



## **“Who are You, My Daughter?”**

**Ruth 3:1-18**

“Seeking Security” is theme of our text this morning. How do we live in such a way that will provide us a secure future? The answer my sisters and I grew up with was “work hard and get a good education.” There is great wisdom in that statement and one appreciates it all the more when we hear examples of parents who grew up in poverty and sacrificed everything so that their children could get an education. Many of you came to America for just that purpose and it has opened the door to opportunities your parents never had whether you were a man or a woman.

In the ancient patriarchal culture, however, that was not the case. In that world a woman’s only viable option for security was what Naomi prayed for Orpah and Ruth while they were *en route* to Bethlehem, that they would “find **rest** in the home of another husband” (Ruth 1:9 NIV). But how can that come about for a barren widow in a foreign land? With no man to speak for her, no dowry, no social connections, she brings nothing to the table. The answer is found in the “the determination of Naomi, the daring of Ruth, and the uprightness of Boaz” who risk themselves to serve the interests of others, which in turn opens the door to a “secure” future that outlasts time. The Hebrew word for it is *hesed*—unfailing love for the helpless.

Tod Linafelt notes that, with regard to form and structure, Chapters 2 and 3 are nearly identical.

## Chapter 2

- a. Exchange between Ruth and Naomi (vv. 1-2)
- b. Ruth goes to the field and meets Boaz (v. 3)
- c. Boaz inquires as to Ruth's identity (vv. 4-7)
- d. Boaz asks Ruth to stay, deems her worthy, gives her food and protection (vv. 8-17)
- e. Ruth reports back to Naomi and receives counsel (vv. 18-23)

## Chapter 3

- a. Exchange between **Naomi** and Ruth (vv. 1-5)
- b. Ruth goes to the **threshing floor** and meets Boaz (vv. 6-7)
- c. Boaz inquires as to Ruth's identity (vv. 8-9)
- d. Boaz asks Ruth to stay, deems her worthy, gives her food and protection (vv. 10-15)
- e. Ruth reports back to Naomi and receives counsel (vv. 16-18)"<sup>1</sup>

While the structure is similar, the setting and the context in which the encounter takes place between Ruth and Boaz are quite different. In Chapter 2 they meet in the barley field in full view of the public with Boaz playing the role of the magnanimous *maître d'* and Ruth the humble and appreciative guest. In Chapter 3, by contrast, they meet in a private place under the cover of night. The setting is significant, for how one acts in private when no one is watching is a litmus test of one's true character. The second difference is that Chapter 3 opens with Naomi taking initiative that she lacked in Chapter 2.

### I. Naomi's Daring Initiative (3:1-5)

**1 Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not seek **rest** for you, that it may **be well with you**? 2 Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.**

Being reassured that God has not forgotten her, Naomi is re-emerging out of her paralysis and despondency and back to her former self as a pro-active and affectionate mother, who places the needs of her daughter-in-law above her own. Though Ruth's diligent work and Boaz's uncommon generosity during the three months of the barley harvests kept them afloat, Ruth's ultimate future is still insecure. With no man to speak for Ruth, Naomi takes on the responsibility to be Ruth's matchmaker and sees Boaz as the perfect choice; and tonight at the threshing floor, the perfect time and place to execute her plan.

**3 Wash therefore and anoint yourself and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” 5 And she replied, “All that you say I will do.”**

Linafelt: The rhetorical structure of her speech can be seen below:

A “Behold, **he** is winnowing barley tonight...” (2b)

B four imperatives (3a)

wash

anoint

put on cloak

go down

C “Do **not** make yourself **known**...until...” (3b)

C’ “But when he lies down...” (4a)

B’ four imperatives (4b)

observe (“**know**”)

go

uncover

lie down

A’ “**He** will tell you what to do.” (5)

Naomi instructs Ruth to prepare herself by bathing, anointing herself with perfumed oil, and putting on her best garments. Her appearance will signal to Boaz that she is breaking out of her identity as a widow and ending her time of mourning, making herself eligible for marriage. The plan depends on Ruth having more knowledge than Boaz, who is to be literally and figuratively in the dark. But once the scenario turns to its second phase, Naomi assumes that Boaz will be the one with the knowledge and will tell Ruth what to do next.

Naomi’s plan may be clever, but it is risky. Naomi is sending an unmarried Moabite woman out in the dead of night to go down secretly to the threshing floor—a place where men harvesters had been celebrating with plenty of alcohol and perhaps prostitutes. Ruth is then to lie down next to a (perhaps drunken) man, to uncover him in some way, and then to wait and see what he tells her to do. The scene is laced with

sexually loaded terms, which I won't go into. However, it is important for us to be aware how sexually charged and dangerous this situation is in order to grasp the courageous beauty and purity of their responses. Carolyn Custis James suggests that the contrast makes this "one of the most powerful gospel encounters between two people in all of Scripture."<sup>2</sup>

In her defense, Naomi is aware of the risks but, in her mind, they are worth taking if they give her daughter a secure future. The problem at hand is that there is no male to negotiate a match, nor is there any way for Ruth to carry on such a conversation in public (no cell phones or email). But Naomi has figured out the perfect time and place for a private conversation that will not tarnish their reputation if the scheme fails. She knows where Boaz will be that evening, what he will be doing, when his mood will be most favorable, and what will be the best manner and most propitious moment to approach him."<sup>3</sup> This is a once in a lifetime opportunity and **Naomi seizes it.**

In any case, she depends on the noble character of both Ruth and Boaz to do the right thing. Ruth's response, "All that you say I will do," Her response is similar to Mary's to the angel of the Lord: "*I am the Lord's servant. . . . May it be to me as you have said*" (Luke 1:38).

## **II. Ruth Encounters Boaz at the Threshing floor (3:6-15)**

### **A. Room for two? (vv. 6-7)**

**6 So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. 7 And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down.**

The suspense in this scene would make your hair stand up if you saw it on screen. Ruth, perfumed and dressed to the nines, cautiously makes her way to the threshing floor under the cover of night. She finds a spot a short distance away where she can view Boaz as he finishes his eating and drinking and lies down to sleep. Then she must wait. Minutes seem like hours in the stillness of the night. Finally she gathers her courage and tiptoes over the fallen husks of grain toward the spot where Boaz is sleeping. She bends down and uncovers his feet hoping not to wake him. Then she lies down and must wait to see what will happen next. How much did she uncover and what will Boaz do with this unsuspected opportunity?

## B. Terrified by a nightmare, waking up to a dream (vv. 8-9)

8 At midnight the man trembled and twisted round, and behold, a woman is lying at his feet! 9 He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."

The turning point of this crucial scene at the threshing floor comes in 'the middle of night.' I would title it, "**terrified by a nightmare, waking up to a dream.**" The ESV's translation Boaz "*startled and turned over*" doesn't capture the intensity of Boaz's fright. Linafelt comments, "Much is unclear, but what we can say is that Boaz, during the day a wealthy landowner in control of his immediate world, is at night transformed into a man who shudders and is seized by forces beyond his control."<sup>4</sup>

**What will Boaz do?** Anyone familiar with the backdrop of Israel's story would know exactly how the man will react when he wakes in the middle of the night and discovers a young woman lying at his feet. .

This is the second of three times that the question of **Ruth's identity** is posed in the course of the story. The first time Boaz saw the young foreigner in the field, he asked, "To whom *does this worker girl belong?*" (2:5). At that time he viewed her as someone else's property with no identity of her own. But now on the threshing floor, he asks Ruth to name her own identity. Ruth makes a subtle but important change in the way she characterizes **her relationship to Boaz**. Earlier she called herself a *shipha* ("a female slave without the prospect of marriage"); now she uses a term *'ama* ("a household servant of elevated standing with the prospect of marriage").

Regardless of their difference in social status, Ruth does not hesitate to give Boaz instruction. Elsewhere in the Bible, the image of a man "spreading his wing" over a woman connotes the social and economic protection of marriage (Ezek 16:8), and that is clearly what Ruth is asking for. Boaz earlier used the metaphor of wings when he commended Ruth to God's protection (2:12). Now, in asking that he spread his own wing over her, she says, in effect, "You act on God's behalf to make your prayer a reality!"<sup>5</sup>

She explains her bold request: "since you are a **redeemer** (*gō'ēl*)." The word is a participle form of the verb meaning "**to act as next of kin**" in the sense of "redeem."

The term is a legal one, but it is highly charged socially because it is the way God is named in Israel by those who are in dire straits and for whom there is no human help.

But now, this is what the LORD says—

he who created you, Jacob,

he who formed you, Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” (Isa 43:1)

### C. Boaz’s Blessing and Pledge (vv. 10-11)

**10 And he said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.**

Boaz is immediately appreciative of what Ruth has done. Addressing her affectionately as “my daughter” he invokes the Lord’s blessing on her because “this last instance of loyalty is greater than the first.” So we must ask, “In what sense is looking to Boaz for marriage rather than some young man better?” Katherine Sankenfeld astutely observes,

To be loyal to her family, Ruth not only journeys to a foreign land, but once there she seeks marriage not for love or money, “but in a way to ensure Naomi’s security, not just her own. Thus it is an act of loyalty, greater because it provides for long-range security beyond the short-term solution of gleaning and greater because it clarifies the depth of Ruth’s commitment to the promises she made to Naomi, since the marriage will make permanent Ruth’s bond to Naomi’s place and people.”<sup>6</sup>

Boaz sensitively calms her fears, recognizing how great a risk Ruth took in approaching him in the night and making her proposal. She could easily have been taken advantage of and compromised her integrity and letting the village know his version of the story, as many men with power do.

**11 And now, my daughter, do not fear. All that you say I will do, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.**

Instead Boaz gives his full consent to her request: “All that you say I will do.”

As Ellen Davis affirms, “That echo aptly sums up the relational dynamics of this book. It is a statement of complete trust and deference—each tough, experienced individual entrusting the uncertain future into the hands of a now-beloved other, each

forfeiting the impoverished security of going it alone, each yielding to the other's wisdom and genuine need."<sup>7</sup> This is a wonderful example of "mutual submission," and should be an encouragement that women do not need permission to take the initiative in matters of the kingdom.

If that were not enough to prove his respect, Boaz further elevates Ruth by unveiling her approval ratings among "my fellow townsman" (lit. "gate of my people"). Waltke translates it as the "esteemed citizens of Bethlehem." It would be as if Boaz said, "I was in the mayor's office last week and saw a bronze plaque on his wall with this inscription: **"RUTH, A DAUGHTER OF YAHWEH AND VALOROUS WOMAN** (*ʿēšet ḥayil*)."

In the Hebrew bible the book of Ruth follows immediately after Proverbs, which concludes with valorous Israelite woman (*ʿēšet ḥayil*), whose wise work and teaching secure the well-being of the family. The first individual to receive this ACADEMY AWARD is Ruth. Though she is not yet wealthy or married with children, she is a prime example of the woman who takes initiative inside and outside the household arena to provide for her family. She is a noble and competent woman, a woman far more precious than rubies (Prov 31:10). Just look at the list!

"She does good, not harm" (31:12)

"She works with willing hands" (31:13)

"She rises while it is night

and provides food her household" (31:15);

"She dresses herself with strength

and makes her arms strong. (31:17)

"She reaches out her hands to the needy." (31:20)

"Strength and dignity are her clothing" (31:25);

"The teaching of *hesed* is on her tongue" (31:26)

"She does not eat the bread of idleness" (31:27)

She is a "woman who fears the LORD" (31:30)

The capstone comes *"let her works praise her in the city gates!"*

Boaz's elevation of Ruth serves as a needed corrective to any cultural assumption that only married women are truly "worthy." Single daughters rejoice!

#### D. Legal Issue (vv. 12-13)

**12 And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. 13 Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning."**

As much as Boaz respects Ruth and as much as he would like to marry her, there is a problem. There is a nearer "kinsman-redeemer" than Boaz, and it is his responsibility under God to redeem the family property. Boaz's will not "usurp another's man's right to act responsibility."<sup>8</sup> (Campbell, Ruth, 137) Having said that, he is not oblivious to the implications of his decision upon her. He assures Ruth that he will settle the matter first thing in the morning and if the nearer kinsman refuses to take his responsibility, he vows that he will—"as the LORD lives!

When Boaz instructs Ruth to "remain" for the night and "lie down until morning" he guards against any sexual misinterpretation. he avoids the word *shakab*, preferring to speak of lodging or spending the night (*lîn*)—the same word that Ruth used in 1:16 when she committed herself to lodging wherever Naomi would lodge. But why remain at all, it's risky. But it might be that Boaz just wants her near at hand, for what may be his last opportunity to have the intimate pleasure of her company.

#### E. Sleepless in Bethlehem (vv. 14-15)

**14 So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." 15 And he said, "Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out." So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city.**

The narrator amplifies Ruth's obedience to Boaz's instruction "to lie down until morning" with the additional specification of "at his feet." Thus the mystery of the balance between sexual attraction and upright behavior is brought full circle.

Davis suggests, "In what follows, Boaz speaks of Ruth rather than directly to her. Yet Ruth seems to have arisen in response to Boaz's unspoken thought. Perhaps the narrator is suggesting that the pair is already learning to communicate and to give heed to each other with the subtlety and mutual respect that can make a home truly a 'resting-place' (3:1)."<sup>9</sup>

As a token that there will be a redeemer, Boaz provides Ruth with a substantial



gift of barley from the just-winnowed pile of grain. Boaz himself loads the grain-filled garment onto Ruth's back, perhaps because of its weight, or perhaps as a gesture of tenderness, since it is the closest to physical contact between the two that the narrator makes explicit. In the predawn hours, Ruth walks home with a backpack of barley slung over her from the low-lying fields up a steep hill toward Bethlehem.

#### V. Hesed for Naomi (3:15-18)

**16 And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, “Who are you, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her, 17 saying, “These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, ‘You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’”**

When Ruth arrived home, Naomi can't wait to find out, “who are you?” What is your identity... a scorned woman, a slave girl, or a wife? Instead of answering her question directly, Ruth “tells Naomi all that the man had done for her.” What is central to her report is not that Boaz agreed to the plan for marriage, but his *hesed* love for Naomi. Behind his caring words—“you must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law”—Naomi heard God's voice answering her bitter complaint (Ruth 1:20-21) and here emptiness evaporated like dew on hot pavement. Naomi will have a son-in-law who cares as much for her as he does Ruth. No wonder Naomi closing words are filled with confidence.

**18 She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.”**

The matchmaker knows her man: Boaz will not rest. No obstacle will keep him from keeping his word (see Ruth 3:11). There is joy in Bethlehem tonight, recognizing God's *hesed* love is at work in all the characters of the story.

I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love,  
because you have seen my affliction;  
you have known the distress of my soul.

Psalm 31:5<sup>10</sup>

The choices made by Naomi, Ruth and Boaz are exemplary and compel us to constantly re-negotiate the complexities of moral decision making in a world where everyone is in some way threatened or compromised. Karen Sakenfeld sums up the appropriate hermeneutic that should govern our understanding of their choices.

Where options are limited, people take advantage of whatever possibilities are available and pray that God will see them through. Theirs is of necessity a “theology of survival.” The story of Ruth need not, indeed should not, be read as an endorsement of every aspect of its ending as the desire of God for all times and place. It is rather a story of women making a way out of no way, enabled by God behind the scenes and by other faithful people, epitomized by Boaz.<sup>11</sup>

### **Postscript: *Hesed* love the Ukraine**

Violeta Altmann writes about life among our friends, who are serving the refugees who have fled to Romania to escape the terror in Ukraine.

After dropping the kids to school, we went shopping and served breakfast. Conrad made a large frying pan of scrambled eggs that was quickly eaten. It was strangely quiet for a full house of people. Those first weeks there were hundreds of deaf-mute families passing through our city. Another time I cooked goulash soup and a band of mothers enjoyed it. And last time, we served lunch to a busload of people, who were getting ready to travel outside the country right after lunch. Elbow to elbow with another young mom, we served the soup, the rice and schnitzel, all while making 50 sandwiches for the road.

It was an exhilarating rush, working joyously, preparing packages of snacks, water, fruit and sending people on their way with a blessing and a hug. We couldn’t communicate through words. They would come to us with Google translate and tearful eyes to express their gratitude. We may never see them again. But for this brief moment, we shared grace and we blessed each other in unexpected ways. We happened to look them in the eyes, be silent and yet be changed forever.

Conrad was holding this adorable baby while his mom ate, the baby’s eyes would well up with tears. He didn’t seem distressed anymore. He was a little restless at first, especially while his mom was trying to eat, holding his wiggly body, but as Conrad picked the baby up, he turned to see where his mom was and then relaxed feeling safe in Conrad’s arms. You could tell he felt (if not heard) the vibration of Conrad’s voice (we’re not sure if he was also deaf – the

entire group was though). The baby would look into Conrad's eyes, or lock eyes with me, and just stay like that for a long time. I'd smile at him and tears would well up in his eyes. This interaction made us tearful too.

In 10 years, this baby and his siblings may have a story to tell. And I pray it will be a story of healing that started early. Too easily we discount the experience of children in the war.



We don't understand their behavior well enough. And these kids also learn to fly under the radar. Not make trouble. Not add to the burden of their parents. But it's not ok long term. It's not Sustainable. May we have the wisdom to listen to them as well and may we be brave to do the ground work necessary so that an entire generation would not grow up broken by resentment and hurt.

As we pull our sleeves up we see clearer what we can do and how we can help. The needs are sorted naturally, and people jump in to help as the requests are shared in various groups we are part of. Join a community, donate, pray, show up. A willing heart, a flexible mind, a humble attitude and a brave spirit can move mountains in faith.

May we show love, and may we lead the way with awareness and skill.  
May we be salt and light in the world. Amen.



Violeta, Camilla, Liviu and Conrad

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<sup>1</sup> Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *Ruth and Esther, Berit Olam, Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Custis James, *The Gospel of Ruth, Loving God Enough to Break the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 145.

<sup>3</sup> James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 145.

<sup>4</sup> Linafelt, *Ruth*, 54.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Who are You My Daughter? Reading Ruth Through Text and Image* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003), 79.

<sup>6</sup> Katharine Sakenfeld, *Ruth (Int)* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 61-62.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 170.

<sup>8</sup> Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth*, AB Vol. 7 (New York: Anchor Bible, 1975), 187.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, *Who are You My Daughter?*, 87.

<sup>10</sup> The presence of *hesed* is prolific in the book of Psalms; it is found in 127 verses of 46 psalms.

<sup>11</sup> Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 87.