

## Ruth: Ruth and Her Redeemer

Ruth 3:1-18

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Last week, at the end of Ruth chapter 2, we saw Naomi's faith being revived. She finds out that "by chance" (providence), Ruth had spent the day gleaning in the field of Boaz, who, it turns out, is a kinsman-redeemer of Naomi's family. That is, a relative who can buy land, thus redeeming the family from poverty, and who also can, perhaps, raise up offspring to perpetuate the name of the dead. He can make the Abrahamic promises of land and seed a continuing reality for a hurting and impoverished family. Through Ruth's diligence and especially through Boaz's kindness (*hesed*), Naomi realizes that God has, in fact, not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.

So, Ruth continues to glean through the harvest – probably 6 or 7 weeks, roughly the time from Passover to Pentecost – she gleans in the fields of Boaz. And at the end of chapter 2 we were told – she lived with her mother-in-law – that is, she is in need of a husband. That brings us to today's text, Ruth chapter 3, and we will make three points. *Naomi's strategy in verses 1-4, Ruth's courage in verses 5-9, and Boaz's grace in verses 10-18.*

### I. Naomi's Strategy

First, then. Naomi's strategy. A number of weeks having passed from the first meeting of Ruth and Boaz, and Naomi's becoming aware of Boaz's existence and all that implies, and nothing, it appears, has developed between Ruth and Boaz. There is not going to be any quick nuptials. And it's clear that Naomi has been thinking about this, since she heard that it was Boaz's field that Ruth was gleaning in. For, one day, our text opens, one day, she says to Ruth: My daughter, I must find a home for you where you will be well provided for. Just the words every single widowed woman wants to hear from her mother-in-law. Naomi has a wonderful plan for your life!

At least Naomi is thinking of others now, and thinking of the future, rather than wallowing in bitterness and self-pity. But she is also reading the divine providence in the appearance of Boaz – and she's extrapolating, drawing her own conclusions about what has to happen, and this is usually, beloved, a bad

idea. The balance here is something like this: it's good to take trusting, holy initiative, its bad to be rash and run ahead of God.

John Favel, great Puritan preacher, once said: the providences of God are like Hebrew words, they can only be read backwards. After God does something, we can look back and see his hand – Naomi, however, wants to help him out with what she sees as his future works. What is good here is that she – and we saw this of Boaz last week – she is becoming the answer to her own prayers. Back in chapter 1 she prayed for Ruth (and Orpah) that they would find rest in the home of another husband. Here, she seeks to bring about that rest.

So, she begins to unveil her matchmaking plan to Ruth in v.2: Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked is a relative (kinsman) of ours. As a kinsman-redeemer we've already seen what he can do for both Naomi and Ruth. He can buy the family land, and perpetuate the name of Elimelek (Naomi's dead husband), by marrying Ruth – and this because Ruth is Mahlon's – Elimelek's son's widow. In doing this, of course, he would be a husband for Ruth as well.

Now, and this is important, he is not obligated to do this. The kinsman, as we will see later in Ruth, could decline. *If this were mandatory, you would just demand that Boaz get on with his duty. Naomi would not have to cook up her provocative plan.* So, here's the plan, she tells Ruth: Tonight, Boaz will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Usually, these were outside of town. That is, somewhat remote. So, she tells her to wash, put on perfume and her best clothes. N is trying to facilitate a marriage here. The text echoes God's finding and choosing of Israel in Ezek. 16 where the Lord speaks in nuptial terms:

*"I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you. <sup>10</sup> I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put sandals of fine leather on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments.*

Then Ruth is to go down to the threshing floor secretly and remain hidden until Boaz is finished eating and drinking. For harvest time was a celebratory time. There's a kind of recklessness here. Well-intentioned, perhaps – but reckless nonetheless, with respect to Ruth's safety. Boaz had to tell the men not to touch her – and that was in broad daylight in the field. And Naomi acknowledged that she should stay with Boaz's servant-girls because she could get hurt in another field. Now she sends Ruth out alone AT NIGHT – to the more remote threshing floor, where a fair amount of drinking will be going on.

But the plan's most questionable feature is in v.4: When he lies down, note the place where he is lying, then go uncover his feet and lie down. All the key words here can have double entendre(s) of a sexual nature. Lying down, uncovering, and even the word for feet here, are all used in the Hebrew Bible in more explicitly sexual contexts.

Now, all these terms can be taken innocently here, but in a nocturnal context, where you've bathed and perfumed and put your best clothes on, and the male is eating and drinking, and the place is secret and remote – one has to wonder exactly what Naomi was thinking.

It's shocking advice really. A girl most likely in her twenties, a Moabite woman no less, a people with whom Israel has committed idolatry and immorality in the past, alone with an older man to whom she's not married, in this posture. Both Ruth and Boaz's integrity and purity are put to the test here. To give Naomi the benefit of the doubt, she may trust both of them deeply, to put them in this situation. Nonetheless, it is fraught with moral danger, and a lot of things could have gone wrong here. So, after Ruth uncovers and lies at Boaz's feet, she is simply to wait. He will tell you what to do, the end of v. 4 says.

## **II. Ruth's Courage**

Our second point is Ruth's courage. Ruth, who has vowed obedience to Naomi, simply goes and does what she's told. And in v.7, after eating and drinking, Boaz, in good spirits the text says, lies down near the grain pile (guarding). Ruth approaches quietly, uncovers his feet, and lies down. In the middle of the night, at midnight in some translations, something startles Boaz.

And remember this story has already evoked marriage language in speaking of Ruth cleaving to Naomi, and of her leaving mother and father to come to Israel with her. And the earlier washing, perfuming, and clothing is covenantal marriage language (first and foremost between God and Israel). And so here you have Boaz, Adam-like waking from sleep to find his future bride next to him. He wakes, turns and there was a woman at his feet!

Talk about a disorienting reality. Not only is this surprising, its awkward, and its morally dubious at best. I don't know how we'd react – or what we might spontaneously say - when we are woken up in some strange fashion in the middle of the dark night to find a stranger present in the pitch-black darkness, but Boaz shows great poise by saying, simply: who are you? I am your servant Ruth, she said. What happens next is truly remarkable. Naomi had told her that, at this point, He will tell you what to do.

Ruth, already in a vulnerable spot, ignores Naomi's advice, takes the initiative, and boldly, counterculturally, asks Boaz to marry her. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family." This language echoes the language Boaz used of Ruth earlier in ch.2, when he said that she had come seeking shelter under the WINGS of the Lord. The word translated "corner of your garment" can mean wings and the ESV translates it as wings. This is covenant marriage language Ruth is using.

The Ezekiel 16 text we cited earlier has God saying this to Israel: *When you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you, and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, says the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine.*

Again, Boaz is being asked to be the answer to his own prayer. He has prayed for the Lord, under whose wings Ruth had sought refuge, to bless her richly. Now he is asked to be those wings, to spread his garment over Ruth – an act which, here, would be akin to an engagement ring – a pledge to marry.

He should do this, Ruth says, since you are a redeemer for our family. Notice the word OUR. Ruth is not asking simply for marriage, she is asking for Boaz to be her Levir – to raise up offspring for the family name of her dead father-in-law and husband, *AND she is calling Boaz to be a redeemer, to buy the land at risk, for Naomi's sake, and to care for her as well. You are a redeemer of OUR family.*

This is not your standard marriage proposal. If it was it would be absurd. Ferguson: Single, impoverished, widowed, Moabite woman, seeks wealthy man from Bethlehem – must love my mother in law. Naomi engineered this situation and she's part of the deal. What Boaz is being called to do here is very costly, both in terms of personal commitment, and in terms of money. To be the Goel, the Redeemer, is an act of deep self-sacrifice.

### **III. Boaz's Grace**

This brings us to our third point, Boaz's grace. In v.10 he says: this kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier. Kindness here is hesed – a key word in the book – again, it means covenant love, kindness and generosity. The earlier kindness Ruth showed to Naomi was her grand cleaving to Naomi in refusing to return to Moab in chapter 1. This kindness is in choosing Boaz as Redeemer, but it is also a kindness, and act of hesed, shown to Naomi and the dead males in the family.

You have not run after the younger men whether rich or poor. From Boaz's point of view, perhaps she had options. She was noble, and word of her nobility had gotten around town. But, of course she hadn't done this. And the reason is simple. She is marrying out of obedience to the law of the Lord, for the sake of Naomi, and for the sake of perpetuating the family name. She is not looking for the best eligible male. She needs a kinsman of Elimelek's. Ruth is not marrying for love or money, or even primarily for herself, she is marrying out of hesed for Yahweh's hesed for her.

Now, though its subtle in the text, mostly between the lines, it appears there is genuine respect and even desire between them. If so, then this is a case where one's desires and one's biblical duty happen to converge. Thus, Ruth, who didn't

marry for love or money will end up getting both – love and substance, provision. Boaz agrees to Ruth's proposal. His zeal here is one sign that he is taken with Ruth. But the heart of his attraction is that "all the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character." The same word for noble character was used of Boaz in 2:1 when he was called a man of standing. This is the root of their compatibility.

In the Hebrew ordering of books, Ruth is after Proverbs, probably because her noble character makes her a Prov. 31 woman. And she is already known in the gates as the wife in Proverbs 31 was. "All the people of my town," in v. 11 is literally "all the gates of my people."

So, Boaz is willing and able. One may wonder why he hasn't acted over the last 6+ weeks, and we may get that answer next. Namely, there is another kinsman-redeemer more closely related than Boaz. Besides showing the integrity, the respect for the provisions of the Torah, that Boaz has, this also shows the rashness of Naomi's plan. There is a redeemer sitting at the head of the line. So, ever concerned for Ruth's safety, Boaz says "stay here for the night" in the morning he will check with the other redeemer. If he wants to redeem – good; if not, Boaz swears an oath that he'll do it. Again, he seems eager.

In the morning, Boaz, ready to send her off says: No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor. He's clearly aware N's scheme put both their reputations at risk. He sends her off with a shawl full of barley – some think this could be up to 80 lbs. of grain. It's a down payment on the abundance, the plenteous redemption he will eventually bring the family. When she returns and relays what happened to Naomi, she tells her Boaz said: Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty handed. Again, Naomi who left full and returned empty is being filled up by the hesed of God through the hesed of Boaz. The story leaves us with Naomi and Ruth waiting for this momentous matter to be settled. Something which shall happen this very day.

Let us conclude with two applications. First: It turns out that Naomi's scheme worked. She thought she read/discerned what God wanted to do, and she recklessly set out to move things along. But it would be dangerous to imitate her example. Providence, we said earlier, is read backwards. We are not to be in the business of projecting what God may or may not do in the details of even the, short-term, future.

One theologian once said: providence is the Christian's diary, not his Bible. There's a bit of grasping and manipulating in Naomi's scheme. You write in your diary what happened. Leave writing the future to God. Read the Word, be obsessed with it. Scour it. Stop reading events, and extrapolating like they are little tea leaves.

Second, Boaz directs us to Jesus Christ. Christ was not obligated to redeem, but he takes on the duty willingly and freely. He sees the plight of the poor and oppressed, and he acts. He becomes our kin, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. He spreads the corner of his garment over us, the beautiful robe of his righteousness. And being raised as the firstborn among many BRETHREN (kinsman), He creates a new and everlasting family, a perpetual seed, destined for an enduring land, and an unfading, secure inheritance. For this we should ever be praising God, and to that end, no words are more fitting than these from Peter's first epistle:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> *and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,* <sup>5</sup> who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. Amen.

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