

Series Ruth

This Message #4

Scripture Ruth 3:1-18

The turning point in the story of Ruth and Naomi was in chapter 2. A series of seemingly coincidental circumstances turned Naomi's despair into hope. For example, when Ruth went out to obtain food for them, she "just happened" to go to the field belonging to Boaz, who "just happened" to be a relative of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech. At that point, Naomi realized that there was someone who could fulfill the role of "kinsman-redeemer" for her.

The verse in chapter 2 which turned Naomi's despair into hope was verse 20. This verse just happens to be the exact midpoint in the story, at least in the Hebrew language in which the story was written. The person who wrote this story, who, by the way, is unknown, was an excellent literary craftsman. He used the middle verse of the story to introduce Naomi's reawakened attitude of hope, thus dividing the story into two equal parts, one emphasizing the downward spiral of her life and the other describing the pathway of her restoration and renewed happiness.

The writer also used symmetry in other ways as well. For example, the background introduction of the story, chapter 1, verses 1-5, and the conclusion outcome of the story both contain 71 words in the original Hebrew. This story was written with thoughtfulness, cleverness, and skill.

In chapter 2 we learned about Ruth's efforts to take care of her mother-in-law. Ruth volunteered to go glean in the harvest fields, putting herself at some possible risk for the sake of her mother-in-law. In chapter 3, we will learn about the love that Naomi had for Ruth, and her strategy to acquire a husband for Ruth, and more about the deep love that Ruth had for Naomi in her willingness to marry Boaz. We will also learn about the love that Boaz demonstrated toward Naomi and Ruth through his willingness to serve as their "kinsman-redeemer." The theme of love and consideration of others is prominent throughout chapter 3. Look for these characteristics as we read.

Read Ruth 3:1-18

Naomi and Ruth had obligations toward each other based on their culture and traditions. Ruth was obligated to stay with and care for her mother-in-law. Naomi, as the surviving member and head of her family, had an obligation to provide a home for her daughter-in-law. However, love for one another is emphasized in chapter 3, not obligation.

The last phrase in chapter 2 indicated that Ruth lived with Naomi. Naomi could have selfishly perpetuated this arrangement in order that Ruth would be available to take care of her ongoing needs. However, verse 1 of our reading indicated that Naomi wanted Ruth to be happily married, and to enjoy the blessings of a husband's companionship and protection. She put the needs of Ruth ahead of her own concerns.

Verses 1 and 2 imply that Naomi had given careful thought to this matter of marriage for Ruth and she realized that the time was right for action. Our English translation explains that Naomi wanted to find a "home" for Ruth. The Hebrew word translated "home" has a much richer and fuller meaning. We talked about this word when we were in chapter 1. In verse 9 of that chapter, the same word was translated "rest." In the Hebrew language the word combines the ideas of security and comfort, as well as refuge and asylum under the authority of a protector or guardian. For Ruth, these conditions could only be satisfied with a husband and her own home. Therefore, Naomi proposed a plan which would directly benefit Ruth and indirectly benefit herself as well.

Her plan was daring and risky. It was, to say the least, an unusual way to solicit a marriage proposal. And it required prompt action. Naomi knew that Boaz would be spending the following night on the threshing floor. She knew that Boaz had acted kindly and generously toward Ruth during the weeks in which Ruth had gleaned alongside his workers. Naomi was satisfied that Boaz was a man who could be trusted to do things in a proper and godly way. And so she advised Ruth about how to proceed.

Naomi instructed Ruth to beautify herself. She was to bathe, perfume herself, and put on her best clothes. Then at dusk she was to go down to the threshing floor, note where Boaz was going to sleep, then to quietly go to him, uncover his feet, and lie down.

Only Boaz was to be aware of her presence and then only at the proper time. Naomi anticipated that Boaz would recognize Ruth's action as an appeal to marry her as the "kinsman-redeemer" relative. Boaz was not so closely related to Elimelech's family that Naomi could require him to serve as the kinsman-redeemer, but she apparently believed that he would be willing to do so because of Ruth.

Ruth was willing to follow the instructions of her mother-in-law for two reasons. First, she was expected to honor the wishes of Naomi, who was the head of the household. Secondly, it is my guess that there was already a strong attraction between Ruth and Boaz. They had probably seen each frequently throughout the harvest season, a period of six to seven weeks. However, it seemed that a bold initiative on the part of Ruth was necessary to push him into a commitment toward her.

Let me describe a threshing floor. A threshing floor was a common area near a town or village to which many land owners would bring their sheaves of grain. The floor itself would be a table of hard packed soil about 2 or 3 feet higher than the surrounding area. Bundles of grain would be spread on the floor and a heavy sledge would be pulled over the stalks in order to separate the heads of grain from the stalks. The sledge would be pulled round and round the floor by a donkey or ox. Workers would rake off the grain and stalks that were separated and add more bundles. If there was a steady breeze, the workmen would toss shovelfuls into the air. The heavier grain would fall straight down, and the chaff and bits of stalk would be blown away.

Threshing activities were occasions for celebration. Threshing represented the last stage in the annual cycle of producing food. There would be great joy at threshing time if the harvest was abundant. An abundant harvest meant that there would be adequate food for the next 12 months.

Among pagan societies immoral practices associated with fertility rites were often part of the threshing work, but there is no hint of that in this story. Threshing was also a time when thieves would try to steal quantities of grain. Because of this, owners and workers were obligated to spend the night near their harvested grain until it could be moved to safer storage areas.

Verses 6 through 9 describe how Ruth carried out the instructions of Naomi. As Naomi had anticipated, Boaz ate and drank with the workers. He was in a happy mood. Later he lay down at the end of the pile of grain that had been winnowed and went to sleep. Sometime still later, Ruth entered quietly, uncovered his feet, and lay down at his feet.

In the middle of the night, Boaz was startled awake by something, whereupon he discovered the shadowy figure of a woman. In response to his question, Ruth immediately identified herself as his servant and asked him to “spread the corner of his garment over her since he was a ‘go’el,’ a kinsman-redeemer.”

The phrase “corner of the garment” is only one word in the Hebrew language. The same word was used in chapter 2, only there it was translated “wing.” Let me quote the words that Boaz used in blessing Ruth: “May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (*Ruth 2:12*). To be under the “wings” of someone meant that a person was under the authority and protection of another. There, in the middle of the night, Ruth asked Boaz to become her protector. She wanted to be under his “wings.” She was declaring her desire to live under his oversight and care in the same way she had placed her life under the refuge of the LORD God of Israel when she declared her intention to accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem.

Boaz did not react negatively to Ruth’s proposal. Quite the opposite. He was pleased that she had sought him out rather than seeking a relationship with one of the younger men. The reason was obvious; he could serve as the kinsman-redeemer and they were ineligible to do so. If Ruth had been thinking only of herself, and following her natural instincts, she would have more logically sought a relationship with someone her own age. She would not have been concerned about the redemption of Naomi’s life. But instead of acting selfishly to please only herself, Ruth was willing and eager to marry the man who was qualified to meet the needs of Naomi. He considered Ruth’s proposal to himself to be a greater act of kindness than the kindness she had shown earlier to Naomi in not forsaking her. For Ruth, her act of kindness required marriage to an elderly Boaz.

I think the difference in the ages of Ruth and Boaz is rather obvious. Ruth could not have been more than 30 years old. Her previous marriage had lasted less than ten years. Boaz was a “man of standing” (*see Ruth 2:1*) in the community, a landowner, with many workers and servant girls. He was surprised that Ruth would consider him. In comparison to the younger men, he was much older.

Boaz quickly assured Ruth that he would do all that she requested. As he observed, everyone in the town knew that she was a “woman of noble character.” This may have been his way of saying that he would be pleased to marry her.

We must keep in mind that Ruth, by her actions, was claiming a right which had been granted by God in the Old Testament Law, but Boaz could have fulfilled his obligation as kinsman-redeemer to Naomi without marrying Ruth. There were several reasons for this. First of all, Ruth was a gentile from Moab, not a citizen of Israel. Even though she was recognized as a “woman of noble character,” marriages between Israelites and non-Israelites was discouraged. Furthermore, marriage to Ruth on the basis of the levirate law did not apply to him. Such a marriage would have been required only if Boaz had been Ruth’s brother-in-law, which he wasn’t (*see Deuteronomy 25:5-6*). The extent of Boaz’s legal obligation as kinsman-redeemer concerned only property which had belonged to Elimelech but needed to be restored to Naomi. The point is that Boaz was willing to go beyond the requirements of the law in order to redeem Ruth as well as Naomi.

However, there was a barrier to his serving as kinsman-redeemer — Boaz was aware of another person who was a closer relative than he was, and it was the privilege of that other person to have the right of first refusal in the redemption process. Boaz committed himself with an oath to see the matter to completion, and if the other relative refused to redeem the land and Ruth, he would do it himself.

Ruth was instructed to remain at the threshing floor the remainder of the night, and the text states that she lay at his feet until morning. Taking a position at the feet of someone was an act of submission. For example, a servant would lie at the feet of the master in order to be ready to carry out any command of the master. Ruth had announced herself as the servant of Boaz. Her position at Boaz’s feet was another example of the humble, submissive, and upright character of Ruth.

Wishing to protect Boaz, she rose very early so as to leave the threshing floor before anyone would be aware of her presence. Boaz agreed with the propriety of her departure, but before she departed, he provided her with a large amount of grain. It seems that this gift of barley was for Naomi, perhaps his pledge to her that he would fulfill his responsibility on her behalf.

This episode at the threshing floor ended with both of them heading back to the town, Ruth to rejoin her mother-in-law, who must have been extremely eager to know the outcome of the night's events, and Boaz to prepare for the events of the day.

Ruth told her mother-in-law all that had happened. Both women were undoubtedly anxious about how events would play out. Who would want to redeem Elimelech's property? Who would be willing to marry Ruth? There must have been a lot of nervous tension and pacing about, yet there was nothing the women could do but wait. Naomi advised patience. I think her advice was an evidence of her growing confidence in the LORD. As the result of events since her return to Bethlehem, she was beginning to recognize how the LORD was working to restore her life. Instead of ever-increasing bitterness, she was becoming more and more hopeful.

She knew that Boaz would be proactive. As she said at the end of verse 18, Boaz "would not rest until the matter was settled." Ruth and Naomi had done what they could. Now they would rest and wait, because the outcome was in the LORD's hands. They would trust the LORD to do what was best for everyone concerned.

I hope you recognized the attitudes of love demonstrated by each person in this chapter. Naomi put the happiness of Ruth ahead of her own personal concerns. Ruth was willing to marry Boaz because of the benefits it would bring to Naomi. Boaz was willing to serve as the kinsman-redeemer in order to help the two women. And with divine love the LORD was revealing Himself to all of them.

Some Things From Chapter Three to Think About:

- *We can make good logical decisions, but results are up to the LORD.
- *Bold actions are good if they are based on the promises and commands of God.
- *We should put the interests of others ahead of our own.