

At the Gate: A Guide to Ruth 4

What Is Really Happening in the Final Chapter

Ruth 4 opens with a scene that can leave a modern reader lost: a group of men sitting at the entrance to town, a conversation about a field, a relative who says yes and then no, and a sandal changing hands. It is easy to skim past it to get to the wedding. But this is the moment the whole book has been building toward. This guide walks through what is happening, step by step, so that nothing in the final chapter gets missed.

Why It Happens at the City Gate

In ancient Israel, the gate of a walled town was much more than a way in and out. It was the town's courthouse, city hall, and public square all in one. The elders (the respected older men who led the community) sat there to settle disputes and to witness agreements (Deuteronomy 21:19; 22:15; Proverbs 31:23; Amos 5:15).

Archaeologists digging at ancient Israelite towns have found stone benches built right into the gate area for exactly this purpose.

The gate was also the one place everyone had to pass through on the way out to the fields in the morning. That is why Boaz goes there and sits down. He knows the man he needs will come by, and he does (Ruth 4:1).

One more thing helps here. Ordinary people in this world did not sign papers and file them in an office. An agreement was made official by being spoken out loud in front of witnesses, who could later confirm what they saw and heard. That is why Boaz says twice, “You are witnesses this day” (Ruth 4:9-10).

Who Is in the Scene

- **Boaz.** He promised Ruth the night before that he would settle the matter (Ruth 3:13), and Naomi predicted he would not rest until he had (Ruth 3:18). He is at the gate first thing in the morning.
- **The closer relative.** Boaz told Ruth there was a man more closely related to Naomi's family than he was (Ruth 3:12), and that man had the first right to act. Boaz greets him as “friend” (Ruth 4:1). The Hebrew phrase is *peloni almoni*, an expression that works like our “so-and-so.” Boaz surely knew the man's name. The writer of Ruth chose not to record it.
- **Ten elders.** Boaz gathers ten of the town's leaders to serve as official witnesses (Ruth 4:2). With that many respected men present, no one could later question what was decided.
- **The townspeople.** Others are standing around and listening (Ruth 4:9, 11). This is a public event.
- **Who is missing: Ruth and Naomi.** The two people with the most at stake are at home, waiting (Ruth 3:18). Their whole future is being decided in a meeting they are not part of. Someone else is doing for them what they could never do for themselves. Keep that in mind. It matters at the end of this guide.

The Scene, Step by Step

Verses	What Happens	What It Means
4:1-2	Boaz sits at the gate, calls the closer relative over, and seats ten elders.	Boaz is calling a legal hearing to order. Everything will be done in the open, the right way.
4:3-4	Boaz tells the relative that Naomi's family land is available. The man says, "I will redeem it."	The nearest relative had the first right to buy back family land so it stayed in the family (Leviticus 25:25). More land for his estate sounds like a good deal, so he says yes.
4:5	Boaz adds that the land comes with Ruth, the widow of Naomi's son Mahlon.	Whoever redeems the land also takes responsibility for the widow, and for raising a son who will carry on the dead man's name.
4:6	The relative changes his answer: "I cannot redeem it."	The cost just went up. He steps aside and hands his right over to Boaz.
4:7-8	He takes off his sandal.	This was the public sign that the right had been handed over. See below.
4:9-10	Boaz announces what he has done in front of everyone.	This spoken declaration is the "signature." He names the land, the family, and Ruth.
4:11-12	The elders and the people answer, "We are witnesses," and bless the marriage.	The town confirms the agreement and prays for the new family.
4:13-17	Boaz and Ruth marry. The LORD gives them a son, Obed.	The empty family from chapter 1 has a future again.

What Is the Deal with the Land?

Boaz says that Naomi "sold the piece of land which belonged to our brother Elimelech" (Ruth 4:3). Other translations, such as the ESV and NIV, say she "is selling" it, and that is a helpful way to read it, since the rest of the scene talks about buying the field "from the hand of Naomi" that very day (Ruth 4:5, 9). Either way, the situation is the same: a poor widow cannot hold on to her husband's land, and it is about to pass out of the family.

That mattered deeply in Israel. Land was not just real estate. God had given each family its portion of the Promised Land, and He told Israel the land ultimately belonged to Him (Leviticus 25:23). To lose the family field was to lose the family's share in what God had promised. So the Law made a way to keep that from being permanent: a close relative could step in and buy it back. That relative was called a redeemer, and the Hebrew word is *go'el*. (The Boaz character study in this series covers that role in more detail.)

Why the Closer Relative Backs Out

At first the offer looks simple: pay for a field and add it to what you own. Then Boaz explains the rest. The field comes with Ruth, and the purpose is “to perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance” (Ruth 4:5). In plain terms, a son born to Ruth would be counted as the heir of her first husband's family, and the field would one day go to that son.

So the man would pay for the land, provide for a wife and a child, and then watch the land leave his own estate anyway. He says so himself: “I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I ruin my own inheritance” (Ruth 4:6).

It is worth being fair to him. He broke no law, and he is not the villain of the story. He counted the cost and decided it was too high. But notice what happens. The man who stepped back to protect his own name and inheritance is the one person in this scene whose name we never learn. Boaz counted the very same cost, paid it gladly, and his name is still being read three thousand years later.

The Sandal

Verse 7 stops the story to explain: “Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging, to confirm anything: one man took off his sandal and gave it to the other.” The custom was already old enough that the first readers of Ruth needed it explained too, so you are in good company.

Think of it as the handshake or the signature. By handing over his sandal, the closer relative showed everyone watching that he was giving his right to Boaz. Some scholars connect it with the idea that walking on a piece of land was a way of claiming it (see Deuteronomy 11:24 and Joshua 1:3), though we cannot be certain.

If you know Deuteronomy 25:7-10, you may remember another sandal. There, a widow removes the sandal of a brother-in-law who refuses to marry her, and it is a public shaming. That is a related custom, but it is not what happens here. No one is shamed in Ruth 4. The sandal simply makes the transfer official.

“I Have Acquired as My Wife”

Boaz's words in Ruth 4:10 can sound cold to us, as if Ruth were being purchased along with the field. That is not what is going on. This is the formal language of a legal hearing. Boaz is declaring in front of witnesses that he is taking on every responsibility for Ruth and for her first husband's family, with nothing left unclear.

Read it next to the rest of the book. Ruth is the one who proposed (Ruth 3:9). Boaz has protected her, fed her, praised her character in front of others, and called her “a virtuous woman” (Ruth 3:11). And look at the reason he gives: “that the name of the dead may not be cut off.” He is doing this for the sake of another man's family, at his own expense.

The Blessing from the Crowd

The witnesses do more than agree. They pray, and they reach back into Israel's family history to do it (Ruth 4:11-12):

- **“Like Rachel and Leah.”** These were the wives of Jacob, the mothers from whose household the twelve tribes of Israel came (Genesis 29-30). The people of Bethlehem are asking God to make a woman from

Moab like the founding mothers of their nation. Given how Israel viewed Moab, that is a stunning welcome.

- **“Like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”** Tamar's story is in Genesis 38. She too was a widow who had been left without the heir she was owed, and her son Perez became the ancestor of Boaz and his clan in Bethlehem. The crowd is saying: God has built this family through an unlikely woman before. May He do it again.

How It Ends

“The LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13). Ruth had been married in Moab for about ten years without a child (Ruth 1:4-5). The writer of Ruth almost never tells us directly what God is doing. He does it plainly in only two places: when God gives His people bread (Ruth 1:6), and here, when God gives a child. Everything in between looked like coincidence.

Then the women of the town turn to Naomi: “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a close relative” (Ruth 4:14). The close relative they mean is the baby. They name him Obed, which means “servant,” and the book tells us who he became: “the father of Jesse, the father of David” (Ruth 4:17).

This is also where Naomi's story comes full circle. In chapter 1 she said, “I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty” (Ruth 1:21). The book has been answering that word ever since. The two women arrived just as the barley harvest began (Ruth 1:22). Ruth came home from her first day with an ephah of grain (Ruth 2:17). Boaz sent her back from the threshing floor with more, saying, “Do not go empty-handed to your mother-in-law” (Ruth 3:17). Now the women call the child “a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age,” and Naomi takes him and lays him in her lap (Ruth 4:15-16). The woman who came home empty is holding a grandson.

Whose Son Is Obed?

A careful reader may wonder about this. Boaz said he was marrying Ruth “to perpetuate the name of the dead through his inheritance” (Ruth 4:10). So is Obed counted as the son of Mahlon, Ruth's first husband, or as the son of Boaz?

The answer seems to be both, in different ways. The women say, “There is a son born to Naomi” (Ruth 4:17). The child belongs to Elimelech's family, and that family's land and place in Bethlehem have an heir again. Yet every family record we have lists Obed as the son of Boaz (Ruth 4:21; 1 Chronicles 2:12; Matthew 1:5). Keeping the dead man's name alive was about his inheritance and his family's standing in the town. It did not mean that Boaz was written out of the story.

So one family was restored and the other was not erased. Boaz lost nothing of who he was by redeeming, and the family he rescued kept everything that was theirs.

Seeing Jesus at the Gate

A redeemer had to be three things: a near relative, able to pay the price, and willing to pay it. The closer relative was near and apparently able, but he was not willing. Boaz was all three.

That is the shape of what Jesus has done. He became one of us, a true near relative (Hebrews 2:14-17). He was able to pay what our redemption cost, “not ... with corruptible things, like silver or gold,” but “with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18-19). And He was willing. No one forced Him (John 10:18).

Remember who was missing from the gate. Ruth and Naomi did nothing that morning but wait while someone else secured their future. That is a picture of grace. And there is one beautiful difference between Jesus and the man with no name: that man feared redemption would ruin his inheritance. Jesus shares His. Those He redeems become “joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17).

Questions to Think About

1. Boaz could have handled this quietly. Why do you think he insisted on doing it publicly and properly?
2. The closer relative weighed the cost and said no. Where are you tempted to protect what is yours instead of showing costly kindness?
3. Ruth and Naomi could only wait while Boaz acted for them. How does that help you understand what it means to trust Christ?
4. The town welcomed Ruth, an outsider, with a blessing. Who might need that kind of welcome from you?

All Scripture references follow the New King James Version (NKJV) unless noted otherwise.