

The Book of Ruth

Lesson 6 - Chapter 3

We finished up Ruth chapter 2 last week and we'll study chapter 3 this week.

Before we do I'd like to review a bit and get our bearings because we're about to enter into the 2nd great theological principle demonstrated by Ruth, the principle of the role of the Kinsman Redeemer in God's plan of redemption for the world.

We'll of course read the entire 3rd chapter of Ruth; but in a nutshell it begins with Na'omi instructing her daughter in law Ruth to visit Boaz and attempt to get him to marry her on the grounds that Boaz is her redeemer. Ruth did as Na'omi instructed and Boaz responded as the two widows had hoped; but Boaz also told Ruth that there was another family **go'el** (redeemer) in Bethlehem who was a nearer relative to Elimelech than he was and that it was proper protocol to give that nearer relative the first chance at performing the duties of a **go'el**.

Thus Boaz gave Ruth all the grain she could ever hope to carry (as a sort of gift sealing the agreement) and sent her home to Na'omi to await the outcome of his meeting with this nearer relative.

Now this sounds pretty straightforward on the surface, but underneath it all in order for us to truly understand the advice that Na'omi gave to Ruth (and that Ruth faithfully carried out); and to get both the historical and theological aspects of this event in proper perspective, we have to grasp the very real legal ramifications (at least legal from the Jewish cultural perspective) that were in play and in process of being satisfied. So, hang in there with me as I give you some foundation for studying the final two chapters of Ruth.

In Jewish thought of that day (and in fact a thought that was completely in harmony with the Scriptures), Yehoveh was the true and ultimate owner of the land where the Hebrew people had settled (the former land of Canaan). By means of His covenant with Abraham the Lord had given Israel the right to inherit this land; however this inheritance did NOT involve transference of ownership **first** from the Canaanites to Yehoveh, **and then** from Yehoveh to the Israelites. Rather it was that Israel would only benefit from the USE of the land that continued to belong to God; He did NOT turn over ownership of the land to Israel.

The USE of the land had been divided up (under the supervision of Joshua and Moses) among the tribes **and** among the clans who formed the tribes. So it's important when we look at a map of Canaan after the conquest (what we could loosely term "Israel"), and we see the 12 tribal territories outlined with their boundaries, that we understand that a further subdivision had also occurred in which the clans of each tribe were assigned specific portions of the territory given to their particular tribe (a clan being, of course, just a subdivision of a tribe, and a family being a subdivision of the clan). Thus whoever possessed a certain tract of land was not allowed to sell it or part with it in any other manner; rather it was intended that the family

land remain part of his family, clan, and tribe forever (again, not as owners but rather as the authorized tenants if you would, who lived on God's land).

Should the Hebrew possessor of a piece of the Promised Land find himself in a situation where he had to sell it (usually on account of financial disaster), and actually did sell it, then it was the obligation of the nearest family relative to intercede and purchase that land back (redeem it) in order for it to stay in the family and ultimately the clan.

We find from the Book of Leviticus that even if the land was **not** redeemed in a timely manner by the family **go'el** (for whatever reason) that it still eventually came back (by means of the Laws of Jubilee) to the original family and clan who had possessed it (but lost it) by means of the Jubilee laws that required no payment to the person who had purchased that land if the family waited until the year of Jubilee that came around on a 50 year cycle. Essentially the land had been "lost" only temporarily and further it wasn't so much that the land had been lost. as merely that the use of the land had been transferred to the new owner for a time. This reality was reflected in the price that a new owner would pay for the land (and the price that a redeemer of the land would pay if he interceded and purchased it back after the land had been lost to this new owner) that was based not on the value of the land but on the sale of the yearly produce that came from the land. Thus no sale of the land had actually ever occurred (at least not as we think of buying and selling real property).

Now there was another custom of the era (that had actually been written into the Law of Moses) that we have come to call Levirate Marriage. This was the marriage of a brother in law to the widowed wife of his brother. And the idea was that a Hebrew man who died without children (or more importantly without a son) died without an heir. Thus it was the duty of the deceased man's brother to marry his sister in law (now widowed) and produce a son with her. This son would NOT be considered as the son of the brother but rather as the son of the deceased man; thus his name and family line would not come to a dead end within the clan. The son produced from this Levirate Marriage then became the legal heir to the land that belonged to (what was biologically) his deceased uncle.

Now, Scripturally and legally speaking Levirate Marriage and the obligations of a family redeemer (a **go'el**) are not connected. However in the story of Ruth we see that the two institutions had, at some point, become bound together by Hebrew tradition. In other words while the Torah technically only required that a brother in law marry the childless widow of his deceased brother in order to produce an heir, at some point it became customary to include this kind of marriage obligation as one of the several duties of a **go'el** if circumstances demanded it. Thus if there was no brother of the deceased man, or if there was a brother but he refused to go through with a Levirate Marriage with the widow, the family **go'el** should step in and accept this role along with redeeming the land of the deceased in order that it remain within the family and clan.

Thus in this section of Ruth that we are about to read, Elimelech had possessed some portion of land in and around Beit-Lechem. But because both of Elimelech's sons had died, and their widows had produced no sons, there was no legal heir to the land; so it fell to Elimelech's wife Na'omi. Since she was poverty stricken she had to sell the land (she was too old to work the

land), and Boaz (who was related to Elimelech) was the family redeemer (the **go'el**) whom Na'omi hoped would accept the obligations attendant with being the family **go'el** (remember, we discussed last week that there was a whole list of duties assigned to a **go'el**). And part of Na'omi's hope was that Boaz would marry her daughter in law Ruth to give her a well-secured life, plus that Boaz would purchase the field, plus Boaz would give Ruth a son to carry on Machlon's (Machlon was Ruth's deceased husband) family name. This son would also be the needed heir for Elimelech and thus the clan and family line would be persevered. Pretty complex isn't it? Well, it's only that way for us because this is not at all how Western society operates and it seems so foreign (if not downright immoral) to us. But this procedure was well understood by the ancient Hebrews and everyone knew their role and their rights and duties in this process. Bottom line: if Boaz (a potential family **go'el**) would commit to marry Ruth, a whole series of problems would be solved in one bold stroke.

It is with this in mind that we can now have our context for reading Ruth chapter 3, and better understanding Na'omi's motives for instructing Ruth in the rather strange and bold actions Na'omi wanted Ruth to take.

READ RUTH CHAPTER 3 all

Some unrecorded amount of time passes between the end of chapter 2 and beginning of chapter 3, very likely just a short time because we find that the threshing part of the harvesting process was still ongoing. But Na'omi has had a chance to ponder the wonderful turn of fortunes she has suffered in the form of Ruth's providential meeting with Boaz, an elderly but well-to-do relative of Elimelech; and she has no interest in letting this amazing opportunity pass her by. After she has formulated a plan, she starts up a conversation with Ruth that begins with, "My daughter, shall I not seek rest for you, so that it may be well with you?" Our CJB has a better translation where it says, "Shall I not seek security for you?"

The Hebrew word that is, in most translations, rendered as "rest" is **manoach**. And in this context **manoach** means a PLACE of rest; and the place she is referring to, is in the home of a new husband who can give Ruth safety, shelter and a well-secured life that generally was only available to a woman by means of marriage. This bodes back to the first part of our story of Ruth while they were still in Moab. In chapter 1 verses 8 and 9, Na'omi had prayed this prayer over her two daughters in law:

CJB Ruth 1:8 Na'omi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Each of you, go back to your mother's house. May ADONAI show grace to you, as you did to those who died and to me. 9 May ADONAI grant you security in the home of a new husband." Then she kissed them, but they began weeping aloud.

This is a wonderful example of how God works in concert with His followers to bring about His will. It had been a long time since Na'omi had prayed for new husbands for her daughters in law, and one wonders if she even recalled she had done so. But what a gracious and important lesson it is for us that God hears our prayers and answers them, sometimes even long after we have perhaps forgotten we prayed them.

Thus in this statement Na'omi is telling Ruth that what she is about to instruct has Ruth's welfare as it's target. And she tells Ruth in verse 2 that since Boaz is a family *go'el* that it is her intent to involve him as a solution to their predicament. And to remind us of the context of the multi-faceted solution she was seeking: 1st, how could she find a way to keep the name of Elimelech and his clan alive since he and both of his sons were dead? 2nd, how could the elderly Na'omi properly protect the all-important land inheritance that had been left in her trust, since her husband died and there were no male heirs? 3rd, how could Ruth, young and with so much life yet to live, be afforded a good and decent future? And although it's not front and center but is self-evident, 4th, how could Na'omi find a means of support in her old age since she had no sons to provide for her? The answer to all of these challenges may lie in Boaz IF her plan works.

One could also ask: how is it that Na'omi knew that Boaz would be at the threshing floor that night? In fact, would the farmers really be doing winnowing after dark? The winnowing process was very rudimentary in that day. A threshing floor was little more than a relatively flat area of ground that was in a place where a breeze would flow through. A surface of rock was preferable, but more often than not a threshing floor was merely an area where the soil had been tamped down until it was hard. After the stalks of grain were laid upon it and pounded to loosen the heads from the stems, men and women with pitchforks would heave the stalks into the air, and the breeze would carry the lightest part (the straw) a distance away, while the heaviest part (the kernels of grain) would fall more or less straight down. The problem is that while some wind is required to make the process work, it had to be the right amount. Too strong of a wind and the grain blew away right along with the chaff and the straw. Too little wind and everything that went up in the air came right back down and it didn't separate.

The time of year for the wheat harvest was late summer, early fall, and it was hot. The desert winds were always quite strong during the afternoon at that time of year. But as the sun moved downward toward the horizon, the breeze became gentle. By dark it became calm. Thus it wasn't truly nighttime that Na'omi was speaking of but rather dusk when Boaz was winnowing and that would have been the regular time that winnowing took place in the part of Judah where they were. So Na'omi wasn't clairvoyant, nor had she been spying, she simply knew how winnowing operated in Beit-Lechem.

Since the plan was for Boaz to marry Ruth, wiley old Na'omi knew that step one was to make Ruth attractive to Boaz, thus she instructs her to bathe, anoint herself, and then put on good clothes. There is a lot of commentary on this one verse that wants to paint a picture of a very pious and righteous Ruth taking a ritual bath (a mikvah), anointing herself in oil (as a spiritual matter), and then putting on a wedding dress (in fact that's more or less the standard Christian take). But that is just not the case. First, there is no religious ritual occurring here. The immersion is a common bath meant to cleanse her body and remove the dirt, dust and sweat. The anointing was not of a religious nature; it was merely the application of scented oil (usually olive oil) to make her skin smooth and to apply a pleasing fragrance (like a perfume). And finally the usual rendering (like our CJB) of Ruth "putting on her good clothes" is simply not a warranted translation and in fact goes against the plain meaning.

Rather Na'omi just uses the more or less standard generic word for "clothes", *simlah*.

Although ***simplah*** was used as a general word for clothing, it was also the proper name of a kind of garment that is sometimes called a cape or a cloak or a mantle. It was an everyday garment of the common folk that more or less resembled a long blanket that was worn around the waist and then one end thrown over the shoulder to hang down. In fact it often doubled as a blanket when sleeping. In no way does this indicate anything but regular everyday dress. So why would Na'omi tell her to put on clothing? After all Ruth of course would not show up naked to meet Boaz!

The Sages have a pretty good solution for this that makes common sense. Widows in that era often stayed in mourning for a very long time; sometimes until they were re-married. So the Rabbis say that Na'omi was telling Ruth it was time to put away her widow's outfit and return to wearing a ***simplah***, the regular everyday clothing. The notion that she would show up to meet Boaz in a wedding dress just doesn't fly. It would have been presumptuous beyond imagination to do such a thing; and besides, a couple of poor widows wouldn't have had the luxury of "good clothing" let alone a wedding dress just sitting on a shelf awaiting use! So who came up with the idea of a "wedding dress" as the meaning? It was another of those doctrines that comes from working with the New Testament and then going backwards. In other words, since Christianity has long (and correctly) held that Yeshua is the Kinsman Redeemer for all who believe, then the image of the saints as the "brides" of Messiah, and of his "brides" coming to the wedding feast of the Lamb, is applied to the Ruth story. Thus the reasoning is that Ruth must have been putting on a wedding dress since she was about to come into a relationship with her Kinsman Redeemer. Not a chance. And this is a very good example of what happens when one tries to explain the Old Testament in light of the New, instead of the other way around.

Ruth continues her instruction to Ruth telling her to stay out of Boaz's view, but to take careful notice where he beds down for the night. Further, since it will be the end of the day and dark, Boaz will have completed his work and then dine and drink before retiring. When it speaks of his drinking, it very likely includes wine because it just wasn't common parlance to break a meal down into the eating of solid food and drinking liquid if it was merely water. Rather, drinking invariably refers to drinking alcoholic beverages (and the context will bear that out as well). Further this doesn't in any way mean that he went to bed drunk; it just means that he was well off enough to afford some wine with his meal (something most any Hebrew would have preferred if they had enough money).

But then the instruction gets a little dicey; Na'omi tells Ruth to uncover his feet and lie down with him. Now I'm sure most of you have an image of seduction in your minds about now, and you might be right (although it was not to the extent that some have claimed). Here's the thing; the Bible can get very sensual and sexual at times. Sex was just an everyday part of life, and while modesty was called for in God's people, they were also around farm animals all the time and every child was familiar from an early age of the natural reproductive process. And certain flirtations between men and women were open and common in Biblical days that today would be seen as crude and objectionable. I'll explain where I'm going with this later.

Na'omi's last words were really kind of odd: "he (Boaz) will tell you what to do". And to this Ruth promised to faithfully do what Na'omi instructed. Now there has always been a question

about this little Kabuki Dance that Na'omi tells Ruth to perform, as to whether this was rather customary of Hebrews in that day or if it was unique. And the answer is that we really don't know. For sure the whole purpose of this endeavor is for Ruth to indicate her desire to marry Boaz. But is this how engagement happened among the ancient Jews? There are no records to indicate such a thing, although there are a couple of similar scenes elsewhere in the bible (such as Ezekiel 16 and II Samuel 12).

But on another level, while her going to Boaz, uncovering his feet and then laying down beside him may not necessarily have been usual, the purpose of proposing marriage on the grounds that Boaz is her **go'el** is likely what Na'omi was referring to when she said that Boaz would then tell her what to do. That is, Ruth was a Moabite and unfamiliar with the Jewish ways. Even though most Middle Eastern societies (almost certainly the Moabites as well) had some kind of family redeemer customs they followed, how each nation performed them would have been somewhat different. Na'omi and Boaz thoroughly understood the role and duties of a **go'el** within Hebrew society, and all the nuances of how someone approached a potential **go'el** for their help; and then there were the unique social intricacies that would follow. Of these Ruth knew little if anything since she was a foreigner. Therefore while Na'omi got the ball rolling sufficiently for Boaz to understand what was being asked of him, Ruth would then have to rely on Boaz to take over and do what logically and legally came next. And that depended on whether or not he accepted Ruth's request of him or not. Therefore (as Na'omi said), "he will tell you what to do". This was all up to Boaz.

It was getting dark, so Ruth left her mother in law and went to the threshing floor. She did exactly what Na'omi told her to do, fully trusting that Na'omi not only knew what she was doing but that it was honorable and had Ruth's best interests in mind. Verse 8 says that Boaz had finished eating and drinking and "was feeling good". This is not talking about a general state of well being; Boaz had a bit of a buzz on due to downing a couple of glasses of wine. Tired and relaxed he located himself at the end of the pile of grain undoubtedly to make sure no one came to help themselves to the product of his days work; there he fell asleep.

Ruth stole in quietly so as not to disturb his sleep, uncovered his feet, and lay down next to him. Sometime later, in the middle of the night, something awakened Boaz and he was startled to find a person lying next to him. It was dark, he was drowsy, and so blurts out, "who is there?!" Ruth responds that it is she, and would he spread his robe over her **BECAUSE** he is her **go'el**.

Wow there's a lot going on here, so let's take it step by step. The most controversial aspect of this section is the part of Ruth "uncovering his feet". The controversy is that "feet" is often used as a Biblical idiom that is referring to genitals. "Covering one's feet" is also at times used to describe going to the bathroom. Thus some scholars (primarily those who specialize in literary criticism techniques) believe that what Ruth did was to expose Boaz's genitals as an expression of her desire for him to marry her. And that maybe this was some heretofore-unknown engagement practice in that era. In fact that line of thought has become a rather popular recent interpretation of the scene, but more level headed scholars (gentile and Jew) make it clear that there are too many problems associated with this approach to make this what was going on.

Let's first dispel this new view that Ruth committed a very sexually provocative act upon the slumbering Boaz. The Hebrew word that is usually rendered "feet" in the book of Ruth is ***margeloth***. In the entire Bible it is only used in 3 places here in Ruth and once more in Daniel 10, and there it means legs and not feet. ***Margeloth*** refers to a larger region of the body than merely feet. In fact some scholars think that it basically means everything from the hips down (that is, the legs and feet, the entire of the extremities that starts at the hip). The usual Hebrew word for foot or feet throughout the Old Testament is ***regel***. And indeed we DO find the word ***regel*** used in the idioms that definitely refer to the genitals. Nowhere in the whole of the Bible do we find ***margeloth*** used that way; and thus it is almost certainly inaccurate to translate ***margeloth*** to be "feet" here in Ruth; rather it should be translated as legs.

Thus we have Ruth uncovering Boaz's legs (not his feet) and her lying there next to him as instructed by her mother in law, and nothing more. However that there are sexual overtones to all this is hard to dispute; the issue is the degree. Certainly what man would go to bed alone, only to be startled awake by a lovely young woman lying next to him, and not be a little excited by the situation? If you're an older man like Boaz and this young thing sneaks into your bed, crawls under your blanket and essentially proposes marriage, well, that'll get your attention for sure. But it seems that the author of this story intends it to be this way; after all, Ruth is trying to entice Boaz to marry her and by all accounts she is quite beautiful not only in character but in appearance. So what could be more normal than for her to make use of these natural gifts in a way that interests men?

Let's also dispel this thought of aggressive sexual action taken by Ruth upon Boaz as he sleeps by our recalling the context and history of the Ruth narrative. Ruth and Boaz have shown themselves to be exemplary people; devout, faithful to Yehoveh, righteous and upright. Boaz has raved about how well known Ruth's high character is among the residents of Beit-Lechem, and Boaz has been shown to be a kind man with only noble motives and intentions in all he does. Except within the institution of marriage, for a woman to look upon an exposed man could bring her a terrible punishment (recall the instance in the Torah of a wife who helped her husband in a fight by grabbing the genitals of her husband's opponent; it resulted in her hand being cut off). For Ruth to uncover a man's private parts would be nothing less than prostitution. So to accuse Ruth and Boaz of engaging in sexual activities that are strictly forbidden by the Laws of Moses would be completely inconsistent with all we have learned about them, and counter to the entire purpose and nature of the story.

There's still more we need to dissect about this nocturnal encounter, but let's stop here for today and continue in chapter 3 next week.