

One Beautiful, Scandalous Night: How God Brings Redemption Through A Foolish Plan, A Faithful Woman, and A Righteous Man (Ruth 3:1–18)

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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."

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 ser-

vant, for you are a redeemer." (Ruth 3:1–9)

Sometimes things are not as they appear. For instance, the Trojan Horse came as an outstanding gift but contained inside a vengeful army. In politics the promising candidate turns out to be another self-interested bureaucrat. And the friend who seemed so trustworthy reveals his true colors when he overspends your credit card.

It is a sad fact of life, we often cannot trust the 'goodness' of those around us. But conversely, we cannot always trust the 'badness' of things either. Sometimes an apparent scandal is nothing more than a lack of understanding or a premature conclusion. And sometimes, God works in a mysterious way to bring light out of darkness, life out of death.

A perfect example of this is the story of the midnight encounter between Boaz and Ruth. In this chapter the author of Ruth inches closer to resolving Naomi's plight and Ruth's protection, but not without passing through one of the most scandalous nights in the Bible. Or at least, Ruth 3 looks like one of the most scandalous nights in Holy Scripture.

Under the guise of unrighteousness, God is at work to unite Boaz and Ruth and to bring from their holy union a blessing that touches Naomi and the nations. In his sovereign wisdom God permits the faith-filled but folly-laden plans of Naomi to draw out the righteous character of Ruth and Boaz, as these saints are called upon to exercise incredible self-restraint to accomplish God's purposes.

Naomi's Foolish Plan (3:1-5)

Chapter 3 begins with Naomi concocting a plan to find Ruth a husband. Verse 1 reads, "Should I not seek rest for you." Based on a comparison with Ruth 1:9, "rest" is clearly another way saying that Naomi aims to do a little match-making for Ruth. And in Boaz, the close relative, Naomi believes she has found her man. In contrast to her lethargy in Moab, Naomi is now primed to assist her daughter-in-law.¹

Halfway through the book, Naomi's faith is being restored. No longer is she embittered and apathetic. Instead, she is actively planning a way for Ruth to find a husband. Yet, her counsel is far from sanctified. As I will show from the text, faith generates Naomi's scheme but folly is not far from her.

Verses 2-4 give the details of Naomi's plan. First, Naomi's actions are impelled by the quality and proximity of the man Boaz. Whereas chapter 2 introduced this man's virtue, now Naomi's words are filled with emphasis. When she asks, "Is not Boaz our relative?" she is really asking, "Is he not *the One*?"²

Of course, Boaz is the one, but on what basis does Naomi know that? At this point, her confidence is based upon something that has yet to be manifested. Naomi's actions are understandable, but also hasty (cf. Prov. 19:2).

Convinced that Boaz is the One, Naomi acts in a way that resembles a little too closely the actions of Moab (cf. Num 25). Notice the specifics of her plan. In the middle of the barley harvest, Naomi knows Boaz will be at the threshing floor night and day (Ruth 3:2). The threshing floor was usually an elevated place outside of town where men like Boaz would spend the night to protect their crops from thieves. However, threshing floors were also known to be a place where prostitutes would frequent (Hos 9:1).³

A Perilous Place

For any ancient Near Eastern reader, the story's location would have raised more than a few eyebrows. Let us not forget that these were the days of the Judges (Ruth 1:1), when men did whatever was right in their own eyes (Jdg 21:25). Away from home, tired from labor, loose women might exchange sexual favors for grain. In fact, from a certain distance, the movements of Ruth and Boaz would have a striking resemblance to such a sensual trade. In the beginning of the chapter, Ruth prepares herself to meet the man, and at the end of the chapter, she leaves the threshing floor with a sack full of grain (vv. 14-15).⁴

And of course, this is where looks can be deceiving. As the narrator recalls, there is not the slightest hint of impropriety between Ruth and Boaz. And yet, to the outside observer, there would be in this encounter great material for gossip.⁵

Therefore, we can assert that the actions of Ruth and Boaz are entirely righteous, but at the same time, it is possible to see the dubious counsel of Naomi. Upon close inspection, her instructions take on the worldly wisdom of Moab: If you want a man, go after him. If you can present yourself in an alluring manner, what would stop you? This is not pure and spiritual wisdom, but that which is of the flesh (cf. James 3:15-18).⁶

Dangerous Instructions

Naomi begins by telling Ruth, "Wash therefore and anoint yourself with oil" (Ruth 3:3a). Customarily this kind of washing preceded a sexual encounter or marriage, as in Ezekiel 16:8-9.⁷ Next, she says, "Put on your cloak and go to the threshing floor" (Ruth 3:3b). Although the NIV suggests that Ruth put on her "best clothes," it seems more likely that Ruth removed her garments of mourning. Against a reading that suggests that Ruth is proposing to Boaz, Ruth is instead removing any barriers from Boaz redeeming her.⁸

Third, Naomi takes into account the condition of the man: "But do not make yourself known, until he is done eating and drinking" (v. 3a). In other words, "wait for the evening to come and when he is relaxed and merry with wine, go to him." It is too much to infer that Boaz would be drunk or that

Naomi is gambling on the fact that his food and drink would lower his inhibitions, but it is true that with a merry heart, in the middle of the night, with a young perfumed woman, Boaz is going to have to make decisions that deny his physical longings.

Naomi continues, “When he lies down . . . go and uncover his feet and lie down” (v. 4). The words here are highly suggestive. “Uncover” is a word often used to speak of sexual nakedness (Lev 18:6; Ezek 16:37; 23:10). “Feet” can sometimes refer to exposing oneself (Exod 4:25; Jdg 3:24; 1 Sam 24:3; Ezek 16:25). And “lie down” was a euphemism for intercourse (Gen 19:34; Deut 22:25). Collectively, these words (repeated again in v. 7) have a staggering effect on the reader. Even if Naomi is not commanding Ruth to proposition Boaz, the reader is forced to wonder what exactly Naomi is telling Ruth to do.⁹

Last, Naomi tells Ruth, “wait for him to tell you what to do.” This is Naomi’s final instruction. And it is the reason why I do not think Naomi is explicitly telling her to offer sex.¹⁰ She is leading Ruth to present herself to Boaz, trusting that he will do the right thing. But what would that be? There is evidence in Ruth 2 that Boaz would seek to protect Ruth from disgrace and abuse. But how could she be sure? What *would* Boaz tell Ruth to do?

Naomi must have trusted that Boaz was not like the men of Benjamin who were notorious for abusing women (cf. Jdg 19). But was her confidence in this man too great? No man, especially in the period of the Judges, was incapable of unrighteousness. And thus Naomi’s brazen scheme endangers the purity of this union from the start.

A Complicated Situation

This presentation of Naomi accounts for the complexity of the chapter. Naomi is acting in faith, but she is simultaneously directed by folly. Her way of thinking is reminiscent of the women of Moab, but neither is it entirely inappropriate.

In fact, it seems that Naomi and Ruth are actually responding to the kindness of Boaz’s subtle advances.¹¹ Against feminist interpreters who understand Naomi and Ruth as models of female empowerment, Naomi and Ruth are actually displaying a kind of risky submission. They are

not taking their own initiative; they are following Boaz’s lead in a subtle but substantive form of complementarity.¹²

To press this point further, it is worth asking: What evidence is there that Boaz has given leadership to these women? Remember, Boaz is an older man, who is pleasantly surprised that Ruth had not run after younger men (3:10). He is a wealthy landowner with a great reputation among his peers. Under these circumstances, how could he communicate his interest to a younger woman, especially when she is a foreigner from Moab?

The situation is more than a little complicated. Boaz, the older bachelor, could not just ask her to Starbucks. He had to lead in other ways. In fact, he would have to do the things that we see him doing in chapter 2.¹³ In that chapter, Boaz showed Ruth unusual favor (vv. 10, 13). He told his men to respect her (v. 9); he invited her to eat with him and then urged his men to help her (vv. 14–16). He initiated unusual kindness to her, and he waited to see if she would respond.

Under God’s providence, Ruth did respond, with the help of Naomi who perceived the intentions of her late husband’s relative. She saw his kindness as an invitation to respond. And though her exact steps may have been suspect, her counsel to Ruth set up a midnight rendezvous with redemptive-history on the line.

Such human actions, tainted even with folly, were not outside of God’s decree. In fact, the stratagems leading up to the scene at the threshing floor remind us that God works all things for the good of his purposes and his people. Instead of letting this midnight rendezvous slide into an illicit one-night stand, God reveals the character of these two lovers. In the moment of temptation the man and woman display unusual self-restraint. God is glorified. And in the process we are reminded that God’s wisdom far surpasses our own.

Ruth’s Faithful Approach (3:6-9)

Moving from planning to execution, verse 6 takes us to the threshing floor. Verse 5 records Ruth’s words to Naomi: “All that you say, I will do.” And verse 6 says, “She went down . . . and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded.” As this

whole episode will reveal, Ruth is a woman of character, whose virtue is not seen in her willingness to break the rules, but in her unusual obedience to Naomi, Boaz, and God.

In context, verse 7 brings us to the threshing floor, where it says that after Boaz's heart was merry, he retired to the far end of the grain pile. Laying at a distance from the other men, Ruth approached him just as Naomi told her. In typical Hebrew narrative fashion, the words from verse 4 are recycled: "She came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down" (v. 7).

Verse 8 gives us the moment of truth. At midnight, after Ruth's anxious wait, the man suddenly stirs. He finds Ruth at his feet, and he asks: "Who are you?"

A Humble Response

Ruth responds and she says three things. First, she honestly identifies herself: "I am Ruth. . ." Next, she describes herself as "his servant." The wording is important. She does not come to instruct him or lead him in the way she wants. She comes as his servant, ready to do as he wills (cf. 3:4). Third, she entreats, "Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."

In this statement, she tells him that she sees him as her redeemer. She indicates that she wants to come under his wings. This language is vital to understand what is happening. First, the language of covering her with his skirt carries clear marital connotations (cf. Ezek 16:8–9). However, this language is not her own. She is repeating Boaz's language back to him.

Against the feminist reading of this verse, Ruth is not taking her own initiative to ask Boaz to marry her. This is not the Old Testament equivalent of a Sadie Hawkins dance. The author has made sure that we can see that Ruth's entreaty is in direct response to Boaz's own kind words to her.

In Ruth 2:12 Boaz applauds Ruth for taking refuge under the Lord's wings. Commending her for her willingness to leave her "father and mother" along with her "native land," Boaz says, "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!" Boaz recognized the hardships Ruth had to undergo to come to Israel, and he commended her for seeking refuge in the Lord.

Now Ruth is responding to Boaz in kind. After observing the way that Yahweh provided grain, protection, and favor at the hands of Boaz, Ruth is asking Boaz if he will continue to be the Lord's redeemer. After all, he has already acted in this way, and Ruth is now responding to the noble actions of this worthy man. Indeed, she is displaying her character by submitting herself to him as *his servant*.

Complementarian Beauty

While feminist interpreters want to make Ruth's actions a power play over the man, the evidence goes against that interpretation. First, the historical context is antithetical to such a modern view. Second, Ruth's language ("your servant") and posture (laying at his feet) indicate a submissive spirit (in the vein of 1 Peter 3:1–6). Third, the preceding chapter displays the initiative of Boaz. Fourth, Naomi's instruction is to do what the man says ("he will tell you what to do"). This is hardly a ploy to gain the upper hand.

It is far better to see the virtue of Ruth in her complementarian beauty. In her humble submission to follow her mother-in-law's plan, we see a woman willing to honor her authorities. Likewise, in coming to Boaz, she displays both courage and trust that this man will know what to do. Already, Ruth 1–2 shows her godly character in her willingness to unite herself to the people of Israel and in her industry to glean in the fields like the Proverbs 31 woman. In all these ways, Ruth stands tall as a complementarian woman who is following God and the authorities placed in her life.

Boaz's Blessed Righteousness (Ruth 3:10–13)

After Ruth discloses her identity in verse 9, the reader is left to guess what Boaz's response will be? The author answers the question immediately. Verses 10–13 reveal his blessed thankfulness for Ruth's kindness. He says,

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.”

Boaz praises Ruth for responding to his kindness (v. 10). He reaffirms her character and that her virtuous reputation is well known (v. 11). Then, he affirms the fact that he is a redeemer (v. 12). However, he also says something else—something that Naomi must not have been aware of and something that could have jeopardized her plan.

Boaz tells Ruth that he cannot legally have her because there is another redeemer who stands closer to her. If Ruth’s character sparkles in her obedience and submissive spirit, Boaz’s righteousness is just as sterling!

In the middle of the night, hidden from the sight of anyone else, under the covers with a perfumed young woman, Boaz has the presence of mind to say, “No! I must uphold the law, and consider my brother.” Boaz’s character is not just a public act; it is the genuine article. In a moment when a young woman lies beside him, he halts the action to make sure that he does not violate the laws of levirate marriage.

A Complementarian Model of Self-Controlled Purity

Boaz’s actions are a powerful model for young men. Men, what would you do in his situation? Would you be so committed to consider your brother ahead of yourself (1 Thess 4:6)? Would you honor God in that moment, when no one else is looking? Boaz’s triumph in this situation reflects a heart that is set on the Lord, and a character that was established long before this night. He is a model of true manhood who does not need to grasp after what he cannot legally have. He trusts in the Lord and he is moved to do things the right way.

As a result, Boaz’s righteousness has a far-reaching effect. By exercising self-control in the moment, Boaz blesses Ruth, Naomi, and in time, the whole world. He is not interested in simply satisfying his libido. He has set apart the Lord as his king (he is the true Elimelech), and thus God is able to use him in an incredible way.

This scene is so breathtaking because it stands in such stark contrast to the world we live in. In the middle of what Hollywood would make a bedroom scene, Boaz, and Ruth too, stand out as two Spirit-empowered, self-controlled people. They do not give into temptation because they are not living for themselves but for God (cf. Ruth 1:16–17; 2:4).

They model the kind of purity God requires. They are a man and woman who are just, who love mercy, and who walk humbly with their God (cf. Mic 6:8). Indeed, by close examination of this event, we find not the least hint of impurity. Instead, we find a godly man protecting and leading Ruth to a long-term, legal commitment. And we find in Ruth, a woman who trusts in the character and decision of Boaz. Together, they model what a complementary relationship should be.

Good News for the Unrighteous (Ruth 3:14–18)

Still, God is doing more in them than simply giving us a model for righteousness. Yahweh is also working to bring a savior who will redeem the unrighteous. In other words, Ruth 3 is not just good news for those who have said “no” to sexual temptations. It is also good news for those who haven’t.

Don’t miss this. While Boaz and Ruth’s story calls you and I to be righteous, it also promises hope to those who have failed and taken foolish paths. The proof of this is found in the way God brings blessing to Naomi through this righteous couple.

Remember: Naomi has unwittingly put this couple in a compromising position. In the wisdom of Moab, she almost blew up the whole thing. She has set a powder keg next to a gas stove, and hoped that the sparks of romance would fly.

For Naomi and the Rest of Us

Unfortunately, Christians do this all the time. Trying to do the right thing, they act in haste or ignorance. They mean well, but use worldly meth-

ods to achieve God's result. As a result they put themselves and others in terrible positions. Though, they are justified by faith in God's promise, they still make decisions like the world.

Maybe this describes something in your past. In trying to serve God you've made poor decisions. Your actions have hurt others; your decisions have brought about pain. If you have trusted Christ, you know you are forgiven, but now you suffer from the consequences of your folly. To those in this situation, Ruth 3 offers hope.

The hope is found in the fact that in this story, blessing comes to those who act righteously and to those who hope in them. In other words, blessing comes to Ruth and Naomi because of their similar trust in Boaz. Boaz is the agent of blessing in this story, and as both women trust in him, they both will find fulfillment. Ruth will receive a husband (4:13) and Naomi a son (4:17). While Ruth shows great character in this story and Naomi displays questionable wisdom, both women are eventually "redeemed" because of their relationship with Boaz.

God Works for Those Who Wait

In fact, in the remaining verses of Ruth 3 we see just how active Boaz is to bless Ruth and Naomi. In verses 14–15, Boaz tells Ruth to rest at his feet until morning. She complies, but before she departs, Boaz fills her shawl with grain. He does this so that Ruth would not leave "empty-handed" and so that Naomi would be blessed (v. 17). Indeed, as with every movement in this story, it is the man who leads, guides, and provides for these two destitute women.

We can see in his actions the way that God is favoring Ruth and Naomi through his instrument of blessing—Boaz. But there is something else. When Ruth returns to Naomi, the two women discuss all the intricacies of the night and Naomi makes this profound statement: "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today" (v. 18). This confidence in Boaz's action surely stems from the midnight rendezvous, but it also reveals something of the character of God.

In the story of Ruth, Boaz has become the human means by which God would bless Naomi

and Ruth. And thus his actions show how God himself is going to bless these women. And just as Naomi ascribed to Boaz a posture of earnest activity on their behalf, so we know that the Lord will not rest until he blesses his people (Ps 121). As Isaiah 64:4 says, "From of old no one has heard, or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who act for those who wait for him." Truly, in Boaz we have a man with the character of God, one who works vigorously for the women who wait for him.

In this way, the story of Boaz and Ruth prefigures the kind of complementarian service that is later substantiated in Christ and his church. Christ, as the righteous redeemer, acts on behalf of his bride, going so far as to even lay down his life for her (Eph 5:25–27). In turn, his bride waits upon him and trusts in him (Eph 5:22–24). Of course, like Ruth, this never means that the bride of Christ is inactive or lethargic; it simply notes that what we find in Ruth 3 is a perfect, historic parable of Christ and the church—a man who leads and redeems and a woman who trusts and obeys.

Conclusion

Feminists have regularly co-opted this story to assert their agenda, but upon a closer reading of the passage, we find a beautiful and distinct harmony between a leading man and lovely lady.¹⁴ Indeed, as we pull back from Ruth 3, we quickly discover that the redemptive-historical significance of their union relates to the coming of king David (Ruth 4:17–22) and later to the birth of Jesus Christ himself (Matt 1:1–17, esp. v. 5).

In this canonical perspective, it becomes evident that Boaz is not simply a righteous man who Israelite boys were supposed to imitate. Boaz was a type of the Messiah. His righteous care for Ruth was seen again in the relationship between Joseph and Mary (Matt 1:18–20), and beyond that in the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ for his bride.

Truly, as we situate the story of Ruth and Boaz in the larger canonical context, it becomes evident that the actions between Boaz and Ruth are not just the product of chance. They are part of God's design to reveal how his Son will relate to his bride. In this way, the complementarian actions between Ruth and Boaz are a beautiful prefigura-

tion of Christ and his church.

Moreover, by understanding their relationship we can also marvel at how God can work good out of our foolishness. We take comfort to see how God meets us in the awkward moments of everyday life.¹⁵ And finally, we see how events that may hurt our reputations or put us in circumstances that look unrighteous can be used by God to bring about greater righteousness and blessing in the end. This was true with the couple who met on a threshing floor in the middle of the night. And this was true of their great, great grand-son, of whom the apostle Paul wrote: “He who knew no sin became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

What a glorious God we serve, whose wisdom is unfathomable and whose name is willing to be scandalized in order to bring blessing to his bride. To him be all the glory, honor, and power, forever and ever. Amen!

ENDNOTES

¹John Piper’s interpretation of Ruth 3 has influenced my own reading, but I believe he is too positive towards Naomi (see his *A Sweet and Bitter Providence: Sex, Race, and the Sovereignty of God* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010], 80–83). It seems that her hope has moved her towards action (as Piper suggests), but her counsel is more than “odd” (ibid., 82). Her instructions are downright dangerous. All in all, the book of Ruth seems to be ambivalent towards Naomi, and may even contrast Naomi’s decision-making with Ruth’s virtuous character. Textually, only Ruth is called a virtuous woman (3:11).

²Daniel Block observes, “The order of the sentence, subject-predicate, is not merely emphatic; it establishes this as a verbless clause of identification, which suggests that in Naomi’s mind Boaz is not simply a relative but the near kinsman who must fulfill the role she has in mind” (*Judges, Ruth* [New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999], 682).

³“Apparently common prostitutes as well as cult prostitutes frequented the areas where harvest and shearing festivals took place” (John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000], 757), as Hosea 9:1 condemns Israel’s harlotry: “You have loved a prostitute’s wages on all threshing floors.”

⁴Dean Ulrich observes the danger of Naomi’s plan, saying, “the Bethlehemites would have savored a sex scandal. Naomi did no one any favor that night. She put both Ruth and Boaz at risk of yielding to temptation or being unjustly accused” (*From Famine to Fullness: The Gospel According to Ruth* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007], 90).

⁵Boaz’s own instruction to Ruth in verse 14 (“Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor”) sought to protect against any communal misunderstanding.

⁶Incidentally, it is this sort of bravado that feminist interpretations

commend. Carolyn Custis James applauds Ruth for being a “rule-breaker” (*The Gospel of Ruth: Loving God Enough to Break the Rules* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008]), and Phyllis Tribble suggests that Ruth is a “defier of custom, the maker of decisions, and the worker of salvation” (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978], 184).

⁷Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 683; Ulrich, *From Famine to Fullness*, 90–91.

⁸Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 683–84.

⁹Ulrich, *From Famine to Fullness*, 90–93.

¹⁰Then again, it would not be unprecedented for a woman of faith to suggest something worldly to bring about God’s blessing. This is exactly what Sarai did when her faith in God’s promise ran low (Gen 16:1–16). And, to be clear, this illicit pursuit of blessing is not just something limited to women, either. The leading men of Israel often employed worldly strategies to protect themselves or advance God’s purposes.

¹¹Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, 83–84; Ulrich, *From Famine to Fullness*, 88–89.

¹²Contra Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 178.

¹³Cf. Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, 86–89.

¹⁴Interestingly, neither *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), nor *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005) take time to consider the story of Ruth and its implications for gender roles.

¹⁵Ulrich, *From Famine to Fullness*, 93–96.