

WEEK SIX

Denouement at Dawn

A Word from the Author

In the last several years I have been invited a number of times to teach on leadership. Of course the Bible has *a lot* to say about leadership—the good, the bad, and the “collapse and run” are all in there. We have, for example, 1 and 2 Samuel in which the stories of King Saul and King David are narrated to illustrate how leaders fail and succeed, what abuse of power looks like, what happens when a leader chooses to rationalize their mistakes instead of confronting them, and what happens when a leader of God’s people is more afraid of his constituency than he is of his God.

Then there is the image of “shepherd” as “leader” that can be found throughout the Bible. This image is repeated because it was such a broadly recognized cultural metaphor. *Everyone* in Israel’s world knew what a good shepherd looked like . . . and what a bad shepherd looked like (Ps. 23 versus Ezek. 34). And *everyone* knew about the hassles and challenges of daily dealings with the typical mixed flock of sheep and goats with which every family in town had contact. Bedouin shepherds will quickly testify that sheep are not smart, are terribly nearsighted, regularly get lost and panic, and need constant protection as their only natural defense is to huddle. In other words, without a shepherd who will commit himself to the relentless pursuit of good pasturage and water, put his own life on the line to deal with predators, and

act as the midwife in the middle of the night—sheep are nothing but prey.* As a result, the image of shepherd as leader and king goes all the way back to the fourth millennium BCE in Egypt and Mesopotamia. So, yes, the Bible is a very good resource for leadership principles.

The topic of leadership has also become *huge* in the self-help category at the bookstores. You may even have been invited to some sort of continuing education at your workplace on the topic. What most of the literature will tell you is that each of us has a circle of influence of some sort, and if we utilize our authority within that circle of influence wisely, paying careful attention to the needs of our stakeholders, we will accomplish leadership. Some of us have a lot of influence; some of us just a little. But deploying that influence effectively . . . well, that is what leadership is all about.

Real Time and Space

One of the things I find very interesting about Boaz in our story is that he is one of those people who has a *lot* of influence. Granted, he has a lot of influence in a very small town, but he has influence all the same. My life experience tells me that Boaz had gained that influence and found his way inside by adapting to the norms and values of his community and exercising a give-and-take reciprocity that kept him in good standing with the other businessmen in town. In this fashion, Boaz had earned a level of currency that served him well when it was time to haggle over prices, land, and water rights. But in this particular story, Boaz (a good old boy of sorts) chooses to use his influence for the outsider, who we all know has no chance of influencing the stakeholders on her own. As I say in my seminars, crisis calls for currency. Boaz has it. The question is: How will he use it?

Our last session ended with Ruth safely home after her night on the threshing floor, having just proposed to the wealthiest and most influential man in town. Boaz, on the other hand, is off to the city gate (the epicenter of power in his world) to fulfill his oath. What will become of our widow Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth? Our session this week begins at the city gate.

* Timothy Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks: Forty Daily Reflections on Biblical Leadership* (Charlotte, NC: ShepherdLeader Publications, 2016).

DAY ONE

Integrity Triumphs

First Contact

Zig Ziglar, a successful American author, salesman, and motivational speaker, once said, “With integrity, you have nothing to fear, since you have nothing to hide. With integrity, you will do the right thing, so you will have no guilt.” Any leader will tell you that living with integrity is costly. But as Ziglar said, that cost is far lower than *not* living with integrity.

Into the Book

Today we’re going to take a brief look at the scene at the city gate. We’ll begin with a look at our narrative in Ruth before we turn to a relevant law found in the book of Deuteronomy and to another narrative found in Genesis illustrating the seriousness of the choice made at the gate.

Ruth 4:1–6

¹Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat down there just as the guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along. Boaz said, “Come over here, my friend, and sit down.” So he went over and sat down.

²Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, “Sit here,” and they did so. ³Then he said to the guardian-redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. ⁴I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.”

“I will redeem it,” he said.

⁵Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man’s widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.”

⁶At this, the guardian-redeemer said, “Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.” (NIV)

- Boaz begins by presenting the opportunity to purchase Naomi’s land, and the man says, “I’ll take it!” From what you now know about Israelite culture, why would the chance to actually *purchase* the land be so appealing to him?
- Did you note a change of tone when the closer kinsman finds out Ruth and Naomi are in the mix? Describe that change of tone.
- Why do you think this other kinsman might have responded as he did?

- Recall the levirate law that we read back in Week Three. In that Israelite law, when a woman is widowed young, her brother-in-law (the nearest relative) is supposed to produce a son in his deceased brother's name. An odd law to us—but effective! Our question: Does Ruth have the privileges of an *Israelite* widow?

- As you watch Boaz deploy his negotiating skills in this deal at the city gate, what tried-and-true methods do you see our small-town businessman utilizing to achieve his end goal?

- What do you think was Boaz's real objective in this business transaction? What is negotiable for him? What is non-negotiable?

In Week Three, Day Two, we read Deuteronomy 25:5–6 regarding the levirate law. In today's reading we see the process that is followed when a man refuses to perform his duty.

Deuteronomy 25:7–10

⁷But if the man does not desire to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, "My husband's brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband's brother to me." ⁸Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And if he persists and says, "I do not desire to take her," ⁹then his brother's wife shall come to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall declare, "Thus it is done to the man who

does not build up his brother's house." ¹⁰In Israel his [household] name shall be called, "The house of him whose sandal is removed."

- Underline the three things that the widowed woman is to do to the kinsman who refuses to marry her.
- What do you think is the purpose of naming the uncooperative brother-in-law's household, "The house of him whose sandal is removed"?

Finally, read Genesis 38:6–10. In this (edgy!) narrative a man named Judah (one of the twelve patriarchs of the nation of Israel) has married his eldest son Er to Tamar. When Er dies before a child is produced, the law requires that the second son, Onan, father a son in his brother's name. But as in the sandal law above, Onan refuses.

Genesis 38:6–10

⁶Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. ⁷But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death. ⁸Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother." ⁹But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also. (NRSV)

- Underline Judah's name in this narrative, circle the name of Er's wife, and double underline Onan's name.

- According to the passage, why did Onan refuse to “perform the duty of a brother-in-law” (v. 8)?

- Understanding Onan as a real person in real space and time, what motivations can you imagine are directing his behavior?

- Onan is commanded to perform the duty of a levirate (v. 8). What does he do instead?

- It seems that Onan’s crime is a secret crime—no one but God would have known of his treachery. Why would he want to keep his crime a secret?

- How does Onan’s secret crime affect everyone around him?

- How serious was his action? What happened to him as a result of his action?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

Be assured that Yahweh did not execute everyone who refused to perform his levirate duty. This is apparent in the law found in Deuteronomy. But the law of Deuteronomy 25 makes it clear that the extended family of the man who behaves in this fashion will be permanently and publicly shamed.

The man's *bêt 'āb* will be known as “the house of him whose sandal is removed.” Why are they shamed? Because they have refused to care for the widow in their own household. Recall our study in Week Four, Day One when we looked at the gleaning laws in Deuteronomy 24 (the command to leave leftovers in the field for the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan). We are remembering that this triad of people is highlighted repeatedly as those needing particular care because they do not have a *bêt 'āb* to protect them. Hence, it is even more outrageous for a *bêt 'āb* to refuse to care for its own widows. So important is this cultural and biblical value that Deuteronomy 27:19 states: “Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow” (NIV). What we see in all these laws is God's compassion, concern, and provision for those who are on the margins of society. Thus, this sandal law is designed to protect the young widow and shame the relative who refuses to protect her.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

As we ponder biblical law about foreigners, widows, and orphans (cf. the New Testament, James 1:27), we need to ask ourselves: Who are the people on the margins in *our* world? It is no longer the case that becoming a widow necessarily collapses one's financial or legal security. Being a foreigner does not necessarily make a person landless and penniless. Many orphans are adopted into fabulous families. So who is the foreigner, widow, and orphan in our world? Is it the person in your workplace who is underpaid and underemployed (i.e., regularly overlooked for promotion) because of their immigrant status, gender, or religious commitments—and the fact that they don't have the confidence to fight for themselves? Is it the single mother working two minimum-wage jobs while her nine-year-old watches the six- and two-year-olds in an empty, unheated apartment? Is it the foster child who *has* parents but has been neglected and abused his entire life? If our God is the one who “executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing” (Deut. 10:18 rsv), shouldn't his people be doing the same thing?

DAY TWO

Hope Returns

First Contact

We have talked a lot about hope and despair in our study. We have noted how life has a way of knocking our legs out from under us at a time least expected and leaving us gasping for air. We've also noted that "hope" is defined as a road forward out of the resulting chaos. The problem, of course, is that once you've had your legs taken out from under you, finding the energy to make a new plan is sometimes completely out of reach. Sometimes we need others to find hope for us. Sometimes we need a champion to step up to the plate and say "I've got this one." Other times . . . we need to *be* that champion for someone else.

Into the Book

Ruth 4:13–22

¹³So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.

¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is the LORD who has not left

you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. ¹⁵May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.”

¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. ¹⁷The neighbor women gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi!” So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

¹⁸Now these are the generations of Perez: to Perez was born Hezron, ¹⁹and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, ²⁰and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, ²¹and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed [“servant”], ²²and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David.

- Have you noticed yet that in ten years of marriage to Mahlon, Ruth had borne no children, but in her marriage to Boaz, she immediately conceives a son? On a blessing scale of one to ten, where would you rate this event in Ruth’s life?
- In verses 14–15 the townswomen bless Naomi. Circle each aspect of the blessing they name as having already occurred. Underline every wishful thought they pronounce over Naomi.
- Compare Ruth 4:14–15 with Ruth 1:19–21 when Ruth and Naomi first arrived in Bethlehem. Here the women of the town run to greet their old friend, saying, “Is this Naomi?” (v. 19). And Naomi responds: “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the

LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?” (vv. 20–21).

- What has changed?

- Knowing that Obed’s name means “servant,” why do you think a child of this union might be named as he is?

- In Ruth 4:17 do you recognize any of these names? Who is Jesse? Who is David? Why does the narrator want you to know that Ruth’s child is related to these people?

- Do you have a grandma in your life? Are you perhaps one yourself? What is it that Naomi is feeling as she “cuddled [Obed] to her breast” (4:16 NLT)?

Let’s focus on 4:12 for a moment: “Moreover, may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman.”

Why would the townspeople be so focused on blessing Boaz and Ruth with the blessing of Judah and Tamar? The answer to this question takes us back to our study on Day One of this week. If you continue reading the story we began earlier this week (Gen. 38), you learn that after Onan’s treachery, Judah failed to fulfill his responsibility as the patriarch of his household to marry Tamar to his third son. This left Tamar in “no-woman’s-land”—she was no longer a lawful member of her biological father’s *bêṯ ’āb*, she wasn’t married to anyone in Judah’s *bêṯ ’āb*, and she had no children. Recognizing the injustice done to her, Tamar took matters into her own hands and got

herself pregnant by her father-in-law, Judah (vv. 14–26). Yet another reason why the Bible is not always rated G! After a *lot* of drama, Tamar finally gets her child, and Er gets his heir. We pick up here at the time of the Tamar’s delivery.

Genesis 38:27–30

²⁷When the time of her [Tamar’s] delivery came, there were twins in her womb. ²⁸While she was in labor, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, saying, “This one came out first.” ²⁹But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” Therefore he was named Perez. ³⁰Afterward his brother came out with the crimson thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah. (NRSV)

- Circle the names of Tamar’s sons.
- Knowing what you do of Israel’s patriarchal culture, how would Tamar and her kinsmen feel about twin sons?
- With the birth of these boys, and Judah’s repentance for his irresponsibility, is Tamar’s economic and legal standing restored?
- Why do you think the townspeople would see it as appropriate to bless Ruth with Tamar’s blessing? What do these two women have in common?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

In the passage we have read today we have seen how the mind and heart of a community can be changed by the steady display of good character even in the face of poor treatment and bigotry. The book of Galatians says it this way: “And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart” (6:9 RSV). Even in her poverty and her questionable past, Ruth proves herself a woman of *hayil*. Boaz, on the other hand, shows us how the heart and mind of a community can be changed by the courage of one insider who is willing to use his influence to represent those on the margins. Boaz could have easily looked the other way. But instead he keeps his promises, displays costly hospitality, and cashes in his currency for the outsider. Boaz proves himself a man of *hayil*. The result of these ordinary lives lived well? The birth of a treasured son, Obed. Obed is the solution to Ruth’s compromised status, the salve to Naomi’s broken heart, and as we will see in our next study, the ultimate solution to a community in crisis.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

The obvious question that arises out of these passages is: What is the impact of a life lived with perseverance in the midst of opposition, hospitality in the face of prejudice, hope in the midst of despair? Romans says it this way: “We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation” (5:3–4 NLT). Here we have come to know two characters who are in many ways foils of one another—an insider with everything; an outsider with nothing. But based on the strength of character of each, Naomi’s life is rescued. And Boaz’s and Ruth’s lives are filled to overflowing right along with hers. Take a look around you. Where is your influence needed? Where might your hospitality make a difference? Who in your world needs to see your perseverance so that they can grab hold of hope themselves?

DAY THREE

A Community Is Saved

First Contact

Way back in Week Four, Day Two, I spoke of Harry Potter as an unexpected hero. I identified him as the ultimate insider who was treated like an outsider by the very people who should have recognized him for who he was. Aragorn, son of Arathorn, in *The Lord of the Rings*, would qualify as the same sort of character. This ranger of the North is, in reality, the heir of Elendil but spends the bulk of his life on the margins because he is unrecognized by the very kingdom (Gondor) he has come to save. Jesus the Christ shares the same bio. The Gospel of John says it this way: “He came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him” (1:10–11 NLT). As we are about to read, Ruth fills a similar space in the great story of the Bible.

Into the Book

Back in Week Two, Day Three we made you read through the genealogy of Jesus. Most modern readers do not find genealogies engaging reading! But for the ancients, genealogies played a critical function. A genealogy gets a reader from one story to the next—it is the glue that holds the larger

narrative together. A well-crafted genealogy tells the reader who the important characters are and why. Let's take a look at the genealogy that closes down our story and see if you can find the writer's clues as to where we are going next.

Ruth 4:18-22

¹⁸Now these are the generations of Perez: to Perez was born Hezron, ¹⁹and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, ²⁰and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, ²¹and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed, ²²and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David.

- ▣ Underline each person the biblical writer names. How many of these names do you recognize?
- ▣ With which name does the genealogy end?
- ▣ What does that tell you about the character David?

- ▣ List three things here you know about David.

2 Samuel 7:8-16

⁸Now read this passage, where God offers his covenant to King David. Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and I have been with

you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. ¹⁴I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; ¹⁵but I will not take my steadfast love [*hésed*] from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.” (RSV)

- How does David start his career?

- How does David end his career?

- What is God’s job description for David?

- What is God's promise to David?

Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." ⁷Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (RSV)

- Do you recognize this passage from Christmas church services and cards? Do you realize that it is typically understood as being fulfilled in the birth of Jesus?
- According to this passage, what will this unnamed king bring to the citizens of Israel?
- Whose throne does this king sit on?
- Use this chart to compare and contrast these two genealogies. As you read through each, fill in the boxes with the names found in the genealogy (as in the example below). Use the boxes on the right to record any information found in Matthew that is not included in Ruth. Do you think our biblical writer has achieved his goal of identifying the critical characters and gluing together the great story?

WEEK SIX

Ruth
4:18-22
[above]

Perez [father of]

Hezron

Matthew
1:3-6
(see Week Two, Day Three)

Perez [father of]

Tamar, mother of Perez

Hezron

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

As we have now seen, the biblical narrator considers the ultimate climax of the story of Ruth to be the fact that her child becomes the grandfather of David. Why? Because David will become the greatest king in all of Israel's history. You probably already knew the story of David and Goliath, where David, an unlikely leader (unarmed and underage for the draft), stands up to the biggest Philistine Israel had ever seen (see 1 Sam. 17). You probably knew that in this act of rare courage he turns the tide of foreign oppression and a young shepherd launches his long road to leadership. What you probably didn't know is that David was the eighth son of Jesse, an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah (see 1 Sam. 17:12). And although David was situated far from the role of leadership within his own *bêt 'āb*, because of his courage, his character, and his perseverance, he will eventually be crowned king. Does any of this sound familiar? Of course it does! Because it sounds an awful lot like the story of David's great-grandmother, Ruth.

But there is another very important reason that this outcome should grab your attention. Think all the way back to our first weeks of study together. Do you remember why the era of the judges was such a mess? "In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes" (Judg. 21:25 NLT). Do we think the people in the little suburb of Ephrathah were suffering because the nation couldn't get its act together? Of course they were. According to our biblical narrators, the ultimate solution to this community's greatest threat will be a king. And where would this king come from? Well that would be the child of the Moabitess. The outsider that Ephrathah did not want among them in the first place winds up bringing to this community the gift of a new start. She offers them a road forward, *hope*. Ruth's gift was one she did not even realize she was bringing—the transformation of a conflicted and corrupted community into a kingdom. And in the midst, she also managed to heal an old widow's heart. How about *that* for a story!

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

In the stories we've read this week, we've seen incredible integrity and courage displayed: Tamar, a childless widow who stands up against her culture calling for justice; David, a boy who does not see the size of the giant but the size of his God; a young widow who will not allow her mother-in-law to walk the road of loss and grief alone; a mature businessman who decides to put his own reputation and resources on the line to help two widows. And we've also seen how the God of Israel used these ordinary people in their ordinary lives to do extraordinary things.

Will you indulge me while I bring this story full circle? Of all the kings who will rule in Israel, they will all be compared to Ruth's great-grandson. Every king who rules in David's wake will be judged against the standard he established. And God promises that David's kingdom will never fail (see 2 Sam. 7:16). And it does not. Rather, the shoot that emerges from the stump of Jesse becomes the child that leads the way into a new start for each of us. The hero of Matthew's genealogy ("The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" [Matt. 1:1 rsv]) is yet again rejected as an outsider by the very people who should have welcomed him. But like his great-great-great-great-grandparents, he stands his ground. He demonstrates that he is a man of *ḥayil*, he shows that he knows what *ḥésed* looks like, and he endures to the very end. And it is in this child, born in Bethlehem, that true hope for our corrupt and crumbling communities is found. He is the character that stands behind all these characters. And it is my great hope that you've caught a glimpse of him via the epic tale of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz.