

The Wedding Planner

Ruth 3

A forgetful husband thought he had whipped the problem of forgetting his wife's birthday, their anniversary and other special days. He opened an account with a florist and told her to send all the appropriate flowers along with a note signed, "Your loving husband." His wife was thrilled by this new display of attention. All went well until one day, many bouquets later, he came home, kissed his wife and carelessly asked, "Nice flowers, dear. Where'd you get them?"

Some men can use all the help they can get when it comes to affairs of the heart. Might Boaz have been one of these? Naomi was taking notes as Boaz extended one inexplicable kindness after another to her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Boaz was a relative of Ruth's deceased husband. He was an appropriate candidate to marry her and to provide her with a life of security. He clearly cared about her. Now, as chapter 3 opens, Naomi has decided that she should try to make something happen. She is already planning a wedding before Boaz can know what hit him. But, while Naomi's nuptial designs were instrumental in bringing Ruth and Boaz together, this was only because a greater will, an infinitely wiser Wedding Planner was already at work.

But, let us first consider this story through the eyes of its human characters ...

I. Naomi's Affectionate Project (1-4)

¹One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? ²Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

A. Naomi Cared Deeply about Ruth's Future

Chapter 2 closed, noting that Ruth "gleaned" (picked up spare grain) in the fields of Boaz (with a number of extraordinary perks) for the duration of the barley and wheat harvests. This gave Naomi about seven weeks to observe how things were developing between the two. Gleaning was only a short-term remedy to inevitable poverty, so Naomi, as Ruth's surrogate mother, began to look farther ahead and try to arrange a marriage and a "home" for Ruth. "Home" is the same word rendered "rest" in 1:9 when Naomi urged both of her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab to find new husbands. The idea conveyed is of one security, something that Naomi could not provide for Ruth.

Naomi wanted to know that Ruth would be cared for. Boaz was close enough of a relative to marry her and to carry on the name of Mahlon, Ruth's deceased husband. Apparently, there was also a field belonging to Naomi's husband for which he had sold the property rights after he had fallen on hard times. As kinsman-redeemer, Boaz could buy back that property. Certainly, Naomi was aware that her husband had a closer relative than Boaz who could claim both Ruth and the land. Maybe he would. Maybe he wouldn't. Still, someone had to start this ball rolling.

B. Perhaps, Naomi Felt Boaz Needed a Nudge

A *Reader's Digest* contest once asked the question, "What has six eyes and cannot see?" The winning answer? "Three men, in a house with dirty laundry, over-flowing trash cans, and a sink full of dirty dishes." Some guys can be a bit oblivious. Perhaps, Boaz was one of those guys.

It was obvious that he had some kind of an interest in Ruth, if only a paternal one, but Naomi was hoping there was more to it. For whatever reason, Boaz was not making a move. Perhaps, as "a man of standing," his good name might take a hit were he to pursue a Moabite bride. Might it have been his age? Perhaps, he did not want to look like an old fool to Ruth or to anyone else by chasing a younger woman. Perhaps, he just never imagined that she could love him that way.

Naomi had an idea. Boaz had servants, but he liked to winnow his own grain, at least some of it, alone at "the threshing floor." Servants threshed by beating the harvested stalks so as to separate the grain from the stalks. Boaz "winnowed" by tossing this threshed mess into the wind. The grain fell to the floor as the waste material blew away. After a hard day at this, Boaz would dine, drink and sleep on the threshing floor. This may have been an annual thanksgiving and reflection ritual for him. In any event, Naomi knew what to expect from Boaz on this particular night.

Naomi told Ruth not to interrupt this ritual, but to doll herself up, and when Boaz was asleep to approach him, to uncover his feet and to lay there. When discovered, she was to do whatever Boaz requested of her. I believe Naomi thought this action would communicate to Boaz Ruth's desire to become his wife, and that he would either cover her with the pulled back blanket, essentially, proposing to her, or he would send her away. Now, a number of modern scholars suggest that this is all euphemism for some sexually inappropriate behavior in which Naomi encouraged Ruth to engage if necessary. That is needlessly provocative, for the balance of the narrative makes the best sense when we attribute the utmost purity to both Ruth and Boaz.

II. Ruth's Audacious Proposal (5-9)

A. At First, Ruth Followed Naomi's Instructions to the Letter verses 5-7

⁵"I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. ⁶So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

⁷When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down.

Boaz had worked all day. He ate. He drank. He was in "good spirits." This in no way implies drunkenness, only that he was satisfied, content, happy, grateful and ready for bed. He was likely reflecting on a good life and the generosity of *YAHWEH*. If, in fact, he was falling in love with Ruth, it is not far-fetched to think that she too was an object of his reflections. After he was out, Ruth approached, uncovered his feet and laid down. A few hours pass between verses 7 and 8.

B. Then, She Began to Ad Lib verses 8, 9

... ⁸In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet.

⁹"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer."

Perhaps, a dream or an animal's howl startled Boaz in the night. Maybe, his feet were just cold. In any event, he either rolled over or sat up (the Hebrew can mean either) and found a woman at his feet. It was dark, so he asked who she was. Maybe Ruth panicked, or she knew not to leave a tender moment like this up to a man. What she said, Boaz immediately interpreted as a marriage proposal. "Spread the corner of your garment over me ..."

The *NIV* treats this as a request from Ruth to Boaz, but the original language allows for another interpretation. She may have been observing that he had already covered her with his past kindnesses. "corner of your garment" can also be rendered "wing" as it was earlier, in chapter two. There, Boaz had admired and blessed Ruth for how she had sought refuge under the "wings" of "the LORD, the God of Israel." Ruth may have been replaying his own words back to him: "You are a kinsman-redeemer. You have saved me already from much with wing and your kindness. Perhaps, you are the one through whom the refuge of God is to come."

Ruth risked her own reputation and Boaz's. The event plays out in pristine innocence, but who could account for the idle chatter of Bethlehem's old biddies. If so many modern scholars are willing to put a base spin on the situation, the gossips of the time would certainly do the same. Ruth risked rejection. Imagine how devastating it might have been had Boaz said, "I'm sorry if I misled you but I just think of you as a friend." Ruth risked the relationship she already had with Boaz. For whatever reason, he had taken it upon himself to look after her. Her "forwardness" might have jeopardized that.

Those risks were not realized because God had raised up Boaz to be the instrument through which He would care for this gentle lady from Moab. And, through their union, God would raise up a shepherd-king for His chosen nation. And, through that king, through David, God would raise up another King, One Who would redeem and rescue and shepherd and rule His people into eternity.

III. Boaz' Appreciative Promise (10-14)

A. The Old Fellow Was Flattered verse 10

¹⁰"The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor."

It becomes evident here that whatever the difference in years between Ruth and Boaz, it was significant to Boaz. He is amazed but also exhilarated that Ruth wants to marry him. He speaks of her "kindness" as being greater than some earlier kindness. Earlier, she had sworn her loyalty to Naomi, refusing her mother-in-law's offer to release her from all obligations and to return to her home country. Out of relentless affection for Naomi, Ruth had placed her future on the line.

This later "kindness" is not just Ruth taking pity on an old man. In order to carry on the name of her deceased husband and in order to care for Naomi by retrieving her land, Ruth had chosen to pursue a legal kinsman-redeemer, albeit an older man, rather than simply follow the passions of a youthful heart. Boaz considered her loyalty to Naomi and to the late Mahlon profound. But, it would be silly to doubt that on a personal level, the old guy was still giddy that she had chosen him.

B. Boaz Finally Took the Lead verses 11-14

... ¹¹And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. ¹²Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. ¹³Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning."

¹⁴So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor."

If Boaz needed that initial nudge, once everything was out on the table, he took over. He would happily do as Ruth desired. Apparently, her nationality was never a negative factor in Boaz' mind because her character was evident throughout Bethlehem. That phrase, "a woman of noble character" is the same phrase translated "a wife of noble character" in Proverbs 31. There, such a woman is described in terms of value, goodness, industry, resourcefulness, hard work, compassion, wisdom, strength, dignity and kindness. King Lemuel of Proverbs 31 suggests that any man would be proud to have such a wife. Boaz would be every bit as proud to have Ruth as his wife.

Of course, there was a potential glitch in the plan. One relative closer to the trunk on the family tree than Boaz was first in line to redeem the property of the deceased if he so desired. He was also the first-in-line in regard to the marital duty toward Ruth, his deceased relative's widow. The Law made a provision for a man to surrender the rights and duties of a kinsman-redeemer, but that was out of Ruth's or Boaz' hands. It was entirely up to this other relative.

Boaz's respect for God's Law and for the rights of this other relative, in spite of his own feelings for Ruth, is just one more proof of his noble character. But, he swore by *YAHWEH* that if the other relative was not willing to marry Ruth, he would do so in a heartbeat. "As surely as the LORD lives" was the most serious and binding formula by which Boaz could give his word to Ruth. To break this promise, this oath, was to stomp on Commandment #3 of the "Big Ten":

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. – Exodus 20:7

It was not safe for Ruth to venture home in the middle of the night, so Boaz told her to remain where she was until morning. Still, to protect themselves from the idle chatter of the Bethlehem busybodies, he sent her on her way home while it was still dark enough that no one would know it was her. In a short time, Ruth had forged a reputation in Bethlehem for high character. Boaz was determined to look after her reputation as well as to protect his own good name.

IV. YAHWEH's Abundant Provision & Amazing Providence (15-18)

¹⁵He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her. Then he went back to town.

¹⁶When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?" Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her ¹⁷and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.' "

¹⁸Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

A. Until the Kinsman-Redeemer Issue Was Resolved, Boaz Would Do the Right Thing

Boaz sent Ruth home with "six measures of barley." Now, unless one of the characteristics of "a noble woman" was to be as strong as a Clydesdale, this measure probably just referred to whatever scoop Boaz kept with his grain. Some farming cultures place a value on such "sturdy" women. I get the sense that this supply of grain was just intended to tide them over.

Ruth reported to Naomi that Boaz had provided the barley with her in mind. He said, "Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed." This was a fascinating choice of words. "Empty" is the same word Naomi used in chapter one when speaking of the bitterness of her years in Moab. She said, "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:21).

Was Boaz beginning to see his role in a greater scheme of things? Did he see himself as a vehicle through which God might attend to Naomi's needs, bringing Ruth into his life and him into hers?

Of course, they must all resist the temptation to run ahead of God. At one point, Naomi's advice to Ruth was simply "Wait." They all had to honor the Law even if it meant that their own imagined notion of a dream come true must crumble. Their futures lay in the hands of God, but God had placed them in the hands of this other relative. Their desire to marry hinged on the desires and the choice of another. They could not scheme. They could not look for an end-around play. They simply needed to wait and see what God was bringing to pass.

B. Ultimately, Ruth's Little Story Is Part of the Bigger Story of YAHWEH

As noted, a number of hopes expressed by characters in *Ruth* are fulfilled by providence as the narrative unfolds. In chapter one, Naomi desires "rest" for Ruth, meaning the home and security of married life. In chapter three, she wonders if God might be providing this rest, this "home," through Boaz. In chapter one, Naomi laments the "emptiness" of her life. In chapter three, that emptiness begins to be filled. In chapter 2, Boaz admires the faith that has led Ruth to seek refuge under the wing of YAHWEH. In chapter 3, he detects that *HE* might be God's wing to cover Ruth. Behind the romance, the seeming coincidences, the human kindnesses and the bold moves to make things happen, God's hand was there, working all things together according to His will.

God uses His people to minister to His people and to bring about His purposes. The New Testament tells us that our trials produce the perseverance that builds faith. Hardship can be the hand of a heavenly Father lovingly shaping His children. We are consoled in our heartache by God so that we might console others as they endure heartache. God's hand is explained to us in the New Testament, but we see it in the Old Testament, in the lives of people who had much less information than do we. Still, what they lacked in information, they made up for in faith.

Ruth, Naomi and Boaz obeyed God and trusted Him in an age of lawlessness when most people were just doing as they saw fit. God can bring His purposes to pass with or without an obedient people, but the process is gentler and lovelier when He works through things like the loyalty of Ruth, the love of Naomi and the kindness of Boaz. In the final analysis, God does not need for any of us to be loving or obedient in order to bring His purposes to fruition. But, we need to be obedient, so as to welcome His hand and to establish our own legacies of faith and beauty.

When God worked to bring to pass a wedding between Ruth and Boaz, He was just getting warmed up. Ultimately, He had another wedding in mind – a union between a Redeemer from heaven and the church. A bride purified and purchased by the sacrificed blood of Jesus. We are a part of that bride, or we can be.