

RUTH 3-4

3: 1-5

Now that Naomi is opened up to hope, she also opens up her heart. What are Naomi's motives, Ruth's motives, Boaz' motives? However different they may be, they all come together in the end, serving divine purposes.

Naomi makes her motives clear: "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you." Her motives are Ruth's welfare, not her own or that of carrying on her family line.

What she tells Ruth to do, however, is highly unorthodox. In the simplest terms, she persuades Ruth to seduce Boaz. How? Ruth is to wait for the right time. After a full day's work, Boaz will eat, drink and be merry. He will go to sleep. Ruth is to follow him there, and once he's asleep she is to go beside him, "uncover his feet", which has clear sexual connotations, and accept whatever action he reciprocates. Ruth doesn't question her mother-in-law. She will do whatever she is advised to do.

3: 6-18

Ruth does whatever Naomi tells her to do, but she also has to improvise and do things her own way as well. Ruth goes to lie down where Boaz is lying down, but only at midnight when he awakens does he realize someone is there. Who is it? Ruth identifies herself as "your servant," and she invites him to claim her as her "next-of-kin." The claim would be made sexually, but then it would have to be followed up legally (marriage). Ruth (and Naomi) trust that Boaz would do the honourable thing. Boaz had told Ruth that in coming into the land of Israel, she was also adopting God "under whose wings you have come for refuge." (2:12) Now Ruth is asking Boaz to spread his cloak "over your servant" as she is seeking refuge under his care and protection. In doing this Boaz would be imitating the God he claims to follow.

We can imagine the big risk Ruth and Naomi were taking in doing this. They were not going to await Boaz' initiative. They were taking the bull by the horns. Boaz could very well have thought of Ruth as a promiscuous woman. However, instead of questioning her morals, he is even more impressed with her than he had been before. He interprets her actions as a commitment to her kin, rather than a preference for a husband based on appearance or age (obviously Boaz was considerably older than Ruth).

The story could very well end here, but a further complication is introduced.

Unbeknownst to us or Naomi, it seems, there is another relative who is even a closer one to Naomi than Boaz. This means he has the right to redeem Ruth before Boaz does. And because Boaz wants to do the right thing above his own desires, he will offer this relative the option to redeem Ruth, and only if he gives up this option will Boaz take it up.

Boaz also ensures that Ruth is able to leave before anyone gets wind of what has happened. He wants her to keep her good name. He also sends her home with lots of food. Once Ruth returns home to Naomi and Naomi sees the food and hears all that has transpired, she knows Boaz is determined and motivated.

4:1-6

These verses present us with a picture of an ancient legal transaction. Boaz brings together the other relative and 10 witnesses. He offers the other relative the first option to “redeem”. What is he to redeem? Boaz doesn’t begin by mentioning Ruth. Instead, he focuses on a piece of land that Naomi has (which up to this point we have no information about). What’s happening with this land? Is it being farmed? Why is Ruth gleaning from Boaz’ land? We do not know. But before the relative has a chance to consider whether he has the money to pay Naomi for the land, Boaz throws a kink in the deal by informing him that with the land there is also the requirement to redeem Ruth, the widow of the dead man’s property. By taking Ruth as wife, the man would supply Mahlon (Ruth’s first husband) with future offspring, as well as for himself, and the land would be redeemed by being cultivated.

Predictably, the man back’s away from the deal, as it involves more than just land. Boaz has also made it easy for him to back away as he has already said he would be ready to pay for it and take Ruth.

4: 7-12

The deal is made and the transaction is completed. All those who witness it wish Boaz well, not only in the food crops to be grown but in the fruitfulness of Ruth bearing children. The children will carry both Mahlon’s line as well as that of Boaz. Families were more closely knit then than they are now. Boaz was taking care of his wider family, which included Mahlon.

4: 13-22

Boaz and Ruth are married. Their first born is named Obed. The women of Bethlehem interpret this as a gift from God who has restored Naomi and nourished her in her old age. God has done this through Ruth, whose love and devotion to Naomi are worth many sons (given Naomi’s loss of both of hers). We are also told that Obed will be the grandfather of King David. We are further given the lineage all the way back to Jacob’s sons (Judah). Finally, Ruth is one of four women in a royal genealogy, all of whom had irregular sexual experiences in giving birth to their sons - Tamar, who tricked her father-in-law into paternity (Genesis 38); Rahab, who was a Canaanite prostitute, betraying her city to the Israelites (Joshua 2); Ruth, and Bathsheba, whom David claimed in an adulterous liaison, and whose husband David had killed. This only serves to underscore that God can work through any means to bring about purposes which we could never imagine possible or likely. It also tells us that God is not limited by having to work with those who are racially pure, morally blameless, wealthy, or powerful. Quite the opposite, in fact. God chooses to work with those marginalized, underprivileged or tainted according to the world’s eyes. As Mary’s song declares (Luke 1), God lifts up the lowly and brings down the mighty who perpetuate a world of inequity and injustice contrary to the kingdom God envisions.

