

## Beautiful-er

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Narratives about success are better when there is a comeback element in them; aren't they? We like them that way. We like it when the character encounters tragedy but then overcomes and ascends to greater heights than we could've ever imagined. We like fictional stories like this—*Rocky*, *Rudy*, or *The Natural* are a few examples of these kinds of narratives.

However, we like true examples of this even more—like the story of Joanne who was a single mother on welfare. She aspired to be a novelist, but her first novel was rejected 12 separate times. Then, when it was finally accepted for publication, she was told to keep her day job because the novel's chances of being successful were slim to none. Today, almost everyone knows Joanne. We know her books well. They're loved the world over. And, it's safe to say that Joanne has a better day job as the bestselling author, J. K. Rowling.

Today, as we finish Ruth, we will conclude another amazing comeback story. And, it highlights something truly wonderful about the purposes of our God.

#### **Ruth 4:13-22**

<sup>13</sup> So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. <sup>14</sup> The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! <sup>15</sup> 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."

<sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. <sup>17</sup> The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

<sup>18</sup> This, then, is the family line of Perez:

Perez was the father of Hezron, / <sup>19</sup> Hezron the father of Ram, / Ram the father of Amminadab, / <sup>20</sup> Amminadab the father of Nahshon, / Nahshon the father of Salmon, / <sup>21</sup> Salmon the father of Boaz, / Boaz the father of Obed, / <sup>22</sup> Obed the father of Jesse, / and Jesse the father of David.

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Well, as we conclude this comeback story, two points need to be highlighted; two lessons need to be learned from the comeback-redemption of Naomi and Ruth. (1<sup>st</sup>) We must see that **God redeems up**. (2<sup>nd</sup>) We must see that **God redeems freely**. I'll unpack what I mean by each of these as we move forward thru today's sermon. So, stick with me because there's much to be encouraged by here.

### 1. God redeems up.

What do I mean? Well, in short, I mean that the Lord never merely restores us to our former place. You don't simply get what you had before. You get way more than you could ever imagine. When the Lord redeems, there is always an elevation or promotion for those whom he redeems. This is exemplified throughout Scripture. God rescues up. God redeems up. Let me give you a couple very prominent instances of this truth from the biblical narrative.

- Job encounters all kinds of mysterious trials and struggles in the narrative which bears his name. Job is exceedingly prosperous when his story begins then he loses everything. Yet, in the end, there is redemption from the Lord for this man. But, what does redemption look like? Is it mere restoration? No. The Lord's redemption is an elevation. The author makes this plain—"The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part" of his life (Job 42:12). ***God redeems up!***
- Joseph is another excellent example of this. He's his father's favorite child, but this makes his brother's jealous. So, they attack him and, then, sell him into slavery. Yet, God is always with Joseph and eventually redeems him, rescuing him from a prison cell, but not simply to restore him to his family. *No!* Rather, the Lord God makes him a leader in the most powerful nation in the world—so he can save his family (Genesis 50). ***God redeems up!***

This is also what we see in the Book of Ruth. God's redemption is upwards. Just consider Naomi's story. When she left Israel for Moab, I argued that her family was one of the most prominent families of Bethlehem. They were likely descendants of Caleb the great Israelite hero. She had status and honor. Naomi was a Vanderbilt or a Rockefeller or a Kennedy in Bethlehem.

Yet, the famine and the move and the death of her husband and her two sons has devastated her. *How the mighty have fallen! Beautiful is now bitter!*

So, for the better part of the book, the questions surrounding Naomi's situation have taken center stage. Will she survive? Will God allow this elite Israelite family to perish? Will he save Naomi's family-line? These are the tense questions swirling around the book's storyline.

Yet, the answers are far greater than the audience would have ever anticipated. The answers surpass reasonable expectations. The answers surpass mere restoration for Naomi. God's redemption for Naomi is upwards; her position will be far greater than it was previously. This is all communicated by a simple little line of genealogy. Our expert narrator tells us—"...they named [Ruth's baby] Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David" (v. 17). *What a redemption!*

- Before Naomi had sons who had wives, yet neither of them had children. Now she has this daughter-in-law who is more valuable than "seven sons" and she has her first grandson too.
- Before Naomi was the matriarch of one of the elite families of Bethlehem. Now she is going to be one of the renowned matriarchs of the royal family of Israel—great King David's great, great grandmother.
- Before Naomi was part of the family-line of an important hero of Israel—faithful Caleb. But, now we can see (this side of the cross) that she's part of the family-line which leads to the most faithful hero of all—Jesus Christ.

Friends, this story isn't a story of mere restoration. Rather, it's about elevation. God redeems up. And, this speaks about the very character of God. He is gracious. He is generous. He is merciful. He is comforter. He is redeemer. *Don't miss all this! It is so beautiful and encouraging!*

It's beautiful and encouraging because—what's true for Naomi's redemption is true for our redemption also. And, this is good news. Our salvation is also upwards. We are redeemed upwards like Naomi.

Simply consider the trajectory of the redemptive historical narrative. In Eden, we were united to our first father Adam. We were, therefore, bound-up with his sins.

His fall was our fall. His judgment was our judgment. Yet, when we're redeemed, we are united to Christ Jesus. We are, therefore, bound-up with his righteousness. His glory is our glory. His Father is now our Father. ***It's upwards!***

Or, think about this. The biblical text starts our journey in a beautiful garden. Yet, we transgressed God's one law for us and were banished from the glory of Eden and unfettered fellowship with God. Nevertheless, through faith in the work of Jesus, we are redeemed to a garden city—the New Jerusalem. It's an Eden that's elevated. It's greater than where we started. It's more glorious. It's more perfect. It's far better. ***It's upwards!***

Friends, being in the New Jerusalem is far better than being in that first garden, and being in Jesus Christ is far superior to being reckoned in our first father—Adam. ***Upwards! Upwards! Upwards!*** With God, redemption is always upwards.

I love how C. S. Lewis pictures eternity at the conclusion of *The Last Battle*, the final novel in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis writes this.

*And as [Aslan] spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.<sup>1</sup>*

This is no fiction. This is the biblical promise for you if you're in Christ Jesus. It has been the Christian hope for two thousand years and the biblical witness long before that. It's even here in this ancient, short story about Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. The character of our God is to redeem his people upwards—even into eternity.

Friends, no matter where you are today, whether in good times or in bad times, know that God has great plans for you. His purposes are greater than our purposes. His ways are greater than our ways. And, his redemption in Jesus Christ is far greater than you could ever imagine. You may feel like the Lord Jesus has abandoned you. You may feel like you're beyond rescue. Nevertheless, the Lord God has good plans

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 228.

for you—not plans to harm you but to prosper you, not plans to forsake or leave you but plans to nurture and encourage you, plans of hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). This is the character of our God. Amen. *He always redeems up!*

And, this brings us to our second and final lesson.

## **2. God redeems freely.**

You should be wondering why this ancient book, which is called Ruth, ends with a closeup of Naomi. Isn't that strange? If this were a stage production of Ruth, the final scene would feature Naomi at centerstage holding this baby boy in her arms with the spotlight fully on her. Ruth and Boaz are stage right, not being spotlighted, and the women of Bethlehem are stage left singing about Naomi. We should wonder: Why is Naomi in the spotlight here? Why is Naomi the focus?

The answer is she's the model of redemption. She's the one called "beautiful" then called "bitter" and now called "beautiful" again—or maybe "beautiful-er" now. Friends, Naomi is the one character by which we encounter the character of our Lord, by which we see God's free, redeeming work. So, let's take a moment and consider what that work looks like in regard to Naomi.

As we've seen over that last few weeks, there is nothing especially meritorious about Naomi. We are given no indication that she experiences guardian-redemption because she's earned it. She hasn't accomplished anything noteworthy in the story or even been particularly honorable. In fact, as I argued just a couple of weeks ago, Naomi concocts a plan (to win Boaz as redeemer) that's morally questionable at best. Furthermore, in week one, she and her whole family made a rather faithless decision to leave the Promised Land for the idolatrous nation of Moab.

So, let's be clear about this, Naomi isn't presented as the model of heroic faith. She's nobody special. She's messy. And, that's precisely the point.

You know, one of my absolute favorite statements of praise in the whole Bible is found in Romans. It's a question. It's a rhetorical question—just a question asked in order to make a point. Here it is. Paul writes this.

*“Who has known the mind of the Lord?*

*Or who has been his counselor?”*

*“Who has ever given to God,*

*that God should repay them?” (Romans 11:34-35).*

The point is that none of us have. We can demand nothing from the Lord God because we haven't given him a single thing. None of us have earned anything.

This is one of the most important lessons we must learn about our relationship to the Lord. In fact, until we learn it, we will not understand the essence and the truth of the gospel itself. Friends, the good news of Jesus Christ stands upon this lesson. It is the gospel's foundation. Isn't this what Paul tells us earlier in Romans?

*...when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8).*

Friends, this is Naomi's story. She didn't merit her guardian-redeemer's work. She didn't do anything to deserve his provision. She didn't deserve the precious baby whom God provided. Naomi didn't deserve to be in the line of the Davidic Dynasty, let alone in the line of the Messianic Dynasty. Yet, all these things were given freely by the grace of God. They were not earned, and they couldn't ever have been earned. Nonetheless, it was the Lord's pleasure to give them to Naomi freely.

And, it's the Lord's pleasure to give to us freely as well. We were redeemed at a price; we were saved by a great sacrifice (1 Corinthians 6:20). We were rescued by the grace of God through faith in Christ—not by good works (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Lord freely did this. God always redeems freely.

Now, since this is the case, we must be changed. This must transform us all. If we have received freely then we must give freely too. This is the laborious mission of a Christian lifetime. It's the calling for all who follow Jesus. And, above all things, in my experience, this is what characterizes a healthy Christian and a healthy church because this kind of graciousness is what characterizes Jesus. You will know you're in a good church when people who love the Laws of God and know the Laws of God honor those Laws with mercy and grace and love.

- They will be a forgiving people.
- They will be a generous people.

- They will be a patient people.
- They will be a loving people.
- They will be a people who are like their Savior God. Amen.