

ARE YOU WILLING TO WAIT ON GOD?

Ruth 3

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To better understand what takes place in Ruth 3 and 4, we must have some understanding of Jewish custom during the time of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Mosaic law had specific duties or obligations attached to the concept of a redeemer. These roles are spelled out in the covenant concepts of the *goel* and the *levir*. Sinclair Ferguson offers the following, which specifically addresses the role of the kinsmen as the *goel* and the *levir*.

When God called his people Israel into existence, he established them as his own family. The ordinances of his law made provision for their blessing even when they encountered distress and failure, difficulty and tragedy. Thus, among the institutions of the law was that of the family obligation to safeguard its members—particularly with respect to two central elements of the Abrahamic covenant: the continuation of the family and the enjoyment of the Promised Land.

If someone fell into need, a close family member was expected to volunteer to help—to become that person’s redeemer, or *goel*, which means to ‘redeem’ or ‘deliver.’ God describes himself as the Redeemer of his people (Exodus 6:6-8). But God creates his people to be his image (Genesis 1:26-27). His covenant with them as their Redeemer when they were in bondage and need placed an obligation on them to redeem the needy... Underlying this was the fact that family members were God’s servants, not any man’s (Leviticus 25:55); and family land was God’s land, given in trust (Leviticus 25:23). The blessing of God under the old covenant was integrally related to the land that God had parceled out for his people. It was written into the law that the family land should remain within the family in perpetuity as a symbol of God’s covenant blessing.

A similar principle of family unity and covenant continuity is found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, in what is usually referred to as the *levirate law*. The word ‘levirate’ comes from the Latin word *levir*, which means a brother-in-law, although it is possible that the principle of levirate law extended beyond that relationship.

The principle underlying levirate law was the importance of the continuity of the family line. Not only was life sacred, and the land sacred, but the continuity of God’s covenant promises and their fulfilment from generation to generation was important. The levirate law stated that if a husband died childless, his brother would then father a son for the dead man. By this means, the deceased man’s name would not be forgotten and lost in Israel, and the promise of God—that he would bless a faithful man to generations yet unborn—would have visible, physical testimony among his people. [Sinclair Ferguson, *Faithful God*, 91-93]

With this understanding of God’s provision of deliverance for His people and protection of the land inherited through the covenant through the *goel* and the *levir*, we now turn to Ruth 3.

I. Naomi’s Instructions (3:1-5)

Naomi’s instructions to Ruth are not without some suspicion. For us to unravel this narrative a bit we must put ourselves into the context. You remember at the end of chapter 2 Naomi learns that Ruth has gleaned in the fields of Boaz. Naomi is overwhelmed with joy because she sees the workings of God’s providence in all of this in leading Ruth to the field of one of their closest

relatives (2:20). However, we must ask the question, “How well did Naomi really know Boaz?” Much of the narrative in the book of Ruth is conversations, conversations between Naomi and Ruth and between Ruth and Boaz. But nowhere in the book do we see Naomi in conversation with Boaz. We might speculate that Boaz was an acquaintance of Naomi’s prior to their departure for Moab, but it would be just that, speculation.

But how well Naomi knew Boaz is somewhat immaterial when we look at the instruction she gives to Ruth. She seeks security for Ruth. This is evidenced by her final instruction to her in chapter 2, “It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his maids, so that others do not fall upon you in another field” (2:22). However, while Naomi reiterates her concern for Ruth’s safety in v. 1, her instructions here seem a bit out of place. She tells Ruth to go to Boaz in the middle of the night, at the end of a long day of threshing. Is this godly counsel from an older woman, sending a young woman to a single man in the middle of the night?

But suspicion lies not only in *when* she is to go to Boaz, but in *how*. Notice v. 3, “Wash yourself, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes.” Let me ask you young ladies a question. Would you consider it good advice from your parents if they told you to make yourself up all nice and pretty and go to a man in the middle of the night? Naomi tells Ruth to primp to the highest degree. “Anoint yourself” means to put on perfume. Ruth was to do much more than powder her nose – she was to make herself as appealing as possible to Boaz.

But the drama thickens in v. 4, “It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down.” Not only is Ruth to prepare herself and go to Boaz in the middle of the night but she is to literally throw herself at him. We certainly would not describe this as playing hard-to-get! The word translated “**feet**” might even be translated “legs” as it is in Daniel 10:6. I think you get the picture. Is this really sound instruction from one who is concerned about Ruth’s safety? No matter how much confidence and trust Naomi might have had in Boaz, her instruction seems a bit risky for someone who had just met this man the day before.

Therefore, we, the reader, have every right to be suspicious of Naomi’s instruction. However, we would be unwise to think that Naomi for one minute thought that she was in any way jeopardizing Ruth’s safety. Her intent was right. She was concerned for the safety of Ruth and she knew the laws of the *goel* and the *levir*. So what is really going on here? I think Sinclair Ferguson is wise in his assessment of the situation (*Faithful God*, chapter 4). He agrees that Naomi, though unwittingly, is exposing both Ruth and Boaz to great risk. But Ferguson hits upon a tremendous truth about our sinful natures that we need to hear. He asserts the following:

Behind her risky strategy lies Naomi’s old spiritual rashness. It is the residue of the spirit that earlier led to emigration from the Promised Land. *If God does not do things speedily enough for us in our way, then we will take matters into our own hands.* We devise our own ways of bringing to pass what God has promised to give us. We refuse to wait for him to bring his own purposes to fruition. [98]

According to Ferguson, what we have here is Naomi’s attempt to help God out. She knew how He had providentially intervened along the way, and she figured He would do so again. And He did, as we will see. However, Naomi’s actions are the exception, not the rule, in doing God’s will. We see in Scripture those who try to outrun God and their actions had disastrous consequences. I think of Moses striking the rock in anger to provide water for those that griped and grumbled because they were thirsty. The first time this happened, Moses sought the counsel of the Lord in this matter, and the Lord told Him to strike the rock. However, the second time, in his haste, Moses *assumed* that he knew God’s will in the matter. The consequence of his action was that he was unable to see the Promised Land that God had set aside for His people and that Moses had been chosen to lead them to.

We also see times when God intervenes to protect those that *assume* that they know God's will from some disastrous action. In 2 Samuel 7 we see David's desire to build a temple for the Lord. He even has the backing of the prophet Nathan. His intentions were right, but God intervenes and stops David's plans.

The lesson for us is that we must take great care in discerning God's will. We must not outrun God and try to accomplish His purposes apart from His timing. God will faithfully provide for us in His time and in His way. Then, and only then, should we move forward in accomplishing His purposes. Again, Naomi's action here, though everything turned out for the good, is the exception, not the rule.

II. Ruth's Character (3:6-9)

“So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her” (v. 6). Ruth remains loyal to Naomi as she has from the beginning – to a point. Notice what happens.

At the end of a long day of threshing, there would have been a celebration. Times were good for Boaz. We see in v. 7 that when he had all of the merriment he could stand, he lays down to sleep. I am sure he was resting very comfortably when Ruth enters the picture. In v. 8 we are told that she enters secretly, uncovers his feet, or legs, and lies down at his feet. Sometime in the night, Boaz is startled. Perhaps he feels the chill of the cool night air on his legs. Imagine his astonishment when he awakens to find a woman lying at his feet. **“Who are you?”** is a natural response in this situation.

In her response to Boaz, Ruth departs from Naomi's instruction. She responds, **“I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative (or redeemer)” (v. 9).** Here we see Ruth's character on display. She makes her intentions clear from the outset. Her goal was a commitment to marriage because Boaz fulfilled the requirements as the kinsmen-redeemer. He was a next of kin that could legally take Ruth in marriage and carry on the family name. In ancient times, such a commitment was symbolized by covering someone with the corner of one's robe. This type of commitment is equivalent to the giving of an engagement ring in our day. In these actions, Ruth is pledging herself to Boaz. Ruth's intent was not a single night of passion. “Spread your covering over your maid” Ruth says, “for you are a redeemer.”

The commitment that lay behind this “spreading of the covering” is seen in Ezek. 16:8:

Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine," declares the Lord GOD.

But there is something more in Ruth's request for Boaz to spread his covering. The word for “covering” could be translated “wings.” She is identifying him as the man that God has chosen to be His source of refuge for Ruth and Naomi. This hearkens back to 2:12 where Boaz says, “May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, *under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.*” Notice the word “wing” there. Ruth has recognized that Boaz is the agent of God's providence. Boaz is God's wing of protection. As one writer put it, “God will use Boaz to answer his own prayer of reward in 2:12.”

In the midst of this, we must not lose sight of Boaz' status as the kinsmen-redeemer. Though he was a next of kin, and therefore legally *qualified* to fulfill this role, he was not legally *required* to do so. Otherwise, this elaborate scheme would have been unnecessary. Ruth could have simply walked up to Boaz and said, “You are my kinsman redeemer. Do what you are required to do.” So what we see in this scene is that Ruth was asking Boaz to act according to

the spirit of the law, even though he was not under obligation to do so. She appealed to him as a family member who, at his own cost, could act to rescue both her and Naomi, even though he didn't have to [Iain Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, 172]. Ruth asks Boaz as *goel* to act as her *levir*.

What Ruth does here was totally against what was right and proper. Not only was it considered taboo for a woman to propose marriage to a man. Ruth's situation is even more precarious. She was a younger person proposing to her elder. She was a field worker proposing to a field owner. And greater still, she was a Gentile proposing to a Jew. This is where Ruth departs from Naomi's instruction. Naomi told Ruth to uncover Boaz' feet and lie down; "then he will tell you what you shall do." But Ruth blurts out her intentions in answering Boaz' question of her identity.

III. Boaz' Generosity (3:10-18)

Everything hinges on what Boaz will do next. Imagine what must be going through his mind at this point. Here he is, awakened from a comfortable sleep and finds a woman lying at his feet. Not only that, but she announces her intentions of marriage because he was legally qualified to act as her *goel* and her *levir*. Talk about your rude awakening!

But Boaz does not send her away and tell her to come back later as if he needed more time to clear the cobwebs and sort through the situation. Nor does he rebuke her for her actions as if they were suggestive or immoral. He certainly might have done so. His response, "**May you be blessed of the LORD, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich**" (v. 10). His response shows how humbled he is that she would consider an older man like himself over against any number of the younger men of his field. Some suggest that Ruth is around 25 years old and Boaz somewhere between 45-50 years old.

Boaz then indicates that he accepts Ruth's proposal. "**Now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence.**" Not only does he accept her proposal, but he assures her that he could not have chosen anyone more noble and excellent than she to be his wife. And he assures her that he would in fact find it an honor to be chosen by God to be her kinsman redeemer, her *goel* and her *levir* (v. 12a).

However, there is a potential problem in this great love story. Notice v. 12b, "**There is a relative closer than I.**" Talk about letting the air out of the balloon! Imagine what must have gone through Ruth's mind. Here she was, having primped and prepared herself and gone to him in the middle of the night, thrown herself at his feet and requested that he fulfill the requirements of the redeemer, and she has the wrong man! I can think of no more discouraging words. There was another man who had first dibs. Therefore, Boaz was *not* legally qualified to be the kinsman redeemer. This is perhaps why Boaz had not initiated things on his own. According to Old Testament law, this other man had the right to act before Boaz.

However, this adds even more to the story of Ruth and Boaz. Boaz was under no obligation whatsoever to act as the *levirate* in marriage. But he still shows his love and concern for her even in revealing this other man. He demonstrates his generosity in a number of ways. First, he tells her to remain under his protection until morning (v. 13). We can certainly assume that it was dangerous for a woman to be out alone in the middle of the night, particularly a foreigner. Then, he promises to redeem her if the other man refuses to do so. I can only imagine the prayers of Ruth that night! And he seals his promise with, "**As the LORD lives.**" There was no stronger way to assure a promise. Boaz' pledge to Ruth was as sure as the existence of the God of the heavens. Then, in v. 14, we see Boaz' advice that she return as she came, in secret. Boaz is concerned that there be no misunderstandings by others as to this visit in the middle of the

night. Others would have every right to assume some impropriety in this visit and attach some immoral act to it. Boaz is concerned that both his and Ruth's reputation remain in tact. So he tells her to depart before others had arisen. But before he sends her off, he fills her cloak with barley (v. 15). Just as he did when she came on her initial visit to the fields, he sends her back with more than Ruth and Naomi could possibly need. As Leon Morris suggests, this is Boaz' message to Naomi that "her empty days are over."

So Ruth returns to the city and to Naomi and tells her all that transpired in her visit with Boaz. And Naomi responds, **"Wait, my daughter, until you know how the matter turns out; for the man will not rest until he has settled it today."** This is an interesting response from a woman who just the day prior had impatiently sent Ruth to Boaz in the middle of the night. Now she says, **"Wait."** And we will have to wait until next week to know the rest of the story.

Conclusion

We must remember never to run ahead of God. Naomi demonstrated a lack of patience, well meaning though she was. Boaz demonstrated his commitment to wait on God by introducing this man who was a closer kin. He could have *assumed* that it was God's will that he act as Ruth's *goel* and *levir*, but he waited on a clear direction from God.

We too must wait patiently on the Lord. It has been correctly stated that the two most important things in the Christian life are to know God's will and to do it – in this order. We must saturate ourselves in the Word of God and surround ourselves with the people of God before we assume to act according to the will of God. To act before knowing is to presume on God's goodness, which can have disastrous consequences.