

# UNEXPECTED LOVE

## Unexpected Series (Part 4) | Ruth 3

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### Introduction

Of all the marvelous life lessons that gush from the Book of Ruth, perhaps none is so timely as the picture this story gives us of a man and a woman behaving beautifully toward one another. We've had our share of people behaving badly in that relationship over the years, haven't we? We've seen powerful men taking advantage of women. We've seen attractive women, using their gifts to manipulate men.

If you want a good binge-watch during this season, check out the Apple TV+ series, *The Morning Show*, starring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Steve Carell. You'll see about every shade of dysfunction on the #MeToo, #SheToo, #HeToo continuum. When it comes to male-female relationships in the workplace, at home, or among friends, it's enormously convicting and thought-provoking television. You walk away thinking, In my relationship with the opposite sex, "How can I do better?"

Some of you may be wrestling with that question in this COVID season, too. Wives and husbands have found themselves together a lot more than usual. There are going to be a lot of babies born in the first quarter of next year; but there are also going to be a lot of people in counseling or court, because without some of the distancing distractions that, "normally," help to buffer the natural differences between two people, men and women (not just on TV) sometimes behave badly. Maybe you've discovered that for yourself. Maybe you just need to look at your partner and say, *"This is a hard period. I'm sorry we haven't been at our best. But we're going to get through it together and come out the other side. God brought us together for good reason. So let's renew our commitment to be kind to one another and see what He will do."*

Let me just say again, that's why I love the Book of Ruth. If you want a picture of two people under pressure, finding a way to treat each other beautifully, look no further than the story of Ruth and Boaz.

When we left the story last week, Ruth was out gleaning in a field, gathering up the scraps of the harvest so that she and her mother-in-law, Naomi, have something to eat. Suddenly, a guy named Boaz, the owner of the field arrives. Boaz takes an interest in Ruth. He is her distant kinsman by marriage, so it is appropriate that he should have some concern for her welfare. Caring for the relatives of a deceased kinsman was part of the Israelite tradition. But Boaz' kindness toward Ruth goes beyond the usual. He offers her special protection against the lustful approaches of other men and sees that she not only has a job but is paid in grain beyond the normal measure. We begin to get the sense that, for a powerful guy, Boaz is an unusually good MAN, or has at least the wit to recognize what a remarkably good WOMAN Ruth is, or maybe BOTH.

Like a lot of us during this season in our life, from the viewpoint of Ruth and Naomi, the future seems far from secure. That explains why at the start of chapter 3, we hear Naomi shifting gears and advocating the measures she does. **One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? (Ruth 3:1)** From the beginning, it has been clear that Naomi thinks that the long-term security of her daughter-in-laws lies in their marrying again. Earlier on in the story, Naomi had said: **"May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband" (Ruth 1:9)**

The word "rest" in chapter 1 is the Hebrew word *"menuhah"* and a variant form of that same word appears again here at the start of chapter 3 and is translated to be "well provided for." When you know you are "well provided for" – when you know that someone cares as much about your needs as you do and is committing to meeting them, that assurance gives you the freedom to let go of your anxiety, to slow your frantic churnings and labors. In short, it enables you to "find rest" – as Naomi puts it. That's what marriage is supposed to be like. It is supposed to be a circle where your partner and you are equally committed to seeing the other well provided for.

Naomi and Ruth have yet to find that rest. They are still both widows, still living off the gleanings, the charity of others. It is a hand-to-mouth existence at best. For this reason, perhaps, Naomi now recommends a more aggressive strategy for gaining some kind of greater security and rest. She asks Ruth, rhetorically: **Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? (Ruth 3:2)**

Have you ever been in a conversation with a good friend or a family member whom you suspected had romantic feeling for someone else but wasn't talking about it? Have you ever dared to name the unstated, and then seen the other get flustered or smile in a way that admitted the truth? That's what Naomi is doing here. She is asking a probing question. Back in chapter 2 verse 20, when Naomi calls Boaz a kinsman-redeemer, she uses the Hebrew word, *go-el*, that suggests a family relation. Here, however, the term she uses for "kinsman" is a different one. It comes from a Hebrew root that means "to know" – as in "to be intimately or romantically acquainted with." Naomi ask: So, do you KNOW Boaz, your kinsman?

You've seen enough romantic comedies. Ruth is Sandra Bullock and Boaz is Ryan Reynolds. You've got to assume that when Naomi asked the probing question she does, Ruth blushes. So Naomi goes on. **Tonight [Boaz] will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. So here's what you do. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. (Ruth 3:2–3)**

You need to know that washing, perfuming, and getting dressed up were not every weekend occurrences in the ancient world. They aren't for us anymore, are they? In any event, These phrases suggest an elaborate and unusual process of preparation that were typically signals of one of TWO events. FIRST, it might have been the sign of

an end to a period of mourning. In the Old Testament, we read of how devastated king David was at the death of the child he had by Bathsheba. After a period of grieving, the Bible says that **David got up from the ground... washed, put on [perfumed] lotions and changed his clothes.” (2 Sam 12:20)** Maybe Naomi is encouraging Ruth to make it clear to Boaz that she’s finished mourning her husband’s death, just in case he hadn’t pressed the relationship further out of respect. Some of you out there are in a season of life where you’re sort of interested in somebody, but there’s been a season of grieving, so you want to be careful.

The other occasion often signified by washing, perfuming, and changing clothes was the beginning of preparations to be married. In Ezekiel 16, God speaks of the way he prepares his bride, Israel, for marriage: **I bathed you with water... and put ointments on you... I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. (Ezek 16:9-10)** On this basis, perhaps Naomi was telling Ruth that she shouldn’t be coy about her affections for Boaz. Sometimes a man or woman won’t open up their heart until they sense that their affections will be returned. Naomi says, in effect, “Get gussied up, Ruth! Make it clear that you want more than a distant familial relationship.”

Let me just pause there for a moment and offer some practical application of this text to real life. I hope you know this and will teach it to your kids. When you love somebody or want to show them how much you care, you do things that demonstrate it. Love plans out its display of affection. When our son, Cole, decided to ask his beloved, Heather, to marry him, he planned an elaborate set of experiences that reproduced what she had told him a year before constituted her “perfect day.” When my wife, Amy, wanted to show me how much I meant to her, she arranged this amazing weekend in Laguna Niguel that I will never forget. How might you plan a display of affection for someone YOU love?

In any event, Naomi goes on to lay out more of the strategy. “After you’re looking your best,” she says to Ruth, **Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking.** The reference to the “threshing floor” is a reference to a place of work and preoccupation.

When I was in college, I worked on an offshore oil-rig in the Gulf of Mexico on what was called the “drilling floor.” The drilling floor was a place of incredible activity and peril. There were massive hydraulic tongs being used to move sixty foot lengths of pipe. There were gauges that had to be carefully monitored to measure the pressure of the oil in the hole we were drilling. When you were on that floor, you needed to be totally focused or bad things could happen or our economy wouldn’t happen. It took tremendous focus and energy to work the drilling floor and, in ancient times, it took serious investment to work the threshing floor – the place where the stalks that had been harvested were processed into the ground grain that would feed a nation.

Some of the people you love or need to love are under pressure like that. You may not understand all that goes into their profession but, trust me, they are working the floor. It takes everything they have. It takes a lot out of them. You may need to appreciate that more. You may need to SHOW that you appreciate that more. So here's another takeaway. Love shows respect for the commitments of the beloved.

Naomi counsels Ruth, *"Go down to the threshing floor, but give Boaz space until he's finished working. Let him eat. Let him have a drink with his co-workers and friends to depressurize from the day. Value the relationships he has there. Don't resent them."* It's taken me a long time to recognize what my spouse puts into her job and what it takes out of her. I've been too slow to see how important it is to honor the relationships that she has in that context. But this is the kind of respect that men and women are meant to show toward one another. We should honor their commitments. How could you do that more? How could you give your beloved the space and affirmation they need and deserve to fulfill the commitments they are making that helps produce a better world?

But Naomi's speech goes on: **When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do." (Ruth 3:3-4)** During the harvest season, workers (including the boss) usually slept on or near the floor where the barley or wheat stalks were threshed for their grains. The ground was flat where grain was threshed and the gathered stalks or grain made for a natural mattress.

On the surface, Naomi's advice seems plain enough: *"Go visit Boaz after work. Give him space while he's eating and drinking with his friends. Wait till he's heading to bed. Then, pull the covers off his feet – presumably so that his muddy boots don't soil his blankets. Then lie down next to him and strike up a conversation."*

As innocent as that sounds, people hearing this story in ancient times might not have read it the same way. The Hebrew word translated as "uncover" here can refer to "pulling back a cover" or "gaining a revelation" or sometimes for the act of "disrobing" before an intimate encounter (Lev. 18:6-19). The Hebrew word rendered here as "feet" can certainly refer to the things a person puts shoes on; but the same word was also used as a polite way of referring to male or female "private parts" (Deut. 28:25; 1 Sam 24:3) – a fact buried by virtually all English translations. The phrase "lie down with" could mean to simply recline; but it was also frequently used as euphemism for coupling (Gen 19:33-35; 30:15-16; 38:26). The term "threshing floor" was certainly a literal place; but the term was also used in ancient times for a place of erotic encounter.

When we read Scripture texts like this, it's always tempting to sanitize them. People will bend over backwards to give a text a "spiritual" meaning that elevates it above a merely physical sense. And that is understandable. We live in an age of such appalling sexual promiscuity and distortion of sexual appetites, that we naturally shy from any

interpretation of the Bible that seems to condone eroticism. We rightly discern that our society has gone crazy on this point and don't want to read the Bible as supporting it.

In Old Testament times, sexual mores within the community of God's people were different than they are within the Christian community. While adultery, homosexual intercourse, incest, and a range of other sexual behaviors were clearly identified as sins, polygamy was allowed. Sexual contact during the engagement period appears to have been accepted. And precisely when courtship became engagement is a little misty based on the biblical texts.

There are a variety of cultural reasons why certain behavior was condoned by God in Old Testament times and why since the coming of Jesus Christ, God has called his people to live by a more mature standard. Suffice it to say that when we read here what might seem to be a mother-in-law instructing a younger woman in the art of romancing an older man, it is probably OK to read it that way, rather than avert our gaze or pretend she's talking about a quaint Israeli custom having to do with footcare.

I suppose it is even possible to read this text and conclude that Naomi, in her desperation, was actually calling Ruth to engage in a sinful act of seduction. It would not be the first time in Scripture that God chose to bring ultimate good out of what human beings in their sinful foolishness did wrong. (Gen 19; 38)

In any event, the text suggests that Ruth listened intently to Naomi's counsel: **"I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. <sup>7</sup>When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. <sup>8</sup>In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet. <sup>9</sup>"Who are you?" he asked. "I am your servant Ruth," she said. (Ruth 3:5-9)**

It's interesting to note that in chapters 2 and 3, Ruth refers to herself as Boaz' subordinate three times. Each time, however, she uses a different Hebrew word, and with each usage, a word that defines her as progressively more familiar and intimate to Boaz. In 2:10, she calls herself a "*nokriyya*" (a foreigner). In 2:13, she gives thanks that Boaz has treated her like a "*shiphah*" (a family servant). Here in 3:9, Ruth calls herself an "*ama*." An "*ama*", scholars believe, was a very high status family servant, one eligible for marriage into the Master's household.

This, by the way, is the trendline of Scripture. God's Word clearly calls men and women out of the false and subjugating hierarchy that the Fall brought on, into the egalitarian, rib-to-rib helpmate relationship God intended at the Creation. And we see this partnership imagined in the story of Ruth and Boaz.

So, Ruth goes on to say... **Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer. (Ruth 3:10)** I suppose it's possible that Ruth is just asking Boaz to keep her warm on a cold night. But it's also possible, and more likely, that Ruth is asking Boaz here to exercise the tradition of "levirate marriage" as I explained it in the first sermon of this series. For those who missed that lesson, levirate marriage was an institution in which the brother or close kinsman of a deceased man was called to marry the bereaved wife and adopting her children, as a way of redeeming them from the poverty and despair that usually followed such tragedy.

Boaz clearly saw Ruth's actions and words here as an affirmation of him as a Man – in the best sense of that term – as someone worthy of trust and intimacy. **"The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor (Ruth 3:10).** What strikes me by this exchange between Boaz and Ruth is how vulnerable and honest it is. You've got Ruth saying, in effect, *"I'm cold, hungry, and alone in every sense. Please spread your cloak over me."* And you've got Boaz saying, *"I know you could attract all kinds of younger, better looking men, Ruth; but the fact that you would kindly turn toward me blows me away and blesses me."*

Here, I think, is the takeaway from this encounter. The best kind of love is vulnerably honest about what it wants or values. It doesn't deny or cover up what it hopes for, but blurts it out despite the risk, as Ruth and Boaz do. So here's my question: Do the important people in your life know what you want from them and what you value? Have you dared to describe what you wish would happen in your relationship and why that matters to you? How could you and I be more like Ruth and Boaz in the pursuit of what we desire?

In the story we are studying, Boaz hears what Ruth asks for and, to her likely wonder and surprise, moves to meet her desire. Boaz says: **And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character (Ruth 3:11).** Boaz promises to see that Ruth gains the redemptive relationship she seeks. He commits to marrying her himself or seeing that someone honorable does if he isn't the best person.

Boaz' words about Ruth's character is his way of telling her that he knows that this encounter isn't ultimately about a lonely widow looking for sexual warmth or about a young woman looking for a Sugar Daddy. Love prizes noble character above all other qualities. Boaz knows that Ruth is a woman of honor looking to join her life in every way with a man of honor. Isn't that what we most want for ourselves in our most important relationships? To be people of noble character and to be paired with others also striving for the same? Last week, I married a beautiful young woman and man in a backyard in Oak Brook. I tried to remind them: One day she will not be the statuesque beauty she is today. One day, he will not be the chiseled hunk he is today.

But if she or he is someone who has, through relationship with Christ and his Church developed a more noble character, you will be blessed.

We know from Ruth's care of Naomi, amazing work ethic, courage and humility that Ruth is a person of remarkable character. That Boaz is also such a person is made all the clearer by what he says next... **Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. (Ruth 12:13)** Apparently, there was nearby another kinsman to Ruth's deceased husband who was an even closer relation than Boaz was. Boaz didn't want to disrespect him, Ruth's best interests, or his own good name by stepping in where that other person more appropriately might have.

So Boaz goes on to say: **Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning." So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor."**

Right here we see another one of the most beautiful behaviors of the love that God wants to see characterize you and me in our dealings with one another. Love honors the feelings and interests of others, before thinking of its own. Boaz says, in effect, *"If this other guy is more worthy than I am or is better for you, so be it. I want the best for him and you, Ruth. I don't even want anyone whispering about you, because they saw you leaving the threshing floor."* To what extent is your relationship with the people closest to you characterized by that kind of otherwardness and selflessness? Would you pray that God would grow this Christlike orientation in you?

The final act of love displayed in this chapter was Boaz' determination to bless Ruth and her family with food. It's a reminder to us about one of the other characteristics of godly love: Love provides material support to the beloved. Love generously gives of its resources to move others toward flourishing. Is that your pattern and my commitment too? What's the evidence of that? **Boaz also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her. Then he went back to town. <sup>16</sup>When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?" Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her <sup>17</sup>and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'" (Ruth 3:13-16)**

We may never know all of what happened on that threshing floor, but we know enough. In the middle of the night, Love was displayed in technicolor there. The even more important truth is that GOD shows HIS love for US in all of these ways. How could these loving commitments he displays motivate and define the way we behave toward one another in coming days?

That morning after must have been one of overwhelming feelings and incredible suspense for Ruth (as for Boaz, I imagine). The delirious tension must have been all over his face and hers. Maybe that's why her mother-in-law offers this word of assurance: **Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today." (Ruth 3:18)** Come back next week and you'll learn exactly how the matter got settled!

Let me leave you, however, with one final thought to take with you. Sometimes it is hard to wait for the unfolding of the next part of God's good plan for our lives. Sometimes the day of suspense is a very long one indeed. But hold onto this thought, said the Apostle Paul, no stranger to endurance himself: **Be confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil 1:6)**. God will not rest until the truly most important matters of your life – and of our troubled world -- are settled in His perfect time.

Please trust that, as we bow our heads to pray...