

Please keep your Bibles open at Ruth, chapter 3, and then bow your heads with me as we pray,

*“Lord our God, we pray for light in the darkness of our spiritual need. We pray that the light of the glory of Your grace would shine upon us in the face of Jesus Christ. We pray that You would lavish Your Spirit on us that, as Your Word is preached, Christ might be seen with open eyes by us all. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.”*

The Hollywood romantic blockbuster *Titanic* holds the all time box office record, grossing just under 601 million dollars in takings. Every year Hollywood cranks out romantic dramas and comedies that are formulaic and predictable, not to mention oftentimes amoral and foolish, and yet every year millions upon millions of us line up to see them.

The moral of the story? We are suckers for a good love story. Aren’t we?

Of course, the book of Ruth, as you may know, is, in many ways, the epitome of a great a love story. It is the account of the beginning and the blossoming of romantic love between Ruth and Boaz. But it is a love story on a number of other levels, too. It is equally an account of the ebb and flow of the love between the Lord God of Israel and one little covenant family, for example. The story begins, remember, with a narrative of tragedy as Elimelech takes his family away from the land of covenant promise to the land of Israel’s enemies, the land of Moab, almost certainly signaling the spiritual decline and the growing cold of the love between this family and their God. That decline hits rock bottom when eventually Elimelech and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion die, leaving behind them Naomi, Elimelech’s widow, and Orpah and Ruth, her Moabite daughters -in -law. Orpah chose to return to the familiar gods of Moab over the life of a stranger in Israel, but Ruth was converted. And so the story of the book of Ruth is as much a record of the relationship between one covenant family and their God and between Ruth herself and Jehovah, as it is about the romance between Ruth and Boaz.

And there is more even than this going on here. The events of Ruth take place during the time of the Judges, when Israel’s spiritual climate rose and fell. Their love

for the Lord waxed and waned. And in the background to the narrative of this book is the clear intimation that Ruth's story will unfold at a time when the Lord had returned to bless His covenant people. The harvest had begun at the end of a long period of famine. God's judgment has been lifted. The people, if Boaz' treatment of his workers in his fields is any indication, have a close walk with the Lord, and it is at *this* point that Ruth, the young Moabitess widow, wanders, in sorrow and brokenness, into Bethlehem.

Now the objective of the book of Ruth is not simply to make us smile over the burgeoning love between Ruth and Boaz or even to make us glad at the love of God for this covenant family. It is ultimately to explain how the Lord raised up *this* family so that *from them* would come *Israel's King*, David, Ruth's great grandson, and how, through David, the Lord would bring Israel to a time of unprecedented growth and blessing and spiritual prosperity. David was the one in whom God's love for His people was showered upon them in new fullness, and eventually, *through* David, would come the One in whom we see the love of God for sinners *most fully demonstrated*. Great David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, would be born in the fullness of time because Ruth fell in love with Boaz.

All that to say that in this simple love story, the cosmic love story of the Lord God with His people is being told. In this love story we see in *microcosm*, the bigger narrative of *God's betrothal of Himself to us in Christ, whom He freely gave up for us all.*

And I tell you all this because we need to keep a whole-Bible-perspective in view as we work through Ruth's storyline. And perhaps nowhere in the book is that more important than here in chapter 3. In many ways this is the most difficult chapter in Ruth. It contains some morally ambiguous passages. There is humor laced throughout, yet there are echoes in the storyline of deadly serious errors made by Israel in the past. There is the great encouragement of Boaz' godliness and there is the sense throughout that behind everything taking place is the sovereign hand and wise ordering. It is a tremendously complex and multifaceted chapter.

But as difficult as it is, I nevertheless want us to consider its message under three headings.

First is the theme of *spiritual danger*. Then secondly, there's the theme of *identity*. And finally, there is the theme of *redemption*. (Danger, Identity, Redemption)

First of all then, the theme of *spiritual danger*.

At the end of chapter 2, we caught a glimpse of the infinite wisdom of God who orders all things, even the seeming "chance" that finds Ruth gleaning in the field of her kinsman-redeemer, Boaz, and we also caught a glimpse of the cunning plan of a wily mother-in-law begin to take shape, didn't we?

There is the definite sense that Naomi has the beginnings of an idea forming in her mind, when she says to Ruth in 2:22, with what I'm sure was a real gleam in her eye and a knowing smile on her lips, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women and that people do not meet you in any other field." So chapter two had ended with Naomi, slyly advising Ruth to stick close to Boaz's young women as she worked in Boaz' field exclusively.

And now chapter three opens in much the same vein, only now with Naomi giving full vent to her scheme. She is, like many a mother-in-law since, a mother-in-law with an agenda. In this case she is going to match-make for her Moabite daughter-in-law. As one commentator put it, "Naomi loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." (Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 169)

Look at her counsel to Ruth in verses 1-4, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? "Now Boaz, whose young women you were with, *is he* not our relative? In fact, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. "Therefore wash yourself and anoint yourself, put on your *best* garment and go down to the threshing floor; *but* do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. "Then it shall be, when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies; and you shall go in, uncover his feet, and lie down; and he will tell you what you should do."

Now, lest we be too harsh on Naomi, notice first her *motivation*, in verse 1, "shall I not seek security for you that it may be well with you?" Naomi loves Ruth and is concerned for her. They are two widows alone and vulnerable, with little prospects of a secure future. Ruth is a Moabitess, unfamiliar with the customs and laws of Israel. And so Naomi takes responsibility for the guidance of her daughter-in-law. Her motives are the highest.

But her plan is full of spiritual danger. She indicates to Ruth that Boaz is her kinsman, that is he is a *go'el*, a man who stands in the legal position to redeem the family property and marry his relative's widow and carry on the family line. Boaz is the best hope these women have, Naomi sees clearly, for a secure future. So look at what she tells Ruth to do. "He'll be threshing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Get cleaned up, put on some perfume and your best dress, and go down there. Stay in the shadows until Boaz goes off to rest and then go and lie down beside him."

Now right on the surface of that counsel it is clear, isn't it, that Naomi is placing Ruth in direct moral and spiritual jeopardy. She is telling her to dress to kill and go and spend the night with a man she barely knows.

And then, when you factor into the story some of the wider Biblical symbolism of "the threshing floor," you begin to see just how dangerous this whole scheme really was. The prophet Hosea, for example, denounced Israel for its sexual sin which took place at the harvest festival on the threshing floor. Hosea 9:1 says, "Do not rejoice, O Israel, with joy like *other* peoples, For you have played the harlot against your God. You have made love *for* hire on every threshing floor." In verse 9 Hosea even connects the sins of Israel on the threshing floor, with a horrific event involving sexual sin and violence, that took place during the time of the Judges, the same general time that Ruth takes place, at the town of Gibeah.

In other words, in Ruth's day the threshing floor was a dark and dangerous place for a young woman to be. Furthermore, it looks almost like the author of Ruth is setting us up to expect the worst. Ruth, remember, is a *Moabitess*. One of the most notorious episodes in Israel's history, leading to the wrath of God on His people, took place at a place called Baal Peor, when, in the language of Numbers 25:1, the Israelite men "committed harlotry with the women of Moab."

And notice that at the end of chapter 2 when Ruth was reporting to Naomi all that had happened earlier that day as she had been out working in Boaz's fields, Ruth slightly alters Boaz' words to her. Look at verse 21, "He also said to me, 'You shall stay close to my young men until they have finished all my harvest.'" But that's not what Boaz had said. He told her to stay close to all his young *women*. The author seems to imply that Ruth remains a Moabitess for all her newfound faith. And now here in chapter 3 Naomi suggests that Ruth head down to the threshing floor at harvest

time, under cover of darkness, in a way that makes all our moral alarm bells ring loud and clear.

And, then look down at verse 9. On the threshing floor itself when Boaz wakes and asks who Ruth is, she replies with an artful play on words. Our version quite rightly translates her words like this, “Take your maidservant under your wing,” which echoes the language Boaz himself had used back in chapter 2 to describe Ruth’s conversion. She had come to take refuge under the wings of the Almighty. Clearly, Ruth is implying that the fullness of *God’s* blessing on her was tied up with *Boaz*. The security of life under the *Lord’s* wings involved life *at Boaz’s side, under his wings*. And as we will see, Ruth is *exactly* right about that.

But there is another meaning to her words that is rather obscured by our translation. The words, “take me under your wing,” can also be translated “spread the corner of your cloak over me.” You see the subtle innuendo? “The Lord intends for us to be together, Boaz.” She artfully ties *that* possibility together with her presence there at midnight, alone, on the threshing floor, and she invites Boaz to take her into his bed with him.

Now step back for a moment and try to think of all this from the point of view of the original audience of the book. Here are Jewish men and women well acquainted with the reputation of Moabite women and the sinful history of the relationship of Israelite men with them. They know all about the threshing floor. What are *they* thinking as they listen to Naomi’s counsel, and as they watch Ruth agree and head down there at midnight, and hear her words? They are thinking, “Is Ruth about to show her true Moabite colors at last? Is she going to conform to the stereotype?”

Naomi exposes her daughter-in-law to grave spiritual danger, doesn’t she? Ruth, in agreeing to Naomi’s plan, embraces a pattern of behavior more fitting to a Moabite looking to snare a Hebrew husband the old-fashioned Moabite way than to a child of God, someone who has been converted to the faith of Israel.

All of which ought to remind us not to be surprised when Moabite ways reappear in the behavior of a child of God.

Noami has been down the long dusty road to Moab herself. She's lived the life of compromise once before, already. She *ought* to have known better. She ought to have known that compromise does not precipitate blessing, but woe and sorrow and tragedy. Yet even the most mature among us, even those who, like Naomi have been-there-done-that, who have suffered the consequences of past sin and have learned the hard way of its dangers, even they all too easily find themselves, given the right set of circumstances, tempted to travel back down the dangerous road to moral ruin.

Ruth 3 ought to remind us that we are never done with temptation, and never done with sin, 'till glory; that there is *no point* at which it is safe to let our guard down.

Dear brothers and sisters, that is the reality in which we live. And we must never forget it. We all come to the threshing floor at times, where Satan seeks to sift us like wheat, just as he did with Peter in Luke 22. And so we must be on our guard against the onslaught of the enemy and the sudden attacks of temptation. We must search our hearts for the foolish self deception by which we excuse our sin.

Ruth herself had been dramatically converted. We are clear about her real spiritual change. Yet even in the life of a Ruth, the old Moabite shows up from time to time. Her connecting of the grace of God in her life, the plan of God in bringing Boaz and her together, and her sleeping with Boaz on the threshing floor in the language of verse 9 all reveal another important lesson. All of this was Naomi's suggestion. Naomi was the older, wiser, believing woman. It was her plan to send Ruth down there like that. While Ruth is certainly not guiltless in this, Naomi is the one who has enabled the confusion in Ruth's thinking to grow in the first place. Isn't she?

How careful we need to be, brothers and sisters! Our own sin and compromises have implications, not only for ourselves but for those around us. It is a terrible thing to lead another astray, to wound the conscience of a weaker brother or sister, to cause one of the Lord's little ones to stumble.

Let's be warned of the constant danger of temptation and ready ourselves for spiritual attack.

So there is danger in this story. But another key motif is the theme of *identity*. It is actually a theme running through the book of Ruth. The question is asked again and again—who is Ruth? In Chapter 2:5 while Ruth is gleaning in his fields, Boaz asks his foreman, “Whose young woman is this?” And now here in chapter 3, as Ruth uncovers Boaz’s feet and he wakes up in the middle of the night—the text says he was startled in the night—and so would you be if some stranger came and lay down beside you and uncovered your feet to the cold—Boaz asks her, “Who are you?” It is an innocent enough question, but it is repeated in verse 16 by Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, who also asks, literally, who are you? Exactly the same question Boaz asks, which seems to freight the question with an importance beyond simply the issue of Ruth’s name.

The theme of identity is central to the message of Ruth. Who are you, Ruth? What defines you, Ruth? That is a critically important question for us too, isn’t it? We need to ask it of ourselves. God’s word asks it of you tonight. Who are you really? What is it that really defines you?

When Boaz sits bolt upright in shock at midnight on the threshing floor and asks Ruth that question, look how she replies, ““I *am* Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative.”

Now despite the moral ambiguities lacing Ruth’s language, one thing is clear. She is asking Boaz to marry her. That is what she wants. She is inviting him to fulfill the role of the kinsman redeemer. And Boaz agrees. There is one who was a closer relation to the dead men than he, so they must wait to see if he will fulfill this duty, but Boaz clearly indicates his readiness to become Ruth’s husband.

And Naomi’s question to Ruth when she arrives home the next morning seems to suggest that Ruth’s identity might indeed have changed contingent on what had taken place the night before. Who are you, my daughter? Are you the same girl who left here last night? Are you still the widow from Moab? Who are you now?

Naomi’s question hits at a vital truth. Ruth’s identity changes entirely in relation to Boaz, her redeemer. That comes out clearly when you notice that this is the only chapter in the book where Ruth is not called Ruth the Moabitess. It is the one chapter where she acts most *like* a Moabitess, and yet it is the chapter where she is engaged to marry Boaz. Now at last, she sees that her fortunes are bound inextricably

to Boaz. He is her redeemer. Who she is can no longer be defined with reference to her Moabite origins. Who she is must be defined in relation to Boaz.

This brings us to the final point I want you to see in this chapter. It is the theme of redemption. Boaz, in answering Ruth on the threshing floor, does not treat her as a Moabitess, does he? In fact, he pronounces a blessing on her. He brings the name of the Lord into the whole conversation. He says that unlike the reputation of a Moabitess, Ruth has not gone after the young men. She wants Boaz. And he commits to marrying her if the other man will not.

It is as though Boaz sees what others do not, not even Naomi, that Ruth is a child of God, and he treats her that way. He will be her redeemer.

There is a sense in which this whole incident on the threshing floor is a kind of rerun of the worst sins of Israel's history. The sin with Moabite women at Baal Peor and the common sin of the people at the threshing floor for which Hosea denounced them. Only now, instead of it being a story of failure, it is a story of victory. Here in this union between Ruth and Boaz the sorry history of Israel is beginning to be rewritten and undone.

And that is precisely the point. From this union would come David, and from David Christ in whom the sin of Adam and the sin of Israel would be overwritten with the obedience of the Last Adam and the True Israelite. From the union of Ruth and Boaz the undoing of the sin of God's people and the curse of God's justice would take place.

Boaz signals his determination to bless Ruth by sending her back with more grain than she can lift on her own. There is a note of almost giddy comedy at the chapter's end when Ruth comes staggering home under a ridiculous amount of grain and gives Naomi the message from Boaz, "He said do not go back to your mother-in-law empty handed."

Boaz knew fine that Naomi was behind it all along. Stop your scheming mother-in-law. And trust me. I will act for you. Do not take matters into your own hands like this again. That way lies disaster. I will undertake to redeem this broken little family. The matter is out of your hands now. Trust me. And if you will, there will be an abundance of blessing for you, more abundant than you can bear. That is what the grain is all about.

And that is the gospel, is it not? Instead of trusting ourselves to act, to secure our future and our comfort and our needs, which is what Naomi and Ruth do at the beginning of the story, instead of sinful self-reliance, which exposes us to temptation and moral catastrophe, truth, the Redeemer, our blood kinsman, the mediator between God and man the man Christ Jesus. We must trust now only in our redeemer to act on our behalf. We cannot do it. He must secure our salvation. But trusting in Him is overflowing, abundant blessing and mercy upon mercy.

Jesus is greater than Boaz. And the question of our identity, who are we really, what defines us, is bound up with our relationship with Him. If we trust Him to save and redeem, then our old Moabite selves will be replaced with a new identity. We will be wed to Christ the bridegroom. That is who we are. Moabites no longer, but the bride of Christ.

Amen.