

This is week three of our study of Ruth and it is at this point that we come across some difficulties in the story. If we were going to make a film of the story it would be in these first few verses of chapter three that it changes from Disney love story to ‘Carry On Gleaning’!

So far, Naomi and Ruth have travelled back to Bethlehem from Moab and Ruth has managed to find food for them. She has been working in the field of Boaz, a relative of Naomi’s and they seem to have hit it off. However, about two months have passed and now Naomi proposes a plan which attempts to shortcut the plan of God and it is only because of the behaviour of Boaz and Ruth that things work out.

When it comes to our text, some interpreters try to ignore the blatant sexual content in the story. They suggest that there was a common cultural practice underlying the actions which Naomi directed and Ruth carried out. But the reality is that we see no such practice in the Bible – anywhere! Therefore, I take the text at face value. I do not believe that there is some unique cultural interpretation here.

Naomi’s Proposition.

Picture the conversation as told by a couple of Scottish women..... Naomi suggests that she is only interested in Ruth’s welfare. As far as Naomi is concerned that means getting Ruth a new husband and it is clear that she is determined that should be Boaz. It is hard to believe that she did not also realize that she would gain from this arrangement as well.

Naomi supplies one more detail. This is not set forth as a question, but as a statement: “*Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing-floor.*” (verse 2). So what is the point of calling attention to the fact that Boaz will be at the threshing floor that evening? Traditionally, there was a celebration after the winnowing and, although it does not imply that Boaz would be drunk, he would be happy having had good food and drink. Naomi’s plan seems to assume his vulnerability and seeks to take advantage of it. As she reveals her plan, this assumption seems even more likely to be the case.

The plan is really simple. Ruth is to bathe, put on perfume and a dress (presumably the best one she has), and then present herself to Boaz at just the right moment – that moment being after he has eaten and after he has had sufficient wine to be “cheerful” (for his heart to be merry), and after

he has settled down in bed. Only then was Ruth to slip under the blanket with Boaz, waiting for him to tell her what to do next. You see, the phrase ‘uncover his feet’ has sexual connotations – the cognate, the root of the word is penis – and this phrase is used elsewhere with sexual overtones. Even the idea of ‘making yourself known’ is a euphemism. The bible regularly uses the idea of a man knowing a woman as a description of sex. It seems obvious to me that Naomi was anticipating that the food and wine would have a dulling effect on Boaz’s judgement.

Many commentators (4 sheets of paper) try to suggest that in that culture this was a harmless symbolic request for marriage but there are no other examples in the bible. Others say that Ruth was simply changing from clothes that showed she was in mourning to normal clothes, and was ready to remarry. However, there are various issues with that:

1. There is nothing to say she was still in mourning. Naomi had already encouraged her to remarry which might suggest that mourning was already over.
2. Would the servant not have told Boaz, and would he not have mentioned it before if she was in mourning clothes.
3. If she was in mourning the fear of her being molested would not have been as great.
4. If her change of clothing was to indicate that mourning was over why not do it during the day rather than at night under a blanket?

Naomi’s arguments seem to have persuaded Ruth for she promised to do all that her mother-in-law had suggested. While she agreed to do all that Naomi said, she did not do everything exactly the way Naomi seems to have expected things to be done. Somehow Ruth and Boaz are able to navigate the moral minefields of this situation and come out unscathed. All of this takes place, no thanks to Naomi’s meddling.

Can you honestly read Naomi’s words to Ruth as the wise and principled counsel of a godly Israelite woman?

Naomi’s proposition is pure pragmatism, and it is patently wrong for the following reasons:

1. ***Naomi proposes to solve a problem in secret that should have been dealt with in public.*** Is the solution to Ruth’s situation best handled in the bed of Boaz in the middle of the night?
2. ***Naomi’s proposition is God-less.*** In her words of advice to Ruth, there is not one word of reference to God. This is not altogether

shocking since Naomi's first counsel on this matter was a recommendation to stay in Moab, marry a Moabite man, and continue to worship her Moabite gods. From Naomi's words, we would conclude that Ruth's "security" would be best attained by finding a husband, not by placing her trust in God.

3. ***Naomi's plan seeks to appeal to the baser instincts and impulses of Boaz, not his higher sense of duty.*** Naomi's proposition did not encourage Boaz to do the right thing in the right way. It urged Ruth to seek a husband in a questionable and compromising manner. Fortunately, Boaz was committed to doing the right thing the right way. And this is why he refuses to become intimate with Ruth that night, and why he gave the nearest kin the opportunity to do the right thing the next day.
4. ***Naomi's plan does not call for thought and reflection, but rather for impulsive, irreversible action.*** Marriage was not consummated by the declaration of a preacher, or elder; marriage was consummated by the sexual union of a man and a woman. Once a marriage was consummated in the marriage bed, there was no easy way out. So, Naomi's plan was to coax Boaz to become the family redeemer by having sex with Ruth and once that union was consummated, there was no turning back.
5. ***Naomi's scheme needlessly put the reputation of two godly people at risk.*** The words of Boaz in verse 14 indicate that had anyone seen him and Ruth together that night, they would have assumed the worst. Two godly people would have been the subject of gossip, as though they had acted improperly.
6. ***Naomi's plan wrongly implied that Ruth needed to take the initiative in this matter of redemption and marriage, as though Boaz would not have done so on his own.***
7. ***Naomi's plan seems to assume that the end justifies the means.***
8. ***Nowhere in the Book of Ruth is Naomi praised.*** Ruth and Boaz are praised several times.

Some of the older versions of the bible say that Ruth did all that she was commanded to do by Naomi suggesting that what was put forward as a suggestion was understood by Ruth as a command. She does all that she is commanded but not with the expected result, at least not that night.

Boaz's Promise

When Boaz realises that someone is beside him he does the obvious thing and asks who it is. At this point Ruth was supposed to do whatever he said, however, Ruth's next move is not to do whatever Boaz would tell her, but to humbly and modestly ask him to fulfill his role as the family redeemer. Her response to the inquiry of Boaz is a masterpiece: Ruth 3:9 *He said, 'Who are you?' 'I am your servant Ruth,' she said. 'Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.'*

These are very carefully chosen words. When Ruth identifies herself as the servant or maid of Boaz, she chooses a different term than the one she employed in verse 13 of chapter 2. In chapter 2, the term for maid is one that speaks of a very lowly maid, which is exactly Ruth's point. She considered herself totally unworthy of the kind of treatment she was receiving from Boaz. But now she uses a term which speaks of a maid who is higher in the social strata, a class of maid who would be considered eligible for marriage.

Yes, in a general sense, she is asking Boaz to marry her, but more specifically she is asking him to be her kinsman redeemer. She is referring back to the words Boaz spoke in 2:12 *May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.*

In other words, Ruth is asking Boaz to be God's answer to her prayers by redeeming her. I believe this was the noblest request ever made of Boaz, and he immediately regarded it as such.

God's Plan

Boaz acted with honour and was able to redeem Ruth properly, without any deceit. As a result she found a new identity and a new home. She became the wife of Boaz, grandmother of a king, ancestor of Christ.

1. *Godly character is evident in ungodly settings.* The godly character of both Ruth and Boaz is dramatically displayed against the backdrop of chapter 3. Circumstances were far from ideal here, but that did not prevent these two people from living in a way that should command our respect.
2. *Beware of ungodly counsel that comes from people who appear to be pious and to have our best interest at heart.* It is important to discern good and bad counsel. How can you tell the difference?

- a. Consider the relationship the person has with God. Naomi is not a woman who is walking close to God. By her own confession, she is bitter, accusing God of being unduly harsh with her.
 - b. Is the counsel I am being given coming directly from the bible, or is it simply the opinion of the other person?
 - c. Is the counsel being given challenging me to do the difficult (even humanly impossible) thing that is right, or is it justifying me doing the easy thing that I really want to do?
3. *Be alert to the reality of the providence of God in the lives of His people.* This text, though well known and often cited, is surely true: Romans 8:28

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

The providence of God is often unseen until God chooses to lift the veil, so to speak, and reveal what He has been about.

4. *Our text should teach us to beware of taking shortcuts.* It is my contention that Naomi is attempting to take a shortcut in her efforts to get Ruth married to Boaz. I believe that shortcuts are both unbiblical and unwise. But first let me define what I mean by a shortcut. A shortcut is an ungodly, faithless action that we take to avoid pain and suffering, hard work, trusting God, or waiting. In other words, we take shortcuts in order to solve a problem the easy way, as opposed to God's way.

Let me give some examples of shortcuts that were taken by people in the Bible. Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a shortcut to that knowledge that would make them **“like God.”** Abram and Sarai grew weary of waiting for God to give them a son as He had promised, and so, at the prompting of Sarai, Abram slept with Hagar, resulting in the birth of Ishmael – a shortcut for which we are still paying the price. Judah was afraid to give his third son to Tamar, and so Tamar took the shortcut of dressing like a harlot and having sex with Judah. Fearing that they would not be able to marry and produce offspring, Lot's two daughters got him drunk and had sexual relations with him, resulting in the births of Moab and Ammon. Seeing his fighting men

scatter, Saul went ahead and offered the sacrifices himself, rather than to wait for Samuel as he had been instructed. Fearing that they would suffer persecution from the Jews, some who claimed to trust in Christ began to insist that Gentile converts must be circumcised.

I can't find any shortcuts in the bible that worked out well. Jesus redeemed us, not by taking a shortcut, but by being obedient to the will of his father. He could have commanded angel armies to help him, he could have turned away from the cross – but he didn't.