

Scandal in the Family
Ruth 4:1-22

Friends, its wonderful when stories have happy endings isn't it? When we hear a story with a happy ending is helps us to believe that there can be happy endings in our own lives as well.

That in spite of whatever challenges and hardships we might face – there will be something good that comes out of it and it will all have been worth it.

And the story of Ruth certainly delivers in this regard.

Four weeks ago when we began this series the story began with Naomi and her family leaving Bethlehem to go in search of greener pastures elsewhere, and they end up losing everything. Tragedy!

So, Naomi must return to Bethlehem now a poor bitter widow with only her foreign daughter-in-law for company, a person

that would be a reminder that she had walked away from the Promised Land, from her God and his people.

Don't call me Naomi, she says – it means pleasant, but Yaweh has made my life very bitter! So call me Mara.

But what a difference four chapters later into the story! Things have really turned around and Naomi's story has a happy ending after all.

They have found a guardian redeemer, and not only is he kind and generous. He is willing to buy back their land and take Ruth to be his wife. And the Lord gives Ruth and Boaz a son

Naomi came back empty but now she has been filled up once again – the Lord has done more than she could imagine in her life.

So the story ends, the music plays, the credits roll, the lights come up and we leave the theatre with a good feeling in our hearts because we've been encouraged that happy endings do

exist, and if they can happen for others there is hope that God will do the same for us.

But friends, the story of Ruth is much more than a simple heart-warming tale of a Moabite princess who goes from riches to rags, and marries into a poor Israelite family and then she and her mother-in-law find redemption by having Boaz come to their rescue - a nice happy ending.

No, this story is part of a much larger story, and God doesn't want us to miss this, so as the happy ending is celebrated there are certain names which are mentioned in the credits so to speak.

People from the past are brought up and connected to the story of Ruth...

And these people are connected not only because they are ancestors in the family tree, but because they share the common theme of "scandal" with Ruth and Naomi.

These are scandalous ancestors; they are remembered for something in their life that was not quite right, something that was perhaps shameful. So let's take a look at who they were...

So the first scandalous people mentioned are Rachel and Leah – and just by the order in which the names are presented you get a hint at what was going on.

Leah was the older of the two sisters, but if you remember the story of Jacob, he was in love with Rachel and he worked seven years to earn her hand in marriage.

But on the night of the wedding Rachel's father played a trick on Jacob and gave him Leah as his wife. *(Lest we feel too sorry for Jacob, we should remember he's simply getting his just desserts for tricking his own brother out of his inheritance and his father's blessing.)*

So what to do – it's too late to undo the marriage, but Leah is not who Jacob wanted. So He ends up working another seven years to be able to marry Rachel as well.

But Leah's the one who has all the kids; And Rachael eventually has only two – Joseph and Benjamin.

Two wives, not quite the way God intended for marriage to be, a recipe for fighting and conflict in the family.

There is fighting between the wives and their children and it all leads to that infamous “coat of many colors” and Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt.

Yet in spite of this colorful, scandalous family history – Rachel and Leah are the ones whom the story of Ruth mentions as having built up the nation of Israel.

The next scandalous person is Tamar – so who is she, and what is she famous for?

Well, Tamar was a Canaanite daughter-in-law of Judah, the fourth son of Leah and Jacob. Judah's son Er had died and left Tamar without a child.

So Judah told his other son, Onan to fulfill his duty as a brother-in-law Guardian-Redeemer and give Tamar a child. But Onan only used Tamar for pleasure and he wouldn't get her pregnant – so the bible says God put him to death!

Now Judah had another son – who was much younger. Judah promised Tamar that he would become her husband when he grew up. So Tamar waited, but Judah did not keep his promise.

So, Tamar took matters into her own hands – she disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced Judah into sleeping with her and Judah had no idea who she was, and she became pregnant.

When Tamar's pregnancy became visible, she was accused of prostitution. Judah was furious with her for this and wanted to have her put to death.

But Tamar had secured some of Judah's personal effects when she seduced him so she used these to let Judah know that it

was his child she was carrying, and Judah then realized that he had neglected and failed to fulfill his promise and give her his youngest son for a husband, and she had merely tricked him into taking responsibility to give her an heir, a son.

And Tamar's son was Perez, and he and his family and their descendants became the leading family in the Tribe of Judah.

Now there's one last scandalous person to tell you about who is a part of this family tree – but they aren't mentioned in the final credits in chapter 4 – though all of the people involved in the story of Ruth would have known about it.

We only discover it when we read the details of Jesus' family tree at the beginning of the gospel of Mathew 1:1-6.

"¹ This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ Judah the father

of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon,

⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David."

Now right away we notice how this is similar to the genealogy at the end of the story of Ruth.

But we'll also notice that there is a significant detail that was not mentioned in the genealogy of Ruth. In Mathew's family tree we discover that Boaz's mother was Rahab.

You know Rahab, the famous or infamous prostitute from the city of Jericho, whose walls came tumbling down...

She was the one who hid the Israelite spies when they were scouting out the Promised Land, kept them safe, and helped them escape capture.

So for this act of faith her life was spared when the nation of Israel crossed the Jordan and destroyed Jericho in order to take possession of the Promised Land and she became part of God's people.

This Rahab is the mother of Boaz.

So no wonder Boaz has a soft spot for Ruth when he sees her coming in to belong to God's people from a foreign nation.

Now – all these scandalous stories that are connected to the people who show up in the credits at the end of the story of Ruth are all very interesting and make for a juicy dish if you like that sort of thing...

But why is this important for us to know about?

After all we confess and believe that *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* (2 Tim 3:16-17)

So then, even this list of names at the end of the story of Ruth is there for a specific purpose and reason and they are not something we can ignore – like we often do to the credits at the end of the movies...

Because friends, if you or someone you know and love is going through circumstances in life right now where there may be doubt as to whether or not it will come to a happy ending,

and maybe you feel those circumstances are somewhat scandalous or embarrassing – you've lost a job, you've gone through a bad break-up, you're dealing with the consequences of bad decisions –whatever it is...

You need to be reassured that the happy ending to the story of Ruth is not simply a “one-off” episode in the bible.

No, these names make sure that we know it's linked to the larger pattern of grace and mercy in the scriptures where in spite of scandalous situations caused by human sinfulness - God is still present!

It reassures us that no matter what may be going on in our lives or in the world around us, God is at work behind the scenes to bring hope into people's lives –regardless of scandal.

Brothers and sisters, a scandalous past or not being the “right sort of person” or however you want to describe it will not prevent God from extending you His grace and mercy and using you in His plan to bring His salvation to others and to this world.

And friends, I don't think that we can be reminded of this truth too many times because our sinful nature is hardwired to try to make sure that we cover up anything scandalous or “unchristian” in front of God.

We're always going back to the place where we believe that we need to get our crap together in order for God to love us, let alone use us!

And the devil works overtime to convince us of this as well – Always reminding us of the “scandals” in our own lives, waving them in front of our faces, taunting us.

Whispering to us that if people found out about some of the things we've done we'd wish the ground would open up and swallow us, we'd be so ashamed to have others know about it.

And so we keep these areas locked away, we don't care to think of them or remember them.

We keep our guard up whenever conversation or circumstances get too close to them because we certainly wouldn't want others to know about them.

And deep down we wonder if God loves us just a little bit less because them, or that while He may love us, He'd like us more if we didn't have this baggage.

So we try very hard to never make those mistakes again - and maybe we're successful for a time - and ironically that's when we think we're really being good Christians.

Or we struggle and we fail and mess up, we fall into our doubts and everything becomes a heavy burden and we start to despair that we just can't seem to live this Christian life.

But friends, the good news that comes from these scandalous names included in the credits of the story of Ruth is that it's precisely through our mistakes, our sins, in the times of scandal, doubt and despair in our lives that God acts and works miracles in our lives.

It's almost like the happy ending doesn't come unless its been preceded by some tragedy or scandal, and the characters who face up to their part in it, who are honest about it they receive

the grace and mercy, but those who try to hide it or cover it up prevent themselves from experiencing the happy ending.

So brothers and sisters it makes no sense to try avoid the skeletons in our closets.

If we don't open up about them, if we aren't honest about them with our fellow believers, if we won't bring them to God, we won't experience His grace.

All we'll experience is our own self-righteousness, but we won't know the forgiveness, the mercy, the grace or the righteousness of Jesus Christ... and we won't be filled with the gratitude that comes from this experience.

The story of Ruth makes no attempt to hide anything scandalous, to keep any skeletons from getting out of the closet.

It's a story where people are who they are, and they know they are in need of God's help, his grace and mercy, and they receive it and celebrate it.

And this pattern we see the lives of Naomi and Ruth and Boaz doesn't stop at the end of the chapter 4. It continues on many years later in the life of another young woman who comes to Bethlehem under scandalous circumstances.

This young woman is engaged to be married, but has become pregnant – but no one will believe that her fiancé is not the father – but that instead she bears the Son of the Most High, the promised Messiah in her womb.

And so the story of Ruth continues as Mary is engaged to one of Ruth's descendants, from the line of King David... a man named Joseph.

They come to Bethlehem disgraced with her pregnancy outside of marriage, and even though she is God's anointed to give birth to the promised Messiah she and Joseph can find no

decent rooms for rent, and so Mary gives birth to the Son of God in a humble, dirty stable.

So brothers and sisters is why the scriptures say *"God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."* 1
Corinthians 1:27

And this is good news for anyone who is wondering if they have enough strength to hang on and wait for the happy ending...

For anyone who is struggling with something which they are ashamed of...

So friends – tell God what you are ashamed about, tell the Holy Spirit you aren't strong enough to make it anymore, tell Jesus you need him where you are broken and sinful and weak.

It's ok to be in that place brothers and sisters, because that is precisely where you need to be as God works quietly behind the scenes to work His redemptive pattern into your life...

So that Rachel and Leah's story, Tamar's story, Rahab's story, Ruth's story, Mary's story also become your story, and you to experience God bringing blessings and hope and a new beginning through Jesus Christ in your life now, and in the next life to come.

Amen.