

Ruth Week 5 (Ruth 3:1-18)

The Two Famines in the Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth is a story about two widows on a journey from famine to fullness. For Ruth and Naomi, this famine takes at least two specific forms. There is of course the physical, immediate famine involving a lack of food in Bethlehem and the widows' corresponding poverty. By the end of **Ruth 2**, this immediate crisis (poverty) is more-or-less resolved through the staggering generosity of their relative Boaz.

But, despite their sudden abundance of food, there is another famine that still needs to be addressed: the long-term, emotional famine defined by loss, grief, and the lack of any children to continue Naomi and Ruth's family line. It is this emotional famine that Naomi had in mind when she lamented in **Ruth 1:21**, "I went away *full*, but the Lord has brought me back *empty*."

Social scientists (like Abraham Maslow) understand that from an evolutionary perspective, physical needs take precedence over emotional ones. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the physiological ones like food and shelter come before everything else. What that means is that a person doesn't have the time or energy to worry about abstract goals or needs when their very life is in danger due to a lack of food, water, or shelter.

And that's exactly why Ruth and Naomi's top priority is their physical famine (Ruth 2). With that now solved, they have the capacity to focus on their deeper, long-term needs like marriage and family. This emotional famine is the focus for the rest of Ruth, specifically chapters 3-4.

Reflection Question: What is the biggest "famine" in your life right now? What is the blessing or necessity that seems to be lacking?

Can I Say Something Crazy? / I love Crazy! (Ruth 3:1-6)

The love that Naomi and Ruth have for one another is the thread that ties this entire book of the Bible together. Naomi has been kind and gracious to Ruth, and Ruth has been loyal and dedicated to Naomi. In **Ruth 3:1-6**, Naomi takes center stage by dreaming up a slightly-convoluted plan that would (hopefully) lead to a marriage between Ruth and Boaz.

Naomi's motives are made clear in **3:1** when she says, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well-provided for." The "home" she speaks of here is literally a "resting place" in the original Hebrew language, and it's the same word used in **Ruth 1:9** when she urged Ruth to return to Moab so that she might "find rest in the home of another husband." As we all know, Ruth famously rejected this well-intentioned suggestion and instead accompanied Naomi back to Bethlehem. So now in chapter 3, Naomi turns her attention to finding a suitable home (and husband) for Ruth in Israel.

"Well-provided for" is the way the NIV translates the Hebrew idiom "that it may go well with you." In other parts of scripture, this blessing refers to security (**Jeremiah 42:6**), long life (**Genesis 12:13, Deuteronomy 4:40; 5:16, 33**), material prosperity (**Jeremiah 40:9**) and many children (**Deuteronomy 6:3**). All of those are important for Ruth, but the promise of "many children" is probably most significant, based on the tragedies they've experienced so far.

What Was Naomi Thinking Here?

Naomi is a realist, and she understands that she won't be around forever. Perhaps she is concerned about what might happen to Ruth (whom the narrator consistently reminds us is a Moabite) after Naomi is no longer around. Knowing that Ruth faces an uncertain future, Naomi wants to ensure that Ruth's long-term needs are provided for. That explains why she tells Ruth to wash, put on perfume and dress in her best clothes—*bridal preparations in the culture of their day*—and go meet Boaz.

The plan goes like this: Somehow, Naomi knows that Boaz will be threshing barley and enjoying a fine meal in a particular place at a particular time. She instructs Ruth to scout out where Boaz will be sleeping, and then after he's fallen asleep and it's dark and quiet enough to not be noticed, to go lay down next to him and uncover his feet. At that point, says Naomi, Boaz will tell Ruth what to do.

If that plan makes absolutely no sense to you in the 21st century, I don't blame you one bit! The Bible does record several examples of parents arranging marriages for their kids in the Bible (Abraham and Isaac, as one example), but there's nothing quite like this anywhere else in Scripture. There's obviously come cultural practices here that haven't exactly translated to modern-day times.

We'll discuss more later in the chapter, but for now, suffice it to say that Ruth *does understand* what she is to do and pledged to do exactly what Naomi has instructed her in **Ruth 3:5**, "I will do whatever you say." That's a big departure from Ruth's attitude towards Naomi's instructions in chapter 1, when she was told to go back home to Moab. Ruth flat-out refused—and in no uncertain terms. This time, as it says in **Ruth 3:6**, she "did everything her mother-in-law told her to do." *Mother knows best!*

I Love it When a Plan Comes Together! (Ruth 3:7-18)

The events in Ruth 3:7-18 show us that everything pretty much goes according to plan. Boaz was at the right place, at the right time, enjoying a lovely meal—just as Naomi predicted. Ruth did just as she was told, namely, uncovering Boaz's feet and laying down next to him. Bible scholars have rightly pointed out that this turn of events, and the language of "uncovering his feet" is highly suggestive of something more appropriate for a married couple, since the word for "feet" could include the entire leg up to the waist. However, there's no need to assume anything immoral happened, and based on what we know about Ruth and Boaz from the rest of the story, it would be highly out of character for them to engage in anything inappropriate.

Instead, there's a rather simple explanation that **Ruth 3:8** points us to: In the middle of the night, something "startled" Boaz and he woke up. This word just means to shake or quiver—sometimes in fear—or sometimes due to cold. Naomi knew that this tender conversation between Ruth and Boaz would need to be quiet and secluded. By midnight, there would have been quite the chilly breeze blowing through the place where Boaz was asleep. Uncovering Boaz's feet involved waiting for the night air to be cold enough to cause him to shiver himself awake, creating the private moment and Ruth and Boaz needed.

Ruth Takes Matters Into Her Own Hands

When Boaz awakes, he is understandably confused about what is going on. He seems a woman laying next to him that he doesn't immediately recognize, and she's put herself (and him) in a somewhat compromising position. So, he wants to find out who this person is. The first time Boaz encounters Ruth, he doesn't recognize her and asks his servant who she belongs to. This time, the question is more personal and involves a higher level of respect: Who are you? Not who are you associated with, or who claims you or owns you, but who are you as an individual. The way Ruth responds also shows that her status has improved since chapter 2. In **Ruth 3:9**, she calls

herself a maid-servant (Hebrew *amah*), which is a higher position with more honor and dignity than the servant/slave (Hebrew *shipchach*) in chapter 2. If you were an *amah*, you were eligible for marriage to an Israelite man and worthy of higher honor and respect.

At this point, if you were to go by Naomi's instructions, Ruth was to wait for Boaz's instructions on what to do next. Ruth, however, takes matters into her own hands. And isn't that one of the biggest themes in the story? Instead of waiting for instructions, Ruth makes the first move, and in a big way. This is far more significant than wanting a little of his blanket to stay warm on a cold night. This phrase was a marriage proposal, as **Ezekiel 16:8** makes clear:

"Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine."

Ruth was proposing to Boaz! That wasn't part of Naomi's plan, but it ended up working out anyway. And one interesting thing to note is the connection between the "garment" mentioned in chapter 3 and Boaz's prayer of blessing over **Ruth in 2:12**, when he says "May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." The word "garment" in **3:9** is the same word as "wings" in **2:12**. The ESV translation of **Ruth 3:9** makes this quite clear:

"Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."

In **2:12**, Boaz prayed that God would cover Ruth with his love and protection (wings), and now in **3:9** Ruth was using that same terminology to ask Boaz to cover her in a more tangible way. Ruth was asking Boaz to be the answer to his own prayer. Isn't that wonderful to consider? God was taking Ruth under his wings by calling Boaz to take her under his. Robert Hubbard understands this as a description of the way God works through the lives and actions of specific people: "Theologically, God worked here not by direct intervention but within righteous human acts."

Kinsman-Redeemer

Ruth brings up something about Boaz that Naomi didn't mention at all in her plan: his role as the family's kinsman-redeemer. Naomi was focused exclusively on finding a husband for Ruth, but Ruth also wanted to make sure that Naomi's needs were met. By invoking Boaz's duties as the kinsman-redeemer, a legal practice that involved rescuing family members in distress, paying of their debts, or purchasing their freedom, Ruth was going above and beyond Naomi's plan in order to make sure that she would be taken care of, too. The duties of the kinsman-redeemer really didn't involve marriage or providing an heir to a widow, but the concept of Levirate marriage did. The story of Ruth somewhat combines these two responsibilities in a way that the actual laws of Moses didn't really teach. But, for whatever reason, the characters in the story accept this all as legitimate.

By invoking the concept of redemption, Ruth was asking Boaz to not only marry her, but to take on the role of a father who would provide an heir to Naomi and Ruth, who both lost their husbands.

He Said Yes!

Boaz is flattered and grateful for Ruth's proposal. He calls Ruth a woman of "noble character" in **3:11**. Coincidentally, this is the same word the Bible uses to describe Boaz in **Ruth 2:1** ("a man of standing"). They are

both individuals of integrity, wisdom, and impeccable character. In other words—they're a great fit for one another!

Knowing that Ruth is a great fit for him, and knowing the love and dedication she showed by choosing him over those younger guys who were also available, Boaz's immediate inclination is to say yes to Ruth's proposal. However, he knows that the letter of the law requires him to first consult one other family member who is a closer relative, and would have—as my middle school friends would have said—"first dibs" on the right to redeem Ruth. Boaz doesn't want to circumvent the laws of Israel in a way that would cast a shadow of doubt over Ruth's standing, so he decides to do it all by the book. He promises to consult this other relative soon, and then get back to Ruth with a final answer.

In **Ruth 3:14**, Ruth makes a quick early the next morning, before anyone could notice her. She and Boaz are well-aware of what it *looked like* and they didn't want anyone's reputation being tarnished. For Ruth in particular, the gossip would have spread like wildfire, because one of the chief grievances that Israelites had about Moabites was the fact that the seduced Israelite men and led them to idolatry (see **Numbers 25**). Ruth heads back home, Boaz heads out to meet this unnamed relative, and we as the audience are left wondering... *will they find their happily ever after?*

Famine to Fullness (3:15-18)

The chapter ends with a short scene that once again highlight's Boaz's generosity. He lavishes Ruth with six portions of barley—however much that might be—and sent her back home to Naomi. As much as Boaz loved Ruth, this barley was a gift for Naomi. In **3:17**, Ruth explains that Boaz told her "Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty handed." We know from **Ruth 1:21** that Naomi returned to Bethlehem feeling "empty," and Boaz wants to do everything he can to turn her emptiness into satisfaction. Naomi—whose name means pleasant—is coming to find out that God is gracious to us even when we go through our hardest moments.

Christ the Redeemer

In many ways we all are like Ruth and Naomi. We find ourselves in need of grace. Boaz represents the gracious provision that God provides to people in distress. As the story continues in Ruth, we see that Boaz is not only generous with food, but he serves as the redeemer for Ruth and Naomi. This meets a much bigger, long-term need that they have. In the New Testament, we know that Jesus is the central figure in God's plan to redeem the world, just like Boaz will eventually redeem Ruth and Naomi. So today, we will end with these words from **1 Peter 1:17-21**. As you read or listen, pay attention to the way this passage parallels the story of Ruth:

17 Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. 18 For 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 ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

Reflection Question: What is the "empty life" that Peter is talking about in this passage?
