**Part 8: The Instructions of Naomi**

**Ruth 3:1-18** [New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised](https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Anglicised-NRSVA-Bible/) **(NRSVA)**

### Ruth and Boaz at the Threshing-Floor

3 Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 2Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor.

3Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4When 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.’ 5She said to her, ‘All that you tell me I will do.’

Chapter 3 begins with Ruth and Naomi at home alone, with the gathering season of grain coming to an end, but little prospect or idea for their future survival. They had been living with Ruth’s gleaning the fields of Boaz, who saw her as a hard worker and he rewarded her with kindness (*hesed*).

Naomi has a plan for Ruth to carry out to assure their futures. Ruth followed Naomi’s directions to a point, but she also followed her own intuition, as we all must learn to do, even when we have been taught by the best teachers. We have to make it our own.

**Ruth’s daring plan for desperate times (Chapter 3:1-5):** Naomi tells Ruth that she needs to seek a home for her. The Hebrew word for home also means “rest” or “repose,” or “security.” In Ruth 1:9, Naomi pled with her widowed daughters-in-law to return to Moab and to find another home. We see this same word used in other places in the OT.

In Genesis 7:9, Noah sends out a dove which cannot find “rest” until the waters subside from the flood. How often we are unable to rest in our lives until the Lord provides us a place to be ourselves!

In Deuteronomy 28:65, Israel is told there will be no rest without obeying G-d. The word, “obey,” can also be translated as “trust.” This is very interesting given that some women in the current generation don’t include the promise to “obey” in their marriage vows. It has a patriarchal, demeaning sound to many of them. But what if the word, “obey” in English has an incomplete meaning compared to the Hebrew? We think without trust there cannot be willing obedience, and there are times when one must trust one’s spouse to take the lead.

And how restless will we be and unable to settle down if we do not trust G-d? In the time of Ruth and Naomi, a woman’s security was found in men. Women went from being dependent on their fathers to their husbands and if they should die, then on their sons.

But remarkably, in this ancient story, we see that Naomi lost both her husband and sons. Then, Naomi’s security depended on the actions of another woman, Ruth. Before the end of the book, Naomi will tell us that Ruth was better to her “than seven sons [4:15].” But we are getting ahead of the story.

6So she went down to the threshing-floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. 7When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came quietly and uncovered his feet, and lay down. 8At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman!

9He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.’10He said, ‘May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

11And now, my daughter, do not be afraid; I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. 12But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I.

13Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kinfor you, good; let him do so. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kinfor you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kinfor you. Lie down until the morning.’

14So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, ‘It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor.’ 15Then he said, ‘Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.’ So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city.

**Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor (Chapter 3:6-15):** First, some background on the place of a threshing floor in a community: This was a public place where families shared in the work of separating their wheat from the chaff. People commonly gathered and worked there in the daytime – both men and women. There could also be women working together at night on the threshing floor.

People might share in their meals and wine there, and celebrate special days and rituals. Vats of oil and wine as well as grains were stored there for community sharing. It was a very large space. Workers and overseers might sleep near the threshing floor.

But it was not a place for unaccompanied women after dark, which might raise some suspicion about them, as well as pose a risk for them. Women prostitutes might “hang out” there (Hosea 9:1). It was in a sense a transitional space, where one could be free of normal restraints or rules, a place of opportunity, but with the lifting of restrictions, it could also be a place of potential transgression as well. It is interesting to learn that the Jerusalem Temple was originally a threshing floor (1 Samuel 24).

So, Naomi instructed Ruth to go to Boaz at night at the threshing floor. She tells Ruth to “…bathe, anoint yourself, and dress up, and go down to the threshing floor…” In our era, we may read this as a story of preparing to seduce a man. There may indeed be a bit of sexual intrigue. But what did these words mean to the Israelites?

The JPS Commentary on the Book of Ruth says that this trio of verbs, wash, anoint, clothe one’s self foreshadows some type of major change in one’s life. When G-d symbolically ‘married’ or was “betrothed” to Jerusalem, he says, *“I bathed you in water…and anointed you with oil…I clothed you with embroidered garments”* (Ezekiel 16:9-10).

In our own time, we can also compare it to Christian sacraments -- of baptism, and the sacrament of being confirmed with holy oil, and wearing the stole of confirmation or ordination.

The same sequence was used when David ended his mourning of his dead son, to move from his loss to going on with life (2 Samuel 12:10). While we can read the story as Ruth approaching Boaz and offering herself to him, another level from the Hebrew background is that she is preparing herself to make an important life change.

Ruth takes a big chance. She risks being misinterpreted and rejected. At first, she follows Naomi’s instruction, but as the story develops, she does something different. Naomi told her to have *Boaz tell her what to do* – isn’t that the traditional pattern? We wait for the man to instruct us?

But in this case, Ruth takes charge and *she tells Boaz what he should do.* When she tells him to spread his robe over her, this could be interpreted as an act of espousal (Ezekiel 16:8). The word for “robe” also refers to “wings.” Alter says that the Hebrew word, *kanaf,* could be “corner of a garment,” or “wings.” [Page 633]. And it is a metaphor for sheltering, which is a symbol of marriage.

There are images of G-d spreading his wings over us in scripture. In chapter 2, Boaz prayed that G-d would take Ruth under his wings (2:12) and now she asks Boaz to be G-d’s agent for her, to spread his wings over her. He is being called to responsibility, not to romance. Her coming to him was an act of *hesed* for Naomi and he blesses her for doing this. There were protocols for which a man in the family would be responsible for a related widow, and Boaz says that if the man who has priority will not step up to the plate, he will do so.

In our time, we can think of relationships, including the covenant relationship of Naomi and Ruth, and the betrothal of Ruth and Boaz as commitments to shelter one another, to take care of one another – an act of *hesed* for the other. In the best of times, we can think of our close relationships as mirroring G-d for us and reminding us of how G-d takes care of us through our relationships.

And what does Boaz say? He exclaims that Ruth is blessed of the Lord, that her loyalty to Naomi is praiseworthy. He literally says, ‘Blessed are you to YHWH…” His words are one of only seven times in the entire Bible where an individual woman is directly blessed of G-d and the only time when G-d’s name is invoked, connecting her to G-d. In only one instance, a woman blesses a man.

* Rebekah is blessed by her family upon leaving home to be married to Isaac (Genesis 14:60).
* Leban blesses his two daughters, Leah and Rachel, when they are leaving home (Genesis 32:1).
* Deborah blesses Jael for destroying Israel’s enemy (Judges 5:24)
* The priest, Eli, blesses Hannah (I Samuel 2:20).
* David blesses Hannah because she has prevented him from engaging in needless bloodshed (I Samuel 25:32-33).

Boaz then sends Ruth away before it is light, carrying with her six measures of barley for Naomi. The chapter ends with Ruth and Naomi back home with one another. The last words spoken by Ruth in the entire book are these: “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying to me, ‘Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”

The Book of Ruth depicts a transition from emptiness to fullness. We can see that Boaz acknowledged and honored Ruth’s commitment to Naomi. By referring to Naomi as her mother-in-law, he also recognized the previous marriage.

Here is a model for us as well, that we can continue to respect and honor one set of relationships, even while taking on another commitment. We do not abandon our parents when we are married. We can continue to honor both. And implied in his commitment to Ruth is the idea that procreation is not the only goal of marriage, and there is a place in the world for strong and shrewd women who take initiative to secure their place. And in this story, they are rewarded for active planning, not passively waiting for others to take care of them.

16She came to her mother-in-law, who said, ‘How did things go with you, my daughter?’ Then she told her all that the man had done for her, 17saying, ‘He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, “Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”’ 18She replied, ‘Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.’

**Homecoming with good news and grain (Chapter 3:16-18:** Upon her return to Naomi, she is asked, “How is it with you?” or “How did things go for you?” It is a question to get clarification of one’s status or identity. Boaz had asked the same question in chapter 3:8 before Ruth had identified herself when she came to him in the darkness of night.

In the field, he had also asked who is that girl? Naomi is asking whether Ruth’s status has changed after her meeting with Boaz. Note that both Naomi and Boaz refer to Ruth as “daughter,” and so they are connected through this shared relationship. Both are older than Ruth. Remember that Boaz commented on Ruth’s not paying attention to the younger men.

**Food for Thought:**

1. How has the story of Ruth and Naomi influenced your perspective about male/female relationships in the Bible?
2. In a world where men were in charge, what were the risks faced by Naomi and Ruth by taking initiative to solve their problem? Do you see any risks faced by Boaz or the unnamed male relative who decided not to take Ruth in as his wife?
3. Think about the parallel between the story of Abraham leaving his country for a place that the Lord would show him, and Ruth leaving her country making a covenant with Naomi, to accept her G-d and her people? Have you or someone close to you had to leave your familiar life and start all over again?
4. What parallels do you see in the story of Ruth with the Exodus story, where the Israelites left their slavery to cross over the Red Sea, and then to wander in the desert for forty years before entering the Promised Land? Forty years is also symbolic of a long time or a generational change before fulfillment of the promise.
5. Are these stories helpful for understanding the cultural, survival, and spiritual challenges for modern-day immigrants who have left everything behind and started all over again? Do you have friends who have lived through such changes?

Years ago, Martha provided counseling to an Armenian family where the parents had suffered violence and starvation in their native land. But even in America, they would still hoard rotten food.

Another friend who was a child in China during World War II also had trouble discarding food and could not throw away paper or strings. How can we offer *hesed* to people who have lived through such deprivations? What special sensitivity do we need to have to reach better understanding of U.S. immigrants from third world countries?

**Personal Notes:**

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