

SERIES: The Gospel According to Ruth

SERMON: **Strategic Righteousness**

SCRIPTURE: Ruth 3:1-18

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We come this morning to the 3rd chapter of the Book of Ruth, where the romance between Ruth and Boaz emerges in full bloom. For the sake of those who haven't been with us the past few weeks, this Old Testament narrative tells the story of an Arab girl from Moab who married a Jewish boy from Bethlehem. His parents, Elimelech and Naomi, had left Israel and traveled to Moab because of a famine. After Elimelech died, both of his sons married Moabite girls. Both sons also died, leaving only Naomi and her two daughters-in-law—all widowed.

Naomi recognized God's hand of discipline upon her and decided to return to Bethlehem. One of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, committed herself to Naomi (and to Naomi's God) and returned with her. Immediately Ruth set out to work as a gleaner to help provide food for herself and Naomi, and as it happened (God's providence disguised as coincidence) she to come to the field of a wealthy man named Boaz. He was so impressed by her diligence and her kindness to her mother-in-law that he treated her exceptionally well, and a beautiful romance began to develop.

But I suggest to you that the book of Ruth would never have been included in the Bible had it been *just* a romantic story. It is far more than that; it is a beautiful picture of the Divine Romance that unfolds as God pursues us and redeems us through Christ. I want us to pick up the story in chapter 3, tracing the drama in three acts. Then I am going to show how God portrays His plan of redemption through Boaz and Ruth.

*"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? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. 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."*

*"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.*

*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. In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet.*

*"Who are you?" he asked.*

*"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer."*

*"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. 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. Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. 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."*

*He 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.*

*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 and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'"*

*Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.'"*

### **Act One: Naomi plays the matchmaker. (1-4)**

If anyone ever says to you that the Bible is out of date, these first few verses of Ruth 3 are a good passage to turn to for refutation of such a notion. Matchmaking is as old as the hills, and, of course, it's very much alive and well even today. It's not all bad, of course—it depends a great deal upon one's purpose and motivation. By the way, it appears to me that Naomi is slowly letting go of the bitterness and despondency that has gripped her. We saw the first evidence in chapter 2:20 when she expresses thankfulness for Boaz' kindness to Ruth. Now in chapter 3 we find her no longer paralyzed with negativity and depression but hopeful and able to take some initiative.

**Naomi's purpose.** It's stated clearly in the very first verse: "One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to Ruth, 'My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for?'" Immediately we see that Naomi's purpose is not selfish. Rather she's trying to get Ruth married off primarily for Ruth's benefit. She knows good and well that *she* cannot provide any security for Ruth. And once Naomi dies, Ruth would be a lonely stranger in a foreign land.

But Naomi is not interested in security-at-any-price for her daughter-in-law. She is interested in a specific person. In verse 2 Naomi says, "Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours?" Over the previous several months Naomi has watched this man Boaz. She has noticed the special favors he has done for Ruth. It has not been lost on her that he is an eligible bachelor, wealthy, generous, and of good character. But most importantly, he also happens to be a near relative of her deceased husband.

Now I must emphasize how important this last factor is to Naomi. You will notice that this is by no means the first time we have been apprized of the fact that Boaz is kin to Naomi's husband. It was mentioned in 2:1 and in 2:20. Had Boaz been simply an eligible bachelor, wealthy, generous, and a man of integrity, Naomi would probably never have tried to play Cupid, for it would have been a clear violation of the customs of the day for a woman to initiate such a relationship. But

because Boaz is a near relative, it is quite within Naomi's prerogative to pursue an engagement between her daughter-in-law and Boaz. How so?

**Naomi's prerogative.** Do you remember the Levirate Law of Marriage we learned about two weeks ago? Found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, it was designed to protect family names. I think it would be wise for us to read that text:

*If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.*

*However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me." Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her," his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line." That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled.*

Now it's obvious that this law doesn't fit exactly the situation we find in our story, because the only two brothers in the family are dead, but apparently the Jewish people extrapolated from this law a certain responsibility, if not an absolute obligation, for other near relatives, uncles or cousins, to step up to the plate if no brothers are available.

But there is another law, sometimes called that Law of the Redemption of the Land, that was designed to protect family inheritances that comes into play in our story as well. God is speaking in Leviticus 25:23ff:

*"The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.*

*"If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold."*

Do you remember the story of Naboth the Jezreelite? Wicked King Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard, which was next to Ahab's palace. He didn't try to steal it; in fact, he offered a good price for it, or a better vineyard. But Naboth wouldn't sell, not because he was stubborn or disliked the king. He appealed to this very law found in Leviticus 25, as he responded: "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." Jezebel, of course, stepped in, ridiculed Ahab for being a pansy, had Naboth stoned and seized the vineyard for her husband.

This same law plays into our story, for the nearest relative had an obligation to redeem Elimelech's land. It is at this point that I think we should discuss the term translated back in 2:20 as "kinsman-redeemer." The term in Hebrew is *go-el*, and it referred to the brother or uncle or cousin who has a responsibility to step up and marry the widow of his relative and/or redeem his property.

When Ruth first revealed to her mother-in-law the name of the man in whose field she has been gleaning and how he had been especially kind to her, Naomi was delighted because Boaz was, in Naomi's words, "one of our kinsman-redeemers," i.e. a close relative. That fact gave Naomi the prerogative of at least seeking the hand of Boaz for her daughter-in-law in marriage.

So far we have seen that Naomi has an honorable purpose in her matchmaking; in addition she has the moral and legal prerogative to pursue Boaz. She also has a plan.

**Naomi's plan.** And with a plan like that described in verses 2b-4, old Boaz doesn't have a prayer. On first reading it may look like there is something inappropriate, manipulative, even immoral, about Naomi's plan. I don't think that is the case at all. In fact, I am so convinced there is nothing immoral going on that I have used as the title of my sermon, *Strategic Righteousness*, which I borrowed from a chapter in John Piper's book, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*. He states that "there is a kind of inactive righteousness that simply avoids evil. But strategic righteousness takes the initiative and dreams of how to make things right."<sup>i</sup>

There is certainly nothing wrong with Naomi's suggestion to Ruth to wash and perfume herself and put on her best clothes. That's just smart! As they used to say, "If the barn needs paint, paint it!" There's no need to assume, as some commentators do, that Ruth is dressing provocatively. The reason for the cautious logistics is that Ruth has a much more likely opportunity for a private conversation with Boaz under cover of darkness. It would never do for her to approach him with a marriage proposal in public. And the purpose of uncovering his feet is apparently to wake him up, without appearing too obvious. Naomi is gambling on Boaz' reputation that he will not take unfair advantage of Ruth.

In verse 5 we read, "All that you say I will do." Will God bless this clever plan of Naomi? Well, we come to the second act in the drama:

### **Act Two: Ruth proposes to Boaz (5-9)**

**Ruth's propriety.** We can see this easier as we imagine what an ancient threshing floor was like. The clay soil was packed to a hard smooth surface, and ordinarily it was circular with rocks placed around it. After the grain was all cut, it was taken to the threshing floor. Sheaves of grain were spread on the floor and trampled by oxen drawing a sled. Then the workers took a flail and threw the grain up into the air so that the chaff would be blown away and the good grain would come down on the threshing floor. When the wind died down, often late at night, they would have a feast.

After the feast was over, the men would sleep around the grain. Since the threshing floor was circular, they would put their heads toward the grain and their feet would stick out like spokes. They slept that way to protect the grain from thieves.

Ruth finds Boaz, uncovers his feet, and lies down to wait. In the middle of the night something

startles the man. The Hebrew word can actually mean, “he shivered,” indicating I suspect that his feet indeed were indeed chilled. He turns over only to discover a woman at his feet. This upright, honorable Israelite suddenly finds himself face-to-face with an unknown woman (note that he doesn’t recognize her in the darkness) in a secluded corner of the threshing floor. How will Boaz react to this compromising situation? Will he be angry, or delighted, or embarrassed?<sup>ii</sup>

Ruth identifies herself as his servant and requests that Boaz spread the corner of his garment over her. That sounds a bit suspicious, but the phrase was a euphemism for, “Will you marry me?” Even today Jews in many different settings get married under a canopy, which is the same notion that is translated “covering” here—it signifies protection. The basis for her request is clearly stated, “because you are a kinsman-redeemer.” She is not asking him to respond hormonally or emotionally to her but to consider his responsibility based upon the Mosaic law.<sup>iii</sup> Anyone who thinks that a loose woman and a finagling mother-in-law are at work here are missing something beautiful. All is subtle. All is strategic. But all is righteous.<sup>iv</sup>

**Ruth’s patience.** Ruth never seems to be uptight or in a hurry. You will recall that at the end of chapter 2 we were told that she continued to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the end of the wheat harvest. In other words, for at least six weeks and perhaps as long as several months she continued to work, day in and day out. She waited patiently until Naomi suggested it was time to take a step in Boaz’s direction. Even at the threshing floor we find Ruth patiently waiting for Boaz to wake up. After their conversation she again is found patiently waiting for the early morning. And finally, at the end of the chapter we find Naomi advising her, “Wait, my daughter, until you know how the matter turns out.”

Waiting is a really difficult thing to do, isn’t it? How many young people have rushed into marriage out of fear that if they waited, their partner might find someone else. Does that make sense for people who believe in a God whose providence is continually fashioning the details of our lives? Isaiah 40:31 has excellent advice: “they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. . .”

Well, we’ve seen Naomi play cupid and we’ve seen Ruth accept her suggestion and propose to Boaz.

### **Act Three: Boaz proves to be a willing kinsman-redeemer. (10-18)**

There certainly was no guarantee that Boaz would respond positively to this rather bold proposal of marriage from a foreign widow. While Ruth is waiting patiently, imagine Naomi’s state of mind through that long night! She’s not only concerned to provide for Ruth, but any chance of her ever having a grandchild or ever seeing her family property restored may depend upon Boaz’ response. Thankfully she has put her hopes in an honorable man. And in one who is falling in love with Ruth! Far from being offended, once Boaz discovers who the woman is lying at his feet, he seems flattered and delighted. His response is one of praise for her.

### **Boaz’s praise of Ruth (10-11)**

*“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. 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.”*

He praises her for her kindness, first to Naomi and then to himself. He praises her for her sensibility—she didn’t flirt around with the younger men, whether rich or poor (that’s his way of saying she has acted from neither passion nor greed. And he praises her for her reputation as a woman of noble character. (If he thinks she’s also beautiful, which I suspect is the case, he doesn’t say so. His focus is on who she is on the inside).

But Boaz has a problem. Just as the wedding bells begin to ring he reveals to Ruth an unexpected and disconcerting fact, and this is undoubtedly the reason he hasn’t already proposed to Ruth himself.

**Boaz’s problem.** His problem is that while he is a close relative, a *go-el*, there is another man who is even closer than he. Perhaps Boaz is a cousin to Ruth by marriage while this other relative is her uncle by marriage. Uncles had precedence over cousins when it came to such matters in Jewish law. So as an upright Israelite, Boaz bows before that custom rather than scheme to circumvent it. He will not claim Ruth until the closer relative has been given the right of first refusal. That’s why he says in verse 13: “Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, I vow that, as surely as the Lord lives, I will do it. Lie here until morning.”

Pastor Steve Zeisler writes perceptively,

*“Let’s try to imagine what the rest of their night was like. Ruth lay at Boaz’s feet until just before dawn, but we don’t know if either of them slept. Did they whisper to one another, or pray? Did they gaze at the stars and dream of the future? We don’t know, but we do know that they spent the night very close to one another, unsure of whether they would ever be so close again.”<sup>v6</sup>*

Even though Boaz cannot (or will not) act until the nearest of kin acts first, we do see his protection of Ruth.

**Boaz’s protection of Ruth and Naomi.** Boaz insists that she remain at the threshing floor until morning so she doesn’t have to travel the dangerous roads at night. He also desires to protect her reputation as well, because, though she has done nothing wrong, if someone is so inclined he could make it *seem* like she has done something wrong.

The lesson here is that we need to be concerned not only about our actions but also about the appearance of our actions. The verse that is often quoted to support this point is 1 Thessalonians 5:22, “abstain from every appearance of evil.” Unfortunately, that is probably a mistranslation in the KJV, for nearly every modern version reads, “Abstain from every form or kind of evil.” But just because 1 Thess. 5:22 may not teach the point doesn’t mean it isn’t biblical. A verse that does teach it is Romans 14:16: “Therefore, do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as

evil.” The lesson: protect your reputation because your reputation is also God’s reputation in this world. But, of course, if you’re into protecting your reputation while you’re doing evil, that’s something entirely different—that’s blatant hypocrisy.

But we also see Boaz making provision for Ruth in terms of food. He tells her to take her cloak and spread it out and he fills it with 6 measures of barley. It’s so heavy that he has to help her get it up on her head. Today that kindness would appear to be a mixed blessing, but in those days women thought nothing of carrying heavy loads on their heads. At any rate, the gift was a very generous provision, about a week's worth of labor.

But I think the grain is more of a gift for Naomi than for Ruth. Notice Boaz’ statement as reported by Ruth in verse 17: “Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.” That term empty-handed has been used previously in our story, and it is purposely used again. Look back at chapter 1:21, where Naomi used the same term in her bitter outcry against God: “I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty.” Same word. It’s the author’s way of telling us that God’s providence is operative to reverse the tragedies of our lives, or at least bring some good out of them if we give Him the chance.

**Boaz’s perseverance.** This is seen in Naomi's final comment to Ruth: “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.” How she knows this I’m not sure. Perhaps it is just a matter of his reputation. Or perhaps she concludes it from the kindnesses Boaz has done to Ruth. Or maybe he has seen Boaz’ face light up when he has been in Ruth’s presence.

So far this morning we have enjoyed a fascinating love story between a poor but beautiful girl from the wrong side of the tracks and a wealthy and eligible bachelor. It almost sounds like a movie script, doesn't it? No, it's too clean for that.

Our story isn't over. We have yet to witness the drama at the city gate in chapter 4 as Boaz challenges the nearer relative to “put up or shut up.” I’m not going to spoil the conclusion for you. But what I must do yet this morning is to communicate that this is more than a love story, much more.

### **God portrays the plan of redemption through Boaz and Ruth.**

The Book of Ruth is a divinely-drawn picture of God's redeeming grace. Remember the little Hebrew word, *go-el*? There are at least four key requirements for a *go-el* laid out in the Mosaic law.

**1. The one who redeems has to be a relative.** Lev. 25:48-49 says of the one who finds himself bankrupt and obligated beyond his means, “One of his relatives may redeem him: an uncle or a cousin or any blood relative in his clan may redeem him.” Then the text goes on to explain the process and to offer a formula for the price. Boaz qualified as Ruth's *go-el*—he was a relative, a near-kinsman.

Can you also see how Jesus Christ is pictured in Boaz in respect to this requirement of a near-kinsman? Listen to Heb. 2:14-17:

*“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—a and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”*

The whole purpose behind the incarnation was so Jesus could become our *go-el* and redeem us. An angel couldn't do the job. It took a human being to redeem human beings.

**2. The one who redeems has to be willing.** Though there was an obligation on the near-kinsman to marry the childless widow, it was not an absolute obligation. He could refuse. As we have seen, if he refused, then the widow was allowed to humiliate him. But that wasn't necessary in Boaz's case, for he *was* willing.

Jesus too was our willing near relative. We are told many times in Scripture that Jesus willingly gave His life. He himself said in John 10, “No man takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own initiative.” The Romans may have thought they were in charge at Calvary, but they weren't. In fact, Jesus said to Peter when he drew a sword to protect Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt. 26:53). Jesus was our willing near-kinsman.

**3. The one who redeems has to be able to afford the price of redemption.** Boaz could have been a close relative and very willing, but if he didn't have the resources, he would have been unable to redeem Ruth. The very first verse of chapter two says “he was a man of standing.” That means he was a man of considerable means.

Jesus Christ, too, had the price of redemption. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:18, “You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” And in our recent study of Hebrews we learned that while “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins,” (10:4) “Jesus did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.”

**4. The one who redeems has to be free himself.** In other words, if a close relative was bankrupt himself or had hocked his own farm or even sold himself into slavery, there's no way he could become the kinsman-redeemer for someone else. But Boaz was a freeman and therefore able to serve as Ruth's redeemer.

Spiritually speaking Jesus Christ is the only free man who has ever lived. No other near-kinsman

of ours could save us. Adam couldn't, our parents couldn't, our friends can't, we can't even save ourselves, because every human being is a sinner and has sold himself into slavery to sin. But Jesus Christ had no sin. Four times the NT tells us that Jesus committed no sin.

Friends, that's the Gospel, right here in the book of Ruth: Our redeemer is a near-kinsman of ours, He is willing, He is able, and He is free of sin and thus able to redeem sinners.

**Conclusion:** The story of redemption is really a romance. Only, in the spiritual realm it is God who is courting us. He is seeking an intimate relationship with us. How will we respond to His proposal?

I fear there are some here this morning relying upon *other* near relatives for their salvation. Perhaps some think that because they grew up in a Christian home and were baptized, they're home free. Perhaps a young person is relying on his or her parents' faith. Some may even be relying on themselves, their own good works. Let me tell you as plainly as I know how: these are all pseudo-redeemers. Jesus is the only one who qualifies.

Won't you place your faith and trust in Jesus? Won't you ask him to put the corner of his garment over you? I can promise you He will do better than that. He will clothe you in His righteousness for now and for eternity.

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i. John Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, 81.

ii. Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT), 211.

iii. Steve Zeisler, . (Zeisler, #4321, p. 2

iv. Piper, 89.

v. Seidler, 3.