

Redeeming Ruth, week 4
God's Hand in Our Risks (Ruth 3:1–18)

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“Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor . . . Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.”

— Ruth 3:3–4

At this point in the story, Ruth and Boaz have taken center stage. Their relationship commenced with great hope as he spoke kindly to her, prayed for her, protected her, and provided for her, all as one would expect from a man ready to be a godly husband. Furthermore, Ruth has been laboring in his field for perhaps six to seven weeks. Time is running out, though, because once the harvest season ends, Boaz and Ruth will not see each other anymore. The author is a wonderfully gifted storyteller who has led us to a place of crisis and urgency, where, like every good television show, movie, and novel, we want the main characters to fall in love and live happily ever after.

But how can this happen?

In that culture, courtship was how marriages were supposed to occur. Men were to pursue a wife (Genesis 2:24; Proverbs 18:22) and women were to be given in marriage (Jeremiah 29:6; Psalms 78:63; Matthew 24:38; Luke 20:34). This required that the father play a prominent role, keeping the wrong men from his beloved daughter and overseeing her courtship (Exodus 22:16–17; Numbers 30:1–5; Deuteronomy 22:13–22). Sometimes this included arranged marriages (Genesis 24; 34; 38; Exodus 2:21; Judges 14:2–3, 10). However, Ruth's family, including her father, were not worshippers of God, involved in her life, or likely a source of godly counsel. In addition, they were Moabites, a very sexually confused and sinful people.

Subsequently, this three-thousand-year-old story is incredibly timely for our day, city, and church. Roughly half of the women in our church are single like Ruth, and most do not come from godly families, but aspire to marry godly men and have godly families.

We see that Ruth seeks wise counsel from an older woman and in faith takes an enormous risk to “pull a Ruth” and put herself in front of Boaz for marriage. The older woman, Naomi, practices the essence of Titus 2:3–5 by providing wise, albeit risky, counsel to Ruth. In Ruth 1:9, Naomi prayed that God would provide Ruth a mere Moabite husband; here she takes action and is used by God to answer her own prayer by helping to arrange the marriage of Ruth to the great Boaz. Naomi's counsel is both brilliant and bold. Knowing that Boaz had only seen Ruth dirty and sweaty at work in his fields, she counsels Ruth to essentially go tanning, get a full makeover including her hair, nails, and makeup, buy a new party dress, and put on some nice perfume so she will look her best for Boaz. Ruth is then instructed to attend the great party Boaz will be at. She is to wait patiently while Boaz celebrates his great success in business. After he has eaten well and has had a glass of wine or two, then, Naomi advises Ruth, she should get in front of him. And not just get in front of him—Naomi's counsel is to

take the risk of actually approaching Boaz while he is asleep; to invite him to propose marriage!

Heeding Naomi's counsel, Ruth went to the threshing floor. Boaz, along with the other men who had attended the harvest and accompanying party, slept on the threshing floor next to the grain so as to protect it from thieves. While Boaz slept, Ruth took the very daring and bold counsel of Naomi and uncovered his feet and laid down beside them. Startled, Boaz awoke and asked who was with him there in the dark. Boaz was probably wondering if a prostitute was there to tempt him, which was common at the threshing floor where men had a few drinks and were in good spirits with wealth to spend (Hosea 9:1).

Ruth revealed herself as his humble servant. Boaz likely had a moment of uncertainty about her intentions (even though she had recently converted, Ruth was still a Moabite whose entire race began with a young woman seducing her father who had had a few drinks) (Genesis 19:30–38). Furthermore, Ruth and Boaz lived in the dark days of the judges, when there was great sexual immorality of every kind.

Ruth asked Boaz to answer his own prayer (Ruth 2:12) and be God's wing of covering over her. She was not proposing marriage to Boaz, but rather declaring her love for him and inviting him to ask her hand in marriage. The phrase "spread your wings" is also sometimes translated "spread your garment/blanket," which is used elsewhere as a symbol for engagement, much like our current engagement ring (Ezekiel 16:8; Deuteronomy 23:1; 27:20; Malachi 2:16). By doing so, a man was demonstrating that he would both lovingly cover the woman for her life and invite her into his bed as his beloved wife. In 1 Corinthians 7:39, Paul says that a widow, like Ruth, is free to marry any Christian whom she chooses to love, and here Ruth takes an enormous risk by declaring her heart to Boaz. Furthermore, while she is not breaking any rule of Scripture, she is indeed trampling many cultural taboos since she is younger and he is older, she is a servant and he is her boss, she is a Moabite and he is an Israelite, she is poor and he is rich, and she is a woman and he is a man.

Rather than seeking to take advantage of Ruth, Boaz is humbled, shocked, and delighted that she loves him. Boaz had not pursued Ruth for likely many reasons. For example, she was a widow in a season of mourning and he did not want to pressure her; she was in a vulnerable place and he did not want to take advantage of her; and she was younger and he felt that she was "out of his league." In Boaz's humble eyes, there were younger and better-looking men who would have gladly married Ruth, so he did not believe he had any chance of marrying her. By telling her not to fear, Boaz is assuring Ruth that she is safe with him in every way—he will not reject her love or manipulate it for sinful pleasure.

Some commentators have speculated that Ruth sexually seduced Boaz and thus manipulated him into marriage. While such a thing could have occurred since they are both sinners, the context makes it clear that no sin did in fact occur. Rather than sleeping with Ruth, Boaz prays for Ruth, commends her noble character, declares his love for her, and promises to do all he can to marry her. These acts are in no way congruent with any notion that a line was crossed into sin (though admittedly Ruth did perhaps dance on that line of propriety).

Furthermore, some have speculated that, based on the command of Deuteronomy 25:5–10, Boaz was obligated to marry Ruth and she was simply

demanding her legal rights. However, that law only applied to a brother caring for his widowed sister-in-law, and since Boaz was not a brother of Ruth's deceased husband Mahlon, he had no obligation to her. Nonetheless, in love and grace he elects to redeem her in the same way that Jesus Christ, "our glorious Boaz," elected to redeem us by grace. Neither was obligated in any way to do such a wonderful act of kindness.

Despite their differences, Ruth and Boaz are, as Paul might say, "equally yoked." Boaz was called a "worthy man" and he then calls Ruth a "worthy woman" (Ruth 2:1; 3:11). They both loved and trusted God by walking in holiness at such a pace that they could hold hands as husband and wife and walk together in step for the rest of their lives. Boaz also calls her a woman of *hesed*, as she reflects in her character the love, grace, mercy, devotion, and faithfulness of God to others. He is therefore delighted to have the opportunity to marry a woman who is a "crown" (Proverbs 12:4).

The story hits a crisis, though, when Boaz, a law-abiding man, reveals to Ruth that he must find a way to marry her legally. Because Naomi had chosen to welcome Ruth as a full daughter, the women had the legal right to their family land. There was another family member who was closer to the women than Boaz and thus had the first right to redeem the women and obtain their land.

Boaz's mind is already racing to devise a plan by which he can obey the law and still marry Ruth. This reveals that Boaz is a man of action who is highly motivated to act quickly and decisively. Furthermore, Boaz trusts the providence of God to work through their legal system. By not sexually sinning with Ruth or breaking the law, he shows a determination to remain in a place of holiness in faith that God would bless.

After Ruth approaches Boaz, he then invites her to lay at his feet for the evening. He was not engaging in any sexual activity. Rather, he knew that a dolled-up single woman trying to walk home during the night would be in grave danger, so he kept an eye on her as her defender and protector.

Early the next morning, before anyone else awoke, Ruth and Boaz arose and Boaz sent her home before they were seen, so as to protect her character from scandalous gossip and unfounded rumor. Before sending Ruth home, Boaz asks her to open her shawl and he fills it with an unspecified amount of grain, which was likely very valuable. He again proves himself to be a generous and gracious man. Furthermore, Ruth receives his kindness in the same way that God asks us to humbly and gladly receive His grace and provision in our lives.

Upon arriving home to what was likely an anxious Naomi, Ruth explains her evening with Boaz. She also gives Naomi the generous gift from Boaz. Earlier in the story, Naomi remarked that she was bitter because her life was empty (1:21). But Boaz filled her hands and helped to alleviate her bitterness; God reached out His hand to Naomi through the hands of His faithful servant Boaz.

Naomi then demonstrates full faith in both God and Boaz by counseling Ruth to do nothing but wait patiently. Whereas Naomi had previously counseled Ruth to act boldly, here she conversely counsels her to wait patiently. She is certain that Boaz both loves Ruth and is a worthy man who gets things done; she trusts that he would have everything taken care of that very day so that he and Ruth could be married. It is good for both a woman to make her heart known and for a man to do his job. He must protect her reputation and overcome any

obstacles to marriage in a godly and honorable way so that the woman is assured of his intentions and manly ability to lovingly lead and provide for her.

The story of Ruth and Boaz is one of the greatest love stories in Scripture. It is an echo of the great story of Scripture: Jesus is “our glorious Boaz” who redeems His bride, the church (e.g., Ezekiel 16:8). Jesus does this by grace, without any obligation, doing all the work to redeem those who come to Him in faith, just as Ruth came to Boaz seeking redemption and then waited patiently as he redeemed her by grace.

Verses for next week: Ruth 4:1–12