

HOW RUTH GOT HER MAN

The third chapter of Ruth relates what has to be one of the most bizarre engagement stories ever. Can you imagine a conversation between Boaz and his young son a few years down the road when his boy asks him, “Daddy, how did you ask Mommy to marry you?”

Think about this—moms, if your daughter came to you and asked for advice on dating, would you take her to Ruth chapter three? Dads, would you ever have a talk with your boys about what to do if you wake up in the middle of the night and find a woman sleeping at your feet?

The story gets even more extraordinary when we sift out the details. Ruth chapter three tells us how Ruth and Boaz agree to marry. What’s missing from the narrative that would be absolutely prominent if we were writing this today? First, are these people physically attractive? Is Boaz handsome? Is Ruth a beauty? Are they attracted to each other? We don’t know anything about their looks.

A more significant omission jumps out at us when we ask whether or not they loved each other. What does the text say? Absolutely nothing! What’s love got to do with it? This looks like a marriage arranged to provide security for Ruth and possibly Naomi. How oddly unlike our individualized American notions of courtship, love and marriage.

Pastor Walt observed that some might call Ruth a gold-digger by today’s standards. Ruth was a poor immigrant. Boaz was a wealthy, prominent citizen. She was a scavenger eking out a living from fields owned by Boaz. Ruth is younger, probably in her mid to late twenties. Boaz is a much older man, probably in his early forties. What pops into your mind when you hear about a poor young woman who goes after a wealthy older man?

Some read the Book of Ruth in such a way as to conclude that Ruth actually seduced Boaz. In their opinion, Ruth and Boaz had a midnight, sexual encounter.

In the most recent issue of *Christianity Today*, New Testament prof Joseph Hellerman uses the movie, *Titanic*, to illustrate the very different social expectations between the world of the Bible and today. In *Titanic*, Rose is a beautiful young woman being coerced into a loveless marriage with a rich snob of a fiancé, Cal Hockley. She is marrying him because her family has fallen on hard times and they see Hockley’s wealth as a solution to their financial crisis.

Rose is so despondent over her prospects she attempts suicide. Along comes Jack Dawson to the rescue. Jack is a poor but otherwise dashing, aspiring artist. Rose dumps her rich fiancé in order to follow her heart for Jack.

The story line of *Titanic* makes perfect sense to us. Ruth’s story, not so much. Hellerman notes: “We are quite unmoved by the potential social dilemma confronting Rose’s extended family. Our sympathies lie, rather, with the heroine’s personal satisfaction.”

Then he adds, “If *Titanic* were shown in first-century Israel, the audience would be utterly appalled that Rose would even consider sacrificing the good of her extended family for her relational satisfaction” (*Christianity Today*, May 2010, p. 44).

So what are we to make of this chapter in the Book of Ruth? Should her story redefine how we think about courtship and marriage? And, are Naomi and Ruth running ahead of God, forcing something God wants to accomplish in his own time and ways? What’s at play that we don’t understand?

The chapter begins with Naomi taking the initiative of finding a “home” for Ruth where she will be well provided for. Up to this point Naomi has been self-absorbed, paralyzed by bitterness and grief. But Ruth’s success in gleaning and the kindness showed by Boaz has re-opened her heart to God’s *hesed*, the unfailing love and kindness of Yahweh. As that love works in her, Naomi devises a plan to secure Ruth’s future—v. 2-4.

Thirty-two centuries separate us from Naomi and Ruth. The cultural divide is enormous. Even so, we get the possibility of significant risk in Naomi’s plan. What if Boaz is offended by what he might well view as an immoral seduction? Harvest time in Israel was marked by celebration. Immorality of this sort was not unheard of around the threshing floors. What if Boaz shames Ruth publically? Worse, what if he takes advantage of her?

But Naomi has confidence in Boaz’ character. She has also begun to put together the coincidences *we* have seen, but she, to this point, has not. She senses God at work and she is convinced that Boaz may well be the answer to the prayer she offered for both of her daughters-in-law: “May [Yahweh] grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband” (Ruth 1:9).

There is a time to join what God seems to be doing and take action. Discerning that requires wisdom. David wisely understood the value of restraint in claiming the throne of Israel. God had chosen him to succeed Saul, but David would not over-reach and remove Saul by force. He waited for God to act.

Naomi rightly perceives God on the move, which spurs her to action. She advises her daughter-in-law to bathe, perfume herself, and put on her “best clothes.” A poor, immigrant widow might not have had much in the way of best clothes. We can’t think of her going to her walk-in closet and pulling out a fabulous gown.

It is more likely that Naomi is advising Ruth to lay aside the clothing that marked her as a widow in mourning. We don’t know what that might have looked like, but we do know that it was a custom in Israel. Women had a way of dressing that marked them as widows. It seems that Naomi is advising Ruth to put on regular clothing, indicating that her period of mourning is over and she is receptive to re-marriage.

Then she is to go down to the threshing floor, mark where Boaz lies down for the night, wait until he falls asleep, sneak in and uncover his feet and lie down at his feet.

Why would she uncover his feet? Temperatures in Israel this time of year get down to the mid-fifties at night. Boaz’s uncovered feet would get cold and he would wake up to cover them. That would allow Ruth opportunity for an intimate conversation with Boaz.

Ruth agrees and the night plays out as expected. Harvesters partied as they threshed grain. It marked the end of harvest when the cleaned barley and wheat was piled in heaps, ready for transport into town. After a good night’s work, Boaz feasted with his crew and, in good spirits, went to the far end of his grain piles to sleep.

Ruth waits until she hears his breathing become steady, slips beside him, and carefully lifts back the blankets exposing his feet. Then she lies down to wait.

About midnight, Boaz shivered and stirred. He is startled to find a woman lying at his feet. As a godly man and faithful follower of Yahweh, this must have been alarming. He didn’t know who she was or why she was there. All kinds of questions ran through his mind as he asked her to identify herself. Look at v. 9.

We miss something in verse nine that the Hebrew readers would have grasped immediately. What did Ruth mean when she asked Boaz to “Spread the corner of your garment

over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer”? She is asking Boaz to marry her. The word translated “corner” in verse nine is the same word translated “wings” in Ruth 2:12. A man who covered a woman with a garment symbolically declared that he was taking her under the protection of his wings. He was receiving her as his wife.

Also, Ruth appeals to him, not on the basis of love, nor on the basis of mutual attraction. Although it seems obvious that they admired each other, she proposes marriage on the basis of family loyalty. She asks Boaz to fulfill the role of kinsman-redeemer, to be the near relative who steps up and assumes responsibility for the well-being of a needy family member. By becoming Ruth’s husband, he may continue the family line of Elimelech on his behalf, provide for Ruth’s well-being and, by extension, Naomi’s.

Guys, how would you respond to such a proposal? Listen to Boaz: v. 10-13.

Boaz calls her proposal *hesed*, kindness, covenant loyalty and love. Ruth has not tried to find some kind of “soul mate” among the younger, and potentially more appealing available suitors. But neither has she thrown herself away, sacrificing personal happiness for the sake of economic security. That’s how we read it in our radically individualistic western culture.

Ruth has acted with *hesed*, a different kind of love. It’s not romantic love, or passionate, erotic love. Drawn by Boaz’s own kindness, Ruth responds with commitment.

That’s why Boaz blesses her. He is certainly flattered that she chose him. One wonders that he has not pursued her himself.

And he speaks of her established reputation in the community as a woman of noble character. In this she is his peer. He is richer, older, more powerful and more established in Bethlehem society than Ruth. But in character she is his equal. The writer has already introduced Boaz as a man of heroic character (Ruth 2:1). Ruth is his feminine counterpart.

Solomon, who would be their descendant, would write: “A wife of noble character is her husband’s crown...” (Proverbs 12:4). I wonder if Solomon had his great-great-grandmother Ruth in mind.

There is a complication. Naomi has a relative closer and therefore possessing more rights than Boaz. He will have to solve that problem. But he commits himself to Ruth with the words, “I will do for you all that you ask.”

So Ruth slept at his feet until early dawn, although it’s doubtful that either of them slept much that night. Before the rest of the threshing crew stirred, Boaz sent her off with six measures of threshed barley, probably as much as she could carry in her shawl. And both of them set out: Ruth back to Naomi and Boaz to business town.

Ruth reported everything that happened to her mother-in-law. When she showed her the barley, she passed on a message from Boaz to Naomi: “Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.” Perhaps this was his way of reassuring Naomi. Remember when Naomi returned to Bethlehem? What was her complaint: “I went away full, but Yahweh has brought me back *empty*.”

Boaz sends Ruth back “not-empty”—full. And for now, they must wait the outcome of the day’s business.

What do we take away from this curious chapter?

It certainly presents a challenging alternative to the American system of courtship and marriage. We cannot conceive of marrying for anything but love, and we are adamant about choosing our mates ourselves. At the same time, our system isn’t working very well. Romantic love has not shown itself to be a stable basis for keeping a marriage together. We fall in love and

get married. In some other cultures, people get married and then fall in love. Loving feelings, while wonderful and significant, are perhaps not the most important glue to having a successful marriage. That takes a different kind of love: *hesed*—chosen kindness, loyal commitment, self-giving love.

The mechanics of how Ruth got her man are not as significant as the foundation of their marriage. This is descriptive truth. It tells us what happened. It is not prescriptive truth, declaring what should happen. But in their story, so odd to us, we catch glimpses of a way of thinking about marriage that is a refreshing alternative to the hyper-real expectations of overwhelming romantic attraction.

There is something else. We said last week that even when it seems God is not at work, God is at work. Paul affirms that in his letter to the Philippians: "...it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12-13).

But he offers that promise on the heels of this counsel: "...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling..." Paul was talking about engaging our life in Christ, living into our new identity as Christ-followers. We are not passive observers in the process of becoming like Jesus, but active participants and partners with God in the process.

In a similar manner, Naomi and Ruth showed unusual boldness as they participated with God in what they understood to be God's working in their lives.

We walk a fine line between two opposite errors. On the one hand we may share the presumption that God bless every impulsive whim we pursue, no matter how hair-brained it seems. On the other, we may entertain a different presumption, that God must do everything for us. We become risk-averse, expecting God to part the waters of every difficulty and make our life problem-free.

The more difficult middle path is to cultivate the spiritual sensitivity, discernment and boldness to move with God when God seems to be moving. Naomi and Ruth chose that middle alternative between two presumptions: recklessness and immobility.

Boaz and Ruth have shown themselves both to be people of character. The curtain is about to rise on the final act in the drama of their lives. We will return to that next Sunday.