

AGAINST RUTHLESS SOCIETY PART 3 OF 4: RUTH 3

INTRODUCTION

Ruth has been a true friend. Indeed, even when there is nothing to gain she is undaunted in her decision to show kindness toward her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:15-17). Guided by her faith in God, the stipulations in His word, and remarkable love for an old widow, Ruth bears the beautiful fruit of mercy and faithfulness in a time of spiritual famine and blight (Judges 21:25; Ruth 1:1b). We do well to regard her as more than a laudable literary figure. We should imitate this woman; she is commended to us by God's word the book that bears her name and later implicitly in New Testament genealogies (Matthew 1:5). Ah, but we are getting ahead of ourselves.



Something must be said of Boaz (*fleetness; in him is strength*). He has also been an inspiration to the reader in his greeting of faith (Ruth 2:4), his generosity and kindness toward the foreigner (Ruth 2:8-10), and his go-above-and-beyond-the-required attitude toward honoring God (Ruth 2:16). The aged kinsman of Naomi has given us hope when the story seemed to contain only death (Ruth 1:3,5), desertion (Ruth 1:1,11-14), disrespect (Ruth 1:21), and dark feelings toward God (Ruth 1:13, 20-21). When Boaz enters the story it is clear that the writer intends his readership to feel some expectation that relief is coming. But will he do it? That is, will a man old enough to be Ruth's father (Ruth 2:8; 3:11) venture to win the hand of the young heroine. Let me encourage you to read the story before reading these notes. Come back after having spent time with God in the reading chapter three of Ruth. The third chapter, even if you are a slow reader, will not take you more than 10 minutes to read.¹ Of course, if it really is time with God, it could take longer. See you soon.

OPERATION CATCH A MAN (RUTH 3:1-7)

¹ Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? ² Now Boaz, whose young women you were with, is he not our relative? In fact, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Therefore wash yourself and anoint yourself, put on your best garment and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ Then it shall be, when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies; and you shall go in, uncover his feet, and lie down; and he will tell you what you should do." ⁵ And she said to her, "All that you say to me I will do." ⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law instructed her. ⁷ And after Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was cheerful, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came softly, uncovered his feet, and lay down.

At the close of chapter two we are at "the end of the barley harvest and wheat harvest" (Ruth 2:23). The harvest time has been a season of hope and rebirth:

The significance of this season extends beyond literary expression of hope for fruitful land, fruitful wombs, and fruitful lives, though this is certainly part of the author's design. The significance of the barley harvest relates also to the feasts that were celebrated at that time of year, the feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Firstfruits (Lev 23:4-14). The festal cycle in Israel corresponded

¹ If reading is not your thing, listen to it. There are audio books for the Bible. No money for that? If you want a free reading go the church website for small groups. I have posted audio of myself reading the book of Ruth. But know this: my voice is not easy on the ears.

to specific points on the agricultural calendar, which also happened to reinforce the emptiness (and fullness) motifs as developed in Ruth.²

No doubt Ruth has developed a routine of going to the fields early in the morning to gather what remains as she follows the harvesters (which might have been considerable in view of the directions given by Boaz in Ruth 2:16). At the end of the day she brings food home for her and Naomi and they have talked about the events of the day. “Did you meet anyone nice today?” “Did he talk to you today?” Yes, Ruth has been gleaning in the fields of Boaz during that time. She was around his staff and probably saw him regularly. He knew her to be virtuous and saw that she worked hard. However, he has made no attempt to advance the relationship. The period of barley harvest and wheat harvest was a period of several weeks that begin in late April and continued until early June. In roughly six weeks Boaz has not made a move. Why?

Perhaps he was being sensitive toward Ruth as a widow, not wishing to impose himself upon her until she was emotionally healed and ready to contemplate remarriage.³

When we meet Naomi in chapter one she is in a funk; having lost husband and sons she is bitter about her situation and angry with God. She returns from Moab to her homeland bereft of the men her in her life and tries to dissuade her daughters-in-law from staying with her. After all, from her perspective, there is no win for them. But Ruth would not leave her (Ruth 1:16-17) and has labored for about six weeks in the fields to provide for their needs. The young widow has shown *hesed* love for the old widow and brought the aged woman back from self-absorbed bitterness and a dark view of God’s work in her life. Indeed, the melancholy disposition of Naomi (Ruth 1:20-21) has finally given way to a sentiment of sincere concern for someone else. The elderly widow begins to **seek security for Ruth**. How? **Boaz is a relative** (3:2). By pointing this out she explicitly shares her hope that he would perform the duties associated with the law of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:9-10; Genesis 38:1-10). Naomi, seeing that God still has love for her family, begins to use her knowledge of the culture and the thinking of men to help her **daughter** (3:1). Her daughter-in-law has a narrow and singular window of time to put *Operation Catch A Man* into effect. From Naomi’s perspective four things are critical.

First, there was the use of intelligence to plan the strike: **He is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor** (Ruth 3:2). They know *where* Boaz is going to be and *when* he going to be there. Furthermore, based on Naomi’s words, she sees the opportunity to get to him... *alone*. Second, there was the employment of weapons. It is not enough to just catch him by himself; Ruth would have to be equipped to take him down. Naomi tells the young woman to **wash** and **anoint** herself and to put on her **best garment**⁴. Is Ruth a dirty person? There is nothing in the text to indicate that Ruth had a hygiene

Seeing Jesus in the Story

Boaz is a type of Christ. His name and his coming out of Bethlehem prefigure the coming of the saving Strength of God coming out of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). John the Baptist, when questioned about his ministry of baptism made it clear that the Lord Jesus would come prepared (winnowing fan in Hand) to clean up Jerusalem:

¹¹ I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:11-12)

The proper interpretation of Ruth is conditioned upon the realization that the story is actually about Jesus. Christ said as much (John 5:39; Luke 24:27). So then, as you read this story of romance, redemption, and Ruth’s heroism, do not miss the bigger point: Christ is the kinsman redeemer that has saved his Church.

² . Vol. 148: *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 148*. 1991 (592) (428). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

³ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 680). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

problem. However, she has been working for a while doing hard labor in the fields. She may have needed the encouragement toward looking and smelling nice. Those who would be attractive to the opposite sex cannot neglect their physical appearance.

³ Do not let your adornment be *merely* outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on *fine* apparel—⁴ rather *let it be* the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible *beauty* of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. (1 Peter 3:3-4)

Also, it is likely that Ruth has not been dressing in the normal garb of the Jews or the Moabites. Again, she may have been in a period of mourning for the dead. Accordingly Ruth may have been wearing the attire of widowhood.

Being poor she probably did not have a “best dress,” and so, this might mean to exchange her clothes of mourning and widowhood for regular clothes. It might also refer to the outer garment or cape since the word is singular, which would, in turn protect her from the chill of the night as well as allow her to remain anonymous for as long as she chose. Based upon an analogy with II Samuel 12:20, which also mentions bathing, perfume, and a simlah dress when David completed his mourning period for his son, it might imply that Ruth was still wearing the garments of her widowhood. Therefore, Naomi is advising Ruth to end her period of mourning over her widowhood and go on with her life. IF all this time she had been wearing the clothes of widowhood and mourning, it would explain why Boaz had not moved to court her, for he would not impose himself on her as long as she was still in a time of mourning.⁵

Third, there is the use of prudence: **do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.** Why wait until after he has imbibed alcohol? Because, under the influence of a few brews, he will certainly be in a better mood? While the passage does not vilify Naomi it certainly raises questions about her methods. We cannot know for certain what she was thinking. But we do know that she is from a people that are accustomed to doing what is right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25). What follows is the stuff of special forces.

Fourth, there was the surveillance; Ruth was told that **when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies.** The implication is that the rest of the plan would have to be conducted without the benefit of light. Ruth would need to remember where he had gone in order to go to him and perform the remainder of the operation without visual confirmation of his identity.

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTION

Having received her mission, the young woman begins carrying it out. Fifth, there was stealth. Coming under the cover of night she **came softly, uncovered his feet, and lay down** in the place where Boaz was lying.

Ruthless society loathes the advice of parents and spurns the leadership of prior generations (2 Timothy 3:1-3). However, the grace of God is with those submitting to guidance of appointed leadership. The spirit of Ruth is willing to receive counsel and direction from parents and mentors.

THE REASONS FOR NOT REDEEMING (RUTH 3:8-13)

⁴ The text, as indicated by the italics, does not actually say “best” garment. Rather, she is directed to put on a large outer garment (תְּשֹׂמֶט) or mantle. While some commentators say that it was probably aimed at disguising her appearance, the context indicates that it was part of the effort to impress Boaz. Thus, the NKJV provides good guidance on the interpretation of the passage.

⁵ Fruchtenbaum, Arnold G., *Ariel's Bible Commentary: Judges and Ruth* (p. 320). San Antonio, Texas: Ariel Ministries.

⁸ Now it happened at midnight that the man was startled, and turned himself; and there, a woman was lying at his feet. ⁹ And he said, “Who *are* you?” So she answered, “I *am* Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative.” ¹⁰ Then he said, “Blessed *are* you of the LORD, my daughter! For you have shown more kindness at the end than at the beginning, in that you did not go after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you request, for all the people of my town know that you *are* a virtuous woman. ¹² Now it is true that I *am* a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I. ¹³ Stay this night, and in the morning it shall be *that* if he will perform the duty of a close relative for you—good; let him do it. But if he does not want to perform the duty for you, then I will perform the duty for you, *as* the LORD lives! Lie down until morning.”

There is no light and someone has crept in unnoticed as Boaz sleeps near his grain. Neither the mighty man of valor nor his staff saw it coming. Alas, they are no match for the mighty matching-making mind of Naomi. The tactician, having briefed and deployed the soldier has succeeded: **the man was startled** (וַיִּתְרַד). He was terrified and literally shuddered. In the darkness there are only their voices: **And he said, “Who are you?” So she answered, “I am Ruth, your maidservant.”** He no doubt recognized her voice and would have begun to feel relief.



Notice that she does not identify herself by her nationality or in relation to Naomi or her deceased husband. She has an identity and has become comfortable using it when communicating with this man. This cannot be unrelated to the fact that he has treated her with respect.

The next thing she said was a shock. Ruth says, without pausing for late night small talk in the romantic setting of a heap of grain, “**Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative.**” For those of us who do not readily understand ancient Biblical pickup lines, we are going to unpack this.

A few things that we should note about Ruth’s words. First, there is the reference to herself as his **maidservant** (2:13; 3:9). There are two Hebrew words that are translated **maidservant**: the *amah* () and the *shiphah* ().

The *amah* was a slave woman who was eligible to marry or to be a concubine to an Israelite freeman, and thus enjoy the status of being family. ... The *shiphah* denotes a slave girl who belonged to the lowest social class and was responsible for the more menial tasks; she is simply nothing more than the owner’s property.⁶

In the public conversation with Boaz, comforted by his words and generosity, she says that she is his *shiphah* – his maidservant with no privileges (2:13). Time has passed and she is still presenting herself in

⁶ Fruchtenbaum, Arnold G., *Ariel’s Bible Commentary: Judges and Ruth* (p. 312). San Antonio, Texas: Ariel Ministries.

humility. But now Ruth uses the word *amah* – his maidservant available to marry (3:9). The difference is significant and yet lost in most English translations.⁷

Second, she asks Boaz to take her under his wing (3:9). Earlier he noted that she has brought herself under the wing of the LORD GOD (2:12). What is all this talk of being under a wing? Boaz is a mighty man of valor but he does not have wings. To better understand her request consider the following passage from Ezekiel:

⁸ “When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time *was* the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine,” says the Lord GOD. (Ezekiel 16:8)

In this passage God is speaking to His people in the Jerusalem. The spreading of the wing over someone was an idiom for taking them into a relationship where they would be cared and provided for. It means to marry. The word translated **wing** can also be translated as the corner of the garment. This is important because it helps us to interpret the language of Ruth.

[I]n common Hebrew usage “to spread one’s wings over someone” was a euphemistic idiom for marriage. The gesture of a man covering a woman with his garment was a symbolic act, which according to Near Eastern custom signified “the establishment of a new relationship and the symbolic declaration of the husband to provide for the sustenance of the future wife.” This is what Naomi had in mind when she proposed this scheme as a way of providing *mānôah*, “rest, security,” for Ruth in 3:2. In essence [Ruth] challenges Boaz to be the answer to his own invocation of blessing upon her in 2:12.⁸

In the light of these passages we see that the words of Ruth are very clear; they amount to her asking to be taken as a wife. She is asking Boaz to marry her!

AN ANSWER ABOUT THE LACK OF ACTION (RUTH 3:11-12)

Like the master of the feast in Cana, Boaz says that the best has been saved until last (John 2:6-10). But why was it necessary for Ruth to ask this man to marry her? Earlier it was said that Boaz is a mighty man of valor (2:1). Is he really a weak man? His words give the answer.

Where Ruthless society is characterized by the pointless pursuit of pleasure, Boaz does not chase women. He pursues relationships. He would not seek Ruth’s hand in marriage without some indicator that his advances would be rewarded.

Boaz says, in effect, “I want to be with someone who wants to be with me.” He considered Ruth to be out of his league and thus did not even consider the pursuit. But when presented with an opportunity to marry Ruth he is careful to respect the authority of God and the rights of others. He behaves according to his responsibilities to God Almighty and toward his fellow man. He is not driven by his own appetites (Romans 16:18; Philippians 3:19). He praises Ruth for her act of **kindness** (“loyalty,” *hesed*; cf. comments on 1:8) toward him and Naomi. This last act was **greater than** her decision to serve her mother-in-law. Boaz also lauded her for not going **after a younger** man. He seemed to believe Ruth could

⁷ ESV uses *servant* in 2:13 and 3:9. KJV uses *handmaid* in both verses. The NET Bible uses *servant* in both verses but provides notes that help the reader understand that there are two different words being translated. The translation notes says, “Ruth here uses a word (שִׁפְכָחָה, *shifkhah*) that describes the lowest level of female servant (see 1 Sam 25:41). Note Ruth 3:9 where she uses the word אִמָּה (‘*amah*), which refers to a higher class of servant.” NASB uses *maidservant* in 2:13 but *maid* in 3:9.

⁸ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 691). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

have readily found such a match. He praised her for being willing to marry an older man in order to fulfill her commitment to her first husband, Mahlon (cf. 4:10), the family name of Elimelech, and the widow Naomi.⁹

While Ruthless society says that the end justifies the means, the character and counsel of Boaz calls believers to a godly commitment to proper process. Indeed, Boaz is Christ in his portrayal of God-centered adherence to proper process (Matthew 4:5-7). He seeks do everything according to the will of God. He recognizes that the end is preexistent in the means.

Notice that Boaz is not offended by the idea that Ruth wants to marry him in order to help others. By referring to Boaz as *goel* she makes it clear that she has in mind the law of levirate marriage and the benefit that it would bring to an old widow. If Boaz marries Ruth the widow would also come under his care, the property of the family would be redeemed, and the family name of Elimelech would be preserved by a child that would be considered the offspring of Mahlon. Many a man would have been seen an insufferable affront in the notion that the marriage proposal was aimed at blessing others. But Boaz is not like many a man. He has high regard for the fact that Ruth is missional in her view of marriage. In fact, he had already considered the idea but was unable to execute because, although he was a close kinsman, there was a kinsman that was closer (3:12). Do not miss this:

*Against Ruthless Society
Missional Views on Marriage*

Ruth sought to marry Boaz based on something more important than her feelings; she aimed to leverage the law of levirate marriage to lift an elderly widow out of her condition. It would be wrong to say that Ruth was not attracted to Boaz or that she did not have feelings for him. But it would be gross negligence in the study of Scripture to miss her stated motive for getting married (Ruth 3:9). For Ruth marriage was missional; it was coming together with someone of godly character for something and Someone bigger than her own desires.

Boaz is not bothered by the idea that Ruth's request is rooted in reasons other than romance. He is attracted to her virtue and had already been thinking about how he might use matrimony to make life better for others (Ruth 3:12). Without Ruth's overture he was unsure of whether there was a mutual sentiment and, more importantly, whether Ruth was being led by missional thinking. When he knew that the young woman wanted to be his wife and would work with him to help Naomi he (1) took the lead and (2) became assiduous in settling the matter (Ruth 3:11-13). In him is strength.

⁹ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Ru 3:10). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Let us not miss the fact that Boaz (1) will not send this woman home in the dark (11:13), (2) will not be involved in a scandal that would damage the woman's good reputation (11:14), and (3) will not put his own desires ahead of real righteousness. In a time where everyone does what is right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25) this man is a refreshing reminder of what it means to be both compassionate and committed to honoring God and his people. He is a godly remnant and a preacher of righteousness in the midst of moral decay.

THE MESSAGE TO THE MOTHER-IN-LAW (RUTH 3:14-18)

Boaz directed Ruth to take her cloak and position it so as to receive a gift (Ruth 3:15). While she held it he measured out between six measures of barley. Why? He did not want Ruth to go back to her mother-in-law **empty-handed** (3:17). In this way he told Naomi that he had every intention to making Ruth his wife; the gift was a down payment of future kindnesses and caring that would also bless the widow.

Remember what Naomi said in 1:20. She said that she had come back empty. Whether or not Boaz knew what she had said God did. And He can be seen overseeing a ministry of comfort and care for a woman who once believed herself to have nothing. He says in this way

You will not lack food or family going forward, Naomi. Insofar as it depends on me, yours is a future of fulness.

Did Naomi get the message? Indeed. She interpreted the words and works as a promise to push for a resolution that would bless the women. Each of his words was carefully chosen. By saying that he she should not go empty-handed he told her his intention to bless. By referring to Naomi by her family relationship he make it clear that he regarded her as Ruth's family and would be working to ensure that whoever did the duty of the *goel* would have her in mind. To a woman who thought she had come to the end of good days Boaz says, "I see you, Naomi."

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

- Do you know of a marriage proposal story that has impressed you? Why were you impressed?
- Is there any evidence that supports the idea that Ruth asked Boaz to marry her? (Ruth 3:9; Ezekiel 16:8)
- If you believe the passage indicates that Ruth asked Boaz to marry her, why did she take the initiative? (Ruth 3:12; Deuteronomy 25:5-10)
- Boaz has not made advances on Ruth. What are his reasons? (Ruth 2:8; 3:10, 12)
- When presented with an opportunity to get something you desire, in light of the story, what should you do first?