

RUTH 3: HOPE IN ACTION

Grab your Bibles and open up to **Ruth 3**. We will be continuing this love story today, but before we do, let's look back at what has happened up to this point:

The whole story begins with a famine in the Promised Land, which leads an Israelite man named Elimelech to uproot his family and move them to the neighboring country of Moab where food is in abundance. So he, his wife Naomi, and boys Mahlon and Chilion relocate to the land that is an enemy of Israel. Things go well, for a bit. Then Elimelech dies and the boys marry Moabite women, and then the boys die, leaving these three widows desperate.

In this desperate moment the ladies all make decisions for the future: Naomi decides to go back to Israel, Orpah decides to return to her parents, and Ruth clings to Naomi, promising to be her companion no matter what. So these two widows, one older returning home, and one as a young foreigner, roll into Bethlehem at the barley harvest.

Ruth immediately sets out into the fields to take advantage of the Jewish practice of gleaning. She puts her head down and works hard until she is singled out by Boaz, the owner of the field. He shows her great kindness by offering her food and water, protection, and easier work in exchange for... her character. He sees himself as the agent for God to repay her for her faithfulness, saying:

The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!

Ruth takes this news back to her mother-in-law Naomi, who gets very excited, as she is reminded of the God of Israel and declares:

[His] kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!

Chapter 2 ends by simply telling us that Ruth continues to go back to the field of Boaz to work both the barley and wheat harvests. That's the narrative, but we have also been tracing a thematic strand through this story as we have been going:

The HOPE that accompanies the reality of who God is. In chapter 1 we saw how Ruth alone had hope in the midst of suffering, her trust in the God of Naomi giving her the power to suffer well. Last week we saw the hope of redemption come to Naomi, as she saw God's providence working things together. **In today's story we will see how the knowledge of God's divine hand, leads the characters here, as well as us, to action.** Not the type of action where we have all of our i's dotted and t's crossed and can be assured with how it is going to shake out. I am talking about action that is FAITHFULLY OPTIMISTIC. Where we embrace what God is calling us to in a given situation and we act, praying that He will use it for His glory. This is not an easy text, but let's get to it...**Ruth 3.1:**

THE PLAN: strategic faithfulness

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? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. 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. 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." And she replied, "All that you say I will do."

This is a different Naomi than we saw in the first two chapters; as she has seen God working in her life, it has awakened her hope. God's faithfulness revealed to her encouraged her next step. She is excited and she has a plan; but her plan for redemption here sounds a bit... racy. Here is what she tells Ruth to do:

1. Clean yourself up. Look your best. In her words: *Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak.*
2. Hide until he is finished eating and drinking and falls asleep, then uncover his feet and lay there.
3. Wait until he notices you and then do what he tells you to do.

If you get to the end of verse 5 and are not asking yourself: wait, WHAT? There might be something wrong with you. I am the father of two young girls and if I ever got home and my wife said, Eva has her eye on this boy in her class, so we dolled her up and sent her to lie at his feet, and she intends to do what he tells her. Let's just say, I'm not going to be waiting for her to come home. I don't think that the situation that we are reading in Ruth parallels with this modern example, though there are plenty of people who read this story portraying Ruth as a loose woman and Naomi as a mother-in-law/pimp. I believe the difficulty that we have with this text comes from two culture-shaping ideas that we bring TO the Bible:

1. HOLLYWOOD: Romance in movies follows a specific pattern. Boy meets girl, they either love each other immediately (Twilight style) or hate one another but come around (Jane Austen). They overcome some aspect of dramatic circumstances that keep them apart: one of them is already in a relationship with someone else, one of them is a jerk, they are from rival families, fill in the blank. They passionately consummate the relationship be it a kiss at the end that hints at things to come, or as in most films, the full monty. In this, the drama, and the picture of love that is presented to us, is always presented as passion. **This unbelievable emotion that causes people to do reckless things has become the default to how we think of love.** So when we come to the Bible, we read this romantic notion into the story. I am not saying that the Bible doesn't have passion, read the story of Jacob who worked for 14 years to marry Rachel. Read Song of Solomon. But relationships had A LOT of other factors working on them that far outweighed the importance of love as Hollywood portrays it (responsibilities of carrying on family name, necessity of women to be connected to men for social standing, ...) This is a love story, but is a love of fittingness or rightness, not necessarily passion. That is the first lens that we need to recognize we have, that we view love as an emotion rather than as a calculated decision.

2. FUNDAMENTALISM: When I use that term, I am talking about a direct literal reading of Scripture, that attempts to, first and foremost, make passages directly applicable to us. I want to know what this passage is saying to ME. It is the aspect in us that makes us want to modernize the characters in the OT so that we can look at them and say: be like Ruth or be like Boaz. Do what they did. When we come to a text like this, it makes us scratch our heads, because God can't surely be calling us to send our daughters out to, even faithful men, that they may do with them as they please. How should we then look at Naomi's plan? I believe that we can see it as a parable of how we should approach our redeemer.

1. Clean yourself up.

This is a picture of Ruth presenting herself new. She was not a virgin and she was a Moabite, a people descended from an incestuous relationship; all that to say, she would have been considered unclean. Ruth doesn't arrive on the scene without a past, she is a person who has blemishes to overcome. She can't do anything to change these things, but she presents herself to Boaz as she hopes to be. By marrying her, he is ultimately the one who can cleanse her past (make her the wife of Boaz, rather than unclean Moabite).

In the same way, when we come to Christ, we don't come pure. We never approach Him with anything more or less than sinful rags to present to Him. But that doesn't mean we throw our hands up and decide that it doesn't matter what we do. Holiness matters. We are to offer our lives as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God...I love that phrase living sacrifice. Still eating, sleeping, working, we're not dead, but even in the simplest things of life we have the opportunity to deny ourselves, give up the passions of the flesh, in order to present ourselves back to God as an act of worship.

2. Hide until he is finished eating and drinking and falls asleep, then uncover his feet and lay there. What we have seen is that Boaz has extended extraordinary kindness to Ruth, but we also see that it ended at generosity. This little conversation between Ruth and Naomi is not taking place the night of what we talked about last week. She has worked in his fields through the barley and wheat harvests. She has gone back day after day, hoping for more, hoping for him to offer to redeem her (we'll explain what that means in a minute). So what is the next step? Ruth cannot just approach him in the field and address the issue. That would be imprudent and inappropriate in this culture. If you remember the first time that they talked she was bowing at his feet with her face on the ground. So how could she go to him at a time when she could be sure that he would be alone so as not to bring disrespect to him? She could wait in the shadows until everyone left for the evening. But even then it would not be right for her to just come out and begin the conversation: Hey Boaz, are you prepared to marry me? So Naomi comes up with a plan to force him to initiate. She says lay at his feet. Placing yourself at the feet of someone else is a position of submission: bow at the feet, Jesus washing the feet of the disciples...this action is forceful and humble at the same time.

We also have the opportunity to approach God; God wants us to want Him. The Bible is full of verbs: Seek, draw near, come, knock, that lay on us the impulse to get more of God. Pursue Him in prayer, bring your desires to Him. Pursue Him in action, put yourself in positions where God has to show up for it to work out. Do it humbly, not as a means of power, but approach God, knowing that you deserve nothing, but that He is a God who is generous and pours out grace upon grace. A God who does not need you accomplish anything, but chooses to allow you to be part of His mission.

Ruth places herself in a position of humility, while still forcing the issue, because it would be impossible to wake up and find a woman at your feet, and not say SOMETHING.

3. Wait until he notices you and then he will tell you what to do.

This is the risky part of the plan. Boaz is a worthy man, the author has been clear to point that out more than once. So the greatest worry for Ruth was not that she would be physically assaulted (though the possibility was certainly there), but that she would be denied. Even with the humbled way that she presents herself, Boaz could still take offense to her forwardness. He could be offended that after everything that he has already done for her, she wants more. If he is mad, she could lose all of the privileges he had already afforded her in the fields. He could brand her a slut, and most of Israel would not have a hard time believing that a woman from Moab was capable of such things.

We do not have the same concerns when we approach God, but that does not mean it is not without risk. Our Holy God is an all-consuming fire, this isn't Morgan Freeman from Bruce Almighty. We are called to do what God has commanded. This includes both the things he commands in His Scripture that we wish He would not have included, and the urging of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, the Spirit is pulling us in a different direction than what we have planned for our lives. Sometimes we are being asked to give up things we really care about. Sometimes we have to put our personal (unbiblical) beliefs aside in order to fulfill what God calls us to. This is the risk of actually

approaching God with the humility and submission to do what he says. It might be hard. It might hurt. It may not fully make sense. Which is why we have to remember who it is who controls the universe.

Back to Ruth and Boaz. There are a lot of ways this could go wrong, and really only one where this would actually work. But Ruth does not flinch at Naomi's plan, let's jump back into the text at verse 6:

THE ACTION: strategic humility

So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. 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. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer." 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. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. 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."

Ruth does exactly as Naomi instructed her: she sneaks down to the threshing floor, waited for him to go to sleep, and then laid down at his feet.

It says that at midnight something woke him up. It doesn't say what, maybe she was hogging the blanket, or a little snore, but whatever it was, he wakes up to find a woman lying at his feet. This is not just a situation that Boaz can sleep off and hope it goes away, he is forced to initiate; Naomi's plan is working.

So Boaz asks the first question anyone should ask when they find someone sleeping at their feet: WHO ARE YOU? Which has an implied question in it: WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? Ruth answers him:

I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.

In this Ruth makes it clear what her intentions are: I am looking for redemption. Used here is the same wording that we saw last week, of a baby birds taking refuge under the wing of their parents. Last week Boaz used this phrase in reference to Ruth's trust in God, in this case Ruth is using it to describe the relationship that she seeks with Boaz. She is not satisfied with the temporary provision that Boaz has offered, she is not looking for a passionate encounter, she wants to be redeemed.

In order to understand what she is asking of Boaz, we need to understand the concept of a kinsman-redeemer. The kinsman-redeemer was someone who could swoop in and rescue family members who have become impoverished. This kinsman had certain rights related to the property that had formerly belonged to the family, but the main purpose for this provision was to be able to restore the suffering family member back to wholeness. Take them from a position of enslavement to a place of freedom.

The outline for what this looks like is in Leviticus 25 and there are 3 requirements for the kinsman redeemer:

1. The redeemer must be the nearest kinsman.

Much like social services in the U.S. the closest family members get first shot at helping out, and it then passes down until family runs out, and the person looking for help runs out of hope.

2. The redeemer must be able to redeem.

Depending on what the enslavement is, the redeemer must actually be able to rescue them from it. If it is a financial debt, the redeemer must have enough to pay it off. If it is the end of the family line, then the redeemer will have to be able to provide children. If it is the isolation and insecurity of being widows, then the redeemer will have to be able to marry.

3. The redeemer must be willing to redeem.

The kinsman-redeemer is under no obligation to redeem. This provides a way for the family member in a tough spot to approach for help, but the appeal is not stated law. It is left up to the redeemer, who has little to nothing to gain, to choose.

As Ruth approaches Boaz here, she is asking him to step in and be the redeemer for her and Naomi. The way for him to provide for, protect them, and to carry on the family line, was to marry Ruth. She unashamedly asks him to marry her.

Look at Boaz's answer:

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. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask.

He is not just willing to do it, he is thrilled with the opportunity. As he reveals here, in his answer, he is honored by the fact that she would seek him out, a redeemer, rather than seeking after younger men. Just to de-Hollywood this a bit, Boaz is most likely in his 70's here and Ruth 30. What he sees in Ruth is a woman that has sacrificed herself, her own cares and concerns, for the good of someone else. When he says: *you have made this last kindness greater than the first*, he is referring to the kindness that Ruth has shown to Naomi, not to him. The first kindness was in clinging to her and being her companion, following Naomi back to Israel to help her. The second was that she forsook the younger suitors, the other possible avenues for her own personal happiness and gave it up to help redeem Naomi. Ruth could have married anyone she wanted, she seems to be attractive, and the *townsfolk know that you are a worthy woman*. She has child-bearing years left, so her line isn't about to die out...it is Naomi who truly needs to be redeemed here, and what we see in Ruth is a woman who is willing to sacrifice her own rights, risk her well-being and reputation, for the sake of her mother-in-law. Let's see how it plays out, v. 14:

THE RESULT: strategic waiting

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." 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. And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, "How did you fare, my daughter?" Then she told her all that the man had done for her, 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.'" 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."

In the morning before anyone could get the wrong idea, Boaz sends Ruth off with a load of barley. This is not just a gift, but a promise. This is his way of confirming the promise that he made to Ruth that they would be redeemed, either by him, or by the kinsman that was a closer relative. At this point, Ruth and Naomi have to sit and wait for Boaz to do the work. They have to trust that Boaz will do what he said he would do (we'll get to the conclusion of our story next week).

As we started the book of Ruth, I said that this is a story of redemption. Think about how far Naomi has come. At the end of chapter 1, Naomi claims to be empty; she has nothing to show for herself. At the end of chapter 2, their physical needs have been met. Now as we close chapter 3, God has given her the hope of redemption. She is the one calming Ruth. It is not just the story of a few widows being brought from a bad situation to a better one, THIS it is a picture of our relationship to Jesus Christ. HE is our kinsman-redeemer:

1. **Jesus was human.** Jesus was made human so that He could effectively represent and intercede for us. He can act as a mediator between our sinful selves and a holy God because He is both man and God.

2. **He is able to redeem.** The work of Jesus Christ on the cross is fully sufficient. There is nothing else that has to be done. His single offering has perfected for all time.

3. **He is willing to redeem.** This is the most spectacular picture. We are not Ruth, a beautiful, worthy, good person who have found ourselves in a tough spot. We are, every one of us, people who have chosen to chase the Hollywood dream of momentary passion, or believed the Fundamentalist lie that you can find out how to make yourself good and do it. While we were in this state of rebellion, Jesus acted to redeem us.

Jesus Christ set aside the glory that was rightfully His and came to earth. He took our broken, hopeless situation and he turned it upside-down. He was the ONLY one who could ever do the work necessary, and He did it. He redeems.

So as we read this unique love story, we recognize that it is meant to point forward to THE love story of the gospel. And if we read this story through the lens of the gospel, we see that it is not about being like Ruth or Boaz, but instead the character that we ARE most like is Naomi. Naomi who was helpless: too old to start over, too weak to provide for herself, too sad to hope. Naomi is shown the grace of God and the character of Christ in the caring love of Ruth, whose *where you go I will go*, sounds a lot like Jesus' *I will be with you always to the end of the age*. She is shown the powerful act of Christ's redemption in the selfless action of Boaz. We saw last week how God uses this story to point the audience forward to the coming of Christ, but it is also to ground us in what it is that Jesus did for us. By putting redemption into terms we understand. As great as the path from famine to fullness has been for Naomi, Christ's redemption for us is infinitely greater.

In the same way that Naomi's outlook on life was transformed by seeing the work of God; we can act with a faithful optimism because we know what God has done, we have assurance that he is working, and we have a promise that He will bring it all to fulfillment. One of those signs and seals is Communion. A remembrance of what Jesus accomplished on the cross, recognition of our daily need for His sustaining, and a hope in the promise that He is coming again, in glory, to bring all who are His into His presence forever.