



A Risk-Taking Faith

Ruth 3

Ruth 3 is the climax of the book. Like any good love story, everything has been building to the moment when one of the characters finally lets the other know what they are thinking. Many who read this story find an inspiring tale of love, but it's fair to say that this story also raises some eyebrows. Why is Ruth getting dressed up and sneaking over to Boaz, uncovering his feet, and lying down in the dead of night? Why does she ask him to put his clothing over her? Some will argue that Ruth's late-night visit was just a custom, but we have no record of any such custom and it would be odd that Boaz wants Ruth to get out of there before anyone can see her.

Yet to this point Boaz and Ruth have done nothing but act honorably. Naomi, although bitter at the end of chapter 1, has hope restored by the end of chapter 2 and seems to have Ruth's best interest at heart. For these characters to be planning and plotting or even worse carrying out immorality seems out of character, so what is going on here?

Ruth 3 shows us three characters acting nobly and taking risks because they believe God is at work. Naomi's plan is unusual and risky, but her actions seem to flow from a place of faith rather than depression. Ruth trusts Naomi and Boaz so she enacts this risky plan, and Boaz responds by acting nobly and seeking the best for Ruth and Naomi. In the middle of this dark time, when everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, these three characters shine as bright lights by showing loyalty and commitment to one another and ultimately to God.

What does a risk-taking faith look like today?

What do you think it was that Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz were ready and willing to take risks?

Naomi hatches a plan (1-5)

Naomi's Situation (2:23-3:1)

Ruth 2 creates excitement about the future. Ruth "just happened" to stumble upon the field of her near kinsman who spoke highly of her character and showered her with kindness. Even Naomi realizes that God is behind this and that He's not done with Ruth or Naomi. But then we get to the last verse of the chapter which tells us Ruth gleaned until the end of barley and wheat. Roughly 7 weeks separate the

beginning of barley harvest and the end of wheat harvest, which means almost 2 months have passed and nothing new has happened. So Ruth's mother-in-law decides it's time to move things along.

Why do you think it was that Boaz had not yet mentioned anything to Ruth about marriage?

Naomi begins her instructions by telling Ruth she wants to get "rest" for her daughter-in-law. Naomi had once thought that Ruth would need to stay in Moab if she wanted rest (1:9), but now God has rekindled the hope that rest can be found for Ruth in Israel. Naomi has once again begun to hope. "Marah" might have looked at Boaz's inaction and decided that God had indeed abandoned her and Ruth after all. But Naomi looks at the situation and decides it's worth hatching a plan to bring about a happy ending. This dramatic shift shows us how far Naomi has come. As one preacher put it,

"The sheer fact that Naomi has a strategy teaches us something. People who feel like victims don't make plans. As long as Naomi was oppressed; as long as she could only say, 'The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me,' she conceived no strategy for the future.

One of the terrible effects of depression is the inability to move purposefully and hopefully into the future... One of the reasons we must help each other 'hope in God' (Psalm 42:5) is that only hopeful churches plan and strategize. Churches that feel no hope develop a maintenance mentality and just go through the motions year in and year out. But when a church feels the sovereign kindness of God hovering overhead and moving, hope starts to thrive and righteousness ceases to be simply the avoidance of evil and becomes active and strategic."¹

How can we help believers (including ourselves) when they have run out of hope in what God is able to do?

What does planning with hope look like in your life?

Naomi's Solution (3:2-5)

Naomi lays out her plan for Ruth. First, she tells Ruth to get dressed up by washing, putting on oil, and wearing a garment. This might indicate that Naomi wants Ruth to look her best for when she proposes, but there might be another explanation as well. This same chain of verbs – *wash, anoint, put on a garment* – is used in 2 Samuel 12:10 to describe David ending his mourning over the news his child with Bathsheba would die. It's likely that Ruth had still been mourning her husband during her time in Israel. Naomi is then telling Ruth it's time to clearly communicate to Boaz that she is ready to consider remarrying.

But of course, the plan goes further than that. Naomi told Ruth to go to Boaz, wait for him to go to sleep, go over to where he was sleeping and uncover his feet, lie there, and await further instructions. This raises the question of why Naomi would give such unusual instructions. Why did she not simply have Ruth run up to Boaz after a day of gleaning and ask him then? Why not stop by Boaz's house after work? We don't know exactly. Naomi seems to want this request to be done in secret, perhaps because she also knew there was a closer relative (3:12) and wanted to give Boaz a chance to work things out. Maybe she was seeking to avoid embarrassment on Ruth's part in the event Boaz turned her down. Whatever the reason, two things seem clear. 1) Naomi is doing this to try and help Ruth obtain a husband and 2) Naomi trusted

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/ruth-strategic-righteousness>

Boaz's integrity when she told Ruth to wait for Boaz to give her further instructions. Naomi is taking a gamble this will work out well, but she considers it a safe bet to bet on the character of Boaz.

Ruth makes a proposal (6-9)

Ruth's Question (3:6-9)

Ruth does exactly what her mother-in-law tells her to do. She goes down, waits until the festivities are over and Boaz has fallen asleep. She then sneaks over to him, uncovers his feet, and lays down. Eventually Boaz wakes up, looks, and sees a woman lying there!² Not surprisingly, he is nervous and asks who's there. Ruth's response is carefully chosen and shows her understanding of God and Boaz. She identifies herself humbly as Boaz's handmaid. She then requests that Boaz put his garment over her, a custom of which we do have record. For a man in such a culture to cover a woman with garment demonstrated that a new relationship had been formed and that now the man as husband would provide for the wife (cf Ezekiel 16:8).³

But there is more going on here. The Hebrew word for "skirt" is *kanaph*, which can also be translated as "wing." This is the same word used in Ruth 2:12 when Boaz tells Ruth that she has come under God's wings. Ruth reminds Boaz that he is a near kinsman, no doubt referencing the legal expectation that he would redeem Elimelech's property and seek to produce an heir through Ruth. In essence Ruth tells Boaz, "You say that I have come under God's protection, but God has tasked you with the responsibility of marrying me. So you be the protection you say that God is." Naomi had told Ruth to wait and do what Boaz told her. But Ruth takes charge in this situation and graciously but firmly requests that Boaz marry her.

Ruth's Risk

As we have seen so far, Ruth's choice to put herself on the line was risky for several reasons. First, there was the difference in social standing between the two of them.

In what ways would Ruth be considered socially inferior to Boaz during this time?

Ruth was a woman asking a man to marry her. She was a poor person asking a rich person to marry her. She was a younger person asking an older person to marry her. She was a foreigner asking an Israelite to marry her. By virtually every metric, Ruth was inferior to Boaz by the standards of the day. This was indeed a bold move by Ruth.

But the *way* in which Ruth went about asking was daring as well. Ruth puts herself totally at the mercy of Boaz. Her reference to his "wing" might not make sense as he wakes up groggily in the middle of the night. He might interpret her actions as an inappropriate proposition and tell her to get lost. He might see her all alone and decide to take advantage of her. Ruth is in a very vulnerable spot as she asks for Boaz to

² The use of "behold" and the general description "a woman" invite the reader to look at the story through Boaz's eyes. "He turned and... look! a woman!"

³ Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary Series, 691.

marry her. But Ruth trusted the wisdom of Naomi and the character of Boaz, and so she there she sat, shivering in the cold, waiting to hear how Boaz would respond.

Why do you think Ruth was able to be so bold in this situation, given the risk involved?

How might we learn from Ruth's example as we enter situations where doing the right thing is risky?

Boaz takes charge (10-18)

For the second time in 2 chapters readers find themselves waiting to see how Boaz will respond. In chapter 1 readers wait to see how Boaz will respond that a Moabitess is taking a break in the worker's rest hut. Now readers wait to see how Boaz will respond to this unusual and carefully worded request of Ruth as she sits before him in a very vulnerable position.

Boaz honors Ruth (3:10-11)

Boaz once again speaks kindly and highly of Ruth. He goes so far as to say that she is the one honoring him, and that in doing so she was showing a great kindness. While others from the culture would have looked on and thought that for Boaz to propose to Ruth would be a condescension and a great honor, Boaz sees himself as the one honored by this gesture.

Why do you think it was that Boaz was able to look past the culture of his time and see Ruth's proposal as something that brought him honor?

He also notes that the whole city has seen that Ruth is a woman of virtue. This word for "virtue" is the same word used of Boaz in 2:1 where he is described as a mighty man of *wealth*. The word has a wide range of meanings, and can be translated as "virtuous," "worthy," or even "excellent." This is the same word used in Proverbs 31 to describe the virtuous woman there.

In what ways has Ruth demonstrated herself to be a woman of virtue in this book?

What might it look like for a woman to show virtue in a similar way today?

Boaz takes responsibility for Ruth's future (3:12-13)

Boaz statement "there is kinsman nearer than I" comes like a gut punch. It's unclear whether Ruth and Naomi knew this, but the reader certainly didn't. This surprise twist sound like a disaster. Who is this other man? Will he take care of Ruth and Naomi? But Boaz steps in and confidently lets Ruth know he will address the problem. Either the other man will marry Ruth and provide for her and Naomi, or he will. Boaz promises to address the problem the very next day.

How is Boaz an example for men today who must take responsibility for those depending them?

Boaz guards Ruth's integrity (3:14)

Boaz is concerned that it not be known that a woman had been there. He desires to preserve both of their reputations, as well as to avoid complicating the business deal that is about to go down with rumors of anything inappropriate. From start to finish, Boaz is concerned with Ruth and her ultimate well-being. He wants to avoid anything that will tarnish her reputation or jeopardize her future.

Boaz honors Naomi (3:15-17)

Finally, Boaz makes sure that Naomi is considered and that Ruth has something to show for her trip. Boaz cares for Ruth and Naomi and wants to help at every opportunity that he has. There is some debate over what the "measures" are, but it's likely that he simply took a coat of some kind that Ruth was wearing and scooped out six scoops with his hand.⁴

Why do you think Boaz wanted to make sure that Ruth went home with a gift for Naomi?

In the grossly immoral culture of Israel during the time of the judges, these three characters stand out as stellar examples. Ruth is a Moabite, descended from the son of Lot and his daughter. Boaz is a Judahite, descended from the son of Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38). Both are living in a culture where anything goes and everyone does what is right in their own eyes. And yet these two stand above their culture and their genealogy and do what is right and honoring before the Lord. No matter what your background, no matter what your culture, all of us have the choice of whether we will fall to the level of those around us or with the help of God rise to the level of His holiness. All three take risks, but all three do so because they trust one another and because they trust God.

Today we face a similar choice: to live like the ungodly around us or to follow God's holy standard. Like Ruth and Boaz, we are surrounded by a culture that likes to use God's name but doesn't really care to follow His commands. And so like Boaz and Ruth we have the chance to shine as a light regardless of the darkness around us.

How can believers stand out as a light in this culture?

Why is it sometimes harder to take a stand in a culture that names God's name but doesn't live by his standards rather than a culture that rejects God?

⁴ The italics in the KJV correctly indicate that the measurement itself isn't given. The Hebrews simply says "six barleys." Since no measurement is given, commentators have tried to guess whether this was an ephah, an omer (1/10 of an ephah), a seah (1/3 of an ephah), but since there is no measurement it may have not been an official measure, but simply Boaz scooping out six "portions" of barley.