Hi,

Today’s updates:

* My noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet today on [my new Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

Continuing our theme of biblical comebacks, today’s comeback story is the tale of Naomi and Ruth, from three millennia ago.

***Ruth 1:1-5; 4:13-17 (NRSV)***

**In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.**

[After the death of their husbands, Ruth insists upon leaving her home and following Naomi to Bethlehem, telling her, ”Where you go, I will go . . . your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God.” In Bethlehem, Ruth, with some pushing from Naomi, eventually marries Boaz.]

**So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 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 borne him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.**

*First, a synopsis of the story of Ruth*

The story of Naomi (and it is really Naomi’s story despite the name of the book) is about the power of God, working through Ruth’s faithful friendship, to redeem Naomi from bitterness and despair.

Naomi and her husband were living in Israel during the time of the judges (1100-1200BC) when a famine drove them to leave their home and head southeastward to Moab. There they made a new home, where all was well until Naomi’s husband died. Yet even after Elimelech’s death, Naomi was all right. Though a widow, she had two able sons to provide for her and to protect her. Her sons married local women, Orpah and Ruth.

But ten years later, tragedy struck Naomi again. Naomi’s sons died and the three women, now widows, were left alone. In the ancient world, being without a husband or sons was about as big a tragedy as might befall a woman.Naturally, Naomi decided to head back to Israel, hoping to find family and rebuild her life. Naomi was accompanied by her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But, taking pity on them, Naomi urged them to turn around and stay in Moab, among their own families. So Orpah headed home . . . but Ruth did not. Instead, Ruth pledged to follow Naomi, going where Naomi goes, worshiping Naomi’s god as her own. But this was not the end of their story; it was only the beginning.

Upon their arrival in Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem, these two unlikely friends set about the rebuilding of their lives. Given all she had been through, it is no surprise that Naomi was deeply embittered: “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty,” she told the women in Bethlehem. Naomi, whose name meant “sweetness,” even wanted to take a new name, Mara, based on the Hebrew word for “bitter.” Naomi was in great need of restoration and renewal – she needed to be redeemed.

Despite Naomi’s despair, Ruth decided to go into the fields, gathering what grain was left by the harvesters, hoping that someone would notice her. Someone did. Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi’s, not only noticed Ruth, he eventually married her. How their union comes about is a touching and somewhat complicated story that consumes much of the book.

After the marriage, we are told that “when they came together, the Lord made her conceive and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13). The women of Bethlehem knew that this child, Ruth’s son, would be Naomi’s redeemer, legally bound to look after her in her old age, saving her from the ravages of widowhood. But this was no mere legal matter. We understand this when we are told that “Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.” This tiny infant, a gift given to Ruth by God, is a gift also given to Naomi, a gift that will make her whole.

But even with this, the story is not complete. The infant, cuddled and hugged by Naomi, would grow to be the grandfather of the great King David, from whose family would come the Messiah, the one who would redeem all God’s people, making them (us!) whole.

*What a comeback!*

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a comeback story. Two women knocked flat by life who found their way back to the life they sought. It is a dramatic and touching story.

Even your first exposure to their story will enable you to see drama in their comeback, but you will probably not appreciate the magnitude of the turnaround. We have little real sense of what it was like to be a woman in the ancient world.

Sure, we all know that the ancient world was comprised of patriarchal cultures; i.e., the men were in charge. But we don’t understand how women were seen by the men and perhaps by themselves. For a biblical example, read Exodus 20:17, where in the last of the Ten Commandments, women and slaves are lumped in with the house, the ox, the donkey, and anything that “belongs to your neighbor,” i.e., property that is not to be coveted.

I once heard a lecture from a professor of ancient history on the role of women and slaves in Greco-Roman society. The title of the lecture was, “Women and Slaves: Less Than Human.” An inspired title that drives home the truth about the status of women in the ancient world, even the supposedly “enlightened” world of the Greek philosophers. In the first centuries AD, many of the pseudo-Christian gnostics believed that women were incomplete humans, needing to pass upward through manhood on their way to heaven.

All this stands in stark contrast to Paul who wrote to the Galatians that, “There is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). And Paul put this unity to work in the many important responsibilities he gave women in the course of his ministry. You can look at Romans 16 to get a sense for this, including his naming of Junia as an apostle.

*Desperate*

When the men die (Naomi’s husband and her sons, who are the husbands of Ruth and Orpah), the women are in a bad fix, particularly Naomi, who has been away from family for many years. Though Ruth and Orpah are around family, their dead husbands left no surviving brothers for them to marry.

The depth of the women’s plight enables us to grasp that this is a story of redemption, particularly for Naomi, who will return home and take on the name “bitterness” for herself. In the eighty-five verses in the book, “redeem” or “redemption” is used twenty-three times. Reversal is the essence of redemption. It is slavery reversed into freedom. Death into life. Bitterness and fear into sweetness (“Naomi” means “sweet” or “pleasant.” When she gets back to Bethlehem, she wants to be called “Mara,” which means “bitter.”) and courage.

Naomi desperately needs redemption. She finds it through her daughter-in-law, Ruth, who leaves her own people and gods and heads for Bethlehem to a new home and a new God. After Ruth marries Boaz and gives birth to a son, it is Naomi to whom the women in the village come, saying, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 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 borne him” (4:14-15). It is not Ruth who has redeemed Naomi, who reversed her life and provided the kinsman she desperately needs. It is God who is the redeemer.

When Naomi told her daughters-in-law to return to their homes rather than accompany her to Bethlehem, she says, “may the Lord show kindness to you . . . .” The Hebrew word here is *hesed*, a much richer word than simply “kindness.” Rather, *hesed* conveys an essential part of God’s character, his kind mercy and abundant grace. To extend *hesed* was to extend a lovingkindness and mercy far beyond anything that could be expected. This was God’s response to the women’s crisis, and it is God’s response to each of us. God is our redeemer as well.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott