

## THE COMPASS

### *Desperate Housewives of the Bible, Part 4*

## **Romance, Risk, Redemption**

**Doug Brendel**

We began looking at the true story of Naomi and Ruth in our last session together. Naomi was a woman of Israel; she lived in Bethlehem, the same town where Jesus was born, but 1,300 years earlier.

She and her husband and two boys had to move — there was a famine, so they emigrated to the country on the opposite side of the Dead Sea, the nation of Moab. A totally pagan country. A totally foreign experience for the family.

Tragically, Naomi's husband dies. Meanwhile, her boys come of age and both of them marry local girls.

But then, even before either of the boys' marriages can produce grandchildren, each of the young husbands also dies.

This leaves Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, all alone.

In that culture, to be a woman without a husband was a precarious position.

You were financially insecure — that's not putting it strongly enough, really. You were poor. You were at risk. You had few options for work, for income, for feeding or housing yourself comfortably.

Now, all three of these women — one of them old, two of them young — find themselves in this hazardous situation.

Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem. She tells the girls to stay behind in Moab with their own mothers. Maybe they can do the "young widow" routine and snag new husbands.

Orpah agrees. But Ruth says no. She's going to Bethlehem with Naomi. She's committed to her.

Back in Bethlehem, they're poor, and Naomi is depressed, but Ruth refuses to give up. It's harvest season, and she heads out into the wheat fields.

Under the gleaning laws in those days, the poor were allowed to follow behind the field workers and pick up the wheat that the workers missed.

Moses had set up this system centuries before, to give the poor a way to help themselves.

Farm workers were not allowed to harvest their grain right up to the edge of their property. They were obligated to leave a little around the edges for people to come by and pick for themselves.

And then when the farmers harvested, they were only supposed to go over their crops once; they weren't allowed to go back and criss-cross to make sure they got every little bit.

So Ruth gets out there in the field with her burlap sack, and she starts picking up the leftover wheat.

She's working hard; she's pushing.  
 She doesn't take a break every 20 minutes like the other women.  
 She works straight through till lunch.

But Ruth doesn't know where she is.  
 She doesn't realize that she has stumbled into a field owned by a relative of Naomi's, a good guy, an older guy, named Boaz.  
 And Boaz is tuned in. He has heard the chatter about this unusual foreign woman, who gave up her own country, her own family, her own faith, to follow the widow Naomi home to Bethlehem.  
 Boaz kind of admires her for that — and as he watches her work that morning, he admires her even more. She's a workhorse!

So at lunchtime, instead of ignoring her, as he and his workers would normally do with the poor people out in the fields, he invites her to join them for lunch.  
 He had kind of a picnic lunch — some bread, some wine vinegar, some roasted grain — a pretty good spread, for people in those days.  
 So Ruth sits down and starts to eat. She's been working hard; she's worked up an appetite. She eats and eats.  
 But Boaz has been so generous with her — we might say, he filled her plate so full — that even though she eats until she's completely full, she still has leftovers. Something to take home, to put in the fridge for later.  
 And he invites Ruth to come back the next day. In fact, he says, why don't you just work my fields all season long, till the harvest is over.  
 It was dangerous for a woman in that culture to do this kind of work — field hands were often abusive, they would sometimes even molest women — but Boaz would keep her safe.

Then as she gets up to go back to work the afternoon shift, Boaz quietly pulls strings for her.  
 Sometimes field workers would give the poor a hard time, shame them or even ignore the gleaning laws and run them off — especially when the poor went off on the edges of the field to glean from the growing crops there.  
 But Boaz secretly tells his workers not only to let Ruth go wherever she wants to go, and not to make her uncomfortable in any way, but also — whenever Ruth is the one trailing them — to pretend to accidentally drop extra wheat, so she can pick it up.  
 I think he's got a crush on her!

\* \* \*

So Ruth works through the afternoon, filling her burlap sack.  
 (She must have thought that Boaz's field hands were morons, dropping all that wheat!)  
 Then, as the evening sets in, she goes to the threshing floor.  
 This is a flat, open space — usually it was on the top or the side of a high hill where you could count on strong winds blowing.  
 First you would spread out your wheat on the flat surface, and then typically some farm animal would be used to pull a heavy sled-type of apparatus over the grain, to crush it.

The stalks and husks would break apart from the edible parts.  
 Then the crushed wheat would be tossed into the air. This is called winnowing.  
 The wind would take the chaff and the lighter straw, and the heavier part of the grain —  
 the valuable stuff — would fall in a heap.

When Ruth finished threshing her wheat for the day, it amounted to 10 or 11 two-liter  
 bottles completely filled with wheat.

That was a heavy bag!

She lugged that thing home to Naomi — Naomi's eyes must have gotten really wide —  
 and then, on top of that, Ruth pulled out her leftovers from lunch.

Whoa! Now Naomi is way tuned in. She's been depressed for months, feeling like her  
 life is over — but this is *interesting*.

She knows immediately that something is up.

A poor girl — especially a foreigner, whom the field hands liked to pick on — doesn't  
 bring back 10 two-liter bottles of wheat from a single day of gleaning and  
 threshing.

Naomi knows immediately that this is a gender thing.

Ruth has caught the eye of *some guy*.

**“Where did you work?”** Naomi asks her (**Ruth 2:19**).

And then Ruth, very innocently, says the name: Boaz.

Naomi's heart must have skipped a beat. Boaz! She knows this name. They're related.  
 In fact, Boaz and Naomi's dead husband are close relatives.

So close, Naomi tells Ruth, that Boaz is one of their **“kinsman-redeemers”** (**Ruth  
 2:20**).

What's a kinsman-redeemer?

In those days, if a man died and he didn't have any sons, his property could be claimed  
 by his next of kin — there was no such thing as community property or women's  
 rights: the “next of kin” was defined as the next closest *male* relative.

The dead man's next closest relative, his closest “kinsman,” could redeem the loss by  
 taking possession of the family property.

But there was a small hitch. You couldn't just buy the land. You couldn't just take the  
 family business, the house, the furniture.

You had to take the widow too. You had to take the dead man's wife as your own wife.

Taking on the property was considered a plus. Taking on another wife was considered a  
 minus.

The property could make you money. The wife was going to cost you money.

So Ruth continues working in the fields of Boaz.

They're coming down to the end of the harvest.

They'll finish bringing in the barley first, then they'll finish the wheat — and then it will be  
 winter.

Naomi and Ruth will have a little bit of grain stored up — but this is no way to live.

So Naomi's been thinking.

She comes up with a plan.

Boaz is going to be at the threshing floor tonight, winnowing barley.  
 After the work day, he and the guys will eat and drink and have a great time.  
 Then he's going to lie down — he'll sleep near the grain, to keep it from getting stolen.

This was the custom.

So Naomi says to Ruth, Get a bath, put on some perfume, dress up in your best clothes, and wait till he's asleep.

Then uncover his feet — Bible scholars can't agree on what this was about: maybe it was just to make his feet get cold so he would wake up in the middle of the night, maybe it was more complicated than that — but then lie down next to him and see what happens.

Whatever Boaz tells you to do from that point on, you do it.

What is Naomi doing? She's putting Ruth in position for redemption.

She's giving Boaz the opportunity to say, Hey, I'll redeem you. I'll redeem your family. I'll buy the property that Naomi's husband left behind. I'll make up your losses. I'll take you in.

It would have been way simpler for Naomi just to ring Boaz up on the phone and ask him — but she didn't trust him. She wasn't sure he'd go for it.

Buying the property would be good for him, no question. Marrying Ruth — well, who could know how a well established rich guy would feel about bringing this poor foreign girl into his family?

So Naomi created this convoluted strategy for getting his attention and asking him the question.

It's risky. Boaz could really find this approach offensive. He could crow to the whole town about how she sneaked up on him.

But Naomi urges Ruth to roll the dice, and Ruth agrees to give it a try.

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Sure enough, Boaz's feet get cold and he wakes up in the middle of the night.

He finds Ruth next to him — now he's got a potential scandal on his hands — but he doesn't get mad.

He realizes what she's saying to him. She's hoping he will step in, as the kinsman-redeemer.

If he wants her, she's available.

He's old, she's young; she could have gone after a younger guy, certainly back in Moab, and probably would have gotten one.

But she was putting her life in his hands.

There's just one catch. Boaz isn't the next of kin. There's another guy on the family tree who, on a technicality, is a closer relative.

He gets first dibs.

Boaz has to go let this other guy make a decision first.

So Boaz talks it over with Ruth, there by the grain pile in the dark.

He says I'll go talk to the guy. If he is willing to redeem you, so be it. But if he won't, I'll absolutely do it.

Then he gives Ruth six measures of barley to take home for the pantry — a love-gift for the mother-in-law — and he heads into town to find the next of kin.

Ruth comes home with the barley and tells Naomi everything. Naomi sees what kind of a man Boaz is; she senses his heart. **“...The man will not rest until the matter is settled today,” (Ruth 3:18)** she tells Ruth.

Boaz followed the custom of the day. He went to the town gate — that’s where the major business transactions took place — and when the next of kin came along, he called him over. Then he called 10 of the elders, the town leaders, who were required to witness transactions like this. He explained the situation about Naomi’s land. The next of kin was first in line to redeem it.

The next of kin didn’t waste even a second. **“I will redeem it,” he said (Ruth 4:4).** I don’t know if Boaz’s heart sank, or if he saw it coming. The next of kin wanted the property, and he was entitled to it. There was nothing Boaz could do, legally. In any case, Boaz didn’t stop there. He kept talking. Keep in mind, he said, on the day you acquire the property, you acquire the dead man’s widow, Ruth — and then he adds, strategically I think, **“the Moabite” (Ruth 4:5).** As if to say, not only a financial burden, but a foreigner.

Suddenly the deal has changed. The next of kin wasn’t tuned in to this whole story the way Boaz and the rest of the people in town seemed to be. Yeah, maybe he heard people talking about it months ago, how old Naomi was coming back to town, and how she was bringing some foreign daughter-in-law with her. But he was too busy making money to follow the tabloids. He wasn’t tracking the story. He didn’t realize this foreign woman was still in town, still connected to the property. But he did know one thing: if he had to add a wife to his family in order to get the land, he didn’t want the land. He had his estate all set up, and adding another wife to the picture was going to get really, really complicated. **“I might endanger my own estate,”** the next of kin says to Boaz. **“You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.... Buy it yourself” (Ruth 4:6,8).**

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Boaz dickered with the next of kin for Ruth’s future. In much the same way, I believe, God dickered with the devil for my life. That may seem like a far-fetched statement, but look at how God dickered with the devil for Job’s future. Look at how Jesus and the devil sparred in the wilderness. Look at how he arm-wrestled with demon spirits during his earthly ministry. We have an enemy in the spirit realm, he’s commonly called Satan in the Scriptures, he is a real entity, and I believe he contends for the souls of human beings.

I can imagine Jesus and Satan negotiating for my future, long ago. Jesus is looking into the future, and sad to say, it’s obvious that Satan is my next of kin. I’m going to be wrecked with sin. I’m going to lie. I’m going to be manipulative.

To be honest, I'm going to be more like Satan than I am like Jesus.

So Satan says, I'll redeem that Brendel property. I'll take ownership of that territory. I'll work that land. I'll put my name on it. I can grow stuff there. I can trade there. I can do business.

But Jesus doesn't let the conversation end there. He keeps talking. Keep in mind, he says, you don't just acquire the space Doug Brendel will occupy on earth.

You don't just acquire the stuff he's going to produce, the reputation he might establish, the influence might achieve.

You've got to take Doug Brendel himself. The person. You've got to take him on, as your own liability.

You're going to have to put your own life on the line for him.

Suddenly, the deal has changed.

Satan doesn't want to sell out to me. He doesn't want to lay down his own life for a dopey old human being named Doug Brendel. An occasional jerk. A sometime slimeball. A guy who is going to be utterly imperfect his entire life.

So the way I see it, Satan pushes his chair back from the table. He stands up. He says, "I'm out. You redeem him yourself." And he walks out the door.

And the day comes, about 2,000 years ago, when Jesus is being hoisted up on that cross, and he remembers the deal he made for Doug Brendel.

It was in that long series of deals he made — it was about that same time that he made the deal for Rebecca Radmacher ... about that same time he made the deal for Jeff Van Wart, and the deal for Jill O'Neill, and the deal for Kenny Brockman.

But somehow, there at Calvary — even though it's killing him — he's happy he did it. Because he's so in love.

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Well, I'll tell you the end of Ruth's story.

The elders witnessed the deal, Boaz walked off with the deed to the property and an engagement ring for Ruth — I'm paraphrasing about the ring — and Boaz and Ruth were married.

Before long she was pregnant. When the baby came, it was a boy. They named him Obed.

After that, when the Bible talks about Naomi, it paints a picture of grandmotherly joy. Naomi, who was so depressed that she had virtually given up all hope, finds herself in her own beloved hometown, with a wealthy son-in-law, and sitting with a beautiful little grandson on her lap.

If we fast-forward a few years, to the days of King David, I can picture King David sitting with his own children, and saying, "Let me tell you a story. A true story.

Long ago, in the city of Bethlehem..." and he tells them the story of Naomi, and Ruth, and Boaz.

And when he comes to the end of the story, where the little baby is sitting on old

Naomi's lap, King David smiles and says, "And that little baby boy ... grew up to become my grandpa!"

By this complicated route, God saved Naomi and Ruth. He preserved the family line. He produced King David. And eventually, from the same little town, from the same family line, came Jesus.

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Boaz redeemed Ruth, Christ redeems us.

Ruth was helpless to help herself; she had to rely on the grace of this guy who, in essence, came from a different planet.

We're helpless to help ourselves; we have to rely on the gift of grace from a God who is totally beyond us, totally powerful, totally in control, someone we don't have any standing with.

We're desperate. But he is compassionate.

He is good to go.

He loves us.

Thank God for that!