

Homiletics Analysis: Ruth 4

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Ruth 4 is the resolution chapter of the book of Ruth — the moment where every thread of narrative tension finds its answer. Boaz goes to the gate of Bethlehem, the city's legal and civic center, and convenes a formal proceeding before the nearer kinsman-redeemer and ten elders. He presents the case for redeeming Naomi's land and, inseparably bound to it, taking Ruth the Moabitess as his wife to raise up the name of the dead on his inheritance. The nearer kinsman initially agrees to redeem the land but withdraws when Ruth's inclusion is disclosed — he will not jeopardize his own inheritance. He transfers his right to Boaz through the sandal ceremony, and the elders and townspeople witness and bless the transaction. Boaz acquires both the land and Ruth. Ruth conceives and bears a son, Obed. Naomi, who returned to Bethlehem empty and called herself Mara (bitter), is declared by the women of Bethlehem to be full — restored, blessed, given a son through Ruth. The chapter closes with the genealogy from Perez to David, anchoring the entire narrative within the messianic line.

This Text — Intent

God intends through this chapter to demonstrate that His providential faithfulness — operating through ordinary human loyalty, legal procedure, and family covenant — accomplishes not only personal restoration but cosmic redemptive purpose. The chapter presses the reader to see that the hesed (covenant loyalty) displayed throughout the book is ultimately God's own hesed, working through human instruments, bending the ordinary mechanics of ancient Israelite life toward the fulfillment of His eternal covenant purposes. The reader is meant to see that no situation of emptiness, exile, loss, or apparent dead-end is beyond God's ability to fill — and that the filling, when it comes, is often far larger than the original loss.

Subject Sentence: The kinsman-redeemer's faithfulness restores Naomi's emptiness and advances the messianic line.

Primary Claim: God's covenant faithfulness, working through the ordinary loyalty of one faithful man, transforms utter emptiness into fullness — and in doing so, moves the entire story of redemption forward toward its ultimate goal in Christ.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Levirate / Kinsman-Redeemer Institution

A significant interpretive question concerns the precise legal mechanism operating in Ruth 4. The nearer kinsman's withdrawal is sometimes read as identical to the Deuteronomy 25 levirate law (where refusal results in the sandal-removal ceremony and public shaming). The Reformed reading recognizes an overlap but distinguishes: Deuteronomy 25 applies to a brother of the deceased; the kinsman-redeemer (goel) institution in Ruth is the broader provision of Leviticus 25, where a male relative redeems family property and continues the family line. Boaz conflates both obligations — land redemption and marriage to Ruth — in a way that the law did not strictly require but that hesed demanded. The Reformed reading is to be preferred: Boaz acts *beyond* strict legal obligation, which is precisely the point. He is not merely fulfilling a duty but embodying the character of God. Reducing this to legal compliance flattens the narrative's theological claim.

The Nearer Kinsman — Villain or Pragmatist?

Some interpreters treat the nearer kinsman as a villain or a foil for purely negative moral instruction. Others go so far as to suggest he is acting wisely within his legal rights and should not be moralized against. The Reformed reading qualifies both extremes: the text does not condemn the nearer kinsman explicitly, and the law allowed withdrawal. But the narrative *does* present his withdrawal as the contrast that makes Boaz's action luminous. The man is not a villain, but he is the embodiment of a life oriented primarily around protecting one's own inheritance rather than extending hesed. The text lets him remain unnamed — which itself may be the narrator's quiet commentary. The pitfall is using the nearer kinsman as a moralistic foil ("don't be like him") rather than as a narrative device that heightens the theological significance of Boaz's act.

The Genealogy (vv. 18-22) — Appendix or Climax?

Some interpreters treat the closing genealogy as an administrative appendix — dry historical data appended after the story's emotional conclusion. This reading fundamentally misreads the book's architecture. The genealogy is the theological climax: it discloses the *scope* of what God was accomplishing through a widowed Moabitess gleaning in a field. The entire story of Ruth and Boaz was the means by which God was threading the messianic covenant forward from Perez (the son of Judah, himself born of a complicated and scandalous redemption) to David — and, as Matthew 1 will make explicit, to Jesus Christ. The Reformed reading insists that the genealogy is not an afterthought but the lens through which the entire book is to be read retrospectively. Every act of hesed in the story was, simultaneously, an act of messianic advance.

Obed as "Son of Naomi"

The women of Bethlehem declare "A son has been born to Naomi" (v. 17), which has generated interpretive puzzlement — Obed is biologically Ruth's son. Some take this as

evidence of a formal adoption ceremony; others see it as loose social speech. The Reformed reading is that this is the narrator's deliberate theological statement: Naomi's emptiness (declared in chapter 1) is now answered by fullness. The women do not say "Ruth has borne a son" but "a son has been born to Naomi" — because the narrative question the book has been driving toward is not primarily Ruth's personal flourishing but Naomi's restoration and the continuation of the covenant line. This reading does not diminish Ruth — it honors both women by showing that Ruth's *hesed* has accomplished exactly what it set out to accomplish.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 38** — Tamar's story, referenced obliquely in Ruth 4:12 and explicitly in the genealogy at v. 18. Perez was born from a situation of failed levirate duty and unconventional remedy; God wove even that into the messianic line. The canonical resonance is deliberate: God's covenant purposes advance through broken, complicated, unexpected human situations.
 - **Leviticus 25:23-28** — The legal framework for land redemption and the *goel* institution. This provides the legal scaffolding Boaz operates within and expands through *hesed*.
 - **Deuteronomy 25:5-10** — The levirate law that partially overlaps with what Boaz does. Its inclusion grounds Boaz's action in covenant obligation while his exceeding of it reveals his character.
 - **Matthew 1:1-6** — The genealogy of Jesus explicitly names Ruth (and Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David) within the messianic line. This is the canonical completion of Ruth 4:18-22 and confirms that the genealogy is not appendix but climax — the book of Ruth was, all along, the story of how God moved the line of the Messiah forward through Bethlehem.
 - **Ephesians 1:3-10** — The eternal purpose of God to gather all things in Christ, accomplishing redemption according to the riches of His grace. The macro-frame that makes sense of micro-level *hesed*: every act of covenant loyalty in history participates in the one great redemptive movement toward Christ.
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Aim: To show that God's covenant faithfulness operates through ordinary human loyalty to accomplish purposes far larger than the immediate situation — and that the reader, like Naomi, may receive restoration and fullness they could not anticipate or produce.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
4:1	Boaz goes to the gate; the nearer kinsman passes by; Boaz calls him to sit down	The gate is the city's legal forum — Boaz's action is formal and deliberate, not improvised
4:2	Boaz gathers ten elders as witnesses	Ten is the formal quorum for legal proceedings in Israelite custom
4:3-4	Boaz presents the land-redemption case; nearer kinsman agrees to redeem	Naomi is selling land; the kinsman's first instinct is to redeem — it is financially straightforward
4:5	Boaz discloses Ruth's inclusion — to raise up the name of the dead	This changes the calculation: redeeming the land now means raising up an heir who will inherit it, threatening the kinsman's own estate
4:6	Nearer kinsman withdraws — "lest I impair my own inheritance"	His orientation is self-protective; he will not jeopardize what is his; he is not condemned but contrasted
4:7-8	Explanation of the sandal-transfer custom; kinsman removes his sandal and gives it to Boaz	The sandal ceremony formalizes the transfer of redemption rights — ancient readers would understand its legal force
4:9-10	Boaz formally declares before the elders that he has acquired both the land and Ruth; announces his intention to raise up the name of Mahlon	Boaz's declaration is complete and public — he names everything: land, Ruth, the dead man's name, the purpose
4:11-12	Elders and people bless Boaz, invoking Rachel, Leah, Perez	The community blessing invokes the founding mothers of Israel and Perez — the canonical connection to Tamar is explicit here; the messianic thread is being

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
4:13	Boaz takes Ruth; the LORD gives her conception; she bears a son	woven visibly The LORD's active role in giving conception is explicitly noted — this is not merely human event but divine gift
4:14-15	Women of Bethlehem bless the LORD and declare Ruth more valuable than seven sons	The women witness to God's faithfulness; they honor Ruth's hesed toward Naomi
4:16	Naomi takes the child and becomes his nurse	The circle closes: Naomi who came back empty now holds the child of promise in her arms
4:17	Women declare "A son has been born to Naomi"; they name him Obed	Obed means "servant" — he will serve the line; the naming by the women is the narrator's theological punctuation
4:18-22	Genealogy from Perez to David	Not an appendix — the climax: the story of Ruth was the story of how the line of David (and of the Messiah) moved through Bethlehem

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	4:1-6	The Gate: The Legal Crisis and the Nearer Kinsman's Withdrawal
2	4:7-12	The Transaction: Boaz Redeems Publicly and Completely
3	4:13-17	The Fullness: Naomi's Emptiness Answered by God's Gift
4	4:18-22	The Genealogy: The Story's True Scope Disclosed

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The kinsman-redeemer's faithfulness restores Naomi's emptiness and advances the messianic line.

Primary Claim: God's covenant faithfulness, working through the ordinary loyalty of one faithful man, transforms utter emptiness into fullness — and in doing so, moves the entire story of redemption forward toward its ultimate goal in Christ.

Applications (Five)

1. Reckon with the scope of what God is doing in ordinary faithful acts. (*Mind/belief*)

Boaz did not know he was threading the messianic line. He knew a widow needed to be redeemed, a dead man's name needed to be preserved, and hesed needed to be shown. The genealogy reveals that God was doing infinitely more through those acts than Boaz could see. The reader who is faithfully and quietly doing the right thing — keeping covenant, showing loyalty when it costs something, carrying out obligations that nobody notices — should reckon seriously with the possibility that God is doing something of enormous scope through those acts. Faithfulness is rarely as small as it looks. The question is not “does my faithfulness matter?” but “am I willing to be faithful without knowing how much it matters?”

2. Identify what the nearer kinsman's logic has built in your own life.

(*Affections/worship*) The nearer kinsman is not a villain — he is a mirror. “I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance” is not unusual logic. It is the logic of every person who draws the line at exactly the point where loyalty would cost something significant. What is your “own inheritance” that functions as the boundary of your hesed? What do you protect so carefully that covenant faithfulness stops precisely there? The text does not condemn the kinsman by name — the narrator simply lets him walk away unnamed. The more pressing question is not what his name was but what yours is when you walk away from the costly redemption your neighbor needs.

3. Bring your experience of emptiness to the God who fills. (*Affections/worship*)

Naomi's arc is the arc of a person who believed God had turned against her, returned home naming herself after bitterness, and could not see any path from her emptiness to fullness. She did not manufacture her restoration. She did not strategize her way back. She received what only God could give — through Ruth, through Boaz, through a child placed in her arms. If you are living in a Naomi-season — if you have returned from somewhere empty, if the thing you lost cannot be recovered by your own effort — this chapter is written for you. God fills empty arms. He does it on His timetable, through His instruments, by His grace. The discipline this passage calls for is not striving but receiving.

4. Distinguish between legal minimalism and hesed in your own relationships.

(*Will/behavior*) The nearer kinsman operated within the law and was not condemned for it.

Boaz operated within the law and *beyond* it — because his character was oriented toward the other person’s flourishing rather than his own estate. The practical question for the reader is concrete: In your marriage, your friendships, your church relationships, your workplace — where are you doing exactly and only what is required? Where is the boundary of your obligation also the boundary of your love? *Hesed* does not ask “what must I do?” — it asks “what does this person need, and can I provide it?” The two questions sound similar but produce very different lives.

5. Worship Christ as the ultimate Kinsman-Redeemer who did not withdraw.

(Mind/belief) The nearer kinsman withdrew because redemption would cost him his inheritance. Jesus Christ, the ultimate goel, did the opposite: He entered the transaction knowing exactly what it would cost — and He paid it. He took the Gentile bride (Ruth is a Moabitess, outside the covenant), raised up the name of the dead (we were dead in our trespasses), and secured an inheritance not for Himself at our expense but for us at His expense. The entire institution of kinsman-redemption in Israel’s law was a shadow of what Christ would do in full. Boaz is glorious precisely because he points beyond himself. When you see Boaz act at the gate of Bethlehem, you are meant to worship at the cross.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ruth 4 demonstrates that God’s providential governance of history operates not through spectacular interruptions of ordinary life but through ordinary human loyalty faithfully exercised. The LORD is named as the one who gives Ruth conception (v. 13) — the only direct divine action explicitly named in the entire book — but the entire book has been the theater of His activity. The chapter also establishes that God’s covenant purposes are irreversibly cumulative: no act of *hesed* is wasted, no dead-end is permanent, no emptiness is the final word. The genealogy at the chapter’s close is the theological proof: Perez to David, through Boaz and Ruth, across ten generations — God had been weaving the messianic thread through every apparently ordinary transaction. The God of Ruth 4 is the God who keeps covenant across centuries and continents, through the faithful and unfaithful alike, bending all things toward the fulfillment of His redemptive purpose.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ruth 4 is a showcase text for the Reformed understanding of divine providence and human responsibility operating simultaneously without contradiction. God does not override Boaz’s will to accomplish redemption — He works through Boaz’s freely chosen *hesed*. The chapter also embodies the Reformed insistence on the organic unity of the covenant of grace across both Testaments: the genealogy makes explicit what the book has been dramatizing — Israel’s story, even at its most domestic and local, is the story of God’s single covenant of grace advancing toward

its fulfillment in Christ. Furthermore, the inclusion of Ruth the Moabitess in the messianic line is a Reformed proof-text for the universal scope of election: God's electing grace does not respect ethnic or national boundaries; the Gentile woman who clings to the LORD and His people is threaded into the very line of the Messiah. Boaz as kinsman-redeemer functions typologically, and the Reformed tradition rightly reads him as a type of Christ — the one who comes forward when the law's requirements cannot be met, bears the cost willingly, and redeems what was lost.

Main Takeaway

God's faithfulness does not always announce itself. It works through a legal proceeding at a city gate, through a man who could have walked away but didn't, through a woman who was outside the covenant but was brought in, through a child placed in empty arms. What looks like an ordinary story about land and marriage and genealogy is the story of how God moved the line of the Messiah through Bethlehem — and that same God is moving through your ordinary faithfulness right now toward purposes you cannot yet see. The kinsman who did not withdraw at the gate was a shadow of the Redeemer who did not withdraw at the cross. Trust the God who fills empty arms. Keep faith with the people in front of you. The scope of what He is doing is larger than you know.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing Boaz to a marriage model or romantic ideal.** Ruth 4 is frequently preached in singles' ministries as a model for how Christian courtship should work ("wait for your Boaz"). This reading domesticates the chapter catastrophically. Boaz's significance is not that he is an attractive husband — it is that he is a kinsman-redeemer who embodied hesed at personal cost and thereby functions as a type of Christ. Preaching Boaz as a romantic template makes the passage about finding the right spouse rather than about the character of God and the structure of redemption.
- **Moralizing the nearer kinsman.** The text does not condemn the nearer kinsman explicitly, and the preacher should not import condemnation the text withholds. The danger is using him as a simple negative example ("don't be selfish like this man") rather than as a mirror that surfaces the logic of self-protective living that lives in every reader. The more powerful homiletical move is to let his logic convict before naming Boaz's alternative as the gospel-shaped possibility.
- **Treating the genealogy as a postscript.** Any sermon on Ruth 4 that concludes before reaching the genealogy, or that treats vv. 18-22 as administrative data, has missed the chapter's climax. The genealogy is where the book's theological stakes are disclosed in full. The preacher must linger here and show the congregation that

the story of Ruth was the story of the Messiah's line moving through Bethlehem. Without the genealogy, Ruth 4 is a nice story about a nice man and a woman who got her happy ending. With the genealogy, it is the story of God keeping covenant across centuries.

- **Failing to connect Boaz typologically to Christ.** The kinsman-redeemer institution is one of the Old Testament's richest Christological types, and this chapter is its fullest expression. A sermon on Ruth 4 that does not move the congregation toward Christ as the ultimate goel — the one who did not withdraw, who paid the full redemption price, who took the outsider as His bride — has left the most important thing unsaid. This is not an optional homiletical move; the New Testament's use of the redemption vocabulary (especially in Paul) makes clear that the institution was always pointing forward.
- **Sentimentalizing Naomi's restoration without grounding it in God's action.** The women of Bethlehem praise the LORD (v. 14) before they praise Ruth — and the narrator explicitly notes the LORD gave Ruth conception (v. 13). The restoration is not the product of human effort alone, even the extraordinary human hesed of Ruth and Boaz. A sermon that concludes with "loyalty like Ruth's leads to restoration" is not wrong, but it is dangerously incomplete. The ground of the restoration is God's faithfulness — hesed displayed by Boaz and Ruth is the instrument, not the cause.
- **Missing the Gentile-inclusion dimension.** Ruth is a Moabitess — explicitly, repeatedly, throughout the book. The elders' blessing in v. 11-12 invokes the founding mothers of Israel (Rachel, Leah) in application to a Moabite woman. Her inclusion in the messianic genealogy (confirmed in Matthew 1) is not incidental background color — it is a canonical statement about the scope of God's covenant grace. A sermon that treats Ruth simply as a foreigner who converted and married well has not reckoned with what her presence in the line of David means theologically. God's electing grace crosses every boundary the reader is tempted to draw.