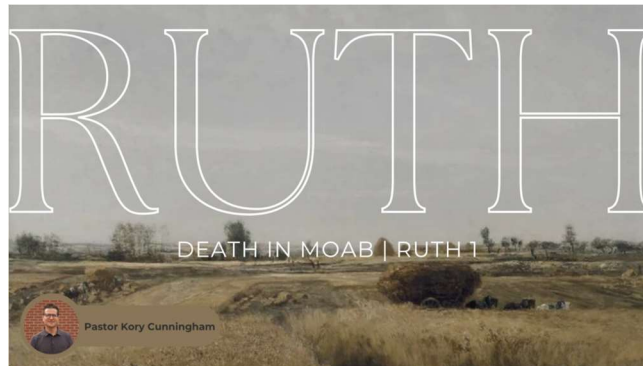


# Life in Bethlehem



## **Bro. Kory Cunningham** **Ruth 4**

A thousand different scenarios will happen at Christmas. For some of you, it's going to be a blissful Christmas. Maybe you have little children and there's nothing quite like the excitement of presents under the tree. They wake up, they can't wait to run in, tear them open, and you get to live Christmas through the eyes of a child. Maybe you have grandkids and it's just spectacular seeing Christmas through their eyes. It's just going to be blissful. Maybe for some of you it's going to be more sorrowful because maybe the kids are gone for the first time or maybe you've lost a loved one and not everyone's around the tree. You can just think about memories past that aren't quite the same as they were. Maybe there are estranged family members and so it's going to be just a tough Christmas. But I think for most of us, there's probably a mixture of sorrow and joy. There's joy about the season, getting to gather with family, but also there's sorrow because Christmas sort of brings out the best and the worst in life. There are things we love and hold dear, but also things we realize we're missing and that are not yet complete, and it can be all those mixes of emotions. So we're all going to experience Christmas differently. There are going to be a thousand different reactions to Christmas, but what I want you to see this morning is every single one of us shares something in common about Christmas. And that is we all need that baby born in Bethlehem who brings new birth to the world. That's what Christmas is about. That's ultimately

what you need. That's what we're going to see in Ruth chapter 4. We're going to see there is a baby born in Bethlehem who really brings new birth, even resurrection to this family. And, we're going to see that's actually the story of Christmas, about a baby born in Bethlehem who brings new birth to the world. I mean, just think about the song, Hark the Herald Angel Sing. I love the line, "Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace...Born that man no more may die." Isn't that a great line? Jesus is born that man, you and I, may no longer die, "Born to raise the sons of Earth, Born to give them second birth." That's really what Christmas is about, that Jesus was born to give us new birth. So we're all going to experience different things, and what you desperately need is the baby in the manger that brings you new birth.

### **Scripture**

***"So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son."***

That first line here in verse 13, the timeline is like an entire year in one sentence. Chapter 4 is sort of the culmination of the story of Boaz and Ruth, it's like the end of the Hallmark movie when everything's right and they kiss—that's the moment. They've just had the wedding, Boaz takes Ruth to be his wife, then we get a glimpse of the honeymoon, and now we see there's a honeymoon baby, she gives birth to a son. Can you imagine the excitement for Ruth and for Naomi? Because we know that Ruth had a husband in Moab, his name was Mahlon. They were married for ten years but they had no children, so we can presume that Ruth is barren. And now, she gets married to Boaz and she has a kid, and it's explained that the Lord has given her conception. The Lord brought this little baby to her, so we see this as a gift from the Lord, which remind us that all of our kids are gifts from the Lord. We should celebrate our kids as gifts from the Lord. But we're going to see that this son, in particular, is going to be a gift from the Lord and him being born is all about their redemption.

Then, we're going to see Naomi. We're going to see her redemption and really her resurrection. This is kind of where the story takes a turn because the whole story is about Ruth. I mean, it's got her name on it, right? But at

the end of the book, we see Ruth moving into the background and Naomi, the mother-in-law, the grandma, is the one coming into focus. She's actually front and center at the end of the story. Verse 14 begins this change of emphasis. It says, "Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer..." The women are now saying blessings to Naomi. Now, I don't know about you, but I love Christmas, and one of the things I love about Christmas is all the blessings you get wherever you go. Everywhere you go someone says, "Merry Christmas!" to you. We had a guy that came into our home and did some repair work, and as he left he said, "Have a Merry Christmas." I'm like, "Yeah, you too!" You just get blessings all over the place; everyone's wishing merry Christmas, they're giving you sweets, and so we get these blessings at Christmas time. Naomi is now receiving this blessing...blessed be the Lord because Naomi has not been left without a redeemer.

Then, we see in the rest of verse 14 through verse 15, about this redeemer "...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 given birth to him." So, Naomi has not been left without a redeemer but now there's blessing over Naomi. Now, the reason that catches our attention as a reader of the story is we know in chapter 1 she was not a blessed woman. In chapter 1, she was broken, she was burdened; in fact, she was bitter. And remember; when she came back from Moab and she walked into town, the women shout things at her and says is this Naomi? (Naomi means pleasant) Isn't this the pleasant one? Isn't this one that went away and has come back? And Naomi said don't call me Naomi anymore, don't call me pleasant; instead, I have a new name and it's Mara, which means bitter. She asks the women in the town to call her bitter because the Lord has dealt bitterly with her. She said I left full and I came back empty. So the women are basically trying to acknowledge her, but she said I'm broken. But now in chapter 4, things are completely different. Now she is spoken to as blessed by those same women. And the difference is she's now holding a little baby. The baby has made all the difference.

See, in chapter 1, we see death in Moab, and she is fleeing. And when you think about Moab, when you think about them running away from the presence of the Lord, it reminds me of what Jesus would call the far country. In Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son—the younger boy went to a far country. He went away from God, away from his father, away from his father's presence. Do you know what he did in the far country? He lived it up! Life was good. He had money, he had fame, he had friends, he had all the things that he could ever want. But then, life didn't work in the far country. There was a famine and he became in need and life just crashed. I think the same thing happened for Naomi and her husband. They went to a far country, Moab, and they tried to live life on their own apart from God. It worked for a little while...until it didn't. They turned up empty trying to find satisfaction away from God. It doesn't work and so they had to come back to Bethlehem. And now, we're seeing the full story. They go from broken, burdened, and bitter to blessed because of a baby.

That's really our story too. We have been the ones who have gone to a far country. We've done our own thing; we've lived our own life. But if you're a Christian, you are now blessed. You're now brought back in because of the baby born on Christmas, because of the Lord Jesus. But some of you right here, right now are still in Moab, you're still in the far country—you are still doing your thing, living your life. For some of you, it's working really well. Life's awesome. You have all the money you want, you have all the pleasure you want, and it's just great. Life is awesome. But for some of you, you're in the far country but you're realizing maybe this isn't working because you don't have peace, you don't have joy, you don't have hope, you don't have love. You have things, but you're not satisfied, you're empty. You're beginning to be like Naomi in Moab who went away full but came back empty because you realize all of the treasure of the world are empty at the end of the day. Maybe some of you are just coming around that corner, you're just starting to realize that maybe you are like the prodigal son who's in the pigpen. You are realizing you're broken, nothing's worked, and you have no hope. Maybe you are realizing that life has crashed. You tried to find satisfaction, hope, joy, purpose, peace, and you pursued it in something other than God. Guess what? It was a false idol and now you're miserable, you're broken, you're angry. You have no

peace, you have no love, and you have no reconciliation. Your life is a wreck. Maybe that's where you are right now. I want you to know there's hope in this story because that same girl who felt those same things is now being rejoiced over because she's not been left without a redeemer. What I want you to hear this morning is you have not been left without a redeemer, someone who pays a price. There is a debt that is owed and a redeemer comes and pays the price so the debt can be forgiven and the one who owes the debt can be freed. It's someone who buys someone back from a debt so that they can be reconciled. That's what a redeemer is. It's someone who redeems, someone who restores. That's what Naomi gets in this little baby. That's what you desperately need. You desperately also need a redeemer because you have a debt. You can't pay a debt that you owe, which is far greater than you could ever work off or manage to erase. You need a redeemer, and the news of Christmas is a redeemer has been born. That redeemer is the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, we see this redeemer is going to be to Naomi a restorer of life. Just think about that language—a restorer of life. If there's a restoration of life, it means that life has been lost, and that's really Naomi. See, because Naomi has no son, she has no husband; her end of the family tree gets cut off. Her husband Elimelech had no sons, so his name is cut off. So she's part of the family tree that is a broken branch that is not going to have a future. She has no life, she's cut off; she's dead in a sense. But now, she's holding Obed, this little baby, and she now has life. It's as if the writer is trying to say Naomi has received resurrection through this baby she's holding. She moved from death to life because a baby was born. Is that not your story? Is that not my story? As believers, we have moved from death to life because Jesus was born and He lived the life we couldn't, died the death we deserve, so that we could have life in His name. See, we move from death to life because of Christmas, because of Jesus. That's her story but it's also our story. But this baby is not just a restorer of life; the women tell Naomi that he is also a nourishment in her old age. So he is a nourisher, a sustainer. And see, we think about what Jesus does to us, He doesn't just give us new life, John 10 says, "I came to give you life." And not just life, abundant life to sustain your life, to nourish your life, to have life—life like it was meant to be lived, in the presence of God.

So, we see this beautiful redemption that is now had from Naomi, but then we're going to see a little bit of a twist in the story. Because if we're just reading along and we're not really paying attention, we now know that Naomi has a redeemer and our assumption is the redeemer is Boaz. Boaz bought the field, he married the girl, he had a son, so Boaz who paid the price is the one who's redeemed Naomi, the family, Ruth; Boaz is the one who's being spoken of as the redeemer. But if you actually read the text, the redeemer is not Boaz for Naomi. So if it's not Boaz, then who is Naomi's redeemer? Notice what it says at the end of our text, "...who is more to you than seven sons because she (Ruth) has given birth to him." Who's the "him?" The "him" is the redeemer, and it says Ruth gave birth to him, so the redeemer is not Boaz, the husband, the redeemer is the baby born in Bethlehem, who redeems them, who gives them resurrection, who gives them new birth. That's the redeemer. The redeemer is the baby Obed, which connects very wonderfully to Christmas because that is what Christmas is about. It's about a baby born in a manger. Who is our redeemer? It is a baby who is our salvation because He is going to grow up, go to a cross, and purchase our redemption. See, her redeemer is the baby; our redeemer also is a baby born in Bethlehem. Do you know what's interesting about this? The women are praising God for not leaving Naomi without a redeemer. They're happy because they know Naomi is childless and she doesn't have a future so she needs a redeemer, she needs a grandson—she needs someone to carry on the family name and she's now not left without a redeemer. Do you know what's ironic in the story? The women who are saying that also equally need this baby Obed to be their redeemer. This is what the whole story's going to show, that it's not just Naomi who needs a redeemer it's everybody, yet these women can't see that. They've got husbands, they've got children, they've got a good life. They've got everything together they don't need a redeemer, Naomi does. They're happy for Naomi, but they don't know that they're living in the times of the judges, they're doing whatever they want, but they also need a redeemer to redeem them. See, what these women don't realize is Obed is their hope too, not just Naomi's hope, but they can't see it because they've got life all put together.

I just want to pause and say maybe that's some of you here right now. You love the idea of redemption for that person; those people you read about, those people you see on the news, those others. You want redemption for them. The cross is great for them, but for you, you don't marvel at the cross because you don't think you need the cross. I mean, you're pretty good. You've got it together. You're one of the people who's been successful and had a decent life; you don't need redemption. You don't want somebody to purchase you back from hell. You don't need that; that's for those other people. So you're happy about Christmas, you're happy about redemption, but you're not enthralled by it because it hasn't really touched your life because you haven't realized you need redemption. So I just want to pause just for a moment and convince you that you need redemption. Because I think for some of us, we think God's going to forgive us.... *God is a forgiving, I know I mess up a little bit, so I know I need forgiveness, but this whole redemption, like cross and blood, I'm not sure I need that. I just need God to say...Some of the things you've done are not so good so I'm going to forgive you and we're all going to get along.* So yeah, you know you need forgiveness, but not redemption, not blood and empty tomb stuff.

Here's the issue with forgiveness. There's actually a problem to it. I love Timothy Keller. In his book, Reason for God, he talks about the problem of forgiveness. He says forgiveness is free to us but it's actually very costly, and he gives a little example. He says imagine that you're in a car wreck. You're driving and you smash your car into another person. Your car's broken and the other person's car's broken. You get out, everyone's okay. But you immediately start thinking... *Man, I don't have insurance. My wife's going to kill me. I don't have any money.* You're going through all the reasons why this is going to bankrupt you and you are done for. Then all of a sudden, the guy gets out of the car and says, "You know, I see that you clearly hit me. It was clearly your fault, but I'm just going to forgive you. You don't owe me a thing. I completely forgive you. We're not going to deal with insurance. I forgive you. You are free to go." Imagine how you would feel in that moment. You know that you're broke, no insurance, you have no hope, and now this guy is saying I completely forgive you. You are off the hook. Well, you're going to be very happy because you've just been

forgiven. So what's the problem? There are still two cars that are completely wrecked and broken, and that guy who forgave you has to now pay the damage to the cars, to fix them and restore them so that they can be made right. See, forgiveness is free, but it often costs. That's the picture of God's forgiveness. It is free to you but it is not free. It is not cheap; it is costly. All the sins that you've committed have incurred a debt, the debt of death that you owe. All of your sins have done all sorts of horrendous things towards God, towards humanity, and those deserve to be punished. There is a payment to those. So when God says I forgive you, He's also the one that says I'm also going to fix the cars. I'm going to pay for the damage you've done and I'm going to pay it through the blood of my Son. That's what redemption is. That's why the cross has to happen for us to be forgiven. God doesn't just say it's okay; He says it's not okay but I'll forgive you and I'll deal with what's not okay through the death, burial, and resurrection of my Son Jesus.

See, the women here love redemption; they just don't think they need it. Naomi knows she needs it so she's celebrating it. Do you know you need redemption this morning? Have you felt it, embraced it, and said yes to Jesus because you need His blood in your life? Maybe for some of you, this morning is the time where you realize you need redemption. You need to claim the blood of Christ in your life. There was a baby born that's all about redemption. That's what Christmas is, a baby born for the purpose of redemption.

Then, we see a second plot twist. It's going to show us that this story is not about Ruth, Boaz, or Obed; the story is actually about someone else. Notice with me as it begins to conclude, verses 16–17 say this, "Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David." If you had heard that for the first time—you're an Israelite, you're listening to the story, you're not really sure it's a love story or how they're all connected together. Then all of a sudden, you get a name, and when you hear the name, it's like a plot twist. It's like, "WHAT?" They hear that name, Jesse, and bells go off because they know who Jesse

is. Jesse is the father of David! All of a sudden, they realize what this story is about. It is a love story, but it's about a greater love story. It is about a messiah whose name is David, which is ultimately about a Messiah whose name is King Jesus. See, the dots begin to be connected for them that this story of a man redeeming and this redemption is actually about a baby born in Bethlehem that is pointing to another baby born in Bethlehem, not just David but actually King Jesus. So they're sort of zooming out and seeing this is what this is about, a messiah is born.

Now notice, you have Naomi who holds this little boy in her lap. Can you imagine Naomi at this point? Naomi has longed to be a grandma. Ruth has longed to be a mom. I mean, ten years in Moab, Ruth was married and no kids, so they know by now that maybe she can't have kids. They aren't sure how this is going to work out and they don't know how they're going to have a future. Then all of a sudden Obed is born and their prayers have been answered. Some of you here may have prayed for years and years and years for a child. Then finally, through years and years of prayer, you got pregnant, or maybe you adopted, and now you're holding this baby. Or you're a grandma who is holding this baby who is your grandchild now, and everything has sort of changed in this moment. That's Naomi rocking this little baby on her lap. Can you imagine the smile on her face? And the women, they actually call him Naomi's son—not Ruth's son, Naomi's son, because they know that this baby is deeply connected to Naomi. He is about her future. This baby born in Bethlehem is her rebirth, her new life, her resurrection...and the same is true for us. That baby born in Bethlehem whose name is Jesus is our new birth, our resurrection, our hope from the grave, and now we see this connection too; it's connected to a baby whose name is David. So we can just see that in chapter 1, she's broken, bitter, and in chapter 4, she's now blessed because of a baby. Big news of Christmas, a baby changes things. When you see that manger, a baby changes things. We see it in the story and we see it in the story of Christmas. A baby makes a difference.

Now we're going to see something strange in the story. The story's actually going to end with a genealogy, which if you didn't know this, it's the only book in the Old Testament that ends with a genealogy. Why would you end

a story with a genealogy? I mean, you've just hooked them, you've just had the wedding, you've had the moment, you've had that end scene, and now we're doing extra credits of a genealogy? You just lost your audience. But we're going to find that the genealogy is actually the point of the book. It is actually the central plotline to the entire thing. In this genealogy, we see a glimpse that the curse is broken. Notice what it says in verses 18–22, “Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.” So now we have a genealogy, not just who's the dad and granddad, but a genealogy, and it's interesting that it's a genealogy of ten generations. Why ten? Why not eleven? Why not nine? Why not eight? Why does the writer put ten generations in? I think it's because the original hearers of this story would've heard and kept track of it being ten generations. Why is ten significant? Well, in their very recent memory, they would have remembered the plot they had with Moab and how Moab came against Israel and God cursed Moab to what...the tenth generation. Now all of a sudden, there is this Moab woman who's now come into the family of God, and it just so happens that she's part of this generation of ten generations. I think it's a tip to say the curse has been broken. When David was born, he was breaking this curse of sin and rebellion because he is the king, this messiah figure who actually points us to a bigger curse breaker, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So genealogies are often really important. Genealogies are something to pay attention to, which is why we're going to take this genealogy and point it right to the New Testament. We're going to see that the New Testament writer, Matthew, actually copied and pasted Ruth's genealogy into his genealogy, so he's clearly connecting the dots that the book of Ruth is actually about Jesus. If you go to Matthew chapter 1, the first thing we see is, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” So Ruth ends with a genealogy and Matthew begins with a genealogy. We see that Jesus is the son of David and Abraham. The promise to David is you're going to have a son who's going to rule forever. The promise to Abraham is you're going to have a son who's going to bless

the world. And Jesus is that son who blesses the world by ruling the world forever. So we see this genealogy that goes right into Ruth's portion of the genealogy. Look with me in Matthew 1, verses 5–6, "...and Salmon the father of Boaz..." Sound familiar? We just read this part and now it's in the New Testament, "...by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king." It's like copy and paste, but there are edits. Matthew adds the girls into the genealogy. I think there are a couple reasons. Number one, it's like...*Hey, if you missed Boaz, there's a whole story about Boaz. He's a redeemer to a girl named Ruth so we're going to connect these dots. Boaz married Ruth so we're going to put her in there. You also know who Boaz's mom is; Boaz's mom is Rahab.* As New Testament readers, we go back and we think about who's Rahab? Well, most of us know who Rahab is. She was a prostitute from Jericho. She's often called in the Bible "Rahab the prostitute." How would you like that title? She's obviously lived a wayward life, but what happens? She has a turn, she does a 180 and she sides with Israel...she sides with the people of God. She makes Yahweh her Yahweh, and she's grafted into the family.

Then, Matthew gives us Ruth. She's a Moabite. She's an outsider. She's living a pagan land worshiping pagan gods. But what does she do? She finds hope in Yahweh. She comes into the family of God by faith. I think part of the reason he's adding these two ladies is for you to go check their backstory and to realize that if you don't think you belong in the family of God, you're in good company. Because none of us does, none of the names on the list belongs in the family of God. It is all by grace through faith. You think...*You don't know what I've done.* No, but I know what Rahab did and it was pretty sketchy. So I think whatever you did can be given a little grace and you can also be welcomed into the family of God. Because guess what? Jesus actually breaks the curse, generation of generation of sin and rebellion, and then a baby is born to Mary, a baby who doesn't sin and breaks the curse for us so that we can all be welcomed in. That's the story of our King Jesus. Matthew says in verse 16, "...and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ." This genealogy leads to Jesus, the Lord Jesus is born.

What I hope you've seen in the story of Ruth is that it's a story of death in Moab. It's a story of hopelessness and people who went to a far country, and their life hasn't worked. They went away full but now they're empty. That may be you this morning. You're away from God and you're empty. You're trying to pursue peace, joy, happiness, and you realize you don't even have one of those things. That's Naomi, that's Rahab. But then redemption happens, and a baby is born and it changes their burden into blessing and their brokenness into life and future. They have a resurrection event because of this little baby. And it's connecting us to another baby, also born in Bethlehem, Jesus, who takes your burden and your bitterness and swallows it up by His cross and His resurrection and gives you blessing and new life and resurrection. See, His birth is about your need for new birth. That's what the manger scene is all about.

I want to end just answering this question. Who is Jesus and what exactly did He do? If all of Ruth is about this baby born in Bethlehem, you got this manger scene, it's kind of like Home Alone, when McCauley Culkin is walking out because he can't find his mom and dad, and all of a sudden, he sees the manger scene. There's a long pause and he ponders and he looks and he looks, and the manger scene then draws him in. That's what I hope is happening right now. The manger scene is drawing you in and you're curious because you're broken. Mom and dad left you alone and you don't know what to do. I want the manger scene to draw you into the redemption found in Jesus. So, who exactly is Jesus? The angel answers it to Joseph in Matthew verses 20–23:

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).”

So who is Jesus? Well, first of all, He's God. This is Emmanuel...this is “God with us.” None of you said that when you held your firstborn baby. They're saying this about Jesus. How can they say that? Because his mom was a

virgin and it was a miracle by the Holy Spirit. This is what the incarnation is about. It's a miracle that God became a man, God put on flesh. Jesus is fully God, very God from very God, very light from very light. He's God. Secondly, what Ruth has shown us so beautifully, and what this narrative shows us, is that He's also man. He was born of woman. Mary was His mom, and that's significant because our redeemer has to be a kinsman. He has to be like us, He has to be human to pay the price for humans. Jesus is God who became a man. So who is Christ? He's fully God, fully man. What did he do? He came, the angel says, to save His people from their sins. That's what He came to do. That was His mission. He came to break the curse of all genealogies, all genealogies. Your family tree is a cycle of sin and brokenness and death. Jesus comes in to graft you into a new family tree. You are a branch that is dying and dead, just like Naomi and Ruth. But Jesus comes in and plants you into a new tree with new life and a new future in the family of God.

See, that's what Christmas is about. It's about the manger. It's about the baby. The baby who grows to live the life we couldn't, to die the death we deserve, to rise from the dead, to ascend into Heaven, and who's going to come back to us. He says in my name, you can have forgiveness and redemption. That's what Christmas is about.