

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: **Samuel Mockbee** was an innovative architect who worked in the South designing structures that were well-designed but also extremely inexpensive. One building he designed was Yancey Chapel, in Sawyerville, Alabama.

The thing that is amazing about this chapel is what it is built with—over 1000 old tires, a center beam from a 150-year old barn, slate from a creek bed, a tin roof. In all, it cost about \$15,000 when it was built in 1995.

I'm intrigued with this building because it is such an apt metaphor for the real church. Remember how Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 1:26, 27, "*Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong...*" We're the human equivalent of worn-out tires, creek-bottom slate and tin, and yet God has made us into his church.

Of course, a church made out of junk is nothing more than a curiosity. What makes Mockbee's Yancey Chapel significant? It's design. Even though he used such common stuff, he created a beautiful church. *TIME* magazine said, "*With a font whose water trickles through the sanctuary, clerestory openings to the sky and an upward-sweeping roof cupped like hands set in prayer, **the chapel is a sublime embodiment for worship.***"

That's what God has done with us. He didn't just make a church out of unimpressive, foolish, weak people, but he made a *beautiful* church, a church which is "*a sublime embodiment for worship.*"

- B. Today we are looking at a unique family of God in the Old Testament to help us understand how we are to function here as God's VCL family. **Turn to Ruth 2.**

I. WHAT MAKES A CHURCH BEAUTIFUL IS A GOD-BLESSED FAMILY

- A. This family starts with Naomi, who was embittered against God because, as she couldn't stop saying, *"The LORD's hand has turned against me. The Almighty has made my life very bitter. The LORD has brought me back empty. The LORD has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."* You get the idea. And God starts this particular family story with her!

One of those daughters-in-law, of course, was Ruth, who Naomi could not persuade to return to her people in Moab. She famously said, *"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."* She's wonderful, but she's a foreigner. What does she know of God's ways? But she, too, is in this family story.

In Ruth 2 we meet the third major member of this developing family. 2:1, *"Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz."* Boaz was a wealthy, older bachelor farmer. He was highly respected and a man of noble character. And he *happened* to be from Naomi's husband's clan. Ruth didn't realize it, but Boaz had heard of her and her sacrifice for Naomi, and he knew that he was related to Naomi by marriage, so Ruth had become family.

- B. Isn't that an odd family? When God puts together a family it is not like other families. Look at our church, for example.

Well, what happened next? **Ruth 2:2-12...** Boaz is the main character in that part of our story, isn't he? **If we were to sum up that story we could say, Boaz took responsibility for Ruth and Naomi because he knew they were his family.** For us...

II. WHAT MAKES A CHURCH BEAUTIFUL IS TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONE ANOTHER

- A. We are responsible to protect the vulnerable among us. In **vv.5-9** Boaz protected Ruth. The fields weren't a safe place for a woman alone. The sense is that there had been some harassment when she started working that morning so Boaz takes her under his wing. Likewise, we are responsible to protect those among us who are vulnerable, beginning with our children. Jesus told us that whatever we do for the least of his brothers and sisters, we do for him. **Gal 6:10** says, *"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."*
- B. Confer God's blessing on one another. Remember the exchange of greetings in v.4: Boaz greeted his workers, *"The LORD be with you."* *"The LORD bless you,"* they answered. That's not just some throw-away dialogue, like *"Good morning to you."* Bible writers don't waste words. **Boaz brought God's blessing to others.** A few verses later Boaz extends a beautiful blessing to Ruth. **Vv.11-12...** Boaz isn't giving her a verbal Hallmark card and he's not just wishing her well. I tell you that the benediction—the blessing— (*"The Lord bless you and keep you..."*) is really your birthright as God's people. Here, Boaz is pronouncing

over Ruth a kind of birthright—all the more wonderful because she had come from the pagan culture of Moab.

Boaz said, “*May the LORD repay you.*” What would it mean for the LORD to “repay” Ruth? Not money, for she hadn’t spent any. What Ruth had invested was her *hesed* loyal love in the life of Naomi, so that Naomi would not go home unloved and alone. So Boaz is saying, *May the LORD repay you so that you, Ruth, will never be unloved or alone.*

Then Boaz extended the blessing: “*May you be **richly rewarded** by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.*” God rewards those who hide in him. We’re positioned for his blessing there, for Jesus’ yes to God’s promises.

Did you know that you can confer God’s blessing on others? Not everyone receives it in faith, or welcomes God’s gifts to them at all, but we can offer it. *Illus.:* A man named **Patrick Lee**, whose profession is portraying famous people like Thomas Jefferson, wrote me about an article I’d written on the power of benedictions. We became email friends. One day he wrote this to me [12/20/15]:

I volunteer at my church's prayer room, praying with people between services who have some need. I prayed with one young woman this morning, maybe a college student. She was too much controlled by a troubled past, too much consumed with present activity and worried about her future. It all kept her away from God, and she wanted a closer relationship with Him.

I took her hand and prayed to those concerns. It wasn't long before she started to cry. Once she had regained her composure, I said, "I have something more. Give me your hand again." She did, and I said, "This is the blessing God ordained for his people in the book of

Numbers. " Holding her hand, with my eyes locked on hers about 18" away, I said, "Mariah, the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

As she left, she said, "Your prayer will get me through this week."

Do you think you could do that once in a while—be a bearer of God’s blessing? Could you purposely say at least three times this week to someone, "*The Lord bless you and keep you*"?

- C. Boaz isn’t done watching out for Ruth. Vv. 13-18... V.23 says that this kept on till the end of the both the barley and wheat harvests were in—about two months. It’s calculated that at the rate Ruth was gleaning the two women would have had enough grain for close to a year! Boaz didn’t stop Ruth from working but he quietly blessed her work with his generosity. We can do that for others: bless their work with our generosity.

Boaz was contributing to the divine blessing he prayed for. He was part of God’s rich reward. He was one way Ruth found refuge under the wings of God. Be generous to brothers and sisters in need. Make their work easier.

Become God’s partner in blessing.

- D. At the beginning of this story Ruth said she was going "*to pick up leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes she found favor.*" When she met Boaz and he told her to stay in his field she bowed low and said, "*Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner.*" And after Boaz blessed her, she said, "*May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord.*" Here in our church family, look for ways to show favor to other brothers and

sisters. Ask God to point you toward a need or opportunity. Imagine that you couldn't show up next week till you had. **Show favors of protection, blessing and generosity.**

- E. In all these things, Boaz is showing the *hesed* kind of love we focused on last week. The Hebrew word *hesed*, loyal love, a love that will not let me go. That is what Boaz was showing throughout this story. He did these things because, even though Ruth was a foreigner, she was now family, under the wings of *Yahweh*, the God of Israel.

Well, wait till Ruth gets home with this story! **V.19...** And Naomi's jaw dropped. You have to know Hebrew to see this but it says, "*And Naomi said, 'Get out!!' Boaz??!!! Are you kidding me?! No, really, who's field?*" (Don't you wish you had taken Hebrew like I did?) **V.20a**, "*The LORD bless him!*" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law." Three times that day Boaz got blessed! And believe me, God was listening. The very thing Boaz had said to Ruth, "*May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel,*" well, that was going to come to Boaz, too. Because, with the Lord, what goes around comes around. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I think Naomi and Ruth started giggling like a couple of girlfriends! Naomi wheezed, "*Boaz?!!*" And Ruth nodded, laughing so hard tears ran down her cheeks. *He had you dip your bread in his wine?!!* And Ruth mimicked the whole scene. *He even let you pull grain out of the sheaves and not just what fell on the ground??* And they started laughing and crying again, all at once.

V.20b, Naomi said, "*He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.*" It isn't clear who the *he* is. It could rightly apply to both Boaz and the LORD. Maybe Naomi meant both, but **I'm sure she meant the LORD, and this is the turning point in Naomi's life.** Remember all the times she said God was

against her? Now she says, “*The LORD “has **not** stopped showing his kindness [after all].”* What must that moment have been like for Naomi! The LORD *wasn’t* against her. She *wasn’t* doomed! Recognize that word *kindness*? It’s *hesed* again. Isaiah said of the coming of the Messiah, “*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.*” That’s what happened to Naomi; out of her darkness she saw a great light.

III. WHAT MAKES A CHURCH BEAUTIFUL IS GOD WORKING THROUGH US TO STRENGTHEN HIS FAMILY

- A. Boaz was a catalyst for God’s blessing because he was a man of integrity and faith. His effect on Ruth and Naomi, not to mention his workers, was not an accident. He was a capable conduit of God’s blessings. Elimelek, Naomi’s husband, by contrast, brought blessings to no one, because he didn’t trust in God’s covenant with his people. **If you want to influence others in God’s family you must be a person of spiritual integrity and grace—bringing protection, blessing, and generosity to the vulnerable.**
- B. There’s something in this story I haven’t mentioned but it’s very important. God’s name is used often, but **only twice in this whole book is any action attributed to God**—the famine at the beginning and the baby at the end. Otherwise, you might think God was busy somewhere else. But look at **2:3**... “*As it turned out*”? The Hebrew is something like, “*It happened to happen...*” And the next verse, “*Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem.*” And Boaz *just happened* to be from the clan of Elimelek? *I think not!* These are among the divine coincidences in this book. God is all over this story, but he’s hiding behind the scenery. **God’s most common kind of miracle, I’ve found, is the divine coincidence.**

C. And that brings up the other key word in this book, *go-el*, guardian-redeemer or kinsman-redeemer. When Elimelek fled to Moab in search of food, he evidently lost his land. Perhaps he sold it. But God's law that said it needed to stay in the family so when land was sold (to pay a debt, for example) it eventually needed to be bought back--*redeemed*, and if the original owner *or* his wife, Naomi, couldn't afford it, the duty fell to their *kinsman-redeemer*. What's more, if the original owner was married but had no children, or if his sons died without sons of their own, his line would die out and his name and family would be lost. To prevent that the kinsman-redeemer not only was expected to buy back the land in his name, but to marry his wife and have a child, who would actually be regarded as the first man's child. When Naomi found out that Ruth's sugar daddy was Boaz, Naomi's eyes lit up. The impossible had happened. Not only did they have a kinsman-redeemer, but *maybe, just maybe* he would be disposed to come to their aid! But for that, we'll have to wait till next week.

Conclusion

Take this with you. We want to be a *beautiful* church, a church family who are "*a sublime embodiment for worship.*" Through Jesus Christ, we are a God-blessed family. What makes our church family beautiful is taking responsibility for one another, especially vulnerable believers, and God working through us to strengthen his family.

Remember this verse: "*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*" Gal 6:10