

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Ruth at the Threshing Floor

Ruth 3:1-18

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?"

Now Naomi speaks to Ruth. Ruth has been providing for both of them, but without either of them having a husband they are little more than beggars. Now Naomi wants to provide for Ruth. As we discussed earlier, a married woman was totally considered as part of her husband's family, and Naomi as the last representative of that family feels the responsibility of providing a new home for her daughter-in-law. Yet also Ruth has been doing so much for her, and she wants to do something for Ruth in return. It is good when people give a lot to us to think of how we can give back to them.

There is no doubt about what Naomi meant by "security." For a woman in that culture, that could mean nothing less than a new husband. Of course, that is what Naomi would have liked to have provided for Ruth all the way back in Ruth 1:11-13. She probably has been thinking about this and wondering how she could pull it off ever since their arrival back in Israel. So Naomi does not mean that she just decided this, for it has been on her mind. What she means is basically that she now has an idea how this could be brought about.

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.

She recalls to Ruth's mind Boaz, the man whose young women she has been threshing with. She reminds Ruth that he is their relative. The word here is not the word *ga'al* for the kinsman-redeemer, but a word used only here for a relative.

The harvest is over, and so Boaz is no longer in the fields. Instead, he is on the threshing floor, winnowing the grain to prepare it for use. They would thresh by first breaking up the grain, often using a pair of oxen and a wooden instrument that they would run over the grain to crush it and break it up. Then, they would take the grain and toss it up into the air from the threshing floor. If there was a wind, the wind would blow the light-weight chaff away, and the heavier grain would fall back to the floor. If you would do this enough times, you would separate the grain. That is what Boaz and his servants were now doing.

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.

Now Naomi advises Ruth what she should do. Basically, she is setting forth to Ruth cultural and societal customs and traditions about which Ruth was completely ignorant. These customs must have seemed very strange or even bizarre to Ruth, since she had grown up in Moab and knew nothing of the way things were done in Israel. In this, we can sympathize with her, for these customs are probably as much different from ours as they were from Moab's, and so we are just as unfamiliar with them as Ruth was. Therefore, it was necessary for Ruth to trust completely in her mother-in-law. No matter how strange what Naomi said may have seemed to her, she must believe her that this is the right thing

to do, and do exactly what she says. Since Ruth already had trusted her life to Naomi, this was no new thing to her.

So Naomi's instructions begin. Ruth is to wash herself and put on perfume. This was more significant then than it is now, for they washed much less often than we do. Then, she is to put on her best garment. That might not have been all that great a garment, for they had come from Moab with just what they could carry, and they had not been rich since. Yet the point was that she was to put on her best, however poor that might have been.

Then, her preparations complete, Ruth is to go down to the threshing floor of Boaz. However, she is not to let Boaz know she is there until after he is done with his evening meal.

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."

Ruth is to watch Boaz, and wait until he lies down to sleep for the night. Naomi knows that he will be doing this at the threshing floor, for he will not leave that great wealth of wheat and barley unguarded. Then, Ruth is to go in to the place where he is sleeping, uncover his feet, and lie down. When Boaz discovers her, he will tell her what she should do.

This all seems very strange to us, and might have seemed equally strange to Ruth. Yet apparently this was all part of their culture and customs. In our overly sexual society, we are likely to think that there was something erotic about this, and yet that was not the case. There was nothing sexual or impure about it. Basically, what Ruth was doing here was proposing marriage to Boaz. To have something under your feet at the time was to have it under your power and protection. Ruth uncovering his feet was a sign that she wanted to be put under the power and protection of Boaz.

5. And she said to her, "All that you say to me I will do."

Ruth was no more familiar with these strange customs than we are, but she was willing to obey her mother-in-law. She had faith in Naomi. So she promised to follow her instructions to the letter.

6. So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law instructed her.

Ruth follows Naomi's instructions, going down to the threshing floor as she commanded her. Ruth's trust in Naomi can be quite an example for us. Ruth trusted completely in the love and wisdom of Naomi, even though she might not have entirely understood what she was instructed to do. Are we as faithful to God's instructions to us as this Moabite woman was to her mother-in-law?

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.

Boaz finishes his supper, and his heart is cheerful. No doubt the harvest is going well, and much of the work is completed. Just a little more labor, and they will have all the grain they will need for another year.

Now, Boaz heads to bed. He bunks down for the night at the foot of the heap of grain they have collected. Basically, he is on guard duty. This is interesting, since he is the master, and yet he is guarding the grain himself. Though he is a rich man, he is clearly not afraid to do his share of the work.

Once Boaz is settled down and sleeping, Ruth, who has watched him bed down, sneaks softly to the place where he is sleeping, uncovers his feet, and lies down, exactly as Naomi had instructed her.

8. Now it happened at midnight that the man was startled, and turned himself; and there, a woman was lying at his feet.

Boaz apparently continues to sleep for a time, and yet at midnight something startles him. We are not told what, but it could have had something to do with Ruth's presence, or it could have been just some common night sound that might have startled him even if Ruth had not been there.

At any rate, upon being startled, he turns himself, and sees a woman lying at his feet. This was probably frightening to him, as in the dark he doubtless could not see Ruth clearly, and so he wakes to suddenly notice this shadowy figure lying at his feet in the dark. Remember, he was on guard duty. Moreover, their wealth at that time was in goods, and not so much in paper or coins, as our wealth is. Boaz had just finished his harvest, and so had a wealth of barley he was watching, all the supply they had grown for the year. The last thing he wanted to wake up to, therefore, was a shadowy figure right next to him. His mind must have immediately gone to wondering if this were a thief, come to kill him in the night and steal his grain.

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."

Boaz was a clever man, and as he shook off his sleep and surprise, he must have figured out that a thief bent on harming him would be unlikely to be lying down at his feet. Yet what, then, is happening, and who is this?

Boaz asks Ruth who she is, still unable to see her in the dark, and she tells him. She is Ruth, his maidservant. Of course, she is technically not, and yet this was a respectful way of addressing a man at this time, and so she uses it. Then she asks for him to take her under his wing. This is a similar figure to being taken under his feet, yet it is using the picture of a mother bird hiding her babies under her wing. It is a picture of tender affection, and this is what Ruth desires from Boaz, the man who has already shown so much tender affection towards her.

Then, she points out that he is a close relative. This is the Hebrew word *ga'al*. Ruth has probably learned all about this Divine custom from Naomi, and she now knows that Boaz is this, and what that means. By pointing this out, she is making a request for him to be her kinsman-redeemer.

Notice from this that Ruth was the one who proposed to Boaz! I know in our society the norm always used to be that the man proposes to the woman, and that still is the common way it is done. In the conservative Baptist school where I went to high school, we were taught that the man must propose to the woman, and that women proposing to men is wrong and should not be done. Well, there is something to be said for the man as the aggressor in the relationship being the proper one to propose, and yet here it is in the Word of God, a woman proposing to a man. What can we say about this?

For one thing, we can notice that Boaz takes the initiative from here on out. Ruth may make the proposal, but it is Boaz that takes care of business from that point. She may have proposed, but it is Boaz who went out to win her. There is not a total departure from what we think of as the traditional male and female roles here.

Yet also understand that this is this way because this relationship between Ruth and Boaz is really a picture for us of the relationship we as sinners must have with our Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Ruth might never have thought twice about Boaz more than as a rich landowner who might let her glean some little grain from the fields if Boaz had not first shown care and affection towards her. In the same way, the Bible tells us, "**We love Him because He first loved us.**" I John 4:19. Yet it was Ruth who responded to that love and care and proposed to Boaz. Similarly, what God looks for from us once we have seen His love for us is that we will respond in faith and ask Him to be our Savior and Redeemer. The story of Boaz and Ruth mirrors the story of us and our Redeemer. We can see ourselves and our Savior in this beautiful tale.

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.

Boaz blesses her in the LORD’s name. He feels that this is another kindness that she has shown in choosing to go after him rather than a younger man. This shows us once again that he was an older man than her. Though we do not know what their age difference actually was, the fact that he mentions it probably means that he was enough older than her that he believed it was a bigger age difference than a young woman like Ruth would normally be expected to easily overlook.

This age difference could well explain why Boaz had not acted to try to win Ruth himself. He believed that she would probably want to find someone more her own age, and though he was the kinsman-redeemer and would have been glad to help her, he did not want to force her to marry an “old man” or in any way make her feel obligated to do so if she did not wish to. This was a good and gracious attitude for him to have. Certainly as a believer an older man should be very careful when it comes to marrying a younger woman, and should be sure that this is both a good thing for her and something that she desires, and should avoid manipulation of any kind.

The issue of age difference is a sensitive one. There are plenty of bad reasons for marrying far out of your age group that a wise believer should seek to avoid. Men always want to feel like a “hero” to the women they love, and a man who feels somewhat inadequate in this regard can think marrying a much younger woman is a shortcut to being a hero, since his older age will automatically make him seem much wiser and more capable to her. A young woman can be rather timid about growing up and running her own life, and a much older man can both make her feel grown up without actually having to go through the growing process, and can make her feel secure that he is going to run her life for her. The problem with both these things is that a few years down the line she is going to grow up more herself, and then there will need to be more of a basis for the relationship for it to last.

Of course, there are societies where women have their marriages arranged for them, and a father might sell his daughter to a much older man because of the greater bridal price an older man can pay for a young wife. A believing father should never do such a thing to his daughter unless she is genuinely happy with it (not just to please him!)

This is not to say that marriages where the age difference is quite significant are always wrong. The Bible actually gives no rules whatsoever about the relative ages of a couple, and has examples where a couple were two, three, or even more generations apart! Of course, such things are simply recorded, not actually approved of. As in all other things, the first and most important question in choosing whom to marry is if it will please God. After that, it is important that it pleases both people involved, and that it will be a good thing for the life of both of them. Charles Dickens wrote an excellent book about this issue called *The Cricket on the Hearth*. It is a good novel for making you think, as many of Mr. Dicken’s books are.

Other than the obvious reason that he was quite attracted to Ruth and was very happy to marry her, why does Boaz indicate that it reflects so well on Ruth’s character that she chose an older man? Is it because it is a wonderful thing for a young woman to marry an older man? I do not believe that is the reason he was thinking of. The fact was that Ruth could have set herself up with a man that would have been good for her, but would have done nothing for Elimelech and Naomi’s family. A wealthy, handsome younger man would have made Ruth comfortable for the rest of her life, and would have had the added benefit of being much better to look at. Boaz realizes that as we get older, we do not get more attractive. Adding years means adding wrinkles, gray hairs or less hair, age spots, and other things that young men just don’t have. Ruth being a young and attractive woman, Boaz feels that she could have gotten a younger and more attractive man if she wished, maybe even a man with wealth, or set to inherit wealth later in life. Not to mention that an older man is much more likely to die and leave you a widow than a younger one, so there is that added security.

Yet instead, Ruth chose to marry Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer for Naomi’s family. While such a match might not have seemed quite as good for her personally as another might have been, marrying Boaz would do the most for the family of Elimelech and her dear mother-in-law Naomi. Because Boaz was

the kinsman-redeemer, he was able both to restore the fortunes of Naomi, and to carry on Elimelech's family line. Therefore, her accepting this match was the most caring thing she could do for her mother-in-law and her deceased husband Mahlon. Moreover, it was the match the law would have suggested for her, and so Boaz was the man God would have wanted her to marry. So all this certainly contributed to Boaz's praise of her choice.

That said, I do not believe for a moment that this match was not a desirable one for Ruth. From reading the story, it would appear that the prospect of marrying Boaz was a very acceptable thing to Ruth. She seems to be quite excited at the prospect, in fact.

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.

Again Boaz calls her daughter, and calls upon her not to fear. He promises to do for her all that she has requested. The reason he gives her is that all the people of his town know that she is a virtuous woman. It is interesting that the only other place that a woman is called "virtuous" in the Bible is in Proverbs, where the virtuous woman is mentioned in chapter 12, and then described in chapter 31. Some have suggested that this chapter might have been written about her, either by Solomon or David, remembering their relative of several generations back.

Interestingly, the word translated "virtuous," *chayil*, is only translated "virtuous" when relating to women. When speaking of men, it is translated such things as "strong," "valiant," or "able." Certainly, Ruth was all of these things, and virtuous as well.

It is interesting to note that Ruth's reputation so impressed Boaz. It is still true, I believe, that a woman who wants to find a good man would help herself immensely in doing so by being a woman with a good reputation herself. Good men are often looking for such a woman, and so being this kind of woman is a good way to catch their notice. Certainly this worked that way in the case of Ruth and Boaz!

12. Now it is true that I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I.

Now Boaz must bring up an unpleasant fact. While he is very willing to marry Ruth and fulfill the part of a kinsman-redeemer to her, there is one major obstacle in their path. Though he is a kinsman-redeemer, there is a kinsman-redeemer closer than he, and the claim of this relative must be dealt with first. If he wishes to, this kinsman has the first right to redeem the property.

I imagine that Ruth's heart must have sunk at these words. The thought that some other, unknown kinsman might redeem her rather than Boaz was not a pleasant one for her.

Notice that Naomi apparently did not know this, but Boaz did. Could it be that he had already been checking into this, for some reason? What might that reason have been, I wonder? Could it be that when Ruth proposed to him was not the first time that he had thought of the possibility of marrying her? I would tend to think so.

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."

As I said, this must have been distressing news to Ruth, who knew nothing of this closer kinsman. However, Boaz reassures her. She must wait for this night, but in the morning Boaz will waste no time in finding this kinsman and seeing if he will perform the part of the kinsman redeemer. If he will, then that will be good, and he must be allowed to do it. I doubt that Boaz or Ruth would have found it so good, but in that case, there would be little they could do about it. But if the closer kinsman will not become the redeemer, then Boaz pledges once again to grant her request, and perform the duty of the

kinsman-redeemer. He swears this in the name of the LORD. Again we see that the LORD was Boaz's God, and he was not afraid to declare it.

Now, Boaz bids her to lie at his feet until morning. Again this seems strange to us, but it was all according to the customs they had at the time.

14. So she lay at his feet until morning, and she arose before one could recognize another. Then he said, "Do not let it be known that the woman came to the threshing floor."

So she does as Boaz told her, and lies at his feet until morning. She gets up before it is light enough to recognize anyone. Boaz then commands her to not let it be known that she had come there. He is concerned that no one learns what has taken place there that night. Though nothing wrong had taken place, it would not do to start rumors or give people reason to talk. Therefore it is best if no one knows about it.

As believers, it is good for us too not to give others a reason to talk. A good reputation is a valuable thing, and it is good for a believer to take thought for it. Of course, we do not serve our reputation at the expense of serving God. Yet by our reputations we can adorn the teaching about Christ, whereas if we neglect them, we can damage the truth about Him. Therefore, it is good if we avoid causing unnecessary talk.

15. Also he said, "Bring the shawl that is on you and hold it." And when she held it, he measured six ephahs of barley, and laid it on her. Then she went into the city.

Boaz now decides that he does not want to let Ruth go home empty-handed, so he commands her to bring her shawl and hold it out. *The King James Version* translated this as "veil," but *The Companion Bible* notes that peasant women wore a shawl at this time, and only the town women wore veils. So what she held out was a shawl. Then, he loads her down with barley, six ephahs worth. Then she goes home carrying a great weight of barley in her shawl. Boaz does not know what else he will be able to do for her, for it all now depends on the other kinsman. Yet he has done what he could, and this gift at least he has given her.

When we come to the LORD, though there is nothing we can offer Him but ourselves, yet He too does not allow us to return from coming to Him empty-handed. He loads us down with His blessings, or as Ephesians 3 calls them, the unsearchable riches of His grace.

16. When she came to her mother-in-law, she said, "Is that you, my daughter?" Then she told her all that the man had done for her.

Naomi questions Ruth when she returns. Her words seem to be something of an idiom, for of course Naomi knew it was Ruth. It seems that she means she wants to know who Ruth is now. Has everything changed for Ruth? Will she be the wife of Boaz?

Ruth tells Naomi all that has happened, and all that Boaz did for her. She was certainly reliving the events of the night in her mind, and of course was very anxious for what would come of Boaz's mission that morning. Yet notice that what she particularly repeats is what Boaz did for her. Certainly Ruth has been completely won over by Boaz's loving care for her, in spite of the fact that she is a foreigner, and in poverty. When she repeats the story, then, this is the part that she emphasizes the most.

17. And she said, "These six ephahs of barley he gave me; for he said to me, 'Do not go empty-handed to your mother-in-law.'"

Ruth also shows Naomi the six ephahs of barley that Boaz had given her as a gift. She also repeats his statement, that he did not want her to go empty-handed back to her mother-in-law.

18. Then she said, "Sit still, my daughter, until you know how the matter will turn out; for the man will not rest until he has concluded the matter this day."

Naomi advises Ruth to sit still and wait until she hears how the matter turns out. Probably, Ruth was quite nervous and excited, and was moving around quite a bit. She was young and in love, and very concerned with how the mission Boaz is on will turn out. All this resulted in her not being able to sit still, as we put it. Naomi assures her. We have had every indication that Boaz was a man in love. So Naomi is certain he will not rest until he procures Ruth's redemption that very day.

In the same way as this, our Kinsman-Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, because of His great love for us, will not rest until we are redeemed. As He said, "**My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.**" John 5:17. So will He continue to work, and will not rest until this world is redeemed and all His Own once again at last.

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