needs. He was able to give her food. He was willing to marry her and provide for her and Naomi. But Boaz could not take care of Ruth’s biggest problem, which was separation from God. That is our big problem. It is why we feel a lack of peace. It’s why we feel guilty. It’s why we feel depressed. Our separation from God causes us to feel separated from one another. We don’t love each other like we should because we don’t love God the way we should. And part of the penalty for that lack of love is that we live in a broken world, a world where there’s pain and death. No other human being can bring us out of that situation. No amount of money can fix that problem.

That point is made in the Bible. In Psalm 49:7–9, we read:

- <sup>7</sup> Truly no man can ransom another,  
or give to God the price of his life,  
<sup>8</sup> for the ransom of their life is costly  
and can never suffice,  
<sup>9</sup> that he should live on forever  
and never see the pit.

I can't ransom, or redeem, you. You can't redeem me. That's because I also need redemption, and so do you. I can't take on your sins and pay for them because I have sins of my own that need payment. And even if I could die for your sins, I'm just one ordinary man. At best, I could die for the sins of just one other person.

This is the problem we face. But the good news is that God himself provides the solution. The message of Christmas is that Jesus came to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). This is how it's put in Galatians 4:4–5: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." How does this work? Well, we're told earlier in that same book how this works. In Galatians 3:13–14, we read, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." Here's what that means: The apostle Paul, the writer of Galatians, picks up a little bit of information found in the law that God gave to the Israelites. The law (Deut. 21:22–23, specifically) said that some crimes are so bad they're punishable by death, and that the dead person could be hung on a tree, to be made into an example. That hanged man was cursed by God. Paul takes that information and says something remarkable: Jesus became that cursed man for us. Jesus took the death penalty for our sins by being regarded as a sinner, even though he is the only one who has never sinned.

It may seem harsh to talk about the death penalty. But that is how serious our rebellion against God is. We were created to know God and worship him. We were created to love him and serve him. But we don't do that. How many people are truly pursuing God now? Very few. They're pursuing everything else: money, merchandise, the approval of other people, a good time, or whatever. I'm sure that most people in New England will spend more time with the Patriots this week than they do with God. When we ignore God and even reject him, we're rejecting the very reason why we exist. That is a serious crime. We might call it cosmic treason. And that's why God takes sin seriously. It is not only rebellion against him, but it ruins the good world that he made.

But God is good and loving, and he was willing to send his only Son. And the Son of God was willing to come. And more than that, he was willing to redeem us at a great cost. Boaz was willing to redeem Ruth at a pretty high cost: He was willing to care for Naomi, Ruth, and

whatever children Ruth would have. But Jesus gave much more than that. Jesus gave his whole life. He did that to free us from slavery to sin and all the things of this world that won't give us rest. He came to rescue us from broken situations, like the one that Sara Seager found herself in, longing to have the lost years with her dead husband back but unable to turn back the clock to get them. He came to rescue us from death by taking on death himself. And Jesus did that. He not only died for sin, but he rose from the grave, showing that he could not be defeated by sin and death. Jesus is not just a man, but he's also God. Since he's the only sinless human being who has ever lived, he has no need for redemption. And since he's God, he is infinite and can pay for the sins of anyone who ever seeks refuge in him.

The story of Christmas is a rescue mission. God sent his Son for us. Will we turn to Jesus and trust that he is our only hope? When we put our faith in him, we find redemption. We find meaning. We find a people, because we are adopted into God's family. And we will find a place, first in heaven with him, and then in a perfect world, one where all diseases, all war, all pain and suffering, and even death itself are eradicated.

But when we turn to Jesus, we will never be the same. The apostle Paul tells Christians, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). If we are redeemed by Jesus, we are his special possessions. We will live for him. Our lives will no longer be our own. But that's a good thing. Because Jesus is also God. He is the Creator. He knows better than we do how our lives should go. You will find no better Redeemer, no better Savior, no better God, and no better friend.